



MEN OF TOKYO:
*Sudden
Heat*

SEDONIA GUILLONE

Men of Tokyo: Sudden Heat
by Sedonia Guillone

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A Total-E-Bound Publication

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Men of Tokyo: Sudden Heat

ISBN #978-1-907010-09-5

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Cover Art by Lyn Taylor ©Copyright March 2009

Edited by Jess Bimberg

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Published in 2009 by Total-E-Bound Publishing 1 The Corner, Faldingworth Road, Spidlington, Market Rasen, Lincolnshire, LN8 2DE, UK.

Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

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Men of Tokyo

SUDDEN HEAT

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Men of Tokyo: Sudden Heat
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Dedication

To Mitch, always.

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Glossary:

Zafu—a traditional round black cushion used for seated meditation in the Zen tradition.

Zori—a simple Japanese sandal with a flat sole and a single thong, originally made of straw but now also made of rubber or felt.

Tabi sock—a Japanese sock with a thick sole and a separate section for the big toe.

Ryokan—a traditional Japanese establishment providing food and lodging for travellers.

Soji—More precisely, *shoji*—a rice-paper screen in a wooden frame used as a sliding partition or door in traditional Japanese houses. I use the first spelling here because it is more familiar to Western readers.

Saké—a Japanese alcoholic beverage made from fermented rice and usually served warm.

Onsen—hot springs in the Japanese though the term is often used describe the facilities and inns around the hot springs.

Gi—the outfit worn for martial arts

Judoka—a person who practices Judo

Hara—According to holistic medicine, the hara is a core power-source that resides in the auric field of the human body. It is housed inside the tan tien, existing on the level of intentionality. The hara line continues downwards from the tan tien deep into the earth's core, connecting the individual to his soul's purpose for incarnating into the human form.

Congee—rice porridge, a tradition dish in China. Made with rice boiled for a long period of time in water, other ingredients can be added such as meat, chicken or fish to make a savory meal or sugar to make the porridge more dessert-like.

A note about Japanese suffixes—You will notice that sometimes the characters address each other with the suffix -*san* and at other times -*chan*. The use of one or the other denotes the relationship between the speakers. *San* denotes polite distance while *chan* is used between good friends, lovers, family members and from adults to children. There are other suffixes which are used in Japanese, but these are the two that apply in this story.

To native Japanese speakers and others more versed in Japanese language and culture, I apologise for any errors I may have made.

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To be gently drawn to that which is gentle,

To be sweetly drawn to that which is sweet,

To feel fineness and that which is fine and goodness in that
which is good,

To love where you are loved and to love the loveable,

This is natural and just,

And of the heart.—Mitch Halper

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Chapter One

"Chan Chan, I want you so much."

Quan Chan sat up, awakened by that sensuously deep voice. So achingly familiar, Kiku's voice called to his very soul.

Kiku's brawny physique filled the doorway. He stepped into the room. A sudden light splashed across his body, naked except for the colourful tattoos of white tigers and cherry blossoms that adorned nearly every inch of him—broad chest, hard buttocks, powerful thighs, carved abdomen, all the way down to his wrists and ankles. "I want you, Chan Chan. I've missed you."

Quan Chan blinked, hesitant even though the sight before him made his loins throb with need. "What about Yuzo?" he heard himself ask. Certainly Kiku's steady lover wouldn't want Kiku to be in here like this, in spite of their long history.

Kiku drew closer, a grin curving his sensuous lips. "This is your dream, Chan Chan," he said. "The laws and limitations of the physical world don't exist here. You can have whatever you want and no one will be hurt." He leaned over and pulled the covers down, exposing Quan Chan's dragon, already fully erect. Kiku smoothed a large hand across Quan Chan's chest. Quan Chan pulled in a breath as tingling heat suffused his skin. No one else had a touch like Kiku's. Velvety, fiery. Perfect.

Quan Chan watched Kiku's face, his pleasure marred only by his apprehension. "Aren't you getting ... visions?" he asked.

Every time they made love Kiku got terrible visions from touching him, scenes of Quan Chan's childhood and adolescence that injected pain into their pleasure, so much emotional agony that it had eventually ended their love affair. His new lover, Yuzo, didn't give Kiku bad visions, only heaven.

Desire simmered in Kiku's dark eyes. He slid his hand down the centre of Quan Chan's abdominal muscles and over the body of the white tiger inked onto his skin. Kiku paused at his navel, which he circled sensuously. "Not in your dream, my friend." Kiku's touch lingered on his don tien, the sensitive energy spot between his belly button and pubic area, then slid down, closing wide strong fingers around his hard cock.

"Ohhhh." Ecstatic heat flooded Quan Chan's dragon, base to head, and swirled through his yang sac. Kiku knew just how to touch him. And always had, from their first sexual encounter in Shanghai at the Temple of the White Tiger. Back when Quan Chan had been well on his way to advancing to head priest of their Taoist Immortalist sect and Kiku had been to see him during one of his business trips for his crime family back in Tokyo.

"You see?" Kiku crooned, his hand moving in smooth, even strokes up and down Quan Chan's aching dragon. "No visions. As I told you, this is your dream. Nothing here but pleasure—" he stroked up, "—and satisfaction." He held the tip of Quan Chan's dragon suspended a few seconds before stroking back

down along its length. Quan Chan groaned, his chest heaving. He didn't know how much longer he could hold on.

"Enjoy," came Kiku's sensuous whisper.

Quan Chan tilted his head back, eyes closed, and let himself go into the first Realm, the place of delicately twinkling stars behind his eyelids, unable to do anything but accept the gift of Kiku's erotic massage.

"That's right, my dear friend, just enjoy."

"Ahhh," Quan Chan breathed, barely able to speak from the intense flood of pleasure, waves that filled every inch of space around him and within him, as if he were submerged in the sensations.

Kiku's hand moved faster. Faster and faster, drawing the nectar up his stalk, closer and closer...

Quan Chan groaned, long and low. The eruption was like one long orgasmic sneeze followed by shorter pulses. Through the haze of his release, he felt the warm splash of his dragon's cloud coat his stomach and chest and hand. He looked up and saw Kiku's face, smiling at him just before disappearing into the dark mist of heaven...

"Huh." Quan Chan opened his eyes. Kiku wasn't there. All he could see was his room in morning light. All he could hear was his own breath, as tight and urgent as it had been in his—

Dream.

Ai yi. Not again. Quan Chan took a deep breath and looked down.

The covers were pushed down, exposing his lower body. His hand rested on his own softening dragon and the warm

stickiness of his *yang* emission coated his body, the splash of release he'd felt during his dream. Masturbating in his sleep again. How humiliating. Good thing he didn't share this bedroom with anyone. It was bad enough Kiku was only a few rooms away, now cosily settled in with a lover who didn't give him visions, while Quan Chan pined away for the man.

With a deep sigh, he rose from the bed and went straight into the shower. After soaping his body, he stood under the hot spray a bit longer than usual, annoyed with himself for still missing the morning showers he and Kiku used to take at times. Both muscular, their combined brawn barely fit into the tiny stall, but that had been part of the fun. Wet, soapy skin gliding together as they turned to rinse.

A new erection threatened from the mere memory. Damn. He still had it bad for Kiku.

Sighing again, he turned off the shower, grabbed his towel and dried off. At the bathroom mirror, he found himself lingering again. He stared at his reflection, feeling his reluctance to get downstairs and start the day. There was always a lot to do around this place. Tending to guests, housekeeping chores, meditation, helping in the kitchen or wherever it was needed. Yet, in the weeks since Kiku had been forced to end their love affair, getting up each day had gotten increasingly difficult, not easier, as Quan Chan had hoped it would.

Especially now. In recent months, Kiku's White Tiger Hotel had become a love nest of amorous couples. First Naoto had fallen in love with his guest, Koji, then Yuzo had come and stolen Kiku's heart. After that, Ryu, whose love affair with

Kiku had ended for the same reason his own had, met Nat. The gorgeous cop had followed Ryu all the way from Thailand to be with him. Had given up his career and everything. The twins, Tatou and Mod, always had a little love thing of their own, and then in the middle of it all, Basho's long lost lover, an Englishman named Timothy, had miraculously reappeared after fifteen years, when the two men had thought themselves lost to each other forever.

A pang gripped his chest. It was hard to know what bothered him more—that he'd been forced to give Kiku up as a lover or that there didn't seem to be anyone out there who could love him the way Kiku now loved Yuzo or Nat loved Ryu, someone who felt he was worth more than anything else on Earth and that the way to heaven was through making love to him. For Kiku, their lovemaking had largely been a way to hell.

Enough. He turned to hang up his towel. What would Kiku think of his falling into self-pity? Better to meditate, have breakfast and begin the day. Self-pity only led in a downward spiral to more self-pity then rapidly to hopelessness. *Not* the place a White Tiger allowed himself to go when he was supposed to remain on the middle way, the Tao.

Quan Chan sat on his *zafu* and meditated, after which he put on the hotel uniform, an open white vest and shorts, and went downstairs to the kitchen. He pushed open one side of the swinging doors and paused. Timothy was embracing Basho from behind where Basho stood at the table, cutting vegetables. Timothy's eyes were closed and he was nuzzling the curve of Basho's neck.

Quan Chan suppressed a groan. *Just what I need.* Bracing himself, he went quietly in. The two men separated when they saw him.

Basho smiled at him. "Good morning, Chan Chan."

Quan Chan worked a smile onto his lips. "Good morning." He now felt appropriately guilty for his annoyance. Who was he to object, even inwardly, to this man's happiness? Basho had suffered horribly during his forced separation from Timothy, and had undergone experiences that left him burned and crippled in one leg. Not to mention also that Basho fed a hotel full of people, guests and residents alike, three unbelievable meals a day, as he'd done for years without one complaint.

He bowed his head in greeting to Timothy. The Englishman waved and smiled in a friendly way. Timothy truly was a good guy and his presence here had not only made Basho happy, but also brought more humour and laughter to the men of the White Tiger.

Basho indicated a place at the table where a covered tray of food sat. "That's for you," he said.

"Oh, thank you. I ... got a late start this morning."

Basho nodded, his expression sympathetic. It was no secret how Quan Chan was in love with Kiku and had literally been bumped out of Kiku's bed the night Yuzo showed up on the run for his life from his psychotic *yakuza* lover. "You're very welcome. Enjoy."

"I'm sure I will." He sat and uncovered the food. The aroma of *miso* soup floated up at him. He closed his eyes,

said a quick blessing and picked up the bowl and a spoon, carefully fishing out a cube of tofu.

Just then the kitchen door swung open and Kiku walked in. Quan Chan set his bowl down and started to rise, but Kiku held out his hand, a gesture which told him to stay in his seat.

Kiku drew closer and Quan Chan saw an envelope in one large hand. Quan Chan's stomach tightened, not only from the sight of the letter, but from seeing Kiku. No doubt, the other man's second sight would pick up on the fact that he'd dreamt again of him, even though Kiku would be too polite to mention it.

"May I join you?"

"Of course." Quan Chan didn't hesitate. He never did when it came to having a moment with his friend. He watched Kiku slide back a chair and sit.

Kiku smiled at him while his eyes seemed to study Quan Chan's face. Apparently what he saw made his smile fade. "Are you all right, friend?" He leaned forward and gave Quan Chan's forearm a friendly squeeze.

Quan Chan fought the urge to close his eyes and savour the brief touch. "I'm all right."

Kiku frowned. There really was no fooling him. All Kiku had to do was look and he'd see that Quan Chan had once again recently entertained the brief idea of leaving here and returning to the White Tiger Temple in Shanghai. It seemed the reasonable thing to do, especially since Sun Lau was elderly now and probably wanted him to come back. It had been a year and a half since Quan Chan's last visit, the

longest gap of time he'd stayed away in years. Though Sun Lau never complained or guilted him about it, Quan Chan could hear that Sun Lau missed him. It was in the sound of the elderly man's voice whenever they spoke on the phone.

Years ago, when Kiku had first asked Quan Chan to come to Tokyo and help him get this hotel going, Sun Lau had been keen on having a skilled emissary spread the White Tiger practices abroad. None of them had expected Quan Chan to end up staying. Eventually, this place had become Quan Chan's home and Quan Chan had so wanted Kiku to be his partner for the rest of their lives. Out of love for Quan Chan, Sun Lau had been forbearing with him, but there was no possible way Sun Lau could remain so patient with him. Many times Quan Chan had considered going back, to be a dutiful son to the man who'd saved his life. But his passion for Kiku had always won, and his insistence on staying here in Tokyo had been the one great rebellious act of his life.

"Chan Chan, I'm sorry ... about—"

"Please, Kiku, don't apologise. It's not like that. There's no blame." He looked down into his bowl, his stomach suddenly too tight to eat.

"I don't want to lose you. You're special to me. That has never changed. And yet, I wouldn't stop you from following your path."

The pain in his friend's voice made his heart squeeze. Kiku only spoke the truth to him. The bond between them was stronger than anything he could have imagined. Kiku was the one person in his whole life who'd truly grieved the things

that had happened to him as a child growing up on the streets of Shanghai.

"I know that."

"Just so you know," Kiku said after a moment's silence between them, "I'm not saying this because I saw inside of you." He held up the letter. "This was in the morning's mail."

Quan Chan accepted the envelope from him and immediately recognised Sun Lau's scrawly handwriting. Of course, Kiku had known what the letter was before handing it to him.

"Thank you, Kiku," he said, then set it down by his place and picked up the bowl of soup. If he didn't eat, Kiku would notice and worry about him even more. He tipped the bowl to his lips and sipped some of the broth. Soothingly warm and tangy. Basho was amazing.

He thought Kiku would get up and leave, but his friend seemed to linger, and Quan Chan sensed that Kiku was about to ask him for a favour.

Which, of course, he would grant. Anything for Kiku.

"You probably know, Koji's friend Hiru is coming to stay here for the weekend," Kiku began, sounding a bit hesitant. He didn't like to ask Quan Chan for favours, especially after what had happened with Yuzo. "The man is ... confused. You know what I mean?"

Quan Chan nodded. Koji had spoken at times about the man he'd worked with for years at his computer engineering firm. "Of course. I'll tend to him, if that's what you need."

Relief infused Kiku's chiselled features. The man was so damn handsome he took Quan Chan's breath away. "I

thought you'd be best to look after him. You know I wouldn't have asked you ... under the circumstances, but the twins, even one at a time, would, I think, overwhelm the man."

This made Quan Chan smile. This was true. Tatou and Mod, though sweet and very good with guests, would be too much for a man who was confused. "I understand, Kiku. Don't worry."

"Thank you."

Quan Chan bowed his head. In spite of the fact that he was Kiku's teacher on this path, Kiku was still the man who'd opened a whole new world of friendship and passion to him, the very things that had made Quan Chan continue to question the impersonal, almost clinical nature of the White Tiger path as it was practised in Shanghai. He'd always felt that way, especially after Jin had pushed him away, insisting that they were violating their practise by getting too close.

Only lately, however, in his pain over Kiku and Yuzo, had he begun to second guess the whole question of personal love. Maybe some time in Shanghai would give him the space he needed to see things more clearly. It sure as hell was difficult to do while living in such close proximity to Kiku and Yuzo. "I will certainly do my best," he said softly.

Kiku's hand came to rest on his arm again. His expression radiated many things, all of them beautiful. "I've never known you not to do your best, Chan Chan." He squeezed Quan Chan's arm again then released him. "I must get back to my office. Stop in when you're finished, okay?" At Quan Chan's nod, he pushed his chair back and left, calling a greeting to

Basho and Timothy who'd respectfully retreated to Basho's room nearby.

Quan Chan watched Kiku disappear behind the swinging door, and knew the other man had left so that Quan Chan could read his letter. With a sigh, he picked it up and slid his thumb into the small gap to tear open the envelope. He unfolded the thin airmail paper and read, his heartbeat rising higher with each passing sentence. He'd expected merely Sun Lau's customary greetings and declarations of fatherly affection. Not *this*.

As you know, a Golden Dragon comes along only once in many lifetimes, he read the closing portion again after finishing the letter. You have been like a son to me and I wish to give you a gift that expresses my true feelings for you. Wu Li is his name and I wish you to have him before the first blush of his abundant yang nectar fades, as it always does. His beauty and virile essence will be exclusively yours to drink from as long and as often as you wish so long as his gifts blossom.

Please consider this offering, dear Xiao Chan. I understand that after receiving him, you will probably want to return to Tokyo as you have been happy there, my son. That is your own choice. I have only ever wanted your happiness and wellbeing in this embodiment, even more than I've wanted you to achieve Immortality. If you decide to return to Kikuchiya's White Tiger, then at least you will have Wu Li, the ultimate token of my affections for you. Yours always, Sun Lau

Quan Chan put down the paper. He took a deep breath, working to calm his racing heart. *Ai yi*. The elderly man was offering him something he'd never offered before. A Golden Dragon.

Higher in rank than a White Tiger. A man with boundless potential for Immortality. The elder had seen it simply from looking into the young man's eyes. According to writings of recent centuries, a Golden Dragon had not been found since the fourteenth century. And now one was there, in Shanghai. A Golden Dragon was always a man in the prime of his virility, beautiful and luscious, irresistible and capable of bringing a man to the heights of ecstasy from a mere look.

Something was going on.

Another deep breath was necessary before he could fold the letter up and slip it back into the envelope. Sun Lau had always dangled gifts in front of him in exchange only for the promise that he would one day take over the Temple. His own apartments at the Temple. His pick of the best tiger cubs to come through the door. A lifelong personal income of nearly half the Temple's profits. But never something like this. Sun Lau, a man of greater appetites and drives than any other he'd ever known, would keep a Golden Dragon for himself. The Temple must be in desperate straits, a fact that Sun Lau would never discuss simply in writing. Either that or...

No. Quan Chan refused to consider the possibility that his spiritual father was drawing near the end of his life. Sun Lau had saved him, brought him in from the streets and given him meaning and purpose. *Shit*. It wasn't as if he could just simply ask. He'd never get a straight answer from his

teacher. Sun Lau had lived through the Cultural Revolution. As an actor, a man of the arts, his life had been in danger and his survival had depended on his ability to conceal his feelings and to speak like a man of centuries past in service to the emperor of China—every word out of his mouth had double and triple meanings, a message that needed deciphering at every turn. He remained so to this day when a topic was forbidden.

Quan Chan struggled to finish his breakfast. How would he explain this to Kiku?

When he'd finished eating, Quan Chan washed his dishes and headed toward Kiku's office, where he could call Sun Lau. Once there, Kiku left him his privacy. Pressing the numbers that would connect him to Sun Lau's office, Quan Chan's hand trembled, holding the receiver.

Someone picked up on the third ring. "Lau's Tea Room, may I help you?" As Sun Lau had survived the Cultural Revolution by hiding what he truly was, so the White Tiger Temple had also survived by posing as a tea room.

Quan Chan recognised Jin's voice. Jin, his oldest friend and first White Tiger partner, as well as his first romance. Aside from Sun Lau and his own mother, Jin was the only other person in the world whom he'd known nearly his entire life. Although they'd been broken up for years, Jin had been hurt when Quan Chan had left for Tokyo. It came out in things he said from time to time, like the way he always referred to Kiku as 'the Japanese gangster' even though he knew Kiku was half-Chinese.

Quan Chan's insides tightened. "Hi, Jin. How are you?"

Jin sighed. Tension crackled through the line, always an undercurrent when they spoke. "Quan Chan, hello. I'm fine. And you?"

"I'm all right." His heart squeezed, a painful twist in his chest. Years ago, Jin had always called him Xiao Chan, the way his mother and Sun Lau did. But when Quan Chan had left for Tokyo, Jin had stopped using the childhood nickname. "I received a letter from Sun Lau this morning," he went on even though his throat had suddenly gone dry. "He ... he tells me there's a Golden Dragon at the temple now."

A long pause followed on the other end. "There is," Jin said finally. His voice sounded like a string pulled tight with many pounds of pressure.

Quan Chan cleared his throat. A brief memory rose, of himself as a fourteen year old, new at the temple, lying on a mat next to Jin's bed. He'd felt so haunted that he tossed and turned, unable to sleep, but Jin, a few years older than he and assigned to look after him, had been close by. Jin had let Quan Chan curl up against him and held him close. Only then had Quan Chan felt safe enough to sleep.

The memory loosened something inside him. This was ridiculous, holding back this way with someone he'd been so close with for so many years. Just because Jin had tried to follow the rigid rules and not allow his heart to get attached to Quan Chan didn't mean it had worked. If it had, Jin wouldn't have felt so hurt and betrayed when Quan Chan left for Tokyo. The heart always broke the rules. "Jin, please, be honest with me. What's going on with Sun Lau? Is he ill? Is

the temple in trouble? Sun Lau always speaks in riddles, but this ... was different. Is he angry with me?"

Another long pause. "I ... don't know."

That was a lie. Quan Chan heard it in Jin's voice. He knew Jin better than anyone else, perhaps even better than Sun Lau did. His heartbeat rose, as if he were running. "Jin, please, tell me the truth." He squeezed the receiver which he pressed tightly against his ear.

"Perhaps Sun Lau simply misses you, Quan Chan. You haven't been back for a while. You are, after all, his great treasure." Jin's voice sounded gentler now, and it was more difficult than a moment earlier to distinguish between a lie and the truth.

Quan Chan took a deep breath. "Will you put him on the phone, please, Jin?"

Jin cleared his throat. "He's giving a class at the moment. The schedule this weekend is unusually full. A good sign, that is. Shows much more acceptance these days. He'll be teaching straight through. I will tell him you called, though. What if you call first thing Monday morning? I assure you everything will be clear then when you do."

Quan Chan didn't know whether to feel more upset or relieved. At least it gave him the weekend to do that favour for Kiku and for Koji. "All right. Please tell him I'll call again first thing Monday morning. And that I send my love."

"I will." Jin's voice had lightened considerably and Quan Chan allowed himself to be lulled by it for the moment.

Although Jin didn't speak quite as obtusely as Sun Lau did, he too, was highly proficient at it when he deemed it

necessary. Quan Chan could only hope he wasn't doing that now.

"Well, Quan Chan..." Jin hesitated, sounding like he wanted to say something else and was holding back. He did that often. "Until Monday."

"Yes ... Monday." *My friend.* The words hovered in his mind but did not come out of his mouth. Too many times he'd laid bare his heart with Jin only to receive a cold response. "Bye," he said finally.

Quan Chan slowly set the receiver down and sat quietly, elbows on Kiku's desk. No doubt Jin was also bitter that Sun Lau wanted Quan Chan to inherit the temple even though he'd been gone for so long. Well, Jin could have the place to run if that's what he wanted. Golden Dragon or not, Quan Chan's first choice was to remain here, with Kiku and the others. Jin was the perfect successor to Sun Lau—devoted, organised, and an incredible White Tiger in his own right. And Jin had been a good friend when Quan Chan had been the most desperate. More than just a good friend. His first love.

Tilting his head back, Quan Chan closed his eyes. Good thing he had the weekend to concentrate on someone who had nothing to do with his problem. Perhaps doing service for Koji's friend would help make his own path clearer. From what Koji had said about Hiru in past conversations, the man was courteous and good-hearted, as well as boyish-looking and overweight. That was all fine with him. If he wasn't hot like Kiku, it would be easier to attend to him and let him go when the weekend was over.

With a sigh, he stood and went to attend to whatever tasks were needed. Heading out of Kiku's office, he found himself looking forward the arrival of Koji's friend. A welcome distraction. Yet, another feeling nagged at him, one he'd felt at times in the past months but had pushed away. He could no longer push it away.

For the first time since his heartbreak with Kiku, the offer of a Golden Dragon was finally a legitimate enough reason to leave.

* * * *

Jin sat at Sun Lau's desk for a long time after hanging up the phone. Once again he'd failed to communicate his feelings to Quan Chan. Not good. In spite of the problems they'd had over the years, Quan Chan had a special place in his heart. Quan Chan ... Xiao Chan ... had been his first real lover. Quan Chan had always looked up to him, almost as much or more than he had Sun Lau. Quan Chan was a sweet man, a devoted White Tiger. A rare treasure.

And Quan Chan deserved to know the truth.

"Who was on the phone, Jin?"

Jin jumped from his seat at the sound of the shaky voice coming from the doorway. "You should be resting, *sifu*," he said, hurrying over to the elderly man in his red silk dragon robe.

Even in illness, Sun Lau's facial features were still wide and strong, his eyebrows, broad dark arches above small, piercing eyes. The elderly man's silver hair, never shaved off in the way of the other men's, remained longer, down his back, tied

by a string. In spite of his chalky pallor, Sun Lau still managed to give him the strong glare he did when displeased. Only Quan Chan had ever managed to escape being the object of that glare. "Nonsense. I'm not dead yet."

"*Sifu*, please." Jin lightly took hold of his master's elbow, intending to steer him back to his quarters.

Sun Lau sighed, an impatient sound, but allowed Jin to usher him around. "You treat me like an invalid."

Maybe because you're dying of cancer. Jin kept a hand under Sun Lau's elbow. Once strikingly handsome and vibrant, the frail man hobbling next to him made Jin's heart weep.

"You haven't answered my question, Jin. Was that Quan Chan on the phone?"

"Yes, *sifu*."

Sun Lau stiffened and halted. He turned a stern face to Jin. "You didn't tell him, did you?"

Jin bowed his head, though his heart pumped faster. "No, *sifu*." He looked up and braced himself. "Though in all respect, it's not fair to lie to him this way. He deserves to know." Especially since the prognosis gave Sun Lau another month at the most.

Sun Lau's lips tightened in a line. "If you were ill like I am, you'd understand. But you don't. He mustn't be forced to come back that way." Then his eyes softened. "I only want him to be happy. Which is why I offered him Wu Li."

Cold prickles ran through Jin's body. *Not Wu Li.* Quan Chan hadn't mentioned such an offer, only that Sun Lau had told him about the Golden Dragon. Unable to speak, Jin urged Sun

Lau to continue walking. The temple was quiet this morning before the weekend rush of patrons coming to use the baths and get a massage and he wanted to get Sun Lau back to bed before anyone else saw them. Or really, before anyone saw his own complexion which was now undoubtedly pale. Wu Li was *his*. No one else's. How could Sun Lau do this? How could he offer the most beautiful man in the entire world to Quan Chan when Quan Chan was happy to remain in Tokyo with that Japanese gangster he fell in love with?

Yes, Sun Lau had wanted Quan Chan to bring the White Tiger path to Tokyo, which he'd done successfully. But Quan Chan had needed to return afterwards and hadn't. Quan Chan wasn't the one who'd rescued and trained Wu Li, who'd poured his heart and soul into him.

Sun Lau sighed. "You are more readable than the scrolls we study from, Jin. You just don't understand anything, do you? All this time and you have only deepened your attachments. Wu Li should mean nothing more to you than a vehicle to reach Immortality. Romantic love has no place here."

Anger tightened Jin's back. Hysteria boiled deep within him but he fought for control. How hypocritical this man was! Jin bit back a reminder that it was Ming, Sun Lau's patron and lover for decades, who'd bought this place for Sun Lau, and who'd kept him hidden from Mao's Red Guards. Not only that, but Sun Lau's reserved gravesite was next to Ming in the cemetery, a place normally reserved for a wife next to her husband.

But it would be beyond disrespectful to speak to Sun Lau this way. Quan Chan could have done it, but he was the only one. So Jin kept his mouth shut.

They were nearing Sun Lau's quarters and in moments, the sick man would be tucked into bed with three attendants at his bedside at all times, leaving Jin free to run the tea room and the temple behind the tea room's façade. And to look in on his beloved. "You should rest now, *sifu*."

A strange sound escaped Sun Lau, something between a chuckle and a tight breath. "Yes, of course." He let Jin lead him to the bed and used Jin's arm for balance as he climbed in. What should have been the most mundane movement seemed a monumental task for Sun Lau.

Jin adjusted Sun Lau's pillows and pulled the covers over him. In spite of his upset over Wu Li, it was still agonizing to reconcile the dragon Sun Lau had once been to the frail, ill man in the bed. "If you need me, *sifu*, have someone come get me."

Sun Lau stared at him. The look chilled Jin. Was it an unconscious stare due to illness or was Sun Lau looking through him as he'd done since Jin had first come to the temple at age sixteen? "You think I'm a hypocrite, Jin, don't you?"

Jin started. His heartbeat rose slightly. Yes, Sun Lau was a hypocrite to belittle his feelings for Wu Li when deep in his heart Sun Lau had never really gotten over Ming's death, not to mention he so obviously had a soft spot in his heart for Quan Chan. And always had. He cleared his throat. "You're entitled to your own views," he said softly.

Sun Lau's shoulders trembled and his throat gargled. Jin lunged forward to get him a glass of water from the bedside table. Only then, holding the glass close to Sun Lau's lips did he realise his teacher was laughing. He set the glass down and stood, waiting, knowing that in moments, Sun Lau would somehow make him feel like shit.

Finally Sun Lau's laughter ebbed and he wheezed. Jin retrieved the glass of water and held it to his lips. Sun Lau took a sip then lay back, breathing heavily. His gaze remained on Jin. "That answer, Jin, is the reason Wu Li is better off with Quan Chan."

Jin's anger resurged. He wanted to scream at Sun Lau, slap the old man across the cheek. *I'm the one who's stayed by you, the one who's helped you keep this place running. I've worked my whole life to be what you wanted and all you do is insult me, berate me and never show a moment's gratitude for my loyalty.* "How do you know Quan Chan won't develop romantic feelings for Wu Li?" he asked finally.

"He won't." Sun Lau spoke with utmost certainty. "I know him. Besides, Quan Chan is *yin*, like Wu Li."

Jin remained quiet. Sun Lau had his own brand of logic, one Jin could never keep up with, no matter how many years he'd known the man. All he could do was try and face his own strange mixture of feelings. He didn't want Quan Chan to come back now and steal Wu Li away from him. And yet, Quan Chan needed to know the truth about Sun Lau. Regardless of the prize being offered, Quan Chan would suffer the rest of his life knowing he'd not been here for Sun Lau's last days. In all fairness to Quan Chan, the rift between them

wasn't Quan Chan's fault. He'd fucked up where Quan Chan was concerned. He should never have turned Quan Chan away the way he had, no matter how much Sun Lau had berated him in private for the romance blossoming between them. The hurt look on Quan Chan's beautiful face, the tears rolling down his cheeks haunted Jin's memory to this day. Perhaps that act alone had driven Quan Chan to Tokyo when he might have remained here.

"Jin."

Obediently, Jin turned and looked at the man who'd been his teacher, his mentor from the day he'd crossed the threshold of the tea room. Without Sun Lau, he might have ended up dead on the streets somewhere, shot or stabbed by a fellow Red Guard who would have discovered how disloyal to Chairman Mao his heart really was. In such a case he could very well have ended up in prison, tortured, beaten to death, or crippled, as many innocent people had been, including Quan Chan's real father, murdered in a prison work camp somewhere on the border of Tibet. Jin owed his life to Sun Lau, which was why he'd accepted every moment of abuse without complaint. "Yes, *sifu*."

Sun Lau was quiet for several moments. His breath rasped, a painful sound to Jin's ears. "Give me your word you won't tell Quan Chan. He must want to come back because of the gift I'm offering him, not because of guilt."

Jin's heart squeezed. He fought back tears. Had it never occurred to the man that Quan Chan would return to him out of love, to be at his deathbed? The words hovered on his lips, unsaid, as usual. Quan Chan was the only one who could

Speak his mind to Sun Lau without receiving a rasher of shit in return. "Yes, *sifu*, you have my word."

Sun Lau nodded and closed his eyes.

Jin turned and walked out, heading back to his quarters. All he wanted to do right now was to curl up in Wu Li's arms and cry, the way Quan Chan used to do with him in the middle of the night when he'd first come to live at the temple. This untenable position left him so vulnerable he couldn't stand it. How could Sun Lau demand these things of him?

Jin thought of Quan Chan. Quan Chan had always been a sensitive boy and had grown into a sensitive man. He would not take this loss well. No doubt, Quan Chan would then accept Wu Li as his comfort in spite of what Sun Lau had said.

This was a nightmare.

Sighing, Jin turned down the corridor that led to his room. His body and soul were hungry for the young man who waited there for him. He shouldn't be taking such comfort in Wu Li, especially considering that Wu Li would soon no longer be his, but Quan Chan's.

And no doubt, after all this time, Quan Chan would accept Wu Li. No man on Earth, regardless of his sexual leanings, could resist a Golden Dragon.

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Chapter Two

I can't believe I'm doing this. Hiru stared at the glass doors of the *ryokan* where his best friend Koji now lived. The two leaping tigers etched into each door reminded Hiru of the activities that went on inside. Men on men—and all the images such a phrase brought to mind.

A light shiver travelled over the tops of his thighs to concentrate, of all places, in his—what was Koji's delicate word for that part of him?—oh, yes, his *dragon*.

Hiru sighed and tightened his hold on the handles of his overnight bag. Apart from the kinky glass doors, The White Tiger, in the middle of Ni Chome, a busy, swanky area of gay bars and clubs, looked like the typical nondescript inn.

Except that The White Tiger was anything but typical.

On the cab ride over from work, he'd told himself a million times that this was just a weekend break to visit his old friend Koji. After all, for years he saw Koji every day at work and they often went out for beers afterward. They'd become good friends, really, helping each other with personal things too, like moving, when it was needed. Hiru had gone to Koji's stepmother's funeral. And, yeah, he'd seen Koji a bunch of times since Koji had come here and fallen in love with Naoto, the long-haired muscle man of his dreams, but it wasn't the same. Toshio Systems was an even more boring, tortuous place to be without his friend there. *Life* itself was more boring and tortuous without Koji around.

And Koji seemed so ... happy.

Hiru's heartbeat sped up slightly. Who was he kidding? This was more than a friendly visit. He needed to ... see ... if his complete ineptitude with women was, well, the kind of problem he thought it was. He'd loved Megumi so much but since her ... there'd been no one, unless you counted brief interactions ... and disasters ... with women in hostess clubs. He pushed those painful thoughts away. In any case, it had been more than ten years without another serious girlfriend. And then there was the way he'd begun to look at Koji.

He'd often wondered at how easily he'd accepted Koji's confession about being gay. And then, he'd often wondered why he always preferred to hang out with Koji more than anyone else. Why he'd missed his friend so much it depressed him.

Not that he was going to do anything with Koji. Koji was practically married to Naoto. But there were other guys there whose job it was to ... um ... help him.

Before he could take another step, the left glass door opened. In the next second, Koji emerged, a wide grin on his face. "Hey, Hiru-chan!" Koji was wearing that uniform the guys here wore—white vest with nothing underneath and small white shorts, his feet covered in *tabi* socks and *zori* sandals. In the warmer weather, he went barefoot. Koji had told him all about his life here. "Welcome." Koji's smile deepened as he gestured Hiru to the door.

There was no backing out now. Nor did he want to. Koji's presence drew him like a magnet to clasp his friend's hand and shake it even as they bowed to each other. The change in his friend since coming here and meeting Naoto was nothing

short of miraculous. The dark circles Koji'd had under his eyes since Hiru knew him were gone. Koji's skin and hair glowed with health, and his eyes, previously sad and haunted all the time, had light in them.

Hiru found himself smiling in spite of the way his heart beat faster and his stomach flipped over. "Hey to you, too."

Before he knew it, Koji had slipped his bag from his hand and was ushering him inside. "I'm so glad you're here," Koji said as the door floated shut behind them. He gestured to the shoe rack and put down a pair of slippers with the White Tiger's emblem on them so that Hiru could push his feet into them after slipping off his shoes.

"Thanks, Koji-chan. Same with you." He was barely halfway down to pick up his shoes when Koji snatched them up and slipped them into one of the cubby holes.

When Hiru straightened, he noticed a second man standing behind Koji. When had he come in? It wasn't Naoto, he knew, from having met Koji's lover. Naoto was broad and beefy with long hair and a rugged face. This man, though muscular, was narrower in build and smooth-looking, his hair merely a dark shadow over his scalp, shaved as closely as a Zen monk's hair.

Hiru bowed to him while a strange feeling curled suddenly in his gut.

When Koji lifted to his feet, he saw their gazes meeting. "Hiru-chan, I'd like you to meet Quan Chan." The way he said the man's name made it sound like Chwan Chan.

Quan Chan. Koji had mentioned him in past weeks the way he spoke of all his new friends and didn't seem to think

anything of the fact that the man was Chinese. Hiru had never known any Chinese personally, but his grandfather had fought in the Second Sino-Japanese War and had been captured and tortured. Ironically it had been Hiru's father who'd shown the anger for what had happened to *his* father. *Don't trust the Chinese, Hiru-chan*, Dad had said so often while Hiru was growing up. *They'll take advantage of you every way they can. Hungry dogs is what they are.* After Hiru's accident almost eleven years ago, his father had suddenly completely stopped saying these things, yet, the memories were there, burned into Hiru's mind.

Hiru caught himself staring at the other man, his father's words spiralling in his mind and making him hesitate. He'd grown up watching his grandfather limp from the tortures he'd suffered, and yet, here, in the face of Koji's warmth and enthusiasm, he felt suddenly like a backward racist. Koji wasn't the kind of person who'd use history to keep up walls to anyone. Koji gave everyone a chance. And Koji was the happy one now of the two of them. Maybe Koji was also the smarter one.

Hiru pulled himself forcibly out of his state. "Hello," he said to Quan Chan. "Nice to meet you." He gave another quick bow while his cheeks tingled. Briefly he saw Quan Chan return the gesture. When the man straightened, he was wearing a small, kind of shy smile that Hiru found very similar to Koji's smile. Quan Chan certainly didn't look like a hungry dog who'd ever, under any circumstances, torture a man. He also hadn't seemed to pick up on Hiru's little mental foray into prejudice.

"Quan Chan will be looking after you while you're here," Koji went on. He still wore a smile but Hiru noticed a slight blush in his friend's cheeks.

Hiru nodded, though his stomach did a flip. He bowed, partly in an attempt to dispel the feeling. "Ah, thank you." His heart thudded much harder now. Did 'looking after' him mean having sex the way the website explained the White Tiger Path? All that oral stuff. Now Hiru was wishing he hadn't been so reluctant all this time to ask Koji more about the specifics of what he might experience while staying there. Moments like this, being painfully hung up about sex had its sharp drawbacks.

"Now," Koji went on, "I'll show you to your room and Quan Chan will bring up some *saké*. How's that?"

Hmm, *saké*. Probably would be good to calm his nerves a bit. He nodded. "Perfect."

"Great." Koji clapped his shoulder in a friendly way and slid back a *soji* screen which obviously led to the inn's interior. "This way."

Hiru bowed quickly to Quan Chan and followed Koji, not even knowing whether the other man bowed in return. His breathing grew quicker as he followed Koji down a hall of highly polished dark wood, the walkway surrounding a centre garden of raked stones and a small fountain. The décor was that of a traditional Japanese home—simple, clean lines, and peaceful. "This place is beautiful," he murmured.

Koji nodded. "Yes, it is. That was the first thing I noticed about it when I came here." He hesitated. "Well, the second."

Hiru managed a smile through his nervousness. Koji had told him about his first encounter with Naoto, and how immediately enchanted he'd been with him. Yet, Koji had been such a nervous wreck, he'd drunk too much *saké* and managed to put his foot in his mouth a bunch of times within the first ten minutes. Hiru made a mental note not to have more than one cup. All he needed was to get drunk and let something slip about the terrible things his father had often said about the Chinese.

Koji led him into an elevator then down the hallway where he stopped and slid back the *soji* screen to a room. "I hope you'll like it here." He gestured to the room's interior.

"I'm sure I will." Hiru stepped into the room. It felt strange to have Koji hosting him this way, considering their friendship had always been that of two office guys, co-workers who went for beers and watched sumo wrestling matches on TV together.

Behind him, he heard Koji slide the screen closed then saw him cross over to the closet where he set the bag down on a rack. "Make yourself comfortable, Hiru-chan," he said.

Obediently, Hiru went over to the seating area where a low table had room for four to sit, two on each side. On the other side of the room, a black-covered futon rested on a redwood platform with pillows arranged luxuriously at the head. A potted plant and some ... Hiru cleared his throat and wiped his palms on his pants ... erotic drawings of naked men entwined in various poses finished the décor. Hiru turned quickly away from the largest drawing which hung on the wall above the bed.

Koji came over, lowered himself into a chair across from Hiru and smiled at him again, making Hiru vividly aware of Koji's bare chest. Koji had put on a few pounds since living here and his physique was like that of a toned swimmer. Suddenly Hiru was aware of all the times in the past they'd gone on weekends to a nearby *onsen* with co-workers and Hiru had caught himself staring at Koji while they soaked in the baths or washed in the shower. Koji had been much thinner then and Hiru had told himself he'd been concerned about his friend's health as well as upset about the scars on Koji's ass cheeks. But there had been more to it, he saw now. Much more.

Hiru felt the awkward moment pass between them. This setting was a far cry from the couch in front of Koji's TV and coffee table covered with beer bottles and bags of seaweed chips.

"I can't believe you're here," Koji said softly. "I'm so glad."

"Me too." Hiru clasped his hands together. His large body felt suddenly way too damn big for this elegant chair and his hands, resting on his lap, appeared to him as a pair of giant meat hooks. On the judo mat, his size and broadness had been an advantage, but here, he simply felt like an oaf. Actually, in front of Koji, he felt that way. Which had been the main clue as to why he needed to ... explore.

Koji's brow furrowed. "I'm sorry I haven't seen you as often since I moved in here. I feel as if I've abandoned you somehow."

Hiru sighed and felt his shoulders sag a bit, as if Koji's honesty had released some kind of tension. "Don't worry, Ko-

chan. You did no such thing." He gestured to the room, meaning to encompass the entire place. "This is so much better for you. You weren't well. I'd rather you were happy." The sadness in Koji's eyes made him distinctly uncomfortable and he hated feeling as if he had caused it. "Hey," he said, changing the subject, "how's Naoto?"

Koji's face immediately brightened and a dreamy look slipped into his eyes. "Very well. He's working right now but you'll see him later. I was hoping you'd join us all for supper. We always have a great time together and Basho and Yuzo are the best chefs in Tokyo."

Hiru smiled even though his stomach did another flip. He wasn't very good at meeting people, but didn't want to disappoint Koji. "I'd love to. Thanks."

Another friendly moment of quiet passed between them before Koji spoke again. "I hope you'll like Quan Chan," he said. "We call him Chan Chan. He's a wonderful person, considerate, gentle and very sweet." Koji's cheeks coloured a bit and he leaned forward as if someone might be eavesdropping. "And he's a master White Tiger." The pointed tone in Koji's voice conveyed his meaning. "That's why he has the tiger tattoo on his front. It denotes a very high level of practice. To get the tattoo, a person must be able to meditate himself into ecstasy." A mischievous look came into Koji's eyes, a side of his friend Hiru had never seen. Koji put his hand to the side of his mouth, the way one does when telling a secret in someone's ear. "That means without using his hand." Koji winked.

Hiru felt his cheeks burn and stared at the other man. This place had brought out a more different Koji than he'd ever imagined. He and Koji had seen each other naked in the baths a million times over the years, but never, not once, had they discussed sex, beyond the occasional brief conversation about dating women.

Clearing his throat, Hiru pulled a bit at the knot of his tie, loosening it to let some air cool the sudden heat around his collar. "He seems to be all you've said he is."

Koji smiled at him and the corners of his eyes crinkled. Hiru caught himself staring again, this time realising how much he'd always liked Koji's smile, much less rare now than it had always been. Koji had hardly ever smiled over the years. "Kiku-sensei has tried to make this a place where men can come from everywhere and be together, regardless of their race or nationality," Koji went on, as if he'd intuitively understood some of his friend's thoughts. He looked at Hiru. "You don't mind, right? I mean, you're an accepting person but I know about your grandfather. It's hard not to have certain feelings and we've never discussed it. I apologise for not asking you before you got here." Koji frowned.

Hiru stared at his friend. Koji was sensitive like that, often when you least expected it. One of the qualities that had always struck him was how perceptive Koji was even when he appeared completely distracted or upset. Bowing his head, Hiru sighed. "I have felt prejudice in the past, but it's the wrong way to live," he said softly. "I'm nervous enough. I don't want to have such feelings guide me." A gentle hand on his arm made him look up.

Koji's eyes radiated compassion and he smiled.

A strange jolt of energy went through Hiru at the look, followed by that sense of regret he'd been plagued with since Koji had left Toshio Systems as a full-time employee to consult from home. Why had it taken so damn long to realise the truth? Why couldn't he have discovered it before it was too late and Koji was completely in love with someone else?

"It's all right, Hiru-chan."

There wasn't time to say more. Just then a knock sounded on the *soji* screen and the door slid open at Koji's call.

Hiru's stomach tightened. It was Quan Chan, bearing a tray with a *saké* decanter and three cups. Hiru watched him kneel and set the tray down, then turn and slide the screen closed before rising again bringing the tray over to them. Quan Chan's gaze met briefly with Hiru's and he smiled.

Hiru felt his cheeks burn. He returned the smile but Quan Chan was already setting the cups on the low table and pouring the *saké*. A sense of relief filled him that Quan Chan would have a cup too.

Koji lifted his cup and Hiru followed his friend's lead. Having Koji here helped soothe his nerves a bit, but what about when Koji left him alone with Quan Chan? Best not to think about that.

"*Kampai*," Koji toasted and sipped from his cup. Again, Hiru followed, glancing at Quan Chan as if to make sure the other man would also drink. He did and Hiru couldn't help glancing at Quan Chan's throat as he swallowed. The man's Adam's apple slid up and down and other tiny muscles in his neck worked. That led Hiru to notice Quan Chan's skin, a rich

golden colour and flawlessly smooth, like Koji's. Hiru had spent a lot of time studying Koji's skin and so the comparison came to his mind.

Hiru tipped his head back and gulped the *saké*. As large as he was, the tiny cup was a mere sip. The clear liquid burned pleasantly in his throat and he instantly felt the relaxing tingle it brought to his limbs and brain. Carefully he set the cup down, politely refusing the offer of a refill.

Koji, too, set his cup down and smiled at Hiru. "I must go for now, Hiru-chan," he said. "I'll see you a little later, okay?"

Tension clenched Hiru's back and shoulders and his heart immediately pounded. Not wanting to be impolite, he nodded, standing to offer a handshake to Koji.

Koji took his hand warmly but then used it to pull him into an embrace. "I'm so glad you're here," he said again.

"Me too." Hiru hugged him as closely as he dared, unable to ignore the warm press of Koji's bare chest against his front. Koji smelled really good too. Hiru hadn't ever really gotten this close to him before and hadn't known his friend smelled like clean laundry hanging to dry in fresh air. He was both relieved and disappointed when Koji pulled gently away. "See you at supper."

Koji nodded. "Definitely." He waved to Quan Chan and slipped out of the room.

Hiru cleared his throat. Heat flared again around his neck, wherever his collar touched his skin, and more heat made his armpits feel like small infernos. He looked at Quan Chan who had also stood when Koji was leaving. As Hiru had noticed before, Quan Chan had a very attractive face, finely arched

brows, high cheekbones and beautifully-shaped eyes, like very large almonds with long lashes. His lips, too, were really nice, full and soft-looking. Hiru caught himself starting to look lower but then stopped, remembering suddenly what Koji had said about the tiger tattoo. He cleared his throat again and found his hand once more on the knot of his tie.

"Here, allow me." Before he realised what was happening, Quan Chan had stepped up to him and put a hand over his.

Hiru froze. Suddenly, Quan Chan's nationality wasn't even remotely an issue. Quan Chan was a man and was about to help him ... undress. Among other things. For one brief moment, Hiru almost backed away, claiming he'd made a mistake. But then what would he do? Leave and go home to his lonely apartment? Go to a hostess club and upset another woman with his ineptitude? Or maybe, spend another night in front of the television set with a beer in his hand, missing Koji.

No. As frightened as he was, the alternative was nightmarish. He'd lived so long in fearful seclusion. It had already cost him an opportunity with the first person in over a decade he'd felt he could love since Megumi. At thirty-three, he wasn't getting any younger. Simply getting older wasn't going to make his life better.

"Yes," he said, nearly in a whisper, "thank you." He allowed Quan Chan to draw his hand back down to his side and then begin to work the knot open with both hands. The gentle tugging on his neck as the tie loosened turned out to be quite pleasant, as was the brush of the other man's

fingertips against his chest, even through the material of his shirt.

"I'll do everything I can to make your stay pleasant for you, Hiru-san." Quan Chan's low tone echoed the soothing movement of his fingertips. His expression looked sincere as he slid the tie out from under Hiru's collar and hung it over his own shoulder before reaching out again, his fingertips landing on the top button of Hiru's shirt. He paused and peered into Hiru's eyes, a concerned look on his face. "You don't mind my touching you, do you? If you feel at all uncomfortable, you're under no obligation to me." He smiled gently. Like his face and mannerisms, Quan Chan's voice was also agreeable, a smooth tenor that was as refined as his appearance.

Hiru stared a moment, sensing a hidden message in Quan Chan's words. Was the other man so sensitive he picked up on the Chinese issue? Shit, that would simply be the worst. He'd never truly, deep down believed his father and realised with a flash that whatever prejudice he'd harboured had been inherited, not organic to his nature. Quickly he shook his head. "No, not at all. You're ... I mean, I don't mind at all. You're a good ... toucher." *Toucher*? What the hell kind of word was that he'd just made up? What the hell was happening to his tongue, getting so loose all of a sudden? His cheeks flared again with heat and he watched Quan Chan for a response.

The other man's smile widened. "Thank you very much, Hiru-san." He worked open the top button then pulled away, bowing politely to him and gesturing to the bed. "Please make

yourself comfortable," he said kindly. "I need a moment to prepare the room for your relaxation."

With his stomach flopping like a landed fish, Hiru obeyed, going to the edge of the bed and sitting. He watched Quan Chan drape the tie over the back of a chair, light a stick of incense which he set delicately on the bedside table then turn a knob in the wall. The gentle sound of traditional bamboo flute and *shamisen* music floated into the air. The elegant room, already inviting and warm in its traditional Japanese simplicity, became even more peaceful and soothing.

Which was good, because Hiru felt a trembling inside him, a tremor that emanated from his bones and made him feel shaken deep down in a place he was usually unaware of. His awareness now, however, was sharp, as sharp as when he'd been on the judo mat, facing an opponent. He heard every footfall loud and clear as Quan Chan approached the bed and knelt down before him.

"Are you all right, Hiru-san?" he asked. "May I call you that?"

Hiru nodded without hesitation. He didn't think he could bear having Quan Chan address him by his last name, especially if they were going to be doing ... well, the things they were probably about to do.

He cleared his throat. "Of course, that's perfect," he answered. "But how should I call you? I could say Quan-san or Quan Chan-san. Or I could call you Chan-san. There are so many possibilities. Your friends probably call you Chan-chan or Quan Chan-chan. Koji has referred to you as Chan Chan in the past. So that would be Chan Chan-chan. If I called you

Chan Chan, then I guess I would say Chan Chan-san because I just met you. Whatever you prefer. I wouldn't want to—" He abruptly clamped his mouth shut. What the hell?

Quan Chan was staring at him, his already large eyes open wide, as if he were watching Hiru's skin turn bright green or something equally bizarre.

Hiru stared back, every nerve ending tingling with his mounting horror. Where had all that babbling come from? He never babbled like this, even when he was nervous. Usually he clammed up completely, even in front of Koji. "I'm sorry," he said, "I don't know what I'm saying." His cheeks prickled now with intense heat, a hot flush that spread down his neck and arms, all the way to his fingertips. No doubt his face was bright red. *Kuso!* Without thinking, he bowed deeply, finding etiquette his only relief.

When he straightened up and dared to look at the other man, he saw the corners of Quan Chan's soft lips turned up, a sudden warm smile filling his expression, all the way into his eyes. Tiny lines crinkled in his cheeks, almost like dimples but not quite. In any case, they gave his face a kind of ... wise and sweet look, all at once.

Suddenly, Quan Chan's hand came out and covered his. The man's touch was warm, soft the way it rested on the top of his hand. Unexpectedly, Hiru experienced a new tingling, this one soothing in the way it cascaded up his arm, into his chest. He exhaled as tension ran from his limbs and he let his shoulders slump a bit.

Quan Chan laughed softly. "Don't be embarrassed, Hiru-san. You have nice humour, I can tell. Koji speaks very highly

of you." He curled his fingers lightly around Hiru's hand, turned it over, palm facing up, and brushed his fingertips across Hiru's skin. The motion sent another gentle cascade of tingles through Hiru and he felt more tension drain from his body, just as Quan Chan's words helped drain his embarrassment.

"This is your time to relax, Hiru-san. Don't worry about anything." As Quan Chan spoke, he pressed his fingertips into the soft part of Hiru's hand, moving in slow, even circles, a massage that deepened the relaxed feeling in Hiru's body. Even the tightness in his gut began to dispel. He hadn't meant his bumbling statements to be humorous, but if Quan Chan thought they were, all the better. Better to appear funny than to be thought of as a complete geek.

"That's nice." Hiru had had plenty of massages back in his judo days. A massage before competition, then another one after. Well, that is, until the accident.

Quan Chan smiled some more and Hiru felt his insides warm again. Even in their brief contact, Quan Chan looked like a completely different man when he was smiling. *Your smile is nice too*, Hiru almost said, then stopped before embarrassing the crap out of himself again. This must have been how Koji had felt that first day with Naoto. Only what was the excuse now? Hiru had barely drunk at all.

Quan Chan's thumbs continued their easy yet firm circles over his palm for several minutes before smoothing up each finger, squeezing each joint in a way that released pressure Hiru hadn't even known was in there.

"We must try to cover all the pressure points," Quan Chan said, his voice as soothing as his touch. "There are so many in the hands and fingertips that this massage should help relax your whole body."

"It's working," Hiru said. His nervousness seemed to have faded a bit into the background now, more of a shadow in his consciousness rather than the force driving him to quake and babble.

Quan Chan paused at Hiru's wrist and unbuttoned the cuff of his shirt, which he rolled carefully back, just enough to continue his massage partially up Hiru's forearm while the music piped into the background and the incense released a mild cloud of sandalwood scent into the air.

After several more minutes, Quan Chan lowered Hiru's hand so it rested on his thigh and picked up his other hand, repeating the massage. Hiru took another deep breath and continued to watch Quan Chan's hands. Quan Chan's fingers were wide and strong looking, yet also refined, his nails neatly trimmed, like Koji's. Hiru had spent much time looking at Koji's hands, and saw a similar elegance in them as he saw in Quan Chan's. Unbidden, Hiru's gaze flickered up to Quan Chan's forearms, smooth with the lightest down of hair on them. Just as elegant as his hands, lean muscles flexed in them with his movements.

Hiru's stomach made a small flip. In his younger years, he'd developed the habit of observing another man to size him as an opponent on the judo mat. Build, stature, eye contact. Even the way a man walked and the size of his hands told Hiru how balanced an opponent would be and what

possible strategies he'd employ to take Hiru down. His close attention to detail had always served him well and Hiru had been on his way to becoming the top *judoka* in Japan until...

He pulled his mind away from that painful course and back to his furtive examination of Quan Chan, observing the kneeling man in the same sensually curious way he had taken to looking at Koji this past year and a half. His gaze slid up Quan Chan's arms, noting the way his biceps and triceps flexed. Somewhere between Koji and Naoto in height, Quan Chan's body was perfectly proportioned, with leanly rounded muscles. Hiru's constant comparison of Quan Chan to Koji made him uncomfortable, yet he couldn't stop thinking of how close they were in build but also how Quan Chan's muscles were slightly larger and ... Quan Chan's vest gapped open, revealing coin-sized nipples darker than Koji's, more the shade of bittersweet chocolate than milk chocolate.

Truly, Quan Chan was unbelievably handsome, as good-looking as any man on a magazine cover or on television.

Quan Chan gently released Hiru's hand and sat back on his heels, giving Hiru a complete view of his chest and abdominals, the very image of a physique chart he used to see in his physical therapist's office when he'd gone for treatments after the accident. Well, except for the powerfully leaping body of a white tiger inked in astonishing detail across Quan Chan's front. The tiger's front paws stretched over the left side of Quan Chan's ribcage while the rear portion of the beast disappeared around the side of his waist. Hiru cleared his throat, his insides tickling with his sudden overwhelming desire to see where the tiger's tail went.

"Would you like your shoulders and back done, Hiru-san?" Quan Chan's smooth, soft voice pulled Hiru's attention back to the other man's face. Quan Chan wore that wonderful smile he had and his eyes radiated kindness. Although, looking closer, Hiru could have sworn that Quan Chan looked a bit ... sad. Yes, sad and troubled. He hoped it wasn't because of him. He would never want to make Quan Chan feel troubled.

"Whatever you'd like is my pleasure." Quan Chan bowed his head slightly. "I understand this is your first time here."

Hiru stiffened slightly. It would mean taking his shirt off. Some nervousness trickled back in even though Quan Chan was a gracious host, making him feel at ease and giving him the lead of their interaction. Now, to decide what he wanted.

The ghost of Quan Chan's massage remained in his hands and forearms, reminding him of the man's skilled, gentle caress. Hiru definitely wanted more of that and obviously, if he became uncomfortable, he could stop at any time and never have to feel awkward about it. He nodded. "Yes, I'd like ... a massage ... thank you."

The other man's smile widened. "Very good." He bowed, rose up on his knees again and reached forward. "Here, I'll help you with your shirt." He unrolled Hiru's sleeves then moved in closer, settling his fingers on the second button of Hiru's dress shirt.

Hiru's breath caught softly. He watched Quan Chan's face, his expression even and focused, as if unbuttoning Hiru's shirt were as delicate an operation as surgery. Button by button, Hiru felt his bare chest exposed to the air and to Quan Chan's vision. That strange flutter moved again in his gut. How wild

was it that in his life he'd gone naked in baths with other guys for years—millions of times—and hadn't given it a thought? When had it all changed? He didn't know. He just knew that sometime in the last year and a half, he'd begun noticing Koji in a different way, the way he'd notice a woman.

The thought brought him up short. It was the first time he'd allowed himself to pursue the idea. His face grew hot as images of male bodies entwined flashed in his mind ... Koji's and his. His glance flickered to Quan Chan. Surely, the man must feel the thudding of his heart. The images in his mind refused to go. Now, it was Quan Chan's perfect body under his.

Quan Chan undid the last button and reached up to push the shirt back off Hiru's shoulders. Hiru helped him, half-twisting to slide his arms out of the sleeves, then letting Quan Chan pull it away. He turned back around and froze.

Quan Chan's eyes were wide again. This time, though, the look in them was ... different. He wasn't staring at Hiru as if he'd sprouted a second head.

Hiru's heart started to pound. "Is something wrong, Quansan?" There, he'd found the name he'd use to address him.

Quan Chan shook his head. He lifted his gaze to Hiru's and Hiru saw a sudden, distinct flush in the other man's finely planed cheeks. "Nothing's wrong," he said, his voice low, nearly a whisper. "I just ... it's just..." He fell silent and bowed. When he rose up again, that look was still in his eyes. "It's just, your physique. I didn't expect. It's ... incredible."

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Chapter Three

Quan Chan's cheeks felt as if they'd caught fire. *Shit*, he hadn't meant to say such a thing as that. Koji's friend was freaked out and nervous enough already, and there'd been that bit of tension around being touched by a Chinese Quan Chan had sensed in him. Thankfully, it had been just a superficial impulse, one that Hiru-san had examined, seen as unworthy and discarded immediately.

And now this outburst. What must Hiru-san think of him now? He just hadn't expected Hiru to have such a great body, so broad and solid. Hiru's muscles weren't very cut or defined like Kiku's or Naoto's, but his chest and shoulders were wide and strong-looking. Koji had described Hiru as overweight and boyish, so Quan Chan had expected what he'd seen when Hiru had his shirt on: an overweight ox of a man with a boyish face. Apparently, Hiru's somewhat baggy dress shirt had been deceptive. And Koji hadn't seen his friend without clothing for some time.

Not that Quan Chan would have cared if Hiru were overweight. Big men could be hot too. This was just ... well ... that broad chest filled him with the powerful urge to press himself against Hiru and hang on to him. It was flawless except for a reddish, crescent-shaped suture scar across his right pectoral muscle. Quan Chan knew about that scar. Koji had once told him about a terrible car accident Hiru had been in many years ago, an accident that had not only ended a promising judo career but had killed his girlfriend.

"Thank you, Quan-san," Hiru said finally, before Quan Chan gathered his wits enough to apologise. Hiru's cheeks were bright pink now and his dark eyes disbelieving as he stared back, obviously so shocked that he was forgetting to bow. The way he was acting showed he definitely didn't hear such things often, if ever. "I recently lost a lot of weight," he went on. "I'd gotten heavy in the last ten years." A shy, sad look flooded his eyes. He seemed compelled to explain himself. "When Koji came to live here and started to get better and find happiness..." His wide shoulders sagged a bit and he glanced down. "I realised I needed to do something, too. I cut out the beer and tempura and started exercising."

That last sentence erased Quan Chan's embarrassment and made him smile. He liked the way Hiru expressed himself. He was funny without trying to be.

And, Hiru was in love with his friend Koji. That much was obvious in the tone of Hiru's voice when he said Koji's name, and in the wistful way he'd mentioned Koji's coming to live at the White Tiger. That must have been a hard loss for Hiru, knowing Koji was happy with Naoto and now out of reach. Quan Chan felt his smile fade. He certainly understood such a loss. With a surge of empathy, he put his hand over Hiru's again.

"I was worried I'd embarrassed you terribly, Hiru-san," he said. "I don't usually speak so ... boldly. You ... inspired me." That was certainly the truth. The other man's broad strength had nearly left him breathless.

The shy look in Hiru's eyes intensified, as did the pink in his cheeks. The man had a very pleasing face, a wide oval

shape with deep-set eyes that really drew one's attention down his small nose to his very reddish-pink, perfectly bow-shaped, full lips framed by a dark shadow of beard and moustache, heavy even though he was clean-shaven. The cut of his hair, large sideburns, faded on the sides and falling in spiky bangs across his forehead, only served to exaggerate the youthful look of his face. He wasn't exactly handsome really, but definitely very cute. "I've never inspired an outburst of praise like that before," he murmured.

"Really?" Quan Chan felt a bit bolder now. After all, a big part of what he did was to make men feel better about themselves. "This is hard to believe." Hiru was deliciously *yang*, every part of him broad and strongly masculine, with hairy forearms and a sprinkling of soft hair in the centre of his chest.

Hiru looked at him as if he had seaweed stuck between his teeth or something like that.

The expression reminded Quan Chan of how long he'd been away from the outside world and in the gentle world of the White Tiger. Here, in Kiku's domain, praise was a daily part of life. People supported each other, noticed each other deeply. He'd forgotten that out there, the kindest, most wonderful and beautiful people could go starving, begging for love and approval. He'd once been one of those love-starved people. Thanks to Kiku's friendship, his life was full and sweet in spite of this recent heartache.

He looked down, seeing his hand still resting on Hiru's. "It's just a shame," he went on when Hiru didn't answer. Hiru was staring down at him, a confused look in his dark eyes. He

seemed so much like Koji had been when he first came to the White Tiger—polite, gentle, full of unexpressed, unappreciated passion. Naoto had seen immediately what Koji really was under his overworked, haunted exterior, just as Quan Chan could see the same in Hiru.

"A shame?" Hiru's brow furrowed.

"Yes. A man like you going unnoticed." He caressed the top of Hiru's hand with several fingertips, appreciating the *yang* strength he could sense coiled in the other man's tendons.

Hiru's life force had surged during the hand massage and intensified in the glow of Quan Chan's praise. The *qi* now simmered in the air around his large body, drawing Quan Chan's own life force towards him, like a magnet, making his dragon tighten in his shorts.

Hiru swallowed. "You're very kind, Quan-san," he said softly. "No one's ever given me such a compliment before. Well, truthfully, one person has, but ... she's gone many years."

"I'm sorry, Hiru-san," Quan Chan murmured. "She must have been a kind person."

Hiru looked down briefly. Sadness clouded his gaze. "She was. Since her there's been no one to say things like that. I mean ... until now."

Quan Chan stared at his lips as he spoke. Hiru really had incredible lips and the urge to kiss the man seized him. He missed kissing so much. He hadn't kissed in months, not since that last painful night with Kiku. Kiku had been kissing him, their tongues sliding together in that erotic dance they'd

developed from years of making love together when more visions assaulted Kiku and he'd been forced to pull away.

In the very moment following that last kiss, Naoto had come to Kiku's bedroom door with more bad news. Yuzo had just escaped Taro Suzuki, his psychopathic *yakuza* lover, and was a nervous wreck down in the kitchen.

There had been no more kisses after that night.

Quan Chan's heartbeat sped up. The loneliness in Hiru's face and voice pulled him, spoke to the loneliness inside his own heart. Just to kiss someone else who felt as he did was like a potent medicine. Just to feel the soft press of lips, the brush of tongues, the Dance of Red Lotuses that opened the gate to the mingling of souls. It was one of the ways human beings could feel the presence of the divine in their lives. To kiss Hiru in that spirit would be so sweet, wouldn't it? But Hiru didn't even know whether he really wanted to be with a man.

However, he could get closer...

Quan Chan rose up on his knees so that his face was at a level to Hiru's. Hiru's lips were a mere few inches away and Quan Chan's vision blurred. His mind swam while every inch of his skin, back, chest, stomach, thighs, felt as if it were being tickled with a feather. He stopped himself just before leaning in and brushing his lips across Hiru's.

What was he thinking? He wasn't thinking. Hiru's *yang* force was clouding his judgment, making his body feel as if it would suddenly spin out of control. He leaned back in an effort to regain some composure. What must Hiru think of him, behaving like a sex-crazed homo?

He pulled in a calming breath. Best just to continue Hiru-san's massage, as he'd been doing before getting distracted by the man's incredible physique.

"People are preoccupied with their lives," he said, reaching out and letting his palms land softly on Hiru's shoulders. Another jolt of heat got him. Those muscles were hard and warm. Immediately he began to knead them, squeezing in gentle circles. "I learned long ago that most people are unable to pay attention to anyone or anything for more than a few seconds at a time." His speech now bordered on chattering but he needed it to distract himself from the completely unprofessional effect Hiru was having on him. "So you mustn't take it personally."

Without intending to, his gaze locked with Hiru's. The larger man's eyes now looked more velvety than confused and his breathing had deepened. "I never thought of it that way," Hiru said quietly.

Quan Chan dropped his gaze, although there was no safe place on Hiru to look. "Well, I only meant that ... it's not because of you." He slid his hands down Hiru's triceps and more muscle rippled underneath his fingertips. He pulled in a breath. Every part of the other man was hard and masculine. Except for his lips and ... Quan Chan dared to look up again ... eyes. Those radiated an unexpected softness.

Working a smile onto his lips, Quan Chan kneaded Hiru's upper arms, biceps, triceps, then back up to his shoulders. His hands didn't slide as easily as they did when he used the massage oil, but Quan Chan didn't want to use the oil. He wanted to feel the smooth texture of the other man's pale

skin, nearly a shade of porcelain except for the rosy blush in his cheeks, burning as if he had a slight fever.

His gaze dropped to Hiru's chest. Quan Chan felt his insides jump as the mere sight of the other man's broad torso sent a flame of heat licking through his mid-section. Before he knew what he was doing, Quan Chan's hands followed the path of his gaze, in expanding circles over Hiru's chest. Over those wide, hard muscles and small, cinnamon-coloured nipples that peaked immediately from the brush of his palms.

Hiru sucked in a breath and arched his back.

Quan Chan stopped his hands. "I didn't hurt you, did I?" He realised he hadn't thought that perhaps Hiru's injury could still affect him if pressed the wrong way.

But the other man shook his head. A sheen of sweat gleamed on his forehead. "No," he said, his voice slightly raspy.

Relief shimmered through him. "Good. For a moment, I thought I'd ... you know, your scar."

Hiru nodded and a haunted look infused his eyes. "It doesn't hurt anymore," he murmured.

Quan Chan glanced at him before pressing down again with his palms. "I'm glad, Hiru-san." Hiru's warm skin slid under his fingertips, yet Quan Chan couldn't help wondering what had happened to Hiru. According to Koji's account, it had been a miracle that Hiru survived. The car he and his girlfriend had been riding in had collided with another at high speed and had been crushed beyond recognition. Quan Chan suppressed a shudder. How horrible it must have been.

"I know it's ugly," Hiru said. "I'm sorry." The other man's expression reflected pain and sheepishness, as if he'd done something wrong by getting so hurt.

Quan Chan nearly jumped at the statement. His hands stilled on both sides of Hiru's chest, the sheer pleasure of touching him marred by Hiru's embarrassment. The only thing that mattered in that moment was putting Hiru at ease.

He looked pointedly into Hiru's eyes. "It's not ugly, Hiru-san," he said. "Not in the least." He inched forward and brushed several fingertips over the red crescent of skin. Unimaginable how agonising it must have been, having that entire portion of his body crushed by steel.

"To me it is." Hiru's admission was surprisingly open, as was the haunted look that shadowed his eyes.

Quan Chan's heart squeezed. He caressed the scarred skin again, and again, until Hiru's pained expression eased. "You don't see it correctly then, Hiru-san," he said softly. "Your injury calls out for compassion, not shame and criticism." He spoke from experience, from learning the hardest lesson of his own life. How difficult it still was to think of the hungry, ragged child he'd been on the streets of Shanghai and not hate that child's powerlessness, not want to blame himself for his dire circumstances.

Once again, he smoothed his hand over the scar then across Hiru's chest, daring to brush the pads of his fingertips directly over the man's nipples.

"Ohhh." Hiru let out a tiny moan. His *yang* force simmered around him again, his embarrassment seemingly forgotten.

The surge of heat touched off new ripples of arousal through Quan Chan's dragon. Without thinking, he arched his back. Their bodies were so close now, Hiru's broad chest brushed his nipples. *Ahhh*. The friction sent a jolt of heat through Quan Chan's middle. "You're incredibly attractive," he went on, his voice silkier and skated both hands up Hiru's chest, over his shoulders and down his upper arms in a wide, sensuous circles. "The kind of man you hardly ever see anymore. Strong yet gentle."

A look of disbelief slipped through Hiru's eyes and more disbelief seemed to hang in the air around him, but he bowed his head briefly. "Thank you, Quan-san," he said softly.

Quan Chan made another circle over Hiru's chest, unable to keep his skimming touch from becoming openly seductive. "Really, Hiru-san, I swear on my honour, I'm not just trying to flatter you." The words started to tumble from him, as if unleashed by the light friction of Hiru's body against his fingertips. Indeed, the warm cascade of energy swirled within Quan Chan, down his arms, his thighs, through his ass, and across his back. His brain itself felt as if it were melting and his tongue loosening beyond his control, as if he'd drunk too much *saké*. All he wanted to do was rub up against Hiru like a cat, first with his chest while he purred before slinking around to rub his ass in slow, grinding circles right into Hiru's undoubtedly meaty groin. "Please believe me. You may think I say these things to every guest who comes here, but I promise you, I don't. Not ever. You're quite ... *hot*."

Hiru's eyes opened wider. "Ho ... hot? Really?"

Deliriously, Quan Chan nodded and insinuated his front against Hiru's, so closely that all he could do was slip his arms around Hiru's waist and rub his palms over the other man's broad back. "Yes," he breathed close to Hiru's ear, stopping himself at the last second from nibbling the tender flesh of Hiru's earlobe. "Really."

All pretensions of an actual massage vanished and Quan Chan fell, body and mind, into the flow of seduction, powerless in the grip of Hiru's *yang* heat. Hiru's male scent, a musky aroma mixed with some kind of spicy aftershave, invaded him, made him dizzy with need, pushed him well past the point of regaining control. The last guy he'd behaved this way with had been Kiku. Quan Chan had been unable to contain himself with Kiku from Kiku's early visits to Shanghai. And though Hiru wasn't at all like Kiku who'd been confident and equally as seductive, Hiru had that same inner power. He just didn't know it.

But Quan Chan knew it. His body knew it. Felt it. *Wanted* it.

Hiru's back rose and fell under his hands and the large man's breath rasped in his ear. "You're ... hot ... too," Hiru said in a near-whisper.

"Thank you, Hiru-san," he whispered back and brushed his lips over the side of Hiru's neck, a brief whisper that made the other man let out a shuddery breath. Hiru's hands remained at his sides, his uncertainty at what to do practically hanging in the air. Quan Chan pulled back and smiled at him. He released Hiru long enough to slip his vest off and let it fall to the floor. His insides were soaring. Energy flowed through

him, a constant electric current of delicious heat. He felt alive, like the true White Tiger he was meant to be, a strong, powerful, seductive creature, charged with the energy of the creation.

He reached out again to Hiru and placed his hands on the other man's powerful shoulders. Hiru pulled in a breath, his eyes going velvety with admiration as they perused Quan Chan's torso. Quan Chan could barely suppress a bubbling of laughter. Had it really been so very long since such potent life force had flowed through him?

Sadly, yes. It had been that long. The waves of joyful heat passing through him as if released from prison only showed him how on edge he'd been these past few years, pained by the tension between him and Kiku whenever Kiku touched him. And what a prison it had been, knowing Kiku was receiving only visions of his friend's painful childhood rather than the pleasure of swirling life force that *should* be exchanged between lovers.

Quan Chan slid his hands over Hiru's beefy pecs and paused, his gaze on Hiru's face. Would Hiru, too, suffer the agony of seeing Quan Chan in an alleyway, starving, dirty, face bleeding from the group of boys who'd just pounded on him for fun? "How is that, Hiru-san?" he asked softly, hiding his worry under the silky tone. "Does my touch feel good?"

Hiru nodded. His chest heaved under Quan Chan's palms. "Yes, very good."

No visions, then.

Praise Kwan Yin, goddess of compassion. Quan Chan's worry evaporated a tiny bit. Encouraged, he skated his touch

lower, over Hiru's abdomen, daring to let his fingertips land on Hiru's belt buckle. Just below, the man's package bulged mercilessly against the front of his slacks. Quan Chan's throat went dry and he swallowed, trying to rein in the greedy hunger that now made him burn. "You'll be more comfortable if I loosen this," he said. "Do you mind?"

Hiru shook his head. "No." The large man was trembling, his breath rasping. His muscular arms rested at his sides, but he leaned back a bit, giving Quan Chan room to work open his belt.

Quan Chan paused again, his hands on the belt buckle, his eyes momentarily glued to Hiru's wide but toned abdomen. The soft daylight filtering through the blinds glowed on Hiru's pale skin, and the light etchings of his stomach and chest muscles came into relief, emphasised with each heavy breath Hiru took. The man's belly button, too, was as enticing as the rest of his torso and moisture rose suddenly in Quan Chan's mouth with his intense desire to taste Hiru.

Had he been this wildly in charge with Kiku? Quan Chan's muddled brain couldn't recall much but a distant memory rose of him in the same position, hands poised over Kiku's belt. Kiku had worn a lazy grin and had urged him on, teasing and playful. Kiku had always exuded confidence and coolness, sure of his own body and how to use it. Hiru on the other hand, remained quiet, except for his ragged breathing. His uncertainty spiralled between them with a force of its own, mingled with hot energy, coiled so tensely it made the air hum. It was probably a good idea to pull back a bit, not to work Hiru up the way he was doing, but he couldn't have

stopped, not for anything. Hiru's life force alone, his hard maleness and delicious scent had stirred a storm inside Quan Chan, something that couldn't have happened unless Hiru was hot for him in return. Hiru wasn't confused about his sexuality as much as he was simply repressed and shy. A man with this much *yang* power could make love to anyone, male or female. For whatever reason, Hiru's uptight state was his problem, not whether he wanted men or women.

Gently he worked open Hiru's belt then the hook and zipper to his trousers, which he let fall open. Daring a glance, he repressed a smile at the silky blue boxer shorts Hiru was wearing rather than the conventional white briefs Quan Chan had expected to see. Quan Chan's fingertips itched to reach down and caress Hiru's erection through the silky shorts. He would have loved to trace the outline of Hiru's jade stalk just beneath the luxurious fabric, but it was too soon. With Hiru's *yang* force roiling the way it was, such a move would probably send the poor man through the roof.

Rising on his knees again, Quan Chan reached out and bade Hiru to sit up straight. "I haven't finished your massage yet, Hiru-san," he said softly and slipped his arms around the other man's waist again. Hiru didn't ask him why he didn't massage him from behind, which would have been the normal way, but if he had, what was Quan Chan going to say? *I'm doing this because I just want your body against mine? I want to feel our chests rub together? You've got me so hot my insides are melting?*

He pressed the fingertips of both hands into Hiru's lower back muscles, along either side of his spine, and manipulated them gently.

"That's very nice," Hiru said, his voice hoarse with obvious need. His warm breath tickled close to Quan Chan's ear, sending a spiral of gentle heat down Quan Chan's neck, back and arms.

"Enjoy, Hiru-san." He felt his own breath pulse over the side of Hiru's neck. That warm skin was so close to his lips, less than an inch away, he could smell the aroma of it and practically taste the *yang* heat rising off of Hiru. All he had to do was lower his face the tiniest bit and...

Hiru's arms were suddenly around him. The man's large hands pressed into his back, hot on his skin.

"Hiru-san, are you all—"

His words were whipped away by the jerking of his body, arms squeezed to his sides by a crushing embrace. The room tilted and whirled, a blur as he flew through the air and landed on his back.

And found himself on the bed with Hiru's huge brawn on top of him.

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Chapter Four

Quan Chan blinked. His vision came back into focus. Hiru's flushed face and simmering eyes hovered above him. Their bare chests pressed together, the heat sweaty where their skin touched.

"Quan-san," Hiru whispered. The man's glazed eyes were fixed down into his. Hiru shifted the tiniest bit, giving Quan Chan the distinct rub of a huge, hard dragon against his through their clothing. Electricity jolted through Quan Chan's body, a fan of wild tingling that tightened his *yang* sac and made his dragon surge and his ass throb.

Hiru's chest heaved against his with each heavy breath. One emotion after the next passed through Hiru's eyes, as clear as if Quan Chan were listening to his thoughts. Confusion, lust, remorse warred within him. For a moment, it seemed Hiru would pull away and apologise.

No! The word resounded like a gong in Quan Chan's mind. Clarity hit him the way his body had hit the bed. *Big muscular man on top of him, rubbing against him, looking down at him as if he were the sexiest, hottest guy in the entire world. No horrible visions from touching him. Only chest against chest. Dragon against dragon.* He so much didn't want Hiru to get off of him. This felt so ... damned good.

Another understanding flashed in his mind.

Life, the *tao*, was giving him this gift, if just for a little while.

He was going to accept it gratefully.

"Hiru-san," he whispered back. And lifted his thighs, locking his legs around the other man's hips. "Hiru-san," he said again, "You're here. You're ... nnnhh—"

Hiru's lips closed over his and the man's hot tongue slipped into his mouth. Quan Chan's eyelids fluttered and he sighed into Hiru's mouth as his arms closed around the large man's broad back. The heat and weight of Hiru's brawn sank him so deeply into the futon, he felt as if he'd disappear underneath him. *Sweet heaven.*

Hiru's lips chafed against his and his tongue slid against Quan Chan's in a fervent dance. The man's inexperience was obvious in the clumsy way he kissed, but he was also surprisingly, achingly tender. Each stroke of his tongue, each slide of his chest and groin against Quan Chan conveyed his pent up loneliness and longing, as well as gratitude for this chance. Quan Chan stroked his back, delighting in the flex of those hard muscles under his hands. How damn long it had been since he could just enjoy hugging and kissing with abandon.

He likes me. He wants me. The words spiralled through Hiru's fevered mind, fanning the fire inside him. Licks of heat spread through his belly and chest. An inferno seemed to rage in his cock. He hadn't meant to attack Quan Chan, to haul him onto the bed as if he weighed no more than a rag doll, but the man's scent of spicy herbs, the smooth, warm gold of his skin, his touch, his smile, the way the tiger painted onto his skin flexed with his lean muscles ... all had created a fever in Hiru's brain. So when Quan Chan's chest had brushed his nipples, he'd snapped...

Mmm, Hiru licked back and forth across Quan Chan's tongue. He tasted so good, sweet and mild. And the softness of his lips. Each brush of those velvety lips across his made his cock tighten more.

A wave of heat swept Hiru. He pulled away from Quan Chan's mouth and kissed every inch of skin his lips found. Quan Chan had made him feel so good and sexy, not the hairy ape he usually walked around feeling like. He just wanted to make Quan Chan feel as good ... as ecstatic as the man had made him feel. He probably could never do such a thing. He had no talent for this and practically no experience. The most recent time had been a complete disaster, undeserving of another chance. But he had to try. Quan Chan had looked so sad earlier and he tasted so sweet...

Bracing on his elbows, he slid down and rained fervent kisses over the curve of Quan Chan's throat. To his delight, the other man tilted his chin up, silently offering himself for more kisses. Even the skin of Quan Chan's neck was creamy smooth and warm. Hiru brushed his lips over it, nuzzling him, then feathered the tip of his tongue down the tendons on the side and over Quan Chan's Adam's apple. Quan Chan's sighs and whimpers rippled through him, urging him lower.

Quan Chan was not a small man. His muscles were round and hard, yet Hiru felt like he had a precious treasure underneath him and was careful not to crush him as he trailed kisses over Quan Chan's collarbone and then down to his chest.

"Oh, Hiru-san," Quan Chan whispered. His hands clutched and kneaded Hiru's back muscles now, sliding upward against

Hiru's downward journey. Quan Chan's fervent grip sent tingling heat through Hiru's whole body as much as that sweet voice did.

Quan Chan's fingers now raked into his hair. Hiru closed his lips over one dark nipple. Quan Chan let out a small gasp and arched his back. Encouraged, Hiru licked the smooth disk and felt it tighten under his tongue.

"Oh, oh, oh!" Each brush of Hiru's tongue sent another soft cry through the air.

Wow, he couldn't have believed in a million years he'd have this effect on anyone. In the hostess clubs, when he'd done this, he'd never gotten such an appreciative response. Hiru kissed his way across Quan Chan's chest to the other nipple. He tasted, licked and teased it until the other man's fingers rubbed his scalp in rapid circles.

Hiru's body took over, beyond his own will, making him rock his hips faster and faster against Quan Chan's. Each slide of their bodies together made Quan Chan whimper and his eyelids flutter. The man's hands clutched his ass one second then caressed his hips the next. What a touch he had. Hiru had never felt anything like it in his whole life. Quan Chan was so beautiful and handsome and amazing. Soft and hard all at once.

Quan Chan lifted his hips, pressing their groins tight together. Fire licked through Hiru's cock, making him rise up and surge over Quan Chan like a wild beast. On hands and knees straddling Quan Chan's prone body, he looked down into the man's face. Quan Chan's dark golden skin was

flushed, his eyes wild, lips moist and swollen from their earlier kisses.

"Hiru-san," he whispered, his hands slipping over Hiru's hips to grab his ass again.

That was it. Hiru took his lips again. Quan Chan's mouth was a warm, moist cavern that tasted like heaven. Each slide of their tongues together made Hiru feel as if his soul would spiral out of his body. His mind darkened, his consciousness of the outside world waned, leaving nothing but the feel of Quan Chan underneath him, the hands caressing and squeezing his ass and the flare of pleasure each time their cocks rubbed together. Even through their clothing, each thrust rubbed him with maddening pleasure.

Hiru wanted their bare cocks together but he couldn't stop long enough to get his pants and shorts the rest of the way off. In a feverish trance, he thrust against Quan Chan, each rub like a flurry of sparks through his groin, driving him on.

Quan Chan's breath huffed with each up and down slide. His thighs gripped Hiru's hips as if he would spin away without the tight hold. His clutch on Hiru's ass cheeks seemed to demand he finish what he'd started and Hiru knew in that moment he'd do anything Quan Chan wanted him to do.

The fire down below took over. Hiru's thoughts seemed to melt away, leaving only sensation. He rubbed and rubbed. The pressure was so thick and hard in his cock, his body seemed to drive him to release it. The effort made him pull away from their kisses, brace himself on his elbows and ride the other man.

"Yes, Hiru-san, yes!" Quan Chan's throaty whisper surrounded him. The man's head tilted back. His hands clutched. His body felt as if it would fuse with Hiru's, the way it pressed to his in passionate insistence. One body, one soul, careening toward absolute ecstasy...

Hiru's climax gripped his entire body. He groaned, powerless against the waves of release. In the haze of his mind, he felt Quan Chan's body stiffen under his and the fingers on his ass cheeks go still, pressing hard. Quan Chan's chest heaved in short breaths against his and the man arched his back, whimpering with each movement of their bodies.

With the release of seed, Hiru felt the moisture pool in his shorts. His chest rose and fell heavily. His body was sweating. Quan Chan was staring up at him, a dazed look on his handsome face, a gleam of sweat on his perfect skin.

Hiru stared down at him until the waves passed and the tension flew away. He caught himself at the last second from collapsing on top of Quan Chan. The man beneath him was by no means small and crushable, but for some reason, it seemed the wrong thing to do.

Wrong. Yes, wrong. The sheer bliss of pleasure faded as Hiru's memory surged, reminding him of the way he'd grabbed Quan Chan, thrown him onto the bed and pounced on him like a cave man. Like a damned beast.

Rearing back, he bowed low, his hands pressing into the mattress. "Forgive me," he choked out, his throat dry. The ghostly whispers of satisfaction in his body only intensified his shame. "I don't know what came over me. I ... I've never done anything like that." That wasn't exactly true. There was

the one time in the hostess club. The woman had struggled away from him, crying, her makeup smeared. How horrified he'd been, knowing he'd frightened her. Just because she'd had his whole package in her hand, kneading it until he was mindless didn't mean he should have jumped on her and shoved his hand up her blouse. He'd closed his mouth over hers, not realising for many moments she was struggling against him, not returning his passion. An occasion of deep shame that had kept him from going into places like that ever since.

Now, here he was, having done the same thing. Again. What kind of animal was he? "I mean, yes I have. Not exactly like that," he went on. "I mean ... oh God." He rubbed a palm over his face, mildly aware of the shifting movement on the bed beside him. Quan Chan was getting off the bed, away from him, no doubt. And rightfully so.

A gentle grip on his wrist pried his hand off his face. Hiru dared to open his eyes and saw Quan Chan looking at him. Quan Chan's skin was still flushed, his lips swollen from their kisses, but his expression was sympathetic. Not upset or frightened.

"Hiru-san, there is absolutely nothing to be sorry for." Quan Chan clasped Hiru's hand between both of his as he knelt beside him. He settled Hiru's hand onto his thigh and reached out, rubbing Hiru's back. "I ... wanted it ... this, I mean. More than you could know. I swear." His hand rubbed easy circles over Hiru's back.

Hiru looked at him, disbelieving. "Really?"

The other man nodded, a smile on his lips. He really had the sweetest smile. So much like Koji's and yet ... not.

Just as quickly though, his smile faded and the sad look Hiru had detected earlier returned. "Yes, really. I've..." He glanced away, as if debating whether to speak or not. He must have decided to continue for he spoke again, slowly. "I've had much heartache these last few months. Being with you, like this, has been the first ... relief I've had."

Hiru kept staring at him. So, he'd read Quan Chan correctly earlier. Quickly he searched his memory for anything Koji might have divulged that could tell him what the heartache was, but there was nothing. Koji wasn't that kind of gossip. The only information he'd shared about Quan Chan in the past few months was simply that the man came from the original White Tiger temple in Shanghai, was an old friend of Kikuchiya and had followed Kiku here to Tokyo to help him open and run the new White Tiger. Funny, he hadn't thought a man in Quan Chan's ... business, so to speak, would have heartache, at least not the romantic kind. It made Hiru insanely curious about him, though he wouldn't dare ask. It was absolutely none of his business. The important part was he hadn't hurt Quan Chan. Just the opposite, in fact. "Relief," he repeated. He'd never given someone relief before.

Hiru's body unclenched and some of his shame dissipated. He never thought he'd see the day when he'd bring someone relief instead of upset, like the woman in the hostess club. Or death, like Megumi. Perhaps, just maybe, there could be hope for him. "I'm glad to ... help," he murmured.

Quan Chan's smile returned. It widened and lit his large beautiful eyes. Then he laughed. The sound was sweet and rich, like sticky rice steamed in coconut milk. Strange, the comparison Hiru's mind made, a sound to a taste, but for some reason, the timbre of Quan Chan's laughter made Hiru want to taste it. After all, Quan Chan's lips and tongue had tasted incredibly delicious. The sounds coming from that mouth would probably taste good too.

That laughter was also infectious. Hiru felt it sink into him, like gentle vapours, and stir his own laughter. One sound fed off the other and soon they were both practically roaring. Hiru wasn't even sure what was so funny, but the more he laughed, the harder he laughed. Each glimpse of Quan Chan's mirth sent him into another spate of laughter until tears blurred his eyes and he found himself on his back on the mattress next to Quan Chan, whose face was close to his.

The laughter finally passed and Hiru sprawled out, his chest heaving, a smile still stretching his lips. "I don't think I've ever laughed that hard in my life."

"Me neither," Quan Chan breathed.

Hiru turned to the side and saw the other man's smile, his smooth cheeks flushed.

Still smiling, Quan Chan levered up onto one elbow and curled his fingers delicately around Hiru's, a gesture which made Hiru feel as if they'd shared a special private moment. Quan Chan's thumb rubbed the soft flesh of his palm. It was a tiny movement but felt so intimate. A strange flutter of energy passed through the centre of Hiru's chest, down into his abdomen. A few hours ago, sitting at his desk at work

thinking about the weekend to come, he could never have imagined he'd end up like this.

Quan Chan released his hand and leaned over, sliding his touch from Hiru's shoulder, down his chest to his stomach. His hand stilled just at the waistband of Hiru's boxers. "I will help you clean up," he said softly.

Hiru's cheeks immediately burned. "You don't need to," he muttered.

"But I want to."

The eager look on Quan Chan's face made him feel like an oaf again. Barely five minutes earlier, he'd been on top of Quan Chan, riding him like a prize stallion, and now he was blushing like a virgin.

Without waiting for his reply, Quan Chan sat up and began to slide Hiru's open slacks down.

Hiru lifted his ass high enough to help him. "I'm sorry," he said, lowering back down as Quan Chan slid the pants to his knees. "I know it's foolish to be so uptight. I'm always this way. I get all pent up inside and then it comes exploding out."

Quan Chan nodded. "I understand. Then it's good to have release."

Hiru's heart lurched. "No, it isn't. I mean ... I've been hurtful." The words spilled out, unbidden. He glanced down, cheeks burning again with shame. A touch on his hand made him look up.

Quan Chan's gaze radiated compassion. "From what I see of you, Hiru-san, you're a kind man. Perhaps what you think is hurtful really isn't."

The crying woman flashed into Hiru's mind. The same pang gripped his chest as it always did. In the next second, a bouncer, as large as he was, had ordered him to leave. "I'm not sure you'd think that if you knew."

Quan Chan's fingers caressed his hand a few times. "You don't have to talk about it," he said softly. "Only if you wish."

The look in the other man's eyes made a feeling wash over him, a desire to voice his torment. Not even Koji knew about what had happened. When Hiru had gone into work the next day and had seen Koji at his desk, just the sight of his friend had made the shame so much worse. Koji was such a gentle man, certainly he'd not have wanted such a brute for a friend.

But Quan Chan was a stranger, really, in spite of what they'd just done. Losing his regard would not be the same as losing Koji's. "Please, don't tell Koji," he whispered.

Quan Chan smiled gently. "These rooms absorb our secrets," he said. "Once the words are uttered, they evaporate like a mist. I promise."

Hiru believed him. Quan Chan was so mild, his voice so soft and soothing, Hiru could practically imagine his confession evaporating, merely because Quan Chan had promised it would. He pulled in a quick breath and told the other man about what had happened at the hostess club. Quan Chan continued the task of making Hiru more comfortable while Hiru spoke, slipping Hiru's slacks down his calves. Quan Chan paused at his ankles, listening. When he'd finished his horrible tale, Hiru braced himself for a rebuff.

But Quan Chan only looked up, his eyes pained. He slipped the slacks over Hiru's feet and folded them over, gently laying

them aside. When he was done and turned back, he laid a hand over Hiru's knee. "If you're waiting for me to judge you, Hiru-san," he said softly, "you'll be waiting a long time. And I believe strongly that Koji would say the same I'm saying now."

Hiru felt a bit lighter, not only from unburdening himself but from the assurance about Koji. "I hope that's true. Koji would never have done something like that."

Quan Chan looked thoughtful. "Perhaps not, but Koji has his own burden of guilt and to him, it's as heavy as yours is to you." He leaned over and smoothed one hand over Hiru's stomach. "Hiru-san, you stopped immediately, didn't you? As soon as you realised how upset she was."

"Yes." Hiru's voice was a choked whisper, caused by the tightness in his throat. "I would never have wanted to hurt her."

Quan Chan stroked his palm across Hiru's abdomen again then rested it there, a warm pressure that sent more pleasant tingles through Hiru's skin. "I know that," he said. "I'm certain you apologised profusely to her as well."

"I did." Tears threatened in Hiru's eyes. He fought them back. It just felt too ... shameful to break down.

A gentle smile infused Quan Chan's features. "If you'd meant to hurt her, you wouldn't have apologised. If you'd just wanted to have your way, you would have gotten angry at her for rejecting you or have continued to force yourself until you were satisfied." He then rubbed his hand in circles that travelled upward, over Hiru's chest, on each side before returning to his abdomen.

Hiru stared at him, unable to respond. His insides swirled and prickles of heat danced over the surfaces of his skin wherever Quan Chan's touch roamed. And yet, the sensation didn't arouse him as before. This feeling was just ... warm and soft.

"Do you want to know why this happens, Hiru-san?"

"Yes. Very much so."

Quan Chan nodded, his face kind. "The reason for the problem you suffer is that you have a blockage," Quan Chan said gently. "Your *qi* is blocked here—" he smoothed his hand over Hiru's stomach, "—between your gut and your heart. The energy generated in your dragon and in your *hara* cannot rise to your heart." He then touched Hiru's throat with several fingertips. "There is a second blockage between your heart and your mind. The energy flow gets trapped in your throat and you become confused." With a gentle brush of his fingers, he lifted his hand away.

Cool air touched the skin that had been warming under his touch and Hiru felt the absence of contact immediately.

"What's blocking it, Quan-san?" he asked after a few seconds.

Quan Chan's gaze softened more and his eyes took on a melting appearance. "Emotions, Hiru-san. Guilt and self-blame." His hand covered Hiru's again and the mere contact made the tears sting again in Hiru's eyes. Hiru gritted his teeth as he fought with the surge of feeling. No one had ever taken such time to understand him before.

"The guilt blocks the energy from flowing freely between all your chakras, or energy points," Quan Chan went on. He squeezed Hiru's hand. "But you cannot completely stop your

life force from flowing. Like water in a dam that bursts through, it cannot be held back indefinitely."

Hiru experienced a flare of hope. Perhaps if he cured his problem, his energy could flow and he wouldn't repeat what he'd done with that woman and again today with Quan Chan. "Can it be unblocked?"

The other man nodded. "It can be," he said, his gaze intent on Hiru's. "But only if you allow it." His thumb brushed back and forth on Hiru's palm. As before, the tiny movement was soothing. Quan Chan seemed to have a gift for putting him at ease, something no one else he'd ever known could do, not even Koji whom he adored. "You will need to forgive yourself for whatever it is you feel is unforgiveable," Quan Chan went on in his smooth, quiet voice. "All I can do is help to free the energy enough to bring those emotions forth. If you don't forgive yourself, then they'll go back to being blocked."

Quan Chan fell silent and Hiru sensed there was more to this than he was revealing, but he also sensed that Quan Chan was choosing his words carefully and so didn't push. The other man just sat quietly, holding his hand, not asking anything else of him, not even to understand what he was explaining.

"Does everyone have these blockages?" he asked finally.

Again, Quan Chan nodded. "More or less. It would be impossible to be human and to suffer as all humans do and not develop blockages." He smiled. "That's what the White Tiger path was created for, really. To help people find their wholeness again by freeing the flow of their *qi*. Wholeness is

our natural state, not lost, just covered up by our desire to free ourselves from the sufferings of life."

Hiru sat up a bit straighter against the pillows, feeling an energy flow through him that he'd never experienced before. It made him feel ... alive. "Will you help me, Quan-san?" The question was out before Hiru even realised he wanted to ask it. If unblocking his *qi* would feel as good as it had a little while ago when he was on top of Quan Chan, rubbing their cocks together, then ... well ... he could be open to this kind of healing.

"I will do what I can. You're here for this weekend, right?"

"Yes. Is that enough time?"

Quan Chan grew serious. Hiru didn't yet realise what he was asking. "I can't honestly say, Hiru-san," he answered carefully. "Each person is different. If you are really ready to let go, then it might be enough time." In their case, it would have to suffice. After his letter this morning from Sun Lau, Quan Chan's sense that he would need to return to Shanghai within the next week was strengthening. If he had to leave, Hiru would have to continue his practise with someone else. One of the twins, perhaps.

"I must tell you though," he went on, "that you will experience old heartaches. This is a natural result of stimulating your *qi*. It would be unfair of me not to warn you. Most people come here to relax, to have a massage and some pleasure after a stressful day at work. The average man doesn't wish to use the little bit of leisure time he has to channel his life force in the healing of old wounds. It's extremely rare that someone asks for help as you've done

right now." Truthfully, Kiku was the only other person who'd wanted this cleansing. Even Jin, as devoted and sincere a disciple as he was, had resisted it. It took the kind of intense person Kiku was to do this. The fact that Koji and Yuzo and Nat had done this with their respective lovers in just a few months was nothing short of miraculous, something that had never even happened at the temple in Shanghai. "Knowing what I've told you, Hiru-san, do you wish to proceed?" He continued to hold Hiru's hand, loving the way it enveloped his so warmly. In spite of Hiru's abundant, untamed *yang* force, there was something oddly gentle and comforting about him.

Fear and apprehension slipped through Hiru's face, but didn't remain. In the next second, he nodded. "Yes." He turned sad eyes up to Quan Chan's. "I can't live like this anymore, Quan-san. My life is lonely and empty. There has to be more to than working, sleeping and eating until I grow old and die." His fingers squeezed Quan Chan's hand, the touch almost of a sad child. "I've reflected on this endlessly since Koji came to live here," he went on. "One day I realised that just existing would not change the past. I must find meaning in it."

Quan Chan felt a flutter of energy in his gut, a warm flush which spread rapidly up through his chest. He recognised the sensation as admiration. Hiru had profound courage he didn't even know he possessed. Yet Quan Chan felt it, a palpable force that he rarely encountered. For the first time in months, he felt enlivened, encouraged at the depth of Hiru's request. The most his average guest wanted was a massage, a bit of escape from reality and Quan Chan did his best for each man.

Service had been bred into him from the age of fourteen, when Sun Lau pulled him in off the streets. Today, however, Quan Chan faced the opportunity to use his skills for deeper healing of another's soul.

He nodded. Indeed, it would be an honour and a great pleasure to do what he could for Koji's friend. "Good, then let's get started. We have some time before supper. But first, I must get you cleaned up so we can begin."

"I'm ready, Quan-san."

At Hiru's quick nod, he slid the fingertips of both hands under the elastic waist of Hiru's boxers and pulled them down.

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Chapter Five

Quan Chan swallowed. Hard. A delightful shiver ran down his spine, top to base. Quietly, he cleared his throat, determined not to stare at the other man's thick, meaty dragon and heavy *yang* sac, bursting with life force. Instead, he backed off the bed, sliding Hiru's shorts over his muscular thighs and calves and then off. "I'll be back in a few moments," he said, keeping his gaze on Hiru's face. There would be time enough to appreciate and stroke and lick that delicious-looking dragon after cleaning up the other man's *yang* cloud.

Hiru nodded, a flush in his pale cheeks. Quan Chan felt the other man's eyes on him as he went into the bathroom. Quickly he rinsed Hiru's shorts, set them to dry then filled a bowl with steaming water. His heartbeat rose as he picked up some clean towels and went back into the bedroom. Tending to guests' needs was something he'd been doing since his teens and the nervous flutter he used to get in his stomach and heart had left him since growing into adulthood. It had returned when he met Kiku ten years ago. And it was back now.

Kneeling down by the bed, he set the bowl on the tatami-covered floor and opened one of the towels. Then he smiled. "I must put this towel under you, Hiru-san."

Hiru wore a wide-eyed, wondering expression even as he lifted his large body up, allowing Quan Chan to spread a fluffy white towel underneath him. Quan Chan set the other towels

aside and picked up the washcloth he'd been soaking in the bowl. Now he could legitimately turn his attention to the man's dragon, the thick shaft of which rested against his lower abdomen, seeming ready for more.

Quan Chan wrung the cloth out and spread it across Hiru's stomach.

The larger man pulled in a small breath. He seemed to like the attention in spite of the fact that he didn't seem very comfortable with it at the same time. He was clearly not used to being pampered. "That feels good," he said, his voice nearly a whisper.

Wiping gently, Quan Chan smiled up at him, smoothing a palm over one muscled thigh. "Enjoy, Hiru-san." He turned his attention back to his task. Truly, the pleasure was very much his, too. Hiru's body was a garden of delights, every inch of it. He took a second to appreciate even the pattern of soft dark hairs on the man's thighs before dabbing the wet cloth on Hiru's dragon. Gently, he gathered up the dragon's tears that clung to the plump purplish head. The larger man pulled in a soft breath. Quan Chan looked up. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

A sheepish look clouded Hiru's eyes but he shook his head, wearing a shy smile. "Not at all. It's just ... sensitive."

Quan Chan nodded. "I understand." He put the cloth back into the bowl and set it aside where it couldn't spill. Now was time to begin the opening of Hiru's energy channels. Rising up on his knees, he undid his own shorts and slipped them off. Not that he needed to be naked also to do this process, but he sensed that Hiru would be more at ease this way. Naked

together was more equal and open. He'd often argued this point with Jin back in Shanghai. Jin had always clung too strictly to rules, even when bending or breaking them a bit would benefit the very person he was trying to help.

Setting aside the shorts, he turned back. Hiru was staring at him. The man's dark eyes shone with an obvious blend of curiosity, hesitancy and desire. Quan Chan suppressed a chuckle at how readable Hiru's face was. It was incredibly rare to meet a man who was so unguarded this way. Rare and ... delightful, really. Without hesitation, he manoeuvred onto his side, close enough to Hiru to feel the heat of his *qi* as the energy simmered around his large body. The most important thing now was to make sure Hiru was as relaxed as possible.

Hiru turned onto his side immediately, as if Quan Chan had ordered him to do so. The same unguarded look of heated curiosity simmered in his deep-set eyes.

Quan Chan smiled at him and reached up, cupping the other man's cheek. With several fingertips, he traced the shadow of beard on Hiru's cheek. Another delicious quality of his. He probably needed to shave more than once a day. "Feel free to touch me whenever you want to, Hiru-san," he said softly.

An anxious look slipped through Hiru's eyes. "I want to ... it's just ... I don't want to ... behave that way again."

Quan Chan traced Hiru's wide lower lip with the pad of his thumb. Touching Hiru was a sheer pleasure and before answering, he took time to savour the velvety texture of Hiru's lip in contrast to the rougher skin of his jaw and chin.

Then he let his fingertips slide slowly down Hiru's throat, over his Adam's apple, around the hollow and down the centre of his broad chest, through the soft hairs. Delicious. "Don't you worry about that, Hiru-san," he said. "Like I told you, I enjoyed it." Gently he took Hiru's wrist and placed the man's hand on his chest, pressing the palm tightly to his muscle, which he flexed. "I'm not so easy to hurt or crush." Undoubtedly this had been a problem for Hiru with women. "You see?" He released Hiru's wrist and waited to see what the other man would do.

Hiru's gaze flickered to his then back to the place where his large hand rested. "I ... think I see," he murmured. Tentatively, he smoothed his palm straight across Quan Chan's pecs.

The touch was warm and made a trail of spark-like tingles in Quan Chan's skin. The pad of Hiru's thumb brushed one nipple. Quan Chan let out a soft breath. "That's nice," he said. Hopefully, if Hiru could see how much he really enjoyed being touched, the other man would worry less. The worry was a terrible source of blockage for his *qi*.

"Physical strength and endurance are as much a part of the path as meditation, Hiru-san," he explained, even though speaking was getting a bit more difficult as pleasure flooded his nerve endings. "It takes a strong physical body to withstand the surges of energy the White Tiger path can induce. Every practitioner follows a strict regimen of martial arts, similar to the monks in the Shaolin monasteries." Kiku had a practice room downstairs, off the kitchen where the guys could work out. That had been one of the things Quan

Chan had helped them with, training them in the exercise routines to keep them slim, strong and flexible.

Hiru slid his hand back up Quan Chan's chest to his shoulder, which he caressed in light circles, as if imitating the way Quan Chan had touched him earlier. "You have a beautiful physique," he said softly. Appreciation filled his tone.

"Thank you." Quan Chan felt his cheeks burn. Praise had always done that to him, perhaps because Jin had discouraged praise as superficial and had tried to teach him not to crave it. It hadn't worked. The more he'd tried to deny the desire, the worse it had gotten. As soon as Kiku had come into his life, he'd gotten a steady diet of positive reinforcement. "Go ahead, Hiru-san, give my shoulder a firm squeeze," he said.

Again, Hiru's face clouded. He hesitated, but after a second, squeezed Quan Chan's shoulder, the pressure firm but obviously not full strength.

Quan Chan smiled. "You can squeeze much harder than that."

"But—"

"Don't worry, Hiru-san. Do it. As you already saw a little while ago, you can throw me around and pounce on me. All it will do is make me happy."

A sheepish grin spread across Hiru's wide lips. A touch of light came into his eyes. "All right." In the next second, he squeezed again, this time much harder.

Quan Chan pushed against Hiru's fingertips. If he'd wanted to, he could easily have twisted from the other man's grip. He

didn't want to. "Good, Hiru-san. Now lower, on my upper arm."

Obediently, Hiru's large hand closed around his biceps, fingertips pressing firmly into his triceps. He squeezed again and this time Quan Chan flexed his arm muscles, resisting the pressure of Hiru's grip. "Harder," he said.

Hiru squeezed harder and Quan Chan could see the pink infuse his cheeks and the concentration in his face. No doubt this had been his expression years ago on the judo mats.

Quan Chan flexed again, pouring his concentration into resisting the squeeze. His arm muscles bulged and eventually caused Hiru's grip to slip. Not much, but enough to prove Quan Chan's strength, both physical and mental.

Hiru released Quan Chan's arm and lay back, breathing more heavily. "You are stronger than you look," he said. "I mean, you do look strong, but I've never met someone smaller than I who could do something like that." His eyes practically sparkled and Quan Chan could see that this discovery thrilled him. The best thing to do now would be to encourage the excitement he sensed bubbling up in Hiru. The poor guy needed it desperately. Nothing else would be more effective in opening up his blocked energy points.

The knowledge of what to do began to flow. The next step was strange, something that only fit Hiru's needs and no one else's, but Quan Chan had been at this long enough to trust the process. He grinned. "If you really want to see how strong I am," he said, "grapple with me."

Hiru's eyes flew open wide. "What?"

The soaring inner power Quan Chan had felt earlier surged again. The inner tiger, uncoiling after a long, self-imposed slumber, now stretched his claws and prepared to leap. It was glorious! A force that made him feel mischievous and joyful. He nodded enthusiastically. "I mean it, Hiru-san. Grapple me into submission. You'll see for yourself just how you don't have to worry about crushing me or anything. It'll be fun."

Doubt clouded Hiru's face. "I don't know. I'm so big."

Quan Chan laughed. The laughter rose from deep in his *hara*, unrestrained, a sound rich to his own ears. "Yes, you are big, Hiru-san. That's wonderful." Without thinking, he threw one leg over Hiru, launched himself up so that he straddled him and leaned over, hooking one arm under the man's neck. "*Tate Shiho Gatame*," he said, his voice darker, lower now, naming the judo grappling technique he'd put them into position for. "Fight back."

"Quan-san..." Hiru's eyes were still wide, his voice a trembling whisper. He was clearly frightened of hurting him.

Quan Chan made his face look stern. "Do it. Now." He tightened his grip around Hiru's neck and pressed down harder with his naked body.

Underneath him, Hiru came to life. Quan Chan felt the martial artist in the other man rise instinctively to fight off the offense. However, the element of surprise mixed with Hiru's previous hesitation had given Quan Chan some leverage. His thighs had always been one of his strongest features. He used them now to root himself on top of Hiru and keep the hold he had on him by pressing into the other man's hips, though he knew it wouldn't be long before Hiru fought back.

Hiru pushed upward with his pelvis. The movement made their dragons grind together. Quan Chan pulled in a breath. The friction was glorious. He felt a strong arm hook around his thigh. Hiru used his other arm to pry Quan Chan's levering hand off the mattress, throwing him off balance.

Quan Chan struggled against him, determined to give Hiru all the fight he had even though he revelled in the iron strength pushing against him, the sheer power of the man underneath him.

Hiru squeezed Quan Chan's thigh, pulling, lifting, one beat after the other until, as one body, they began to roll. Quan Chan's arm slipped from the bed, causing him to lose his balance. Hiru released a straining grunt of sound as he pulled and suddenly Quan Chan felt that flying sensation again. The room tipped and swayed, followed by the thud of the wood floor meeting his back, Hiru on top of him again. Hiru's leg went out to the side, anchoring his weight. He slid his arms around Quan Chan's neck in a cradle loose enough not to choke him, but snug enough to hold him prisoner. Seconds passed and Quan Chan realised his body was immobilised. No part of him could move enough to gain leverage out of the submission he was in.

Breathing heavily, he sank down, completely content to surrender to the helpless way Hiru had him pinned. Blood pounded through his body. His dragon was completely engorged, his *yang* sac heavy with life force straining to be released. Hiru's muscular torso weighed him down under its brawny force and Hiru's breath thundered close to his ear.

Hiru's grip relaxed and he leaned back, peering into Quan Chan's face. Sweat gleamed on Hiru's pale skin and pink infused his cheeks. "Are you all right, Quan-san?" he breathed.

Quan Chan grinned. He couldn't help it. He felt so ... *alive*. "That was great." He remained in the submission Hiru had grappled him into even though now Hiru hovered above him, staring down at him. The tentative look had left his eyes and Quan Chan could see the man who'd once been a great fighter, strong and disciplined. He felt a rush just remembering the feel of Hiru coming alive underneath him, of Hiru's fighting instincts awakening, sending life and blood through his body.

"You make me feel ... wild," Hiru said. His voice was low but husky, trembling with the life force that had been revived by their contact.

The statement sent another delicious ripple through Quan Chan. His dragon strained, tight and hard, each nerve ending in his body vividly aware of Hiru's simmering *yang* energy. The mischief and desire surged again.

"Show me then, Hiru-san," he said in a silky voice. "Show me how wild you feel. Now that you don't need to worry about hurting me." That purring cat feeling took over him again. Only this time, the things that had happened between them had freed him to express it. Reaching up, he slid his hands down Hiru's sides to his waist, which he caressed, circling over his hips, daring to whisper his fingertips over Hiru's smooth, hard ass cheeks. "You make me feel wild too, Hiru-san," he whispered.

Quickly he pulled back so he could lever onto his elbows, bringing his face close to Hiru's face. "Wild, like a tiger, you make me feel, Hiru-san." He nuzzled Hiru's cheek with his lips. Hiru smelled so good, like soap and musk. The scent was dizzying.

"Really?" Hiru breathed. His lids were heavy over his eyes, but they didn't hide the sudden worry. Damn, Hiru's emotions shifted across his boyish face like a film passing on a screen. He couldn't hide anything. "I thought I hadn't ... satisfied you ... before."

Quan Chan tilted his head. "Why do you think that?"

The flush in Hiru's wide cheeks deepened. He hesitated visibly. "When you removed your shorts earlier, you were dry."

The statement took a moment to process. Then he understood. He smiled and lifted one hand to Hiru's cheek. "Believe me, Hiru-san, you satisfied me. I ejaculated. It's an advanced practise to retain the emission." He brushed a thumb over Hiru's cheekbone, relieved to see that Hiru believed him. The man lacked confidence so badly. He lowered his hand back to the floor to support his weight. "In this case, I just didn't want to make a mess."

The other man looked hesitant. Then he nodded. "I see."

Quan Chan's gaze dropped to Hiru's lips. "Now, where were we?" He leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss to Hiru's cheek, then nuzzled the masculine skin, feeling like a child let out to play in the sunshine.

Hiru released a light breath and turned his head slightly, enough to brush his lips over Quan Chan's cheek.

Quan Chan's eyes fluttered closed and he tilted his head, silently encouraging the other man to continue. It worked. Hiru brushed his lips over Quan Chan's cheek and lingered there, exploring his skin with tentative kisses. One arm came out and cradled Quan Chan's upper body, large fingers splayed on the back of his neck.

Unable to stop himself, Quan Chan reached out and caressed one hip. Hiru's body was so powerful, so deliciously strong. While his hand rubbed and explored, he tilted his head back, his movements flowing with Hiru's. Hiru kissed a trail down the side of his neck.

"That's right, Hiru-san," Quan Chan whispered. "It's not so different, is it?" Hiru understood what he meant; he could feel it in the way the man's kisses heated, the way his lips parted to taste and lick his skin more deeply. Hiru's other arm slid under his back, cradling his torso. This freed Quan Chan's arms to return the embrace, allowed him to slide his palms over the broad expanse of muscles in Hiru's back. God, Hiru felt so incredible. Smooth skin, hard, flexing muscle, soft lips, large hands. Quan Chan let one hand slide all the way up, over the back of Hiru's neck, until his fingers raked through the other man's hair.

Quan Chan didn't expect the jump of his insides at the contact. Soft, yielding, thick and sleek, like precious silk. It had been so long since he'd felt such hair. Kiku kept his head shaved for years after having had a thick head of gorgeous ebony hair and Quan Chan had forgotten the sensation of raking his fingers through a man's hair. He closed his eyes again. Hiru's lips feathered over the side of his neck and his

throat as Quan Chan curled his fingers deeply into that luxurious, beautiful hair.

Pleasure flooded his body, soaking like water into parched earth. He was sinking ... sinking into a heavenly place. The hard floor met his back again. The coolness of it pressed into his back muscles. Quan Chan yielded to being laid down, thrilled to feel Hiru's strong body sink onto his, slowly this time, filling the space between his thighs in a movement of surrender to his desire.

Quan Chan squeezed the larger man's hips, pulling him, drawing him closer, silently begging him to fill the space that Kiku had left. Of course, one man could not substitute for another in his heart ... *but ...* just for a little while, he could feel that completeness again, the closeness he'd craved since he'd first curled up against Jin to sleep all those years ago.

Until this moment, Kiku and Jin were the only men he'd done this intimate act with. Sun Lau had always told him to be selective about the man with whom he did Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon. *When you take a man's qi inside you, Xiao Chan, make sure he's a strong man, a man of conscience.* His godfather was firm on this point. It was one matter to give a man a massage and to give his dragon release by stroking it skilfully. Bringing another man's life force into your body was quite another. *A good man can help you, Xiao Chan,* Sun Lau always said. *A bad man's qi will harm you.* The words had remained true for Quan Chan, guiding him, and he'd never been sorry. Jin and Kiku were both strong men of conscience, and so Quan Chan had felt safe with them, had felt they were the right men.

Hiru had shown himself to be a man of conscience, too, a good, decent-hearted man, just as Koji had said he was.

Quan Chan felt safe with Hiru.

The head of Hiru's dragon bumped against his opening. Hiru pulled in a breath and stiffened. That clouded look filled his eyes again, seeming to war with the velvety desire in them. Quan Chan squeezed his hips, not hard, but enough to keep Hiru from pulling back, away from him. His hands rested on Hiru's waist. "It's all right, Hiru-san. Only stop if you want to." Quan Chan would be disappointed as hell if he wanted to stop, but he'd accept it.

"I ... don't want to ... stop," Hiru said, his voice dark, husky. His chest heaved a deep breath before he spoke again. "I just don't know what to do."

Quan Chan smiled with his relief and rubbed Hiru's hips in a slow circle. "It's not so different," he said. "The only difference is that unlike a woman's cinnabar cave, a man's passage doesn't make its own slipperiness."

"Oh." Hiru's large body trembled between Quan Chan's thighs. The hard stalk of his dragon rubbed the underside of Quan Chan's balls with delicious heat. Apparently, the idea excited him too.

"I just need to reach the oil behind you." He'd set it out for Hiru's massage when he'd prepared the room. When he'd done so, he'd not begun to imagine it would be used this way!

"I'll get it." Hiru turned and took the bottle off the nightstand. The movement made their dragons rub together.

Quan Chan couldn't help arching his back a little. "Thank you," he breathed as Hiru handed him the bottle. He opened

it and drizzled some oil into his palm as Hiru lifted himself off Quan Chan to allow him room. Carefully setting the bottle aside, he wrapped his hand around the shaft of Hiru's cock. It felt as solid as it looked.

"Ohhh." Hiru's eyes glazed over, staring down as Quan Chan smoothed the oil up and down his rigid length.

"You feel so good, Hiru-san." Indeed, that thickness in his hand was glorious and the mere thought of it inside him made his opening quiver. It had been so damn long. He rubbed Hiru's oiled dragon again. "Is that all right for you, Hiru-san?"

Hiru was panting now but Quan Chan could see the other man nod. "Yes," he said in a tight voice.

When Hiru was oiled up nice and slick, Quan Chan smiled at him. "Give me your hand, Hiru-san."

Hiru obeyed and Quan Chan smoothed the remaining oil onto the other man's thick fingers. "I'll show you what to do." He lay back on the floor, not caring that there wasn't even a rug underneath his back. All he wanted was Hiru's dragon buried inside his cave. *Now.*

"Touch me here," he whispered and guided Hiru's fingertips to his opening. "Don't be afraid. It feels really good." He pressed the other man's hand down onto the aching bud of flesh. Quan Chan moaned softly. How good it felt to be touched again this way.

Hiru pulled in a breath and his face darkened, showing his trembling pleasure. "Yes, it feels good," he said. The tenor of his voice matched Quan Chan's in desire and when Quan Chan released him, Hiru kept his fingers there. The universe seemed to be offering him a true gift of compassion this

afternoon in Hiru. "Just rub and explore, Hiru-san. When you feel ready, push a finger inside me." He leaned back onto his elbows and opened his legs farther to give Hiru full access.

The *shamisen* music still played softly, a quiet background to the ragged rise and fall of their breathing. Hiru rubbed over Quan Chan's puckered opening tentatively.

Ohhh. Quan Chan tilted his head back and closed his eyes. "Yes, Hiru-san," he whispered. "Don't be afraid, please. It feels so good."

"Okay." Hiru pressed more firmly and rubbed in tiny circles.

Tingles of pleasure spiralled through Quan Chan's hole, fanned into his ass cheeks and down his legs with each caress of the other man's thick fingertips. "That's so good, Hiru-chan," he breathed. "So wonderful."

He felt his encouragement register in Hiru who circled his hole several more times in a heated way then pushed a finger gently inside.

"Ahh." Quan Chan groaned as the thick digit filled him, deeper and deeper. Delicious sparks of sensation danced all through his torso, right into his nipples. "Yes, Hiru-chan. Oh, yes."

Hiru pushed in a second finger and slid both fingers gently back and forth. Quan Chan sensed that something in the other man, something instinctive had now attuned to him, knowing just how much pressure to put, just what was needed to stretch him open.

Quan Chan's head remained tilted back, eyes closed. A sudden pressure covered his lips. Hiru's kiss. "Mmm." Quan

Chan accepted the delicious hot swirl of Hiru's tongue against his. Yes, Hiru had entered the flow of the moment, allowed his body and mind to surrender. The large man's enjoyment flowed around them as much as the heat of his muscular body infused the air around them.

So delicious, so perfect, Hiru's kiss, the thickness of Hiru's fingers filling his channel, exploring and stretching him open. Quan Chan's mind softened, darkened. His body began to float, anchored only by the sensations in his ass and his mouth, the two points that connected him physically to Hiru.

Vaguely he felt Hiru's fingers slip out although Hiru's lips remained against his. Something pushed again at his opening. Hiru's dragon. A gentle push and more thickness penetrated his now stretched ring of muscle. Ohhhhhh. The mere friction sent dots of light twinkling across his vision. Strong hands on his upper arms lowered him to the floor.

Quan Chan's body was soft, pliant, open for Hiru's pleasure. His legs wrapped around Hiru's hips. Hiru lifted from their kiss, bracing his large body on his elbows. He, too, didn't seem to care about the hard floor beneath them. Nothing else mattered now but the joining of their bodies, the fulfilment of passions. Hiru pushed again, then let out a soft groan. His oiled cock slid in deeper. Deeper. Until Quan Chan felt their bodies meet. His own dragon became sandwiched between their torsos, another glorious point of contact.

"Quan-san," he heard Hiru say by his ear. The soft breath and sound caressed his skin and his soul, only sinking him deeper into his burgeoning ecstasy. Hiru's dragon filled his tight channel completely, and each forward thrust rubbed his

prostate. Quan Chan's palms rested on Hiru's broad back, following the back and forth movement of his body, but he couldn't utter a sound, only lie there, a smile curving his lips, his eyes, now opened, still seeing that dark, velvety blackness dotted with lights.

Hiru's lips closed over his again, a soft, moist warmth that rested there while Hiru rode him. Faster, harder. Hiru's groans vibrated through their joined mouths. Sweat made Hiru's chest slide easily against his and rub Quan Chan's dragon until the pressure began to build.

Yes. Yes. The happy word echoed in Quan Chan's pleasure-saturated mind with each thrust. Hiru's dragon pulsed inside him and he rode harder, driven on toward his climax. The faster motions only made Quan Chan's dragon pulse too, with the abundant life ready to spill from it. In his nearly mindless state, he felt the delicious eruption pool between them. Hiru groaned, seemingly driven on by the emission splashing between them. He moaned again and went stiff. Quan Chan felt the delicious dragon's cloud filling his passage, followed by the gentle collapse of a large, hot muscular body covering his in the aftermath of spent passion.

But Quan Chan couldn't focus his eyes, couldn't speak. He was floating. Floating in ecstasy. Somewhere in the beautiful darkness, he sensed he would frighten Hiru when the other man recovered and realised his partner wasn't quite conscious, but there was nothing Quan Chan could do about it.

He was helplessly, hopelessly, deliciously floating...

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Chapter Six

Hiru lay quietly on top of Quan Chan, his cheek pressed to the other man's, the weight of his torso braced on his elbows. Breathing in the musky scent of Quan Chan's skin, Hiru closed his eyes and smiled to himself. Every muscle in his body felt relaxed for the first time in ... Damn, he couldn't even remember when. Maybe never. Not like this.

The light pressure of Quan Chan's hands remained on his back. Quan Chan's thighs had relaxed their grip on Hiru's hips, though the memory of the strength that had pulled him forward, burying his cock deep into Quan Chan, spiralled through his mind.

The need to look into Quan Chan's eyes seized him. Carefully he lifted himself, feeling a rush of cooler air between their sweating torsos, and looked down.

Quan Chan was smiling, though his eyes were closed. Quan Chan's hands slipped off Hiru's back and landed at his sides.

Hiru frowned. Was Quan Chan asleep? Lowering his ear to Quan Chan's mouth, he listened for breath. Nothing.

Kuso! Hiru vaulted upward. In spite of the sudden movement, Quan Chan remained quiet, hands at his sides, chest unmoving.

Kneeling beside him, Hiru pressed several fingertips to the pulse on Quan Chan's neck. No beat answered his touch.

I killed him! Hiru's sweat chilled on his body. He pressed the service button on the bedside wall then knelt back down,

staring at Quan Chan as if he could will the man back to life. "I'm sorry, Quan-san," he said out loud, his voice a choked whisper. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to..."

A knock sounded on the screen. "Hiru-chan? Is everything all right?" Koji's voice came through from the other side.

Koji. Thank God. Hiru grabbed the towel from the bed and wrapped it around his hips as he ran for the *soji* and slid it back.

Koji's face creased with worry the second their gazes met. "Hiru-chan, what—"

"I killed him." Hiru reached out and grasped Koji's arm. "He's ... not breathing. Look." His hand slipped off Koji's arm as Koji rushed over and knelt beside Quan Chan's naked body.

Hiru stood frozen, watching Koji press his fingertips to the pulse on Quan Chan's neck and rest them there. "We were having ... sex," he explained, "and then this..."

Koji's head shot up. "You were? I mean, oh, I see." He turned his attention back to Quan Chan, his fingers still resting on Quan Chan's neck. In the next second, a smile came to Koji's face. When he looked back up, amusement sparkled in his eyes. "He's not dead, Hiru-chan. He's very much alive."

The relief nearly sent Hiru to his knees. "What's wrong with him?" He practically staggered over and knelt shakily beside Koji. "Did I hurt him?"

Koji's hand landed comfortingly on his shoulder. "No. The opposite, in fact. He's in ecstasy."

Hiru peered into Quan Chan's face again while relief still prickled over every inch of his skin. "Ecstasy? Really?"

"Yes." Koji's voice was soft, as if to be respectful of Quan Chan's state. "Naoto explained everything to me." He pointed. "See the way his eyeballs are moving? That's a primary sign."

"Oh." The movement was barely perceptible, which explained why he'd missed it in his panic. *Thank God.*

"And the breathing. Well, it slows down so much, the person appears not to be breathing at all." He smiled at Hiru. "Your *qi* was good for him, apparently."

Hiru's cheeks burned but he returned the smile. "I guess so." A moment passed and Hiru thought of something. "Shouldn't I cover him? Maybe he's cold."

"No. It's best not to disturb him." Koji rose, went to the closet and retrieved a folded blanket which he set gently down close by. "You can put this on him when he awakens." Then, with a hand on Hiru's arm, Koji urged Hiru to his feet and ushered him closer to the door. His expression grew serious. "Listen, Hiru-chan, if you two were ... you know, having sex, Chan Chan must really have taken to you. I swear I'm not saying this as gossip. In spite of how it may appear, his being a master White Tiger and all, he doesn't have sex with the guests who come here. He's only had two serious lovers in his whole life. This much I know about him. He's very choosy." Koji's smile returned and he patted Hiru's arm.

Hiru bowed his head. A swell of warmth filled his chest. "I'm honoured that he likes me," he murmured. "He's very ... lovely. And sweet." *So much like you*, he wanted to add but

didn't. Another feeling rose in him then, something he hadn't expected. He glanced down at Quan Chan, wanting nothing more than to protect him and help him if he could. This state Quan Chan was in, though obviously pleasant, also left him vulnerable. "What should I do now?"

"Well, are you comfortable with remaining by him while he's like this?"

Hiru looked back at Koji. "Yes, I am."

Koji nodded, still smiling. "There not much you need to do then, Hiru-chan. Just stay close to him and when he wakes, put the blanket over him, give him a drink of water and keep him company. Chan Chan is a strong person and incredibly disciplined. You won't need to worry."

"I understand."

Koji patted his arm again. "Are you all right?"

Hiru sighed. "Yes. I'm just relieved that I didn't hurt him." His cheeks burned again and he looked down. They'd been having one hell of a good time, but Hiru didn't add that. He wasn't feeling quite as liberated as Koji.

"Good. I want you to have a nice weekend."

Hiru bowed to his friend. Without Koji's help, he would have been completely lost. "Thanks, Koji-chan."

When Koji left, Hiru returned to Quan Chan and knelt down. Quan Chan still looked peaceful. The tiny smile remained on his soft lips, a far cry from the sad and troubled look he'd worn earlier. His eyeballs were still darting back and forth under their lids and his breathing remained slow and nearly silent. Hiru wondered briefly how long Quan Chan

would stay like this. He'd forgotten to ask Koji. Perhaps there was no set time.

No matter. The simple act of watching Quan Chan was proving a pleasant experience. For whatever reason, the ecstatic state he was in made him look sweetly innocent, perhaps what he might have looked like when he was younger.

Quan Chan pulled in a sudden breath. Hiru's heart jumped and he watched the other man's eyelids flutter open. Their gazes met.

Quan Chan's eyes looked sleepy, faraway. His irises were fully dilated but the black discs shrank as they adjusted to the soft light in the room. "Hiru-san," he said softly.

Hiru reached for the blanket, opened it and draped it over Quan Chan.

Quan Chan's brow was furrowed. His calm expression had faded, replaced by alert concern. "Are you all right, Hiru-san? You probably didn't understand what was happening." His hand closed gently over Hiru's.

Hiru laced his fingers with the other man. How strange this afternoon had been. He couldn't have been here more than two hours and yet it seemed he and Quan Chan had already lived a kind of adventure together. "I'm fine." His cheeks tingled and he smiled, knowing his look was sheepish. "Koji explained it all to me. I called for help because..." He chuckled, hearing his own nervous sound. "I thought I'd killed you."

Quan Chan's brow creased further. He sat up quickly and reached out with both hands, cupping Hiru's cheeks. "Oh no.

I'm so sorry. You poor man. You've already been through so much."

The worry in Quan Chan's face shook Hiru. *Kuso*. What had he been thinking, telling Quan Chan about this? Lightly he grasped Quan Chan's wrists. "Please, don't be sorry. I shouldn't have told you that. You're not so peaceful now."

Quan Chan gazed at him for several moments. Surprisingly, his concerned look faded slightly, replaced by that gentle smile of his. "Being spiritual doesn't mean having to remain peaceful, Hiru-san. It means being completely yourself, no matter what feelings are there. It's all right." He shifted forward, causing the blanket to slip below his waist, and embraced Hiru.

Though Quan Chan was half his size in build, Hiru felt suddenly enveloped in solid warmth. He closed his eyes and sank into the embrace, letting his arms close around Quan Chan. Soft. Hard. Gentle. Strong. Quan Chan was all those things at once.

Chest to chest, their bodies rested. Quan Chan's palms pressed into Hiru's back again, warm and gentle. Quan Chan's breath pulsed against his skin and a sweet feeling, something with a life of its own, seemed to radiate in the air around them.

Hiru sighed. How long had it been since he'd embraced someone? Felt that warm human contact full of affection? He'd hugged Koji last year to comfort him after Koji's beloved stepmother passed away from cancer. He'd even dared to let his hand rest on Koji's shoulder for a long time once when they sat alone together on the sofa in Koji's apartment ...

after the funeral was over and everyone had gone back to their lives. Everyone except Koji. But Koji had been in a terrible state from his loss and only that had given Hiru the excuse for such contact.

When Quan Chan pulled back and looked up at him, Hiru's heart flipped over. Quan Chan's eyes seemed so large. So ... sweet. Hiru's gaze swept over the other man's face, over his perfectly sculpted features, long lashes, full lips, and his clean-shaven skin where Hiru could discern the merest shadow of moustache and beard on his upper lip, chin and jaw. Hiru stared and felt suddenly like he was ... falling.

Suddenly, a weekend seemed like a terribly, mournfully short time.

* * * *

Hiru's stomach tightened as he followed Quan Chan down to the kitchen a while later. The butterflies had started while he was throwing on a pair of baggy pants and a t-shirt while Quan Chan put his uniform back on. The closer they drew to the kitchen, the more his gut flip-flopped. How truly isolated his life had been for so long, to be so nervous about meeting the rest of Koji's friends. Since recovering from the accident, his life had consisted of work, physical therapy, visiting his parents and helping his father with his computer, some superficial socialising with co-workers, going home, sleeping, then getting up for work again the next morning. Weekends had been for a bit more socialising, thankfully with Koji, and looking after his elderly neighbour, Mrs. Yamada. Koji's friendship had been the highlight of that dreary existence.

And yet, now, having had his world tossed and tumbled—literally—in a mere few hours, that life had been somehow ... safe ... in its lonely monotony. Strangely, the swinging door just ahead of him in the corridor felt like it would open onto more newness than a simple meal with the men of the White Tiger. Hiru felt it in his bones, in the same visceral way he'd responded to Quan Chan. Moments like these were like portals. You had to brace yourself and step through, prepared to meet what was there, or fall back into a kind of numb state in which all you could do was wait for your life to finish itself out with all kinds of regrets. He'd already failed so terribly where Koji was concerned. Could he succeed now?

Quan Chan pushed the door open and held it for him, a warm smile on his face. "Don't worry, Hiru-san, they'll like you." His cheeks coloured slightly as if a memory of their time together had just passed through his mind. "One thing, though," he said in a softer voice, "be prepared to get teased. They might go easier on you because you're a guest, but they can be quite relentless."

Hiru's stomach jumped a tiny bit but he nodded. Getting teased by Koji's friends was infinitely preferable to another night alone on his couch. He smiled back at Quan Chan but insisted on letting Quan Chan precede him, not because of his apprehension but because that ... feeling ... came over him again, of treating the other man with whatever grace and kindness he had to give.

Quan Chan's shy look hinted that he sensed Hiru's feelings, for he nodded and went ahead of Hiru.

A few steps into the kitchen and Hiru heard a murmuring of male voices, followed by laughter. Then he saw a giant round table surrounded by Koji, Naoto next to him, and a bunch of other guys.

"Hey Hiru-chan!" Koji called and stood up. His call brought the others' attention to Hiru and Quan Chan and soon, all the other men there stood and were smiling.

Koji left his seat and came to Hiru's side. "Everyone, this is Hiru," he said, keeping one hand on Hiru's arm. Koji was so sensitive, knowing how shy his friend was. It was obvious Koji was trying to put him as at ease as possible. "Hiru-chan, meet everyone. This is Kiku, our *sensei*."

Of course, the owner of the White Tiger didn't really need to be pointed out to him. Kikuchiya Fujimara emanated a simmering energy that Hiru could feel as the other man came forward, bowed then offered a handshake. Though shorter than himself, Kiku was broad and strong-looking and fit the description precisely that Koji said was used for him by his friends Ryu and Yuzo—a golden Buddha, only with many, many tattoos from his yakuza days.

"Welcome, Hiru-san." Kiku's voice and smile were warm as was his handshake. He continued to hold Hiru's hand, with his other hand on clasping Hiru's forearm. "I'm truly honoured to meet you."

Hiru bowed again, his hand still in Kiku's. "Thank you, Kiku-san," he answered, aware of Quan Chan close by his side.

"I hope you're comfortable here. We want you to have a wonderful stay."

Hiru returned his smile, already feeling a bit more at ease. Koji had said how charming a host Kiku was, and Koji was absolutely right. "I'm very comfortable." He glanced at Quan Chan, who quietly stood by him, a tiny smile on his lips. "Quan-san has been wonderful to me."

He heard a sound, something like a chuckle, from somewhere in the group of men assembled, but when he looked at them, he saw nothing but welcoming smiles.

Kiku released his hands and gestured towards the others. "Please, allow me to introduce you. You already know Naoto, correct?"

Hiru nodded and saw Naoto step forward. "Yes, I do." Naoto shook his hand warmly and smiled, then stepped back, allowing the others to approach him.

Of course, each man he met exactly fit Koji's descriptions in previous conversations. Yuzo, who was Kiku's lover, a slim, small man who looked like a pop star with large, sparkling eyes, then Ryu, wiry in build with classically rounded features and spiky hair, and his partner Nat, the cop from Thailand who'd also once been a pro boxer, then Basho, still wearing his apron from cooking, his lover Timothy, the blond Englishman who greeted him in very halting Japanese, and then twins, Mod and Tatou, the handsome and very mischievous-looking half-Thai, half-English identical twins. Each one, to a man, was incredibly handsome, charming, and seemed genuinely happy to have him here.

Finally, Koji led him to a place at the table, seating him between himself and Quan Chan. A beautiful flower arrangement sat in the centre of the huge table, a burst of

yellow chrysanthemums, while Basho and Yuzo moved around the table, setting down incredible looking appetisers and decanters of *saké* at each place. Bowls of blanched *edamame*, and plates of rice crackers, steamed shellfish, fried shrimp and cubed tofu with soy sauce and bonito flakes covered the surface of the large table.

Everyone fell silent and Kiku said a blessing.

Hiru gratefully accepted a plate of food, glad to have the attention off him as people began to eat. But then, Kiku lifted his small *saké* cup and stood from his chair. Everyone else quieted down again and followed his lead, lifting their cups in the obvious toast that was to come.

"A toast to Koji's friend whose presence here with us is a great blessing."

A chorus of agreement rose up and Hiru heard Quan Chan's voice of assent close to him. He glanced at Quan Chan who smiled at him.

The appetiser course passed into a new course of *sashimi* and clear broth. Everyone ate in a companionable mood. There was much laughter, and as Quan Chan had told him, teasing, most of which seemed to be directed at Quan Chan, especially from the twins who complimented his appearance in gushing tones every few seconds. The quiet man blushed furiously with a shy smile each time and Hiru quickly understood why Quan Chan's responses caused him to be targeted. At first, Hiru almost cut in and told them to stop, even though he was a stranger here, but he saw that Quan Chan actually relished the attention, and so he relaxed and

enjoyed watching Quan Chan's delicate cheeks bloom with colour.

After the *sashimi*, the plates were cleared quickly away, only to be replaced by *yakimono*, a course of grilled chicken and fish in light sauces. That's when Hiru realised that Basho and Yuzo were serving *kaiseki ryori*, a celebratory banquet of many courses. He glanced at Koji.

His friend's gaze met his as the others around them continued to chat and laugh and tease. "Koji-chan, do you guys eat this way every night?"

Koji's soft eyes peered back at him steadily. "No," he answered softly. "We all wanted to celebrate your coming here because you're my good friend and we wanted you to feel welcome."

Hiru bowed his head. He'd always known somehow that Koji was extraordinary, different from everyone else he knew, but in moments like these, he understood why. "Thank you, Koji-chan."

"You're welcome. In fact, I'm going to do the next toast." Koji refilled his *saké* cup and stood, bringing everyone's attention to him. "I'm making another toast," he said. They raised their cups too, with the air of festive relaxation brought on by the incredible food and abundance of *saké*.

"To my friend, Hiru," Koji said, smiling, his cheeks now blushing pink the way they did when he'd had more than one drink. "I'm so glad he's here and I want him to have a wonderful, sweet life."

Hiru bowed his head again. Had he not had also those two cups of *saké* in him, he would have been completely embarrassed and ready to climb under the table.

"I second that."

Hiru looked up. One of the twins, Hiru couldn't tell which, had spoken. The younger man was grinning, practically ear to ear.

"Thank you, Mod," Kiku said.

"I third that," his brother Tatou said. "Hiru's presence here has made us *ecstatic*. Right, Chan Chan?" He looked pointedly at Quan Chan.

Several muffled chuckles rippled around the table, followed by silence.

Naoto put down his cup and glowered at Tatou. "You monkey," he growled, "you're going to get it now."

The others laughed. "Oooh, Tatou's in trouble!" several guys said, almost in unison.

More laughter erupted and grew into a roar as Naoto shot up from his chair and lunged at Tatou. Tatou, being slimmer and quicker than Naoto, managed to avoid him, but not for long. After a short chase around the kitchen, Naoto caught Tatou in a bear wrap and dragged him over to Quan Chan's seat.

Tatou writhed and twisted, laughing hysterically. "Chan Chan, call him off!" he said in between breaths of laughter.

"Do what you wish to with him," Naoto said to Quan Chan.

Hiru watched, feeling his own jaw hanging open. He looked at Quan Chan to see what the man would do.

Quan Chan's face was bright red even though he was laughing softly. He reached up and rubbed Tatou's head with his knuckles, mussing the man's sleek hair. "That's what you get," he said, still laughing. He looked at Naoto. "You can release him now."

But Naoto still held Tatou in his brawny grip. "That's not enough," he said, though his rugged face had lightened and humour now touched his wide-set eyes. In spite of Tatou's struggle against him, Naoto grasped the man's t-shirt and pulled it up, revealing his toned stomach. "Tickle him, Chan Chan," Naoto said.

"No, Naoto!" Tatou begged. "You know what that does to me!"

The kitchen thundered with raucous laughter, drowning out Tatou's protests.

Quan Chan hesitated a moment. In the next, he reached out and feathered his fingertips across Tatou's stomach.

Tatou's body jerked and he let out a howling laugh. "Chan Chan, no!"

Naoto held him tighter. "Keep going," he said, now laughing himself, his thick arm muscles straining in his struggle to keep the writhing man in his grip.

Quan Chan laughed harder and went at Tatou's stomach and waist with both hands.

Tatou's face was bright red and he was howling, a strange mixture of laughter and torment. Managing to work himself to his knees in the effort to avoid the tickling, he brought both Naoto and Quan Chan to the floor.

Hiru watched the scene, suspended between mirth and shock. It was obvious what had happened. Every man here knew about him and Quan Chan. He turned to Koji amidst the thundering laughter around them and the hilarious struggle.

Koji looked back at him, his expression sheepish. "I'm sorry, Hiru-chan. I didn't mean to tell everyone. When there was a crash from your room, Naoto had gone to the hallway to make sure you were all right. He heard your sounds and knew what was happening. Then, when you sounded the call button, I needed to explain why I had rushed to your room, so no one would worry." He put a hand on Hiru's arm. "There really are no secrets here. I apologise. But please know you're among friends. I hope you're not mad at me."

To his own surprise, Hiru smiled at him, feeling suddenly, wildly free of some burden he hadn't even known he carried. Somehow, having all the guys here know what had happened and seem glad of it was an enormous relief. "Of course I'm not mad at you," he said. "You're my best friend."

Koji smiled, that beautiful, sweet smile that made the corners of his eyes crinkle. He squeezed Hiru's arm and turned back to the raucous scene.

By then, Naoto was laughing so hard, Tatou managed to twist from his grip and roll away, clothes and hair completely mussed and rumpled, his pale almond skin red and blotchy from being tickled. Tatou and Naoto both rose to their knees, chests heaving. Tatou stumbled on his knees to Quan Chan, who was laughing and put out a hand to assist Tatou.

"You still love me, don't you, Chan Chan?" Tatou panted.

Quan Chan ruffled his hair, laughing. "Of course I do." He gave Tatou a hug then sat back down, grinning at Naoto as the larger man passed on the way back to his seat. When Hiru looked up at him, Naoto winked at him and sat down at Koji's other side. Koji immediately leaned in to him and smoothed a hand down Naoto's broad back.

The laughter ebbed away bit by bit as everyone settled down and turned back to the incredible meal.

"I hope this didn't make you want to leave us, Hiru-san."

Hiru looked over at Kiku, whose smooth golden face was also flushed from laughter. "Not at all," he answered. "I'm having the best time." It was the truth. From those first moments with Quan Chan, to the beautiful meal prepared just for him, and the spirited camaraderie here, he couldn't imagine any better place to be. A pang squeezed his chest briefly. Too bad it was only for a weekend.

Kiku nodded, looking definitely relieved. "I'm really glad. Enjoy the rest of the meal." He looked pointedly at the twins. "Without further comments from the devil children."

Laughter rippled around the table and Tatou looked sheepish, though also somewhat pleased with himself. Hiru smiled at him then looked at Quan Chan.

The other man was turned in Kiku's direction and Hiru caught the two men exchanging a look. Kiku was smiling at Quan Chan in a soft, sweet way and Quan Chan was looking at him much the same. Hiru's stomach tightened. There was an intimacy in their expressions which people only had when they'd been ... romantic. He knew. He and Megumi had

looked at each other that way at times. So, Kiku was probably the source of the heartache Quan Chan had spoken of earlier.

Hiru turned his attention back to his plate. It was certainly none of his business, although he couldn't understand what kind of trouble had broken them apart when they still gazed at each other that way.

A gentle hand on his arm made him look up. Quan Chan was looking at *him* now, smiling yet also concerned. Hiru's heart flipped over. Words couldn't describe the effect that meeting Quan Chan's gaze had on him. If anything could though, it would be soaring over a mountaintop into warm light. He smiled back.

Quan Chan tried to enjoy the food, but found himself concerned about Hiru. Hiru had finally expressed some passion after a long period of suppression in his life, only to find out that every single man at this table knew they'd had sex. Hiru was behaving calmly, yet what if he was really upset? Hiru's earlier progress could be lost and Quan Chan worried about the other man's emotional wellbeing. Quan Chan forced himself not to appear troubled until he could speak with Hiru alone.

After several more courses and an equally incredible dessert of green tea ice cream covered in delicate chocolate sauce, the meal was finally finished. Hiru offered to help with the cleanup but Kiku insisted that he relax and suggested that Quan Chan take him to the bath where the others would join them for a soak when the kitchen was cleaned up.

Quan Chan led Hiru to the shower room and turned to him. "Are you all right, Hiru-san? I've been worried." He touched

Hiru's arm, struck once again by the hard muscle that met his fingertips. "I was sorry to find out that everyone knew our business." He shook his head. "I told you they could tease, but I wasn't expecting them to be quite so ... spirited." Truthfully, he understood why. Everyone had been worried about him, watching him go through his heartache with Kiku these past months. As much as he'd tried to keep it quiet and not let his emotions disrupt life here, his upset was obvious and of course, his dear friends would be jubilant that he'd had a pleasurable time with Hiru. It just would have been better had they kept their joy a bit more to themselves.

To his surprise, Hiru reached up and touched his cheek. The tiny, sweet gesture made a flutter of heat cascade through Quan Chan's whole body. "It's all right, Quan-san," he said softly, "I *was* shocked and ... embarrassed at first, but then, unexpectedly relieved." His smile faded and he slid his touch from Quan Chan's cheek to rest on his shoulder. That warm shudder passed through Quan Chan again. Did Hiru realise what a wonderful, comforting touch he had? "I'm sorry you had to worry like this."

Quan Chan covered Hiru's hand and squeezed it. Their gazes locked momentarily. Quan Chan couldn't imagine most guys responding so openly to him this afternoon and not getting upset over having his private affair exposed to a group of strangers. Hiru was unusual, especially considering the culture he came from. The Japanese valued privacy more than most. "You're very kind, Hiru-san."

"So are you." Hiru's gaze dropped and he leaned in an inch, as if he were about to kiss him, then stopped.

Quan Chan sensed what was going on in the other man and rose up, brushing a kiss across his lips. If Hiru was concerned that any advance he made was unwelcome, he was completely wrong. Quan Chan kissed him again, this time, lingering over Hiru's soft lips. His own eyes closed and he savoured the larger man's soft, eager whimper. When he finally lifted away and pulled back, Hiru's eyes had darkened, his lids lowered. Quan Chan stared up into his face, his groin tightening. Already, his dragon swelled and pushed against the front of his shorts.

Quan Chan's heart did a small flip. He certainly hadn't expected this when Kiku had asked him to look after Hiru. He hadn't expected the degree of release Hiru was giving him from these past months of grief. And Hiru needed it as badly as he did. For a brief moment in time, they had a respite from the difficulties in their lives. He smiled and slipped off his vest, hanging it on a nearby wall peg.

Hiru followed his lead and they undressed, hanging their clothes on the pegs. Quan Chan turned on the shower and when it was sufficiently hot, picked up Hiru's hand and gently tugged him under the spray. Squeezing shower gel into his palm from the wall dispenser, Quan Chan formed a lather and put his hands on Hiru's broad chest.

Hiru looked down at him, his eyelids heavy, and stood quietly, letting Quan Chan soap his chest and stomach. Ignoring Hiru's thick erection that sprang up between them, Quan Chan moved around to Hiru's back and washed him, daring to let his soapy hands slide past the other man's waist to his ass cheeks. As had happened earlier in Hiru's room,

Quan Chan's body swirled with heat. His dragon stood up stiffly and every cell of his body begged him to step forward and rub every part of him against Hiru's large, beefy physique. Knowing such an action would be more than welcome made it even more important to resist. Kiku did not allow public sex in his place and if he spent too long getting Hiru aroused, they'd have a problem. Hopefully, there would be plenty of time later to touch Hiru more. Touch, kiss, lick, suck. Anything they wanted. He worked quickly, finishing and soaping himself so he could rinse them off and get into the bath.

Turning off the shower, Quan Chan grabbed two towels from the rack by the door, opened one for Hiru then covered himself. There were already a couple of guests lounging in the bath, two men from Denmark who sat together, chatting. They smiled and greeted Quan Chan and Hiru as they came in and descended into the pleasantly hot water to sit on the opposite side. The men spoke in English to Quan Chan, making polite conversation and Quan Chan translated for Hiru, who, apparently, didn't know any English.

After a while, Quan Chan heard the others' voices in the shower room, followed by the sound of the shower spray as they rinsed off. In minutes, Kiku was descending into the bath with Yuzo, followed by Ryu and Nat, as well as Naoto and Koji. Kiku looked at him briefly, as he had during supper, a smile that showed care and concern, but also his relief that Quan Chan was enjoying a man's company again.

Quan Chan sighed and inched a bit closer to Hiru. Yes, it did feel good to have a companion, even for this brief time,

especially since Yuzo was sitting so close to Kiku in the bath and Kiku had a large hand cupped possessively on the back of Yuzo's neck while they conversed with the others. Quan Chan felt a pang. A weekend was nothing in comparison to what he'd shared with Kiku. But it was what life had given him.

Sudden warmth covered his shoulder. Hiru sat with his arm across the side of the bath and now rested his hand on Quan Chan's shoulder. The unmistakable press of Hiru's side against his warmed him where their naked, wet skin met. He glanced up, but Hiru was speaking to Koji, something about work that made the other men laugh. Yet, the gentle possessiveness in the way Hiru's hand pulled him closer made Quan Chan get that warm, melting feeling again, as if Hiru understood everything that had happened to him and was comforting him, making him a part of a couple the way all the other men in the bath were. Naoto had his arms around Koji who sat in front of him on the bench, the way they liked to do. Nat and Ryu were similarly couched together and every so often, Ryu pressed closer to Nat and caressed his hand or arm, conveying his own gratitude at having found someone special.

Hiru's fingertips moved across Quan Chan's skin. Back and forth, until Quan Chan realised Hiru was caressing him. Hiru's attention seemed focussed on the conversation at hand, yet there was a deliberateness in his affection, a definite sensuous, sweet kind of possessive touch that said, *We are together now*. Again, the gesture melted Quan Chan, made him feel buoyed and ... safe. Disturbingly safe, the way he

used to feel when Jin held him so he could sleep. So safe, he'd brought Hiru into his body, mingling their life force.

Quan Chan suppressed a sigh and put his attention on the banter now going on among the other men. Since this last heartache with Kiku, he'd wanted so badly to become someone who didn't want or need romantic affection, to achieve the ideal that Jin and Sun Lau had always touted so strongly. But he couldn't. Never could. Something had always nagged him, a voice deep inside that told him his mentors were wrong, that they were only suppressing their own vitality in some way by hemming in their sexual drive and trying to disconnect it from their hearts. Sun Lau had loved Ming, so why try to kill the beautiful impulse to love a special person? Even after Jin had broken up with him, he hadn't believed them. And then a few months ago when Kiku's visions crushed their romance...

His glance slid to Hiru.

Right or wrong, it seemed he was destined to crave this warm closeness. He allowed himself to snuggle in closer, his back pressed to Hiru's chest. The movement brought them close enough that Hiru's touch could slide down his arm until his large hand rested on Quan Chan's forearm. With his head tilted back, Quan Chan could see Hiru in his peripheral vision. Hiru looked down at him briefly and smiled at him then squeezed Quan Chan a bit closer.

Quan Chan dared to let his hand rest on Hiru's hard thigh, under the water. The thick muscle quivered under his touch. Hiru squeezed back, apparently sensing the unspoken communication between them. The message seemed clear.

Men of Tokyo: Sudden Heat
by Sedonia Guillone

They were both looking forward to getting out of the bath and going back up to Hiru's room.

At least, that's what Quan Chan *hoped*.

Life had given him enough hard surprises that he never took anything for granted. Ever.

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Chapter Seven

How much longer can I bear this? Hiru's body coiled with lust. Under the water's surface, his cock jutted hard, past the point of discomfort to near agony with its driving need to burrow deep inside Quan Chan again. Just sitting next to the man in this bath, the heat of their bodies so close, wet skin sliding together with every tiny movement, was driving him nuts. If there hadn't been a crowd here, he'd have already pulled another caveman manoeuvre on Quan Chan.

Finally the moment came when Quan Chan turned to him and asked if he wished to remain in the bath. The guests from Denmark had left long ago, as had Ryu and Nat. Only Koji and Naoto and Kiku and Yuzo lingered in the bath, obviously playing the gracious hosts, in addition to enjoying the laughter and banter that had gone on the entire time.

Hiru's heartbeat sped up. Here was his chance to be alone again with Quan Chan. "Well, I am somewhat tired," he answered, trying not to sound too eager to get away from the others. "I've been up since quite early."

A look flickered through Quan Chan's eyes. Was it disappointment? Quan Chan nodded and moved away from him, beginning his ascent from the water. Hiru followed him, worried now. Did Quan Chan think he only wanted to go to sleep? *Shit*. Quan Chan handed him his towel with a courteous smile. Koji began to rise from the water but Hiru held a hand out to stop him. "Stay, Koji-chan. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Are you sure?"

He nodded. "Positive," he answered then bowed and thanked the others profusely for the incredible meal and the warm welcome. He wrapped the offered towel around his hips and followed Quan Chan back to the shower room where their clothes hung. He started to reach for his clothing, but Quan Chan had pulled out two kimonos from a rack and held one open for him.

"We keep these spares here," he explained as Hiru slipped his arms into the holes and put the robe on. He watched Quan Chan put on a kimono then reach out for his towel. He threw their towels into a hamper and retrieved Hiru's clothing from its wall peg, in addition to his own. Then he smiled, his expression shy and reserved. "I'll see you to your room, Hiru-san," he said softly and turned before Hiru could answer.

Again, Hiru followed him out into the hallway, into the elevator. The entire way up to his room, he furtively studied Quan Chan's quiet demeanour. Truly, he wanted nothing more than to get back into bed with Quan Chan and cover the other man's sinewy physique with his own. He wanted to kiss and stroke and taste Quan Chan, to hear him make those whimpers and moans in pleasure the way he had earlier. Quan Chan made him feel so ... alive. So much a ... man. Yet, there was now this tense feeling between them. He didn't understand. Did Quan Chan not want to be with him now?

Quan Chan came to a stop by the door and slid it back. Hiru's stomach flopped when Quan Chan went in and set Hiru's clothes neatly into his suitcase in the closet. He proceeded to pull the cover back on the bed, obviously

preparing it for the night. Hiru stood by the bed on the other side, watching to see what the other man would do next.

"Do you need anything before you retire, Hiru-san? Tea or *saké*, perhaps?" Quan Chan remained in his spot, hands clasped in front him, in a kind of servile way.

Hiru stared at him. His mind swam, the way it used to at times after his accident, when his emotions got all muddled up and he'd feel a sweeping tide of panic, like everything he wanted was on a wave, being washed out of his reach. "I ... I..." He bowed his head. "I don't know."

He raked a hand through his damp hair. This was the way he'd felt so often when he'd been hanging out with Koji and wanted to touch him, to tell him how he was feeling and yet became terrified because he didn't know what was right and feared alienating his friend. This moment was like that. Like sitting next to Koji on the sofa, watching the TV and wanting just to reach over and take Koji's hand...

"Hiru-san, are you all right?"

Hiru felt a hand around his. Damn, he hadn't even seen Quan Chan cross over to him. But here he was, standing right in front of him, his white kimono gapping open just enough to give Hiru a glimpse of the furrow between his chest muscles. Quan Chan's touch calmed him even as it heightened his confusion. "I don't want you to leave, Quan-san," he said before he could stop the words from tumbling out. "And I don't know how to say it. Or if I should."

To his relief, Quan Chan smiled and clasped Hiru's hand warmly between both of his. A new light infused Quan Chan's eyes, as if he'd heard something he'd been waiting for. "I

don't want to leave, either, Hiru-san. I thought you wanted to be left alone to rest." He squeezed Hiru's hand. "I'm not supposed to invite myself to a guest's room. I must wait to be invited. It's a rule we have." His smile faded. "It's a good rule in most cases," he went on, "but in our case, perhaps not."

For the second time that day, relief made Hiru's legs go weak. "I ... didn't know," he said. "I wasn't sure what to do. I didn't want to ... impose on you."

Quan Chan lifted Hiru's hand and pressed his lips to it. "You could never impose on me, Hiru-san." He stepped in closer and laid a palm on Hiru's chest, over the soft material of the robe. Even through the cloth, the heat from Quan Chan's skin was like a sensual brand over his muscle. "You and I have both been lonely and sad these past months. There's nothing wrong in finding comfort with each other, is there?"

Comfort. The word reverberated through Hiru, bringing with it a certain ... feeling, a sweet, floating kind of sensation, like his heart was being held in a pair of warm, loving hands. He used to feel it in Megumi's arms. In her smile when she looked at him. It was what he felt in Koji's presence, even just sitting at a table over beers, talking about work or family.

And he felt it now.

What was more, Quan Chan felt it with him, too. He couldn't imagine why, but he sure as hell was grateful.

The sense of liberation he'd experienced earlier in the kitchen, now returned. He shook his head. "No," he murmured, covering Quan Chan's hand where it rested on his chest. "There's nothing wrong with that." As the words left

him, a surge of feeling moved through his chest, a sensation that made him brave, dared him to break from the strictures he normally lived in. Feeling suddenly bold, he lifted Quan Chan's hand and pressed his lips into the man's palm. Closing his eyes, he nuzzled the soft flesh, hearing Quan Chan's quiet intake of breath, a sound of surprise, but also of appreciation. When he finally opened his eyes and lowered Quan Chan's hand, Quan Chan was looking up at him, a heavy-lidded, velvety gaze that seemed to invite more.

Hiru stared at him for several moments. Every nerve ending of his skin sizzled, as if mild electric currents travelled through his veins. Something about Quan Chan just unleashed him, made him into a bold, wild person he didn't recognise. His own breath grew husky. His chest rose and fell heavily, while his cock tightened and lifted again, the way it had in the showers. The way it did whenever he was this close to Quan Chan. "You're so beautiful, Quan-san," he breathed, unsure of what allowed him to speak this way, and unable to stop himself, "I want to kiss you and kiss you and kiss you."

His words visibly affected Quan Chan. The man's eyelids fluttered and his body sagged. He reached out, as if wanting Hiru to catch him. "Please do, Hiru-san," he said in a whisper.

Hiru surged forward and pulled Quan Chan to him. Quan Chan's body was strong and solid in his arms, but the man's eyes, liquid pools, were soft, as were his lips. Tilting his head just enough, Hiru closed his lips over Quan Chan's. A murmur escaped Quan Chan and he sank against Hiru's chest in obvious surrender, his hands resting on Hiru's back.

Hiru's eyes closed again as he fell into the kiss. Quan Chan's flavour filled his senses as his body filled Hiru's arms. Quan Chan was by no means small but something about him was small, soft and yielding. His full lips parted and the velvet of his tongue caressed Hiru's in a sensual dance. *Perfect. Perfect. Perfect.* The word echoed in Hiru's mind as their kiss deepened. Not since Megumi had he felt so welcome, so ... appreciated. So wild and free.

Hiru slipped one hand up and cradled the back of Quan Chan's head while still tasting his lips and tongue, so sweet, so delicious. Quan Chan's hands caressed his back and the hardness of Quan Chan's cock pressed against his. The tiniest rub made his breath catch, set him on fire. With his other hand, he pulled the sash of Quan Chan's kimono. The robe fell open and Hiru smoothed an eager hand across the man's hard chest and smooth, flat nipples. Each rub made Quan Chan pant into Hiru's mouth.

Caught up in the growing heat, Hiru yanked at the collar of Quan Chan's robe. Quan Chan straightened his arms, letting it slip to the floor. His exposed flesh made Hiru's hunger surge. He pulled Quan Chan against him again, tasting him more wildly now, dropping fervent kisses over his lips and cheeks. The more Quan Chan answered with his own soft kisses, the wilder Hiru felt. In one swift movement, he turned with Quan Chan in his arms and lowered the other man onto his back on the bed.

The soft lamplight glowed off Quan Chan's smooth, perfect skin and reflected in his dusky eyes. His lips, swollen from

their kissing, were slightly parted. "Please hurry, Hiru-san," he breathed.

Hiru yanked open his robe, tugged it off and lowered himself onto Quan Chan. Quan Chan's arms wrapped around him and Hiru felt the immediate press of the other man's strong thighs against his hips, as if surrendering to him and possessing him all at once. An erotic shudder passed through Hiru's entire body. He smoothed a hand over Quan Chan's brow. "You're so beautiful," he whispered again and took Quan Chan's lips again before the other man could answer.

Quan Chan's hands cupped his cheeks as they kissed, drinking from each other's lips in soft gulps, tongues caressing, appreciating. When Quan Chan shifted underneath him, the rub of their cocks together sent a shock wave of pleasure through Hiru's body. The fire spread through him, his ass, his thighs, up his back, down his arms ... into his heart. Passion made him feel alive, the way he used to as a younger man, discovering the incredible intense pleasure of sex, when he wanted nothing more than to lock himself away with Megumi and taste her, love her until they were both sore and panting and breathless. She'd yielded to him the way Quan Chan was doing now, wanting him, opening to him, letting Hiru possess him.

He remembered the way he used to taste Megumi's skin, drink in the softness, the way he was doing now. Rising up on his hands, Hiru kissed a trail down the centre of Quan Chan's chest. Thinking stopped, and pure, wild instinct took over. He skimmed his lips over Quan Chan's skin, traced the definition of his muscles with the tip of his tongue. Quan Chan tasted so

good, so clean and sweet. Reaching the other man's navel, Hiru pushed his tongue in and wiggled it, feeling suddenly playful.

"Oh, Hiru-san!" Quan Chan's fevered voice whispered through the air.

Hiru glanced up. Quan Chan's head was tilted back, his arms bent at the elbows, hands clutching the pillow. Skimming his lips up to Quan Chan's ribcage, Hiru closed his lips and tugged the skin there with gentle suction.

"Ohhh!" Quan Chan arched against Hiru's mouth, an obvious plea for more. Hiru wanted only to give him more. And more. Pulling away slightly, he continued to trace the leaping tiger inked on Quan Chan's skin, feathering the tip of his tongue along the lines of the beast's body.

Lower and lower he went on Quan Chan's torso until the man's hard cock bumped his cheek. Hiru paused, his lips pressed to the smooth skin just below Quan Chan's navel. He'd never thought in his life that he'd be in bed with a man, not even when he'd spent so much time desiring Koji. He'd not let his mind wander here, cutting off his thoughts whenever he got near thinking about taking another man's cock into his mouth.

"Hiru-san..."

The breathless voice made Hiru look up.

Quan Chan's heavy-lidded gaze stared back at him. His beautiful face was flushed, full lips parted. "Hiru-san," he said again, "only do what you—"

"Shhh." A wave of hunger took him, made him made to taste Quan Chan everywhere, to make him cry out in ecstasy.

He crouched down and touched his lips to the hard stalk of Quan Chan's erection.

Quan Chan pulled in a sharp breath and tilted his hips. "Oh, yes," he whispered.

The response fired Hiru more. He dared nuzzle the silky skin some more then dragged his tongue up its length, base to tip. Mmm, it was delicious, as delicious as the other parts of Quan Chan he'd tasted so far, infused with that same innocent, clean sweetness. He licked again, pulling the very soft whimpers he'd wanted to hear from the man underneath him.

"Yes, Hiru-san, yes!"

Hiru glanced up. Quan Chan still gripped the pillow while his head thrashed back and forth, eyes closed. Droplets of cum seeped from the tip of his cock and Hiru lowered his head again to lick them up and swallow the tangy fluid. Quan Chan groaned, his sound as sweet as the flavour of his essence. Damn, Quan Chan put him into such a frenzy. He'd thought himself confused when he came here to explore, but from nearly the first moment of contact with Quan Chan, he'd wanted nothing but this.

Bolder still, Hiru crouched lower and ran his tongue over Quan Chan's sac. The firm balls inside bobbed under the slide of his tongue while the skin outside had a pleasant crinkly smoothness.

"Oh, Hiru-san!"

Encouraged, he licked again. And again, loving the frenzied way Quan Chan's hips lifted, as if Hiru's tongue gave him an electric current.

"You're so good, Hiru-san!"

Wild instinct completely overcame him, caused a madness in his brain, made him unable to rest until he'd tasted every part of Quan Chan. He spread the man's ass cheeks open and dove down, seeking the bud of his hole with his tongue.

"Ohhhh!" Quan Chan's cry told him he'd found it even before he felt the puckered skin against his tongue.

He pushed firmly, licking back and forth while his hands gripped Quan Chan's ass possessively.

Quan Chan's hips lifted again, as if he'd fly into space without Hiru's grip on his ass. "Hiru-san, Hiru-san, take me please, I beg you!"

The fevered plea made him look up. Quan Chan groped on the side table for the bottle of massage oil. His hand hit it and the bottle flew off the table. Hiru surged over and caught it.

"Hurry, Hiru-san, please!"

Hiru wanted to obey him so badly, he poured the oil into his palm and smeared it over his cock, over every surface of skin his hand touched. When he looked up, Quan Chan had turned onto his hands and knees, ass up in the air.

Quan Chan was looking over his shoulder, his large liquid eyes dusky, his smooth skin sweaty and flushed. "Now, Hiru-san!"

Hiru lunged forward, grasped Quan Chan's hips and pushed the head of his cock against Quan Chan's opening.

Quan Chan groaned and pushed back, stretching himself open.

Hiru nudged and nudged in repeated thrusts. The head slipped in. Delicious suction tugged him deeper. Yes. He

wanted this so badly. Nothing else. He thrust again and again until he slid in to the root. The friction whipped him more deeply into the carnal madness Quan Chan inspired in him. All that existed were the points of contact he had with Quan Chan, the friction of his cock in Quan Chan's passage, the grip of his hands on Quan Chan's slim hips. Quan Chan's fists gripped the sheets, his arm and back muscles flexing as he anchored himself against Hiru's hard thrusts.

Hiru exhaled with each mad push. He looked down, watching the ruddy thickness of his cock sink into Quan Chan's hole each time. Their heavy breaths rose and fell in a feverish rhythm and mixed with the slapping sound of their naked bodies.

Quan Chan's head was turned to the side, his cheek mashed to the pillow, eyes closed, lips moving, speaking a hushed but impassioned litany in Chinese. Hiru didn't understand the words, but something about them drove him on, made him thrust harder, faster. He couldn't stop, ramming helplessly into Quan Chan's tight passage while the pressure built and built. He squeezed his eyes shut. The world behind his eyelids was shadowy, a soft floating darkness full of twinkling lights, like the night sky over the sea in Okinawa where he used to go with his parents as a child.

"Oh, Hiru-san! *Wo ai ni, wo ai ni, mei nanren!*"

Hiru recognised his name among the excitedly chanted words Quan Chan was saying in his own language. The pressure in his cock and balls tipped over the edge. He groaned, long and hard as his cock emptied itself into Quan Chan.

He collapsed against Quan Chan's back, pulling him close with an arm around the man's front. Sticky moisture met his skin, the evidence of Quan Chan's climax. Turning onto his side, he gently pulled Quan Chan against him, spooning the other man's back while their panting breaths echoed around them. Hot sweat stuck them together and Quan Chan's back heaved against his chest. The air smelled musky from sex and Hiru closed his eyes, breathing in the scent, not wanting to let go of Quan Chan. "Thank you so much, Quan-san," he breathed against the other man's skin. No one had made him feel this good, this special in the longest time. He'd forgotten what it felt like.

He felt the other man lift their joined hands followed by the press of soft lips onto the tendons of his hand. "I'm the one who should thank you," Quan Chan murmured.

His words sent a sweet vibration of warmth through Hiru's nerve endings. He brushed a kiss onto the back of Quan Chan's neck, tasted the salt of his damp skin with a gentle lick. His cock, half-hard, still rested inside Quan Chan's passage. Little by little, as he softened, it slipped out. Hiru's stomach jumped and slight tension curled in his limbs, as if this meant Quan Chan would get up and leave.

Quan Chan turned his head on the pillow and looked at Hiru. "I hope you'll invite me to stay, Hiru-san," he said softly. "I mean, if that's what you want."

Relief shivered through him, showing him just how worried he'd been in that moment. He squeezed Quan Chan more firmly against him. "Yes, it's what I want."

Quan Chan smiled and turned back, snuggling into him. They needed to get cleaned up from their sweaty, sticky, naked mess, but there would be time for that later. All Hiru wanted now was to hold Quan Chan as long as he could. He'd learned all too painfully that the sweet things in life could be taken away in a heartbeat.

Which was probably what would happen anyway when the weekend was over. Then he thought of something else.

"Quan-san?"

"Yes?" Quan Chan's thumb brushed sweetly back and forth across his hand.

Hiru paused. Dare he ask this question? His stomach tightened a bit and he almost stopped. But he just *had* to know. "If I may ask, what were those things you were saying, in Chinese? I couldn't understand."

Quan Chan pulled in a soft breath. His body stilled against Hiru's chest. "Oh ... that." He turned his face again, his expression shy. "May I tell you another time?"

In the soft lamplight, Hiru could see the flush in Quan Chan's cheeks and his heart jumped. Slowly, he nodded. "Of course."

Quan Chan dropped a kiss on his lips before turned back over. "Thank you, Hiru-san. *Mei nanren.*"

* * * *

Jin closed his eyes and breathed in Wu Li's scent. More potent than sandalwood and a million times spicier, especially in the aftermath of passion. Jin couldn't even think of sex with Wu Li as mere Dragon-Tiger practise. Months ago it had

ceased being a methodical, intentional directing of *qi* and had become, in spite of all Jin's touting of the non-romantic ideal ... lovemaking.

Wu Li released a sigh and pressed his back more firmly to Jin's bare chest. The fingers of one hand laced with Jin's fingers and his long hair brushed Jin's lips. A breeze passed through the wooden screen of the window and rustled the silk that hung around the bed. In moments like this, Jin began to wonder if the Realm of the Immortals could possibly be more desirable than this. Perhaps not, but the Realm of the Immortals was just that—immortal while he and Wu Li were very achingly mortal. His time here on Earth with Wu Li was drawing closer to its end with each passing minute.

Wu Li lifted their joined hands upward and Jin felt the press of those velvety lips against his knuckles. In response, he brushed a soft kiss to the nape of Wu Li's neck. Wu Li was a man of only twenty but in moments like this, he seemed timeless, old and wise and childlike all at once. The way Quan Chan had been at that age. The two had similar backgrounds, had lived in the streets, hungry for a man's love and protection, and yet neither had been toughened by the experience.

Wu Li turned suddenly so that he was on his back looking up. The candle burning on the bedside table cast a glow on his creamy skin and made his dark eyes appear luminous. "Jin Jin," he whispered. It was unheard of for a man to use a nickname with his superior, but Jin couldn't help allowing it. He melted each time. After years of trying to obey Sun Lau's

directive against romantic love, his heart had succumbed, completely against his will.

He pulled in a deep breath, bracing for the turbulence to come. His own fault again. He needed to have told Wu Li about Quan Chan this morning immediately after hanging up from the phone call. "Yes?"

Wu Li rose up onto one elbow. His gaze bore down and Jin could feel it as if it were a physical touch. "Are you all right?" His smooth brow crinkled a bit and he leaned over, brushing his fingertips across Jin's cheek.

The tender gesture made Jin's guilt flare mercilessly. This was a nightmare. Wu Li was just learning to trust him ... really, deeply trust him. After having been used by one creep after another in order to feed himself until he'd stumbled onto Jin's doorstep, Wu Li had only recently begun to accept that Jin wasn't another man who wanted to use him for his physical beauty then toss him away. All their hard work was about to be lost.

"I'm sorry," he said before Jin could answer. "You're worried about Sun Lau." He leaned over and pressed a soft kiss to Jin's lips. "Me too."

The statement sliced through Jin's heart. For a moment, he considered not saying anything, but knew he couldn't do that. As soon as he told Quan Chan the truth about Sun Lau, Quan Chan would jump on a plane and come back. Wu Li would have to be prepared. "I *am* worried about Sun Lau," he said finally, "but ... there's something else."

Wu Li nodded. "I knew it. You've not been the same since your phone call this morning." He bowed his head. "I'm sorry. It's none of my business."

Jin sighed and turned, rising up on his elbow. "Actually it *is* your business. It concerns your ... future."

Wu Li's already large eyes widened. "Oh no! I've done something wrong. You're sending me away, aren't you?"

"No." Jin reached out and grasped the other man's wrist. How like Quan Chan Wu Li was. The same insecurity. Quan Chan used to worry all the time that Jin would put him back out on the streets at the slightest offense. Another trust that had been destroyed after a long time building. "I wouldn't do that. Ever."

"Then what is it?" Panic remained in Wu Li's face. In this moment, he looked as he had that first night—a thin, shivering youth who'd turned up on the temple's doorstep in the middle of a rainstorm almost a year and a half ago, hair and skin dripping, ratty clothing drenched. Beautiful silks and a diet that made his hair and skin glow with health would never erase the simple peasant boy who looked out at the world from those incredible eyes.

Jin reached out and pushed back a lock of the other man's hair, tucking it gently behind his ear. "I've struggled with this all day," he said softly.

"With what?"

"With having to tell you the truth ... of our situation."

Wu Li's bottom lip started trembling. His large liquid eyes filled with sadness. As if he knew. Even sad he was the most adorable person in the world. No hardening city experience

had erased the innocent boy who'd come to Shanghai from a poor village in the countryside to escape persecution and instead had found more hardship. "Like I said, you're getting rid of me."

"No. Not getting rid of you." He put a large hand over Wu Li's shoulder. "Wu Li, there's something you don't understand. Sun Lau hasn't told you because he was afraid you'd become arrogant. You're a..." Jin hesitated on the words, as if just saying them would slice the bond between himself and Wu Li. "A Golden Dragon. A gift to mankind."

Wu Li stared at him a moment. The candlelight made his eyes shift in a magical way. His soft lips parted and Jin could almost hear the questions in the man's mind.

"It is said in the scriptures that a being like you comes along only once in many centuries." Jin let his touch slide down the slim, hard muscles in Wu Li's arm and come to rest over his hand. As he'd feared, speaking aloud of the myth had already made him feel unworthy of touching the man who'd been his lover for a year and a half now. In seconds, he'd gone from lying in bed with his soul mate to feeling as if Wu Li were standing on the other side of a gaping chasm, forever out of his reach.

"Why does that trouble you?" Wu Li finally asked. "I don't care what I am as long as I get to be with you." Just like Quan Chan, Wu Li had never been terribly interested in the scriptures of the White Tiger path. From the first all he'd wanted was to feel safe, protected. Loved.

Jin looked down. If he maintained eye contact with Wu Li, he knew he'd never be able to tell him the entire thing. "Sun Lau is dying, Wu Li. You realise that, don't you?"

"Yes."

Just saying that was painful beyond belief and Jin closed his eyes a moment before continuing. "He wants to give Quan Chan a gift before he dies, Wu Li. A special gift that expresses all Sun Lau feels for him." He dared to look up a moment. "Quan Chan was everything to Sun Lau, a favourite son, a prized student ... the one he always loved the most. His great treasure. Only the Golden Dragon will do for Quan Chan." He fell silent, avoiding Wu Li's eyes, as he waited for the other man to comprehend.

It only took a few seconds. Wu Li was a simple country boy, but he had a quick mind. "*I'm* the gift?"

"Yes." Jin bowed his head, feeling only feel shame in this moment. Appropriate, considering he was getting ready to hand over his lover to another man as if Wu Li were a thing, not a human being with feelings.

"But I don't even know Quan Chan." Wu Li's voice rose in pitch, his terror clear in the sound. He'd come to the temple shortly after Quan Chan's last visit here, and so Quan Chan was only someone Wu Li had ever heard about from Sun Lau.

Jin's heart squeezed. He was disgusted with himself, at his weakness and willingness to force Wu Li away from him.

"Quan Chan is a good man. I've known him since he was fourteen. He'll be good to you." He forced himself to look Wu Li in the eyes and was immediately sorry. Those large beautiful eyes were filled with tears and Wu Li's full lower lip

trembled again. Jin saw the other man's inner battle between wanting to refuse and beg in protest and his need to obey the men who'd taken him in and given him a new life.

Jin squeezed Wu Li's hand and brushed the pad of his thumb back and forth over the tendons. The gesture was meant to comfort Wu Li, but Jin knew that as long as he was forcing Wu Li to his fate, comforting him this way was nothing but hypocrisy. Without thinking, he held out his arms. All he could do in this moment was to give his flimsy, hypocritical affection. "Come here, Wu Li. Please."

Without a word, the slim, beautiful man lowered himself into Jin's arms and let himself be embraced.

Jin closed his eyes and breathed in the scent of Wu Li's long hair as he brushed his lips across its sleekness. "If you believe for a second this is what I want," he said in a broken whisper, "you are completely wrong." When the other man didn't answer, Jin fought back a wave of tears. As a younger man, he'd prided himself on his detachment. But then, he'd been able to delude himself. Now, at forty, many more years of practise and struggle had eroded that ability.

Wu Li's silence was worse than if he'd thrown a tantrum or refused the affection. It only brought home to Jin how helpless Wu Li really felt as well as how ready he was to do anything Jin asked of him, no matter how much it hurt him. His body trembled in Jin's arms and Jin felt one hand clutch at his biceps. Wu Li's cheek rested against his chest but Jin could feel the moisture of tears in the warm press where their skin touched.

Jin cradled the back of Wu Li's head with his other hand. This was worse than dying. Once before in his life he'd experienced a moment just like this—years ago, lying in his bed one night, he'd fully understood how much he'd hurt Quan Chan in the name of doing what was right. The hurt he'd caused had never really healed and he suspected the damage he'd just done to Wu Li would be the same.

What he wouldn't have given right this second to trade places with Sun Lau.

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Chapter Eight

"Jin, no, please, don't do this. I love you." Horror closed like a shadow over Quan Chan, choking him, forcing him to gulp for air. Maybe if Jin saw his heartache, his tears, he'd be moved.

But Jin's face remained expressionless. His heart was closed. Like a wall of bricks between them. "This is the only thing to do, Quan Chan, and you know it. We can't keep breaking the rules."

Quan Chan lunged for him, grasped his arm, but Jin wrenched it away, making him gasp again. "Jin, I beg you. Don't leave me."

"I'm not going anywhere," Jin said, still mortifyingly calm. How could he be so calm? "I'm right here. It's just ... you'll be sleeping in another room." Jin stood and backed away, towards the door. He might as well have been on the other side of a valley. "Don't be a baby, Quan Chan. It's time to grow up. You're twenty now. You'll get a new partner." Then he turned and faded into a grey mist.

"No! I love you! No!"

Quan Chan's eyes popped open. He gasped for breath, still horrified. The mist hovered in his vision and he clawed at it, desperate to reach in and yank Jin back. Jin was having a moment of madness, of fear. That was all. He'd come back to his senses.

He continued to pant, hand extended. But the mist was fading. Another bad dream. Soon the mist was gone, replaced

by a view of *soji* screen. No Jin. Just his room at the White Tiger. Hiru's room, actually.

His breathing slowed down a tiny bit, but the horror remained, the agony of having watched Jin crush his heart like a plum fallen from a tree then walk away, as he'd done in real life. As if their love had never meant anything.

Just remembering made the panic return. He'd never really gotten over it. Moments like this, the heartache was as fresh as when it had happened, making his chest rise and fall with his struggle to take in enough air. His hands clutched the sheets and sweat, damp and oppressive, poured over his skin.

"Quan-san?"

"Jin?" Quan Chan answered without thinking. His confusion returned, the melding of dream and waking that made him unable to distinguish. Perhaps...

A soft weight pressed onto his arm. He turned his head and saw a face in the shadowy light. He blinked. Slowly, the face came into focus. Not Jin.

Hiru. He was kneeling by the bed, leaning in close, a hand on Quan Chan's arm.

Quan Chan released a breath, feeling his heartbeat calm a bit. Hiru's boyish face soothed him, chasing away the horrible feeling.

"Are you all right, Quan-san? I think you were having a bad dream."

Quan Chan gazed at Hiru. Hiru's warm touch remained on his arm, also calming. "I was having a nightmare." Then he thought of something. "Did I push you from the bed?"

Hiru smiled. "Not at all. I got up to use the bathroom. When I came out you were crying out in your sleep."

Quan Chan tensed. He didn't want Hiru's pity. Then he remembered. Hiru wouldn't have understood what he was saying. To his knowledge, he never dreamed in any language except his own, either Mandarin, which he learned the few years his mother had sent him to school, or in Shanghai dialect, which he grew up speaking. "I'm sorry, Hiru-san. I hope I didn't disturb you." All he needed was to repulse the one man he'd been able to enjoy himself with in since Kiku. Well, that is, before the visions got so bad their lovemaking turned into nothing but tension. It had truly been years since sex had held this kind of delicious pleasure.

"Please don't be sorry." Hiru released Quan Chan's arm and went around the bed. To Quan Chan's relief, he climbed back in and slid close together, urging Quan Chan onto his side and spooning him from behind the way he'd done last night. "I often have nightmares too. About the accident," Hiru said softly. He sighed deeply and pressed his lips to Quan Chan's shoulder.

Quan Chan closed his eyes and allowed himself to relax against Hiru's front. Of course, he couldn't come to rely on this comfort, but for one weekend, he wouldn't deny himself a few hours of feeling surrounded and held in Hiru's strength. Quietly, he listened to Hiru's breath rise and fall, enjoying the warmth of the other man's body so close to his, the way he used to so long ago, lying with Jin in the early morning before they'd rise for meditation. In spite of the painful breakup,

those moments had remained a sweet memory. A drowsy languor overcame him and his eyes closed again.

When he woke up the second time, Hiru's arm was still over him. Sweaty warmth was trapped now between their naked bodies and Hiru's breath pulsed over his skin. Hiru was asleep.

Quan Chan sighed. He couldn't awaken Hiru now. Hiru was still a guest here, officially, and needed to be allowed to rest. Unfortunately, lying awake, even in the haven of the other man's arms, Quan Chan found his mind racing, the subject now, the Golden Dragon and the seeming urgency behind Sun Lau's letter.

Quan Chan closed his eyes, but that only made his worry intensify. He opened them again and took a deep breath. For years now Sun Lau hadn't pressured him to return to Shanghai even though more than once he'd told Quan Chan he was leaving him the Temple in his will.

Sun Lau's will. Shit. A sense of foreboding rose inside him, like the mist from his dream. When he'd called yesterday morning, Jin's voice had had that calmness, that perfect equanimity the man had worked so hard to cultivate. The tone made it nearly impossible to distinguish a lie from the truth and over the years had often made Quan Chan feel crazy. However, perhaps it really meant nothing. Maybe Sun Lau simply did wish to give him a gift. After all, he'd said that if Quan Chan wished to return to Tokyo, at least he'd have the Golden Dragon.

Quan Chan leaned back, more deeply into Hiru's warmth. The feeling reminded him of why he'd wanted to stay here, in

this place, with Kiku and the others. Warmth. Kiku, for all his quirks, was a warm man, emotionally giving, generous and open-hearted. Quan Chan always knew where he stood with Kiku, even when Kiku was in bed with someone else a mere two doors away. The hurt was endurable in the face of Kiku's honesty. No hidden daggers.

That's why he liked all the other men here. They too, held no hidden daggers. Koji, Naoto, Ryu, Basho, the twins ... to a man, they possessed a kind of open innocence, a guilelessness that made Quan Chan feel safe. Even Tatou's little stunt the night before at supper had really been harmless, a slightly immature, typically guy-teasing way of letting Quan Chan know how happy he was to see his friend relaxed and smiling again. No one here would ever try to deceive him or intentionally hurt him.

And neither, he admitted openly to himself, would Hiru.

A more guileless man he'd never met. And sexy? Sexy as hell.

As if awoken by Quan Chan's thoughts, Hiru stirred and Quan Chan felt the immediate rub of a thick, delicious erection between his ass cheeks.

Hiru stilled. "Forgive me, Quan-san," he said in a sleepy voice.

Quan Chan rolled onto his back and looked at Hiru. Damn, talk about sexy. Hiru's sweet dark eyes looked sleepy, his mussed hair stuck out here and there, just inviting Quan Chan to rake his fingers through it. Heavy morning stubble darkened Hiru's chin and jaw, contrasting against his pale skin, framing his full dusky lips. "Forgive you, for what?"

Hiru sighed. His expression looked truly sorry. "For my ... lust."

What was he talking about? Quan Chan stared at him a second. Ah, then it hit. The giant morning erection rubbing his crevice. *No problem.*

Smiling, he pressed into Hiru's front, and worked his way underneath him so that Hiru had to roll over and lie on top of him. He smiled up at Hiru, more than delighted to have that brawny body pressing him down into the mattress again. This was his idea of Heaven. "Don't ever be sorry for that, Hiru-san," he said, hearing his own voice slip into the tone of seduction.

Hiru's breathing immediately deepened and he stared down at Quan Chan.

Quan Chan's large, dark, liquid eyes gazed back up at him, stealing away words, making him only able to breathe and stare. With a mere look, Quan Chan made him feel desirable, manly. Wild.

Quan Chan's full lips parted, his breath husky. The slimmer man's erection rubbed his, making him groan.

Quan Chan clutched Hiru's ass cheeks and squeezed. His hips lifted and he tilted his head back. "I want you inside me, Hiru-san," he breathed. "I can't get enough of you."

"Really?" The question slipped out, formed by so many years of sexual difficulty and loneliness.

Quan Chan's hands slid past Hiru's hips, up his back, until the man's fingers touched his face, caressing the roughness of his stubble. "Yes, really." Quan Chan's strong thighs spread open and rubbed Hiru's hips as they wrapped around him.

Hiru exhaled and surged against Quan Chan. That movement, that ... surrender ... was so hot, so primal, it made the possessive fever in his cock spread through his balls and ass, down his legs, and up his back.

Quan Chan lifted a hand away and reached for the oil. He poured it into his palm and reached down, sliding his oil-heated touch over Hiru's erection.

Hiru groaned.

Quan Chan's slippery palm smoothed oil the length of his cock then around the head in tiny, gentle circles until his whole cock dripped with oil. "Okay," Quan Chan breathed, leaning back and pulling Hiru's pelvis towards him with those strong thighs. One hand remained on Hiru's cock, guiding it.

Hiru went willingly, pulling in a breath when his cockhead nudged Quan Chan's puckered hole. The thick coating of oil made the head slip right in, past the tight ring of muscles.

"Yessss." Quan Chan's eyelids fluttered and his hands gripped Hiru's back, pulling him closer.

Hiru closed his hands over Quan Chan's hard shoulders and pushed again. Quan Chan's shoulder muscles flexed under his touch, bracing him for the next delicious slide inward.

Quan Chan's eyes opened again and he stared up, his gaze dark with hunger. "Fill me up, Hiru-san," he whispered.

The quiet order made him surge forward and sheathe his whole cock deep inside the other man's channel. The firm slide sent a jolt of heat through Hiru's whole body. He rose up on his elbows, bridging Quan Chan's torso and pulled back, slamming firmly in again.

"Yes, oh yes!" Quan Chan's eyes remained open, staring firmly up at him, connecting their gazes, holding it as captive as Hiru's body was captive. If the bed around them had burst into flames, he wouldn't have been able to pull away from Quan Chan. Quan Chan's eyes rolled partway back in his head, glazed with a completely happy look, and he moaned softly at every bit of friction.

Heated by Quan Chan's moans, consumed by Quan Chan's absolute enjoyment, Hiru thrust again. His fingertips dug into Quan Chan's shoulders, like an anchor against the tide sweeping his body. He started to pull back again, but the strong thighs gripping his hips held him firmly in place.

Quan Chan smiled up at him, full lips parted with deep breaths. "Don't move, Hiru-san," he whispered. "Try not to move. Just look at me."

Hiru obeyed, his heart and body now deliciously enslaved to this beautiful man. If Quan Chan had told him to run up the side of Mt. Fuji, barefoot and naked, he'd have done it.

The shadowy room filled with the rise and fall of their mingled breathing. The air around them smelled of male musk and sex. Staring down into Quan Chan's eyes was like being enveloped in a sensual womb full of sweet pleasurable warmth, and Hiru couldn't imagine wanting to be anywhere else in the entire universe.

"If you start to soften," Quan Chan went on, "just move enough to get hard again, then stop." His palms slid down Hiru's triceps, down his forearms to his hands. Gently but firmly, Quan Chan pried Hiru's fingers off his shoulders and laced them with his, bringing them to rest on either side of

his head. "Imagine that your dragon is deep, deep inside of me, drawing out my *yin*, bringing it into yourself, the way a bee draws nectar from a flower."

The image alone made tingling heat surge through Hiru's cock. He couldn't help moving ... just a bit. Enough to make friction...

Quan Chan let out a small gasp and smiled again, his eyes velvety. A light sheen of sweat dampened his perfect skin. "Your body is drinking from mine, Hiru-san," he whispered, his voice elated, breathless. "Feel it?"

For a moment, Hiru felt lost. He wanted so badly to please the sweet man underneath him, to show him how much he loved being inside him. Would Quan Chan become upset if Hiru didn't understand?

But then, Quan Chan squeezed the muscles of his ass around Hiru's cock. Hiru pulled in a breath. The pleasure made his cock feel as if it would explode into sparks, a warm cascade that travelled upward, into his belly, then his chest. Like a ball of gentle fire, the sensation spread through his chest, swirling, caressing, before continuing into his throat and higher, into the very top of his head.

He pulled in a breath and closed his eyes. Twinkling lights filled the darkness, as if he were looking up at the night sky. The cloak of darkness pulled him in, made his body feel weightless, floating.

Someone laughed softly. A woman's laugh. He looked down and caught his breath. Megumi was looking at him, smiling. She lay on her back, next to him. The sudden crash of the waves sounded close by. The beach. They were lying

on the beach. Like that weekend they stole away to Okinawa during a break from classes. For one whole weekend, he'd had Megumi all to himself. They'd swum in the ocean, made love in their room, ate beautiful food and walked on the beach at night.

"Megumi," he whispered. He reached out to touch her cheek. So soft her skin had been. "What's happening?"

She laughed again while gazing at him. But then her smile faded. "Hiru-chan." Her voice was soft, sweet, the way he remembered it. "You shouldn't hold me this way."

He frowned. His heart felt suddenly as if a fist squeezed it. Didn't she love him? "What do you mean? I love you."

She gazed at him. "I know you love me, but I'm talking about the guilt. You shouldn't hold me out of guilt."

His chest constricted. "But, Meg-chan, I killed you. If we hadn't ... I mean, I wanted it ... all the time. It made me late." He pictured the taxi careening through the heavy rain. Late for a championship because he'd wanted sex. Sex. Sex. Sex. All the time. "We would have been on time. We wouldn't have rushed."

"Don't be ridiculous. It was no one's fault. If you must, blame the rain. Please, Hiru-chan. I love you. Don't suffer with this. *Live*."

Hiru's eyes filled with tears. "Meg-chan." He reached out again, but couldn't touch her this time. She was fading, growing indistinct, like mist. Then she was gone, replaced by the star-studded darkness. He pulled in a breath and opened his eyes. Awareness poured into him, through his body. He was still on top of Quan Chan, inside him, their bodies

intimately connected. He took several panting breaths. The unburdened sensation washed over him, nearly leaving him breathless.

His body felt as if it couldn't hold all the light and warmth moving through him. *Love*. That was the only word to describe it. His whole world, his life, was alive with love.

"You feel it, don't you, Hiru-san?" Quan Chan's soft voice floated through him.

"Yes," he breathed, "I feel it."

Quan Chan's smile widened. His eyes seemed to glow with compassion. "I do too, Hiru-san." He squeezed Hiru's fingers between his, a tiny gesture that felt full of ... closeness. At the same time, he loosened the grip of his thighs, allowing Hiru to move. "Go slowly, Hiru-san," he said softly. "As slowly as you can."

Hiru panted from the effort of restraining himself. The pleasure enveloping him, the pressure from Quan Chan's passage squeezing his cock, and the ecstasy in his heart made him want to dash forward, to drink more and more of Quan Chan's *yin*, or whatever it was making him feel this way. Yet, he wanted to make sure Quan Chan felt good too. "What about you, Quan-san?"

Quan Chan's eyes sparkled. "Don't worry about me. When you climax, your dragon's cloud will fill my body and your *yang* power will nourish me."

"Oh." Hiru stared down at him, captured by Quan Chan's expression and by his words. He didn't understand really, but the idea of Quan Chan's needing his *yang* power made his arousal surge, made that possessive heat thunder through

him and drive him to pull back and thrust, as slowly as he could, into Quan Chan. His belly grazed Quan Chan's hard cock, sandwiched between them and Quan Chan panted now, his eyes rolling back again as before. No, Hiru didn't have to worry that the other man was receiving pleasure.

Their bodies bumped together. Hiru waited, squeezing Quan Chan's hands before pulling slowly back again.

Suddenly Quan Chan pulled his hands away and rose on his elbows. "Hiru-san, arch your back," he said, his warm breath tickling over Hiru's chest.

Hiru obeyed and was immediately rewarded with the moist heat of Quan Chan's tongue on his chest. He groaned. Quan Chan pulled his legs back, letting Hiru go deeper into his ass while he licked a hot trail with his tongue over Hiru's nipple.

Hiru groaned and thrust. Fast now, unable to hold back as before. That feathery trail of wet fire from Quan Chan's tongue unleashed him, made him thrust again and again. But no matter how fast he moved, Quan Chan's mouth stayed on his skin, licked a mind-blowing trail across his muscles to his other nipple. The fire spread through his chest, back down into his belly and groin. His cock surged, swollen with rising nectar. The pressure built and roiled, stoked by Quan Chan's tongue on his nipple.

His control snapped like a band pulled back too far. "I can't stop," he groaned.

Quan Chan lifted his mouth, his lips shiny and moist, his look mischievous. "Don't then, Hiru-san. Let it go now!" He fell softly onto his back again and clutched Hiru's ass with his

hands, pulling Hiru's torso over him enough to sandwich his cock between them.

The organ was like a hard hot brand against Hiru's belly and he loved Quan Chan's groan of pleasure every time he rubbed it. Faster and faster, he rode Quan Chan, feeling his cock twitch suddenly. The pressure burst. He thrust again, moaning from the mere pleasure of his seed spilling out, giving Quan Chan his *yang* power, wanting it to nourish the other man as he'd said it would.

With each movement, he felt slick moisture pooling between them, coating his stomach. Quan Chan's climax. He looked into Quan Chan's face. The slimmer man's eyes were rolling back, his breath softly panting, lips upturned in a smile.

Hiru stared, caught by the look of sheer enjoyment on Quan Chan's face. Even after his climax ebbed away leaving him breathless, he didn't let himself collapse on top of Quan Chan, wanting only to look at him.

But Quan Chan wrapped his arms around Hiru and pulled him down, one hand stroking softly down his back. "Rest now, Hiru-san," he murmured then pressed his lips briefly to Hiru's forehead. Hiru felt Quan Chan still underneath him, in spite of his heavy breathing.

"Something happened to you, Hiru-san. I felt it."

Hiru nodded. "Yes. I saw—"

"Shhh." Quan Chan passed a hand over his hair, as if comforting a child. "Don't speak of it. It was for you, and you alone." Gently he squeezed Hiru, letting Hiru rest on top of him, the length of their fronts pressed together. "When it's all

settled inside you, you can share it with me, if you wish, but not now."

Hiru nodded wordlessly then lay still. He rested a hand on Quan Chan's shoulder, his cheek pressed to the man's damp chest. No rest had ever been deeper or sweeter than in this moment. Megumi's face floated in his memory, the smile she'd worn in the vision, the way she'd spoken, wanting him to be free and happy. Quan Chan had helped him see that, helped him begin to ... understand. Meg didn't blame him for the accident. Quan Chan didn't blame him. And he, himself, would never have blamed anyone else for such an accident.

Truth was, it came down to one thing. He'd loved Megumi. Her death had been a tragedy and he'd mourned her every single day without even realising it. The knowledge flooded him as he lay against Quan Chan, feeling the man's skin warming his, feeling Quan Chan's arms around him.

Tears leaked freely from his eyes now as the ache overtook his chest, the one he'd fought back every time it came over him. Blaming himself for Megumi's death had been the way to fend off his emotions. His way of controlling the hopelessness, the helplessness he felt in the face of her death. She'd been his best friend and ... he still loved her. Still missed her.

Quan Chan's hand caressed his hair with slow, gentle strokes, not stopping until Hiru's tears had spent themselves. Quan Chan reached for a tissue on the bedside table and handed it to him with a kind smile. "Are you all right, Hiru-san?" he asked softly.

Hiru rolled aside and accepted the tissue with a tiny bow of thanks. "Yes, I am. I feel ... cleansed."

Quan Chan nodded, his expression understanding. He gazed a moment longer at Hiru. "Perhaps I was wrong to stop you from sharing it with me," he said. "I apologise." He put a hand on Hiru's arm. "Please, tell me if it would help you." His eyes looked sorrowful.

"Don't apologise. You've helped me so much. I ... saw her. Megumi." For the first time since Megumi's death, he could think of her, speak her name without wanting to run and hide, the *real* reason he'd not gone back to judo. He'd recovered from the physical injury, enough to engage in the sport again, but not from the pain of association. The sport itself reminded him of his life with her.

He looked down, embarrassed. Perhaps what he'd seen would sound absolutely bizarre, even to Quan Chan. "She ... spoke to me."

To his surprise, Quan Chan smiled again, his eyes lighting up. "That's very good, Hiru-san," he said. "It means your blockages opened." He paused, studying Hiru's face with those incredible eyes of his.

Relief flooded Hiru. Affection washed over him. Quan Chan's understanding encouraged him to relay the whole scene and how it had freed him. When Hiru finished, Quan Chan leaned forward and hugged him. "That's wonderful, Hiru-san." He leaned back, his dark eyes misted. "I'm grateful you shared it with me," he said softly.

Hiru stared at him. "Shared it? Quan-san, it happened *because* of you." He picked up the other man's hand and held

it to his cheek. No one had ever understood him the way Quan Chan had. No one had really been able to help him until now. Not even his father who was a good friend to him in spite of the man's prejudices.

Suddenly, the thought of the weekend ending and never seeing Quan Chan again filled him with dread. How could they share all this ... passion and intimacy and then just go their separate ways? The mere prospect horrified him with how wrong it was. Didn't their lovemaking, the shared laughter, the sweetness, mean something more? How could it have happened otherwise? He *had* to find a way to keep Quan Chan in his life.

"Hiru-san, perhaps you'd like to rest some more? Do you need to sleep? You've been through a lot."

Hiru looked at Quan Chan, into the man's eyes. He could stare into those eyes forever if he had the chance. "No," he said, hearing the firmness in his own voice. "I don't want to waste a minute of life." *Or a moment with you.* On impulse, he leaned into Quan Chan and pressed a soft kiss on his lips.

Quan Chan's eyes widened then appeared dreamy. "All right," he said, his voice fallen to a whisper. "We could shower and have something to eat and then see what comes next."

"Yes." Hiru followed Quan Chan from the bed into the bathroom. All through their shower together, he cast in his mind for the way to stay in Quan Chan's life. He couldn't simply ask the man to date him, could he? Quan Chan didn't seem the type of man to go on dates like a regular guy.

Seeing as how committed Quan Chan was to this White Tiger path, Hiru couldn't imagine he'd have a lover apart from it.

That left only one option.

Stepping from the shower, Quan Chan opened a clean towel and dried him off, making Hiru feel incredibly pampered as well as cared for emotionally and spiritually. His heart pounded and nervousness prickled down his arms and across his back as he prepared to ask Quan Chan the question he hoped would ensure he'd see the man after this weekend.

When they were both dry, Quan Chan set aside the towels and held open a kimono, even tying the sash for Hiru before putting on his own robe. Back in the room, Quan Chan pushed the button on the wall by the bed and smiled at Hiru. "Someone will know to bring us up breakfast," he said then sat down on the edge of the bed. "All we have to do is wait."

Hiru looked at him and his heart jumped. Now was the moment.

Approaching Quan Chan, he went down on his knees and sank onto his heels, bowing. "Quan-san."

"Yes?"

He looked up, knowing his face held a pleading look. "Would you be my teacher?"

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Chapter Nine

Quan Chan's heart immediately started to pound. He stared back into Hiru's pleading eyes. Hiru bowed his head down, as if terrified he'd be rejected.

In the absence of words, Quan Chan reached out and stroked the other man's sleek hair, as he would a child's. Such a gentle giant this man was. And yet, there was no denying the raw power of him when Hiru's dragon was up inside him, or when they'd grappled.

His heart squeezed. In all the time he'd been practising the White Tiger path, no one had ever made this request of him. Men came to him for massages, asked specifically for him on a regular basis because he was skilled beyond compare. But not this. How ironic that this would be the same weekend Sun Lau would offer him a Golden Dragon. Talk about the flood after a drought.

"Hiru-san, you dear man," he said softly. With several fingertips under the man's chin, he bid Hiru to look up. "You've honoured me more than you know." He didn't even care if Hiru was just using this as an excuse to see him again after the weekend.

Relief flooded the other man's eyes. "I'm the one who's honoured." He bowed his head again and Quan Chan could just imagine Hiru in his *gi*, on the judo mats, bowing to his opponent before taking him down. A disciplined, honourable *judoka*.

"Please, come and sit with me." Quan Chan urged Hiru up with a light tug at his shoulders. Obediently, Hiru rose and sat next to him, a hesitant look on his face. Quan Chan turned to him and took his hand. "I'd love nothing more than to become your teacher, Hiru-san," he said. That was certainly true. In a matter of hours, Hiru had opened up to him like a flower to a bee, showering him with passionate affection and gratitude. For that alone, Quan Chan wished he could see Hiru again after the weekend. "But..." He sighed. Hiru would have to know the truth. At least, some of it. "There's a chance I'll be returning to Shanghai, very soon, to the White Tiger temple there. I'm not sure when. I'm to call there first thing Monday morning."

Hiru's brow furrowed. "For a visit?"

"Well, I think so. I don't know how long I'd be gone." It all depended on Sun Lau and the matter of the Golden Dragon. With Sun Lau, anything was possible. Sun Lau was the most unpredictable person Quan Chan had ever known.

Light infused Hiru's face. "Perhaps when you return? I'll wait for you, gladly."

That made Quan Chan want to melt right into a puddle. Right there on the polished redwood floor. At Hiru's feet. How could he explain the truth?

He sighed deeply before venturing to speak. The last thing in the world he wanted to do was hurt Hiru in any way. The man had finally dared to open to another human being after everything he'd been through. He didn't deserve to have a door slammed in his face. Quan Chan's heart squeezed again. He couldn't do it. Couldn't tell Hiru about the Golden Dragon

... Wu Li the man's name was. Truthfully, the mere notion of Sun Lau *giving* him a human being as a gift made nausea rise in the pit of his stomach. How he'd handle that situation, he couldn't imagine. It would be much easier, much simpler if he didn't feel so damned guilty toward his spiritual father.

Reaching out, he cupped Hiru's cheek with his palm. Hiru had shaved before they took their shower and the skin was still damp-smooth. "I must take each day as it comes, Hiru-san," he said softly. "I like you very much and ... I will do whatever I can for you." That would have to be good enough.

Hiru broke into an eager grin and he leaned forward, clasping Quan Chan's hand more firmly to his cheek. "Thank you, Quan-san."

Hiru's clean scent carried with him. The aroma of his skin and mild aftershave teased Quan Chan's senses, already weakening him. He hadn't been making it up when he'd told Hiru he couldn't get enough of him. Had anyone told him before this weekend that he'd feel this way about Koji's friend, he'd never have believed it.

Hiru's smile faded. His eyes moved as he studied Quan Chan's face. "You're troubled," he said. "I ... I'm sorry. I was pushy, wasn't I?"

Quan Chan smiled at him, leaning in a bit closer to Hiru. "Not at all. You're ... wonderful."

A small sound, like a breath of surprise, escaped Hiru. His lids lowered. "Every time I look at you, I want to kiss you," Hiru breathed.

Quan Chan's insides jumped. Hiru's words were so sweet, the way they just slipped from him, inspired, like poetry.

Aside from being a passionate lover, Hiru was also a romantic. And from the look in his eyes, he was falling in love...

The jumping sensation inside Quan Chan escalated. Far as he knew, he'd never inspired such feelings in someone else, as badly as he'd wanted to. Perhaps Jin had felt these things, but the man had cut them off, squashed them, and so it was impossible to know for sure. Kiku loved him, found him beautiful and treasured his friendship as deeply as his own life, but Kiku too, had never been so ... dreamy, never appeared so enamoured of him as Hiru did in this moment. And all the men who came to him for massages, well, they enjoyed the way he used his hands, but that wasn't ... like this.

His heartbeat rose, hammering lightly against his chest. Being looked at this way was proving intoxicating ... irresistible. And it didn't hurt that Hiru was so cute and sexy and good-hearted. "Please do, then," he whispered, and tilted his face upward.

His eyes closed at the first touch of their lips. Hiru's kiss was soft, quiet this time, less hungry than his first kisses. Mmm ... a sweet balance of *yin* and *yang* blossomed in the rub of Hiru's lips to his, no doubt, the result of their energies mingling so often in the last fifteen hours.

Hiru rested against his lips for several moments, as if uncertain. A large hand cupped the back of Quan Chan's neck then Hiru brushed his lips across Quan Chan's, tasting him delicately.

Quan Chan's heart beat rapidly, the way it had when Jin first kissed him years ago, with the power of newness and sweetness. His heart now was a young man's heart, free of bitterness, experience, expectations. All that existed was that kiss, Hiru's male scent, the warm press of the man's large hand against the tendons in his neck. This was how he'd felt when a kiss meant everything.

A knock on the door made him jump. "Chan Chan, it's Ryu and Tatou."

Oh, breakfast. He'd completely forgotten. He cleared his throat and closed his kimono which had gapped wide open.

Hiru pulled back and his hand slipped away. Quan Chan stared at the *soji* screen. *Damn*. They should have waited another minute. "Come in," he called, his throat catching softly. He glanced at Hiru whose pale cheeks were flushed.

The door slid open and the tray appeared, lowered to the floor. Then Ryu appeared, kneeling just inside as he picked up the tray, setting it on the low table in the seating area. He smiled at them and bowed, kneeling again as he set up the tray. "Good morning," he said.

"Good morning, Ryu-chan."

Tatou appeared in the doorway with a second tray. The same as Ryu, he set it down, kneeled to close the door and brought the tray over to the table. He looked up at them and smiled, his look sheepish. "Good morning," he said, bowing.

Quan Chan smiled at him. If Tatou thought he was angry at him about the night before, he was wrong. The twins had been his greatest supporters during the whole breakup period with Kiku and he'd never be able to repay the affection and

attention they'd showered on him regularly. "Hello, little monkey," he said.

Tatou's smile widened and relief flooded his male-model features. He and his brother were incredibly hot with their tan skin, big brown eyes and pouty lips. Tatou rose up and approached them, kneeling and bowing again. "Hiru-san, I pray you weren't terribly offended by my behaviour last night." His gaze flickered to Quan Chan and back to Hiru. "I have no excuse other than I couldn't help myself when I saw Quan Chan smiling again."

Quan Chan's cheeks burned. Tatou had no stops on his mouth, but so be it. He was too loveable to get mad at anyway.

"Tatou!" Ryu frowned and gave Tatou a hard look.

"It's all right, Ryu-san," Hiru said. He bowed to Tatou. "That's kind of you, but not necessary. I'm ... honoured."

Quan Chan looked at him, wide-eyed. If Hiru was trying to charm the hell out of him, it was working. He smiled, took Hiru's hand and ushered him over to the table. On one tray was a small envelope with Hiru's name on it. Quan Chan recognised Koji's handwriting and sat by the other tray that was obviously meant for him. As usual, incredible aromas wafted up from the bowls and plates. He sat back while Ryu and Tatou uncovered everything and prepared it for him and Hiru.

Ryu bowed again and looked at Hiru. "Hiru-san, I have a message for you from Kiku." He grinned and his eyes sparkled. "Kiku wanted me to tell you that this room is

completely on him and that you're welcome here any time you wish for as long as you wish, complimentary."

Quan Chan's heart jumped. Rather than teasing, this was Kiku's way of thanking Hiru. He glanced at Hiru, whose cheeks flushed again. The large man bowed with a shy smile on his lips. "Please, thank him for me and tell him I'm honoured."

"I certainly will, Hiru-san." With a wink at Quan Chan, he rose up and followed Tatou out of the room, sliding the screen shut behind them.

Quan Chan turned to him and picked up his soup bowl.

Hiru followed his lead but hesitated with the bowl close to his lips. After a quick sip, he set it down.

Frowning, Quan Chan looked at him. "Is it all right? Is something wrong with the soup?" He couldn't imagine it but anything was possible.

Something passed through Hiru's eyes and he nodded. "Fine. I'm just ... moved by Kiku-san's generosity."

Quan Chan watched him a moment, observing the emotions move across Hiru's face. So sweet, this man was, so guileless. It was obvious he wasn't used to this kind of attention.

"I'm glad if I helped you to smile again." Hiru looked away quickly.

The bold words startled Quan Chan a moment, but then he remembered the interactions he and Hiru had shared in such a short time. Even with Jin and Kiku, it had taken longer...

His stomach tightened. No. He couldn't let his mind go in this direction. And yet, he couldn't ignore the truth. Hiru had

opened to him without reserve, had given so passionately of his heart and spirit. Hiru's lovemaking had sent Quan Chan into ecstasy for the first time in years. This could only happen because Hiru's life force and his had mysteriously, miraculously intimately entwined, both inside and out. If he tried to maintain emotional distance between them, he risked undoing Hiru's progress. And, well, if he did that to Hiru, he'd never forgive himself.

He had no other choice but to acknowledge what they'd shared and to open himself to Hiru in return.

"Yes, Hiru-san," he said softly, his heart pounding, "you've helped me." He took a deep breath and then proceeded to explain what had happened between him and Kiku, the visions, and Yuzo, the entire thing. When he'd finished, he took a deep breath. He hadn't spoken of these things to anyone since they'd happened. He'd avoided it with Kiku and had not confided in anyone else. Everyone just simply knew his business and saw his heartache. Mod and Tatou, of course, comforted him all the time, showering him with affection and attention, their polite way of also letting him know that he'd have a sympathetic ear should he choose to confide.

Hiru's eyes misted and sympathy radiated from him. "I'm sorry you were so hurt, Quan-san."

Quan Chan looked down briefly. "You're very kind. But really, it's all right. If it hadn't happened, I wouldn't have met you. Not like this, anyway." The words were out before he realised what he was saying.

Hiru's eyes widened and he bowed. "Thank you." When he looked up, his eyes showed how moved he was. "I would never have thought of it that way."

Quan Chan's hands trembled now around his soup bowl. He hadn't meant to say such a thing, but now that he had, the sense of relief and comfort he sensed in Hiru made it true. More than true. His cheeks tingled. "I hadn't either, until this moment."

Hiru smiled. The longing, worshipful look returned to his gaze.

Under that warmth, Quan Chan felt both tingly and ... overwhelmed. What if he had to leave for Shanghai? What would he do about the Golden Dragon? He reflected quietly, his soup bowl warming his hands. A decision formed inside him. When he called on Monday morning, he'd tell Sun Lau that he had a student now and couldn't accept the Golden Dragon. Sun Lau wouldn't be pleased but he'd have to deal with it. As upset as Sun Lau might be, he would never deny the teaching to anyone.

Strengthened by his choice, Quan Chan smiled. "Don't let your soup get cold, Hiru-san," he said softly. "And don't forget the note on your tray."

Hiru nodded, still smiling. "*Hai*. Thank you." He took a deep drink from his soup bowl, set it down then picked up Koji's note, slipping it from the envelope.

Quan Chan watched him read it.

Hiru looked up and set the note down, suddenly appearing shy. "Koji wants me to spend some time with him this afternoon."

"Oh, I see." Damn. He shouldn't feel so disappointed, but he did.

Hiru cleared his throat. "Would you like to join us? I mean, if you're free." He looked down. "I fear I've taken so much of your time."

Quan Chan stared at him, his mind suddenly fogged. He also shouldn't be feeling so happy now, so ... wanted. Briefly, he thought of the passionate words he'd said to Hiru during the heat of sex the night before. Good thing Hiru didn't speak Mandarin. Their relationship was already happening so quickly. Hopefully Hiru would forget about having asked for a translation. "I don't want to intrude," he said, trying not to sound as glad as he felt.

"You're not intruding." Hiru sat forward. "Koji said I should invite you if I want." That shy look slipped through his eyes again. "I wanted to."

Quan Chan's heart fluttered again with that feeling of newness he'd experienced during their kiss. Like when he'd been falling in love with Jin, thinking about him all the time, living only for those moments they'd spend together, mourning the moments they were apart. Quan Chan had thought that young, hopeful man lost forever. But in this moment, the truth shone through, previously buried by his disappointment, with Jin and then again with Kiku. He wanted only to love, no matter how much it hurt. He nodded, smiling. "Then I'd love to."

Hiru's smile this time lit up his entire face. "Good. I'm so glad."

"I just need to change my clothes and speak with Kiku. Then I'll join you." It was definitely time to tell Kiku about the letter from Sun Lau. Perhaps Kiku would have some feedback for him about the Golden Dragon, and about Hiru's request to become his student.

A moment passed with their gazes resting on each other then Quan Chan lifted his teacup and sipped. Hiru seemed to take that as a cue to start eating again and they enjoyed the food in companionable silence.

Until Quan Chan thought of something. "Hiru-san," he said quietly.

Hiru looked at him and a jolt of something seemed to pass between them. "Yes?"

Each time Hiru looked at him, his insides stirred. "I just wanted to tell you ... you could never take too much of my time."

Hiru bowed again. "Thank you, Quan-san," he murmured, then picked up his tea cup.

Quan Chan watched him sip his tea, enjoying that simple act of observing Hiru's large hand around the tiny cup, his full lips touching the rim. Unfortunately, at the same moment, another feeling nagged him, an invisible voice whispering somewhere inside him, wanting him to remain ill at ease. *No matter how you feel about Hiru-san, it whispered, you won't have much more time to give him after this weekend.*

* * * *

Jin stared at Wu Li's back. Even with his shoulders hunched, Wu Li was breathtaking. His skin was perfection,

and the willowy musculature underneath stirred Jin's loins from a mere glance. Jin dared to reach out and run several fingertips gingerly down Wu Li's long ebony braid where it rested against the man's spine. "Wu Li, please, look at me."

Since he'd told Wu Li the truth, the young man had been behaving like an indignant cat, not quite ignoring Jin, but making his unhappiness clear by turning away and sulking whenever they were in the same room.

Slowly, Wu Li twisted at the waist and canted his gaze upward.

Jin's heart squeezed. As if Sun Lau's terminal illness weren't bad enough, the light had completely left Wu Li's enchanting gaze. He now had the lacklustre expression of a person weak from hunger. Perhaps it was better if Wu Li's back was turned. "I'm sorry," Jin said, his voice nearly croaking.

"It's not your fault." Wu Li's voice sounded as dreary as his expression. He so obviously didn't mean it.

Jin stared at him. The impulse rose to scold Wu Li, but something stopped him. In the flash of an instant, the horror of what Wu Li was feeling hit him, making his blood run cold. "Wu Li, I swear, it's not as bad as you're making it to be. You'll see." Before he could stop himself, he rose and sat close to his lover, pulling the slimmer man into his arms. He squeezed Wu Li to him, tears burning in his own eyes. The words fell again from his lips, the meaningless assurances, all intended to let Wu Li know that he was wrong, that something precious *wasn't* dying.

Wu Li's torso remained stiff, unyielding, for several moments, then softened. Wu Li melted slowly against him even though his arms remained at his sides, not returning the embrace.

"I promise you, it'll be all right. It won't be so bad." Jin winced from his own words. Never had he hated himself more than in this moment. How could he be saying these things again, after all these years, knowing what he knew now? He'd said the same exact things to Quan Chan years ago. It had been bullshit then, and it was bullshit now. Yet he felt powerless to say anything else.

* * * *

As Quan Chan had expected, Kiku listened sympathetically to him about his situation. When he'd finished telling him everything, he watched Kiku sit back, a thoughtful look on his handsome face. On the low table between them in Kiku's office, steam curled from the teapot Ryu had brought in earlier. Thankfully, Yuzo wasn't here. Not that Quan Chan didn't like Yuzo. He did. It was just that this conversation wasn't for anyone else's ears but Kiku's.

Kiku sighed and took a sip of tea. "That's crappy timing," he said, setting his cup down.

Quan Chan stared at him. Sometimes Kiku said things like this rather than the sage, Buddha-like things he often came out with. And yet, of course, Kiku was absolutely right. His shoulders sagged. "I know." A moment passed and he went on to explain his decision.

Kiku nodded. "That's a good idea." He sighed. "I certainly appreciate your difficult position."

"I know you do." Kiku understood what it meant to walk on the razor's edge. He'd been in the most untenable position for decades, suspended between the Suzuki crime family he'd left and the legitimate world. Until it all ended in a stunning climax, Kiku's archrival, Taro Suzuki, the main boss's son, had made his life a living hell, always threatening to make Ryu his sex slave while Kiku was powerless to stop him in the face of his promised loyalty to the family. Comparing their situations, Quan Chan knew that his own was a day of picking daisies. Kiku's trials had left him exhausted down in his soul and a bit unhinged mentally.

"Well," Kiku went on, "you and I both know how little control we have over anything. All we can do is meditate and bring our hearts to whatever situation arises."

"Yes, that's true." Quan Chan took a sip of tea in the silence that followed. Really, he hadn't expected Kiku to be able to tell him more than that, but just hearing it from his friend brought comfort. "Thanks, Kiku."

Kiku's eyes saddened. "I wish I could be of more help."

Quan Chan smiled at him. "You've been the best."

"Thank you."

Again, silence, then Kiku's brow furrowed and he peered into Quan Chan's eyes, seeming to study him closely.

Quan Chan sat still under the scrutiny, watching his friend's gaze move over him. No doubt Kiku's second sight was getting a front row seat for his and Hiru's passion-fest of the previous hours. Strangely, the thought didn't make Quan

Chan want to stop him. In fact, seeing him with Hiru was probably a relief for Kiku. In spite of the man's happiness with Yuzo, Quan Chan knew that his friend's conscience still ached over the way he'd ended their love affair.

Suddenly Kiku's dark eyes twinkled with humour. "I'd comment on what I see in you right now," he said finally, "but I think you'd accuse me of matchmaking so that you'd never leave here."

In spite of his own modesty, Quan Chan laughed. Kiku was the only person who could talk like this to him without making his cheeks burn. "The only thing you're guilty of is being a good friend. I've never thought—"

A sudden realisation cut off his words. His laughter died and he stared ahead, into Kiku's eyes, something he hadn't been able to do for the past several months without an excruciating ache in his heart.

Kiku's smile also faded and his face registered understanding. A companionable silence settled over them. "I wonder if Hiru-san understands what he's done for you, Chan Chan," he said finally.

Quan Chan felt a flush of heat in his chest. "If he hadn't already, he certainly has come to understand, between Tatou's remark at supper last night and your generosity this morning." He reached out and touched Kiku's arm briefly. "I'm sorry. I meant to thank you for that."

Kiku captured his hand and held it. His eyes radiated many things, the foremost being affection. "You're one of the dearest friends I've ever had, Chan Chan. You mean everything to me." He released Quan Chan's hand with a

gentle squeeze. "Believe me, it's a paltry offering. You're more precious than all the jewels and gold in the world."

Quan Chan looked at him. The ache was back in his heart, but now for a different reason. "It's not a paltry offering, Kiku," he said quietly. "It's sweet and beautiful, and I prefer it a million times more than the offering of a Golden Dragon."

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Chapter Ten

"Wow, Koji-chan, you're an amazing artist!" Hiru had said it probably ten times in the last half-hour, but he couldn't help it. Koji's drawings were as good as any he'd seen in any *manga* he'd ever read. His friend's talents had certainly been going to waste at Toshio Systems.

When he looked up, Koji was still beaming from where he knelt on the floor nearby. "Thank you," he said. "Thank you so much."

Hiru held the large drawing pad full of sketches in his hands. More papers full of *manga* storyboards were spread out over Koji and Naoto's bed. "I mean it. These are just phenomenal." He stared at the top drawing, obviously of Naoto with the rugged face, long hair and intense gaze. "You really have a gift for capturing a person's essence with mere pencil strokes." He set the pad gently down and looked at Koji again. "I remember seeing your sketches on the notepad at your desk," he said. "Even then I thought you were so talented. And now, look, you're actually getting published." Koji's editor, a family friend named Etsu, had gotten him a break, not only because she was in love with him but because she too, saw his incredible talent. The first volume of Koji's samurai *yaoi* manga was hitting bookshelves in the next coming spring.

"Thanks, Hiru-chan," Koji said again. "Of course, you're getting an autographed copy."

Hiru felt his cheeks redden. "I can't wait. Little did I know." He glanced away, embarrassed. "I'm sorry I didn't know how very important it was to you."

Koji's smile faded. "Hey, Hiru-chan, it's not your fault. I kept it hidden away, for a bunch of reasons." He indicated the drawings on the bed, many of which were scenes of naked men entwined in erotic poses. "Not only did I not draw for years, but ... well ... I'd kept this hidden too."

Hiru nodded. "Me too," he said. "I kept it hidden so well, I didn't even know myself."

At that, Koji laughed softly. The humour broke the awkward, sorrow-filled moment. When their laughter subsided, Hiru told Koji about asking Quan Chan to be his teacher.

Koji's eyes widened and he looked enthusiastic. "You did, really? That's awesome! What did he say?"

Hiru sighed. "He was honoured that I'd asked and wanted to accept. That is, if he doesn't have to go back to Shanghai."

Koji frowned. "Go back? I didn't know that." He looked down, pensive. "Quan Chan hasn't mentioned that."

"Oh, sorry. I didn't know."

"Not your fault. He must have his reasons."

Before Hiru could answer, a quiet knock sounded on the edge of the screen.

Hiru's stomach jumped.

"Yes?" Koji called out.

"It's Quan Chan."

"Come in."

Hiru watched the screen slide open and couldn't help his wide grin the second he saw Quan Chan. He set the drawing pad aside and gestured to Quan Chan, who looked hesitant, as if afraid to intrude. He moved aside, hoping Quan Chan would sit with him.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"Of course not, Chan Chan," Koji said, gathering his drawings into a pile. "I'll just make some room for you here. Please."

With a glance at Hiru, Quan Chan sank down next to him on the bed, so close, their thighs were touching. Quan Chan looked up at him and smiled. The man had such a sweet smile and warmth tickled every nerve ending in Hiru's skin.

"How are you, Hiru-san?" he asked. "I feel like I've been gone a long time."

"Excuse me a moment," Koji interjected. "I'll be back in a minute." He disappeared from the room, a smile on his face.

Hiru's insides jumped again. Koji was obviously giving them a moment of privacy. "I'm fine." Without thinking, he reached up and touched the other man's cheek. Delicately, he traced Quan Chan's cheek bone, following the contour down the plane of his cheek, then along his jaw. Quan Chan's long lashes fluttered with obvious pleasure at the touch, though at the same time, a heavy air hung about him, as if he were deeply troubled.

"How about you? Are you all right?" Hiru slid the pad of his index finger over the plump softness of Quan Chan's lower lip. More warmth skittered up his arms and through his back, followed by a soft, melting feeling. He used to touch Megumi's

face this way, loving the feel of her skin and the way she responded ... the way Quan Chan was responding now, with a sweet sigh and a look of relaxation.

Quan Chan's large eyes opened. Unfortunately, that troubled look still clouded their depths. "Yes, Hiru-san," he said softly. "I just wish ... this weekend never had to end."

Hiru's breath caught. That sounded really wonderful. "Me too," he whispered. He slid his other hand down Quan Chan's arm then up again over his bare shoulder. The white tank shirt Quan Chan wore accentuated his sculpted muscles to perfection.

"Listen, Hiru-san." Quan Chan's hand closed gently but firmly over his and his gaze grew pointed, the way it had when he'd incited Hiru to grapple with him. "No matter what happens after this weekend, if I have to leave, you should stay here. That is, if you want to. You seem to fit in so well here and Koji is here. This is a good environment for you. Do you understand?"

Hiru's eyes clouded and he frowned, though his large hand remained cupping Quan Chan's shoulder. "I ... understand," he said, then fell silent. Words, thoughts and feelings seemed to swirl in the air around him but he didn't say anything more.

Quan Chan's stomach flipped. Had he said the wrong thing? "I'm sorry, Hiru-san. I didn't think. I don't mean to push at you. Perhaps you can't just leave the place you live in now. No doubt, you have expenses, responsibilities."

But Hiru shook his head. "No, actually, I live alone. My apartment is paid for. A gift from my father." He looked

down. "He ... got it for me after the accident. He was so worried."

"How kind of him." Quan Chan covered Hiru's hand which still rested on his shoulder. Hiru's touch was heavenly nectar. However, Hiru's sudden nervousness was terrible. "I'm sorry if I pushed at you."

Hiru leaned closer. "You didn't push at me, Quan-san, not at all. I'd love to stay here. It's just that ... I wouldn't want to practise with anyone else but you. You're my teacher."

Quan Chan pulled in a breath. Why he hadn't expected this response from Hiru, he didn't know. He'd never actually accepted Hiru as a student, but Hiru didn't seem to think that way. Warm fingers of heat curled through Quan Chan's chest, a strong yet sweet feeling, like silken fire that passed invisibly through the air between him and Hiru, entwining their souls together. "That doesn't matter, Hiru-san," he said finally. "You don't have to partner with anyone if you don't want to. Truthfully, I'd want only to practise with you, too."

As soon as he'd said the words, their weight sunk in, like flaming arrows he'd aimed at his own heart. With the same force as his earlier realisation in Kiku's office, the flash of the moment made his eyes widen.

He *did* wish he could practise only with Hiru. In a mere day of making love with Hiru, he'd taken great comfort from him in a way he couldn't with anyone else. Not even the twins who'd been his dear friends for years had been able to console him the way Hiru had. For some mysterious, miraculous reason, he and Hiru *fit*. Quan Chan had been at this *yin* and *yang* thing for too long not to know that.

"Quan-san," Hiru breathed, "you really feel that way?"

"Yes."

Before either of them could say more, voices carried in the hallway and in moments, Koji appeared in the doorway with Naoto behind him. "May we come in?"

"Of course," Quan Chan said. "This is *your* room, is it not?"

Koji laughed and came over to the bed, Naoto close behind him, one large hand on Koji's shoulder. "I suppose you're right." He sat on the other side of the bed and Naoto immediately settled behind him, one beefy arm across Koji's front, pulling Koji back against his chest. Koji yielded happily.

Quan Chan saw Naoto glance at Hiru and give him a quick smile. Though Naoto was being polite and hospitable, it was obvious he was feeling possessive. Apparently, Hiru's recent weight loss had made him more into Koji's type and Naoto was worrying Hiru would try to take him away. Naoto was a sensitive man and probably also picked up on the fact that Hiru had feelings for Koji. Although now, perhaps...

Hiru looked at Naoto, worried. The man was behaving possessively with Koji. His insecurity was obvious in his body language, the way he held Koji to him, one arm across Koji's front like a barrier. And then there were those glances Hiru had caught Naoto giving him, as if Naoto felt he needed to keep watch.

Could Naoto possibly be worrying that he'd come here to steal Koji away from him? Damn, he prayed not. He wouldn't ever do that to Koji ... or to Naoto. He wasn't here to hurt anyone and besides ... He pulled Quan Chan closer so that the man's back pressed to his chest and leaned back against

the pillows. Meeting Quan Chan had been like discovering a precious treasure tucked away in this beautiful White Tiger sanctuary.

Hiru leaned into Quan Chan and slid his arm around the man's shoulders, intending to reassure Naoto he wasn't after Koji.

Quan Chan sighed and tilted his head back. He laced the fingers of their hands together, seeming comfortable like this. Hiru hugged him closer. Damn, Quan Chan smelled delicious and his warm hard body felt so good to hold. He leaned in and nuzzled the side of Quan Chan's neck. Mmm, that smooth warm skin. When he looked up, Koji and Naoto were both smiling at him. Naoto definitely looked more relaxed now.

"Quan Chan said I should come to stay here," he told them.

Koji sat up a bit straighter against Naoto's chest. "Really? That would be great! I mean, is that something you would want?"

He nodded, glancing at Naoto to make sure that didn't bother him. So far, he still seemed okay. "Yes, actually. I know I've only been here less than a day, but really, I feel at home, more than I have since ... the accident."

"You *are* home, Hiru-san," Naoto said softly. "If you want to be."

Hiru looked at him, his heartbeat rising. Naoto's eyes expressed a sympathy Hiru hadn't realised Naoto might feel towards him. "Thank you."

* * * *

Late that night, Quan Chan smiled at Hiru and tugged at his hand, leading the larger man down the hallway to the room they'd been sharing. Really this was the moment he'd been craving since they'd sat on Koji's bed where they'd been cosily snuggled the entire afternoon while hanging out with Naoto and Koji. For hours they'd chatted and laughed while the others stopped in to visit from time to time. It seemed everyone liked Hiru and wanted to spend a little time with him and everyone was glad that Hiru wanted to stay here after the weekend was over.

After supper, they'd gone with Naoto and Koji for a walk through Ni-Chome, watching the other people on the sidewalks, on their way to bars and bistros, sitting at tables in the tiny bars and waiting on lines to get into night clubs. The night was cool and pleasant and they'd had a nice time, but Quan Chan couldn't wait to get back upstairs and into bed with Hiru.

After all, there might not be much time left for them together...

Quan Chan slid open the *soji* to Hiru's room and led him inside. They showered together and Quan Chan delighted in being crammed into the tiny shower against Hiru's large, strong body.

When they got out, he dried Hiru off and Hiru insisted on drying him in return. He accepted and stood on the bathmat, surrendering to the gentle way Hiru wiped the towel over his chest and arms, as if he were afraid of hurting him.

Turning, Quan Chan caught sight of his own reflection in the vanity mirror and hitched a soft breath. The man staring

back at him looked ... different. His eyes were brighter even though they still appeared troubled. His face looked relaxed, the skin of his cheeks blushing and, well, radiant. Behind him, Hiru was busy at work, wiping the towel across his back, then down his ass and thighs. The soft material grazed the underside of his balls, sending a pleasant shiver through him, the promise of what was to come.

Hiru stood again and gently scrubbed the towel against the back of Quan Chan's head. Quan Chan smiled at Hiru's reflection and found his gaze suddenly caught in Hiru's shiny hair. How sexy it had been this weekend to rake his fingers through that hair. He sighed. Hiru should have had the same experience.

"What are you thinking, Quan-san? If I may ask?"

Only then did Quan Chan notice Hiru had set the towel aside and stood behind him, staring at them both in the mirror.

"You look so pensive," Hiru added.

"I was just thinking I should grow my hair out." *For you.* He studied the dark shadow over his scalp, the way he'd looked for so long. "I haven't seen my own hair since I was fourteen."

Hiru's eyes suddenly widened. His large hands cupped Quan Chan's shoulders. "Is that when you started ... this path?"

Quan Chan's gut lurched. *Shit!* He hadn't meant to say that. All he needed now was for Hiru to pity him, the way Kiku had all these years. His whole body stiffened under Hiru's touch. There was no backtracking now. Not that it

mattered. After Monday, who knew what the future would hold? "Yes, Hiru-san," he said softly. He turned, not dislodging Hiru's hands and leaned back against the vanity. "I started when I was fourteen."

Hiru frowned. His serious gaze searched Quan Chan's. "Why, Quan-san? Why so young?"

Quan Chan sighed again and glanced down at his feet. Until this moment, Kiku was the only other friend he'd spoken to about his past. "It's a long story. Do you want to hear it?"

Hiru nodded immediately. "Of course," he said softly. "I want to know everything about you."

Heat suffused Quan Chan's face. Hiru's openness always had this effect on him. He drew in a deep breath. "My mother grew up in the countryside outside of Shanghai during the Cultural Revolution. When she was sixteen, she fell in love with a young man. He was what was called an Educated Youth, a high school student from a middle class family in the days when high school students were being sent to the countryside to learn agriculture and labour from the peasants. He fell in love with her too.

"They spent as much time as they could together. He had books with him, illegal novels and poetry books he kept hidden from the Re-education Committee and taught her to read. They had a love affair and she became pregnant. Unfortunately, he couldn't marry her while he was in the country because if he had, he would have been obligated by law to remain there, never able to return to Shanghai. He promised to send for her and marry her when he'd returned and gotten settled with work.

"Unfortunately, however, though he was a hard worker, he refused to allow himself to be re-educated. He remained outspoken, not even pretending for the re-education people to be a good follower of Chairman Mao. He was reported and one day, some Red Guards came and arrested him. They carted him away and my mother never heard from him again."

Hiru's mouth dropped open and a look of horror infused his eyes. "That's terrible."

He nodded. "Yes. It got worse. My mother was determined to find him. Of course, there was no way to do so, but she was determined. She left her home and went into Shanghai. She managed to find his parents but they, too, didn't know where their son had been taken. She spent hours every day in the government buildings, waiting and asking for him, begging for just enough food to keep going." Quan Chan paused. Just speaking of it made the image rise of his mother as a young woman, pregnant and frightened, desperate to find the man she loved, the father of her child. On a bench in a sterile hallway she spent her days waiting.

"Finally," he continued, "she needed to find work. There was no other way to survive. She didn't want me to die inside of her from malnourishment so she went searching for work. She found a room in an old mansion that had been converted into communal housing, claiming she was a widow." He looked down again before continuing. "The other residents there were kind for the most part, letting her help with laundry, cleaning and cooking so she could carry to term and then keep me with her while I was an infant. What I didn't

know was that the landlord was ... using her, threatening to turn her out onto the streets if she didn't..." He fell silent. That part was still painful beyond words. To think of all the humiliation his mother had endured for their survival.

A gentle hand on his shoulder made him look up. Hiru's dark eyes were misted. "You don't have to go on, Quan-san," he said softly. "I apologise for prying."

The sorrow and kindness in Hiru's voice made him want to go on, want to share his past with Hiru. "It's all right," he said finally. "You've shared so much with me already. I want us to be ... friends."

Hiru rubbed his shoulder. "So do I."

That warmth passed between them again, the tendrils of feeling joining their hearts. Quan Chan felt it deep inside and it gave him the urge to continue. "My mother endured the landlord's ... rape ... because she didn't want to be wandering the streets with a child to feed and she didn't want to give me up, not only because she loved me but because I had come from her union with my father."

"Oh, Quan-san." Hiru's voice was heavy with pain.

Quan Chan decided to continue before Hiru could say more. Pity was unbearable to him, and had been his entire life. "My mother made me go to school when I was little, but when I got older, I wouldn't go. I'd sneak out and run around on the streets, looking for food. Often, I'd stay in our room until she came home. I really felt safest when I was with her. Then, one day, while she was at the marketplace, the landlord brought me into his room. He made me sit on his lap. I was frightened of him but obeyed because I didn't want

us to get kicked out." Quan Chan paused. To this day, he could still remember the man's horrible breath, like rotten fish, and the bulge in the man's pants which he'd rubbed against Quan Chan.

"My mother walked in and caught him with me. She started screaming. She yanked me away from him, picked up a bowl and threw it at him. It hit his head but didn't hurt him. She grabbed me and ran, not even taking our few belongings with us. And so it was, we were out on the street just as she had always feared.

"By now, Chairman Mao had died and Deng Xiaoping had come into power. His reforms loosened strictures on free commerce and private enterprise, so that meant the resurgence of brothels. It wasn't long before my mother found one to take her in where she could work. To her, it was better than risking another situation like we'd had." He glanced down, his cheeks hot with guilt. "She could endure the landlord for herself, but she would have killed him before letting him touch me.

"As before, I spent a lot of time roaming the streets. I couldn't bear being in school. I didn't want to be a Red Guard. I was always afraid it would take me far away from my mother. I didn't care that it meant less to eat. I just wanted to stay near her." He omitted the part about getting beaten up by older, bigger boys who called him a faggot. "But when I was fourteen, I stumbled upon the White Tiger temple in a neighbourhood close to my mother's brothel. The place belonged to Sun Lau, an actor whose lover had purchased the property before the Cultural Revolution." There was much

more to that part of the story, but was lengthy and could be told at another time.

He went on. "The men there took me in. They gave me food, clothes, a warm clean bed and meditation. I only practiced with Jin, who was a few years older than I am. I was never forced to service anyone. I didn't begin massaging clientele until I was eighteen. I'd been there ever since when Kiku came along years later." He paused and, in the silence, sensed Hiru's emotions and questions. Hiru was wondering if he'd ever found his father.

"My father died," he added softly. "My mother finally was able to get a record of him. He'd been sent to a gulag on the border of Tibet for re-education. He didn't survive." Quan Chan fell silent and looked into the other man's eyes.

Hiru was staring back at him, his dark eyes still misted over. "Quan-san," he said against softly, his hands still resting on Quan Chan's shoulders.

"Please, Hiru-san, don't feel badly for me. I've had a good life, better than most of the people living out there in the world. My mother is happy now. She's married to a kind man, a professor at Fudan University who fell in love with her when she still worked in the brothel. She fell into her circumstances out of love for my father and she's been a wonderful role model for me. Because of her influence, I have friends like Kiku and Ryu and Koji. All the men here." *And now ... you.*

One of Hiru's hands went to Quan Chan's cheek and cupped it. "I don't feel badly for you, Quan-san," he said. "It's just ... when you were speaking, I was picturing you as a boy

on the streets and wishing I could have been there to help you."

Before Quan Chan could answer, he found himself being pulled into Hiru's arms. A strong, warm embrace surrounded him. He yielded, allowing Hiru to hug him close. "Thank you, Hiru-san," he breathed against the muscle of Hiru's chest. Damn, the man made him feel so ... safe.

Hiru's hand moved across his back, partly caressing in a comforting way, partly exploring, enjoying the muscles there. Fingertips pressed into the ridge of muscle along Quan Chan's spine and Hiru's thick dragon nudged his as it filled and hardened.

Quan Chan released a long, deep sigh. How beautiful it was simply to enjoy this embrace, to feel accepted and desired without the difficulties he'd experienced with Kiku. Of course, he and Kiku had found great pleasure with each other, but there had been the damned visions, and then, when Quan Chan had come to stay here, his love affair with Kiku was painful for Ryu. Quan Chan's conscience had never been clear around Ryu and even though Ryu had eventually befriended him, there had always been an undercurrent of tension between them. Many times, Quan Chan had thought to back away from Kiku, but could never do it. He'd been powerless to stay away from Kiku, desperate himself for the comfort and sensuality Kiku was capable of giving.

Would he be as powerless now, when the circumstances might demand he leave?

He closed his eyes and palmed Hiru's broad back. This sure as hell wasn't the time to think of such things, not when he had this magnificent, virile, passionate man in his arms.

Turning his face slightly, he brushed his lips over Hiru's pectoral muscle. Hiru let out a soft groan and his fingertips agitated against Quan Chan's skin. Hiru's large dragon was thick and hard now, pressing with insistence against Quan Chan's lower abdomen.

Quan Chan let his hands slide down Hiru's back and over his hips, seeking those perfect, hard ass cheeks. His tongue found Hiru's nipple and licked back and forth, pulling short hard breaths from Hiru as the small disk tightened.

Pulling back, he smiled up at Hiru's flushed face. "There are advantages to having practiced as long as I have, Hirusan," he said, his own voice low and husky.

Hiru didn't answer. His lids were heavy over his eyes and he stared down at Quan Chan, breathing heavily. His hands stroked small circles across Quan Chan's back and his dragon twitched again, as if reminding Quan Chan to give it attention.

Well, that was *precisely* what he intended to do. "May I show you?"

Hiru nodded, a barely perceptible movement, as if all his strength had drained from him into his dragon. The ruddy, veined shaft stood straight up, leaking dragon's tears from the tiny opening.

Quan Chan dropped to his knees, one hand on Hiru's hip. Lightly he clasped the base of Hiru's dragon with the fingers

of his other hand and caught the dragon's tears with a lick of his tongue.

Hiru groaned.

Hiru's *yang* essence rolled on his tongue, salty-sweet. Quan Chan closed his eyes a moment and savoured it before leaning back over and capturing the plump head of Hiru's dragon between his lips.

"Oh, Quan-san!" Hiru's large hands cradled Quan Chan's head, fingers moving as if wanting to burrow in hair that wasn't there. Quan Chan pulled away long enough to usher Hiru around so that he could lean against the vanity, then repositioned himself to continue his feast. Hiru tasted so good, silky skin, musky essence. Closing his eyes, Quan Chan anchored his hands on Hiru's hips and took Hiru's dragon in as deep as he could. With his lips almost to the base, he paused, stilled his mind and body, breathing softly around the thick shaft. Hiru's breath filled the air of the small steamy bathroom and Quan Chan swore he could hear the other man's heartbeat in his own ears. Quan Chan's attention focused, sharpened and softened at the same time until all that existed were the two of them, the steamy air, the soapy scent that lingered around them from the shower, the silky skin over the rock hard muscle of Hiru's cock, the weight of it against Quan Chan's tongue. All mingled in his awareness and all that mattered were Hiru's pleasure and well-being.

Only then did Quan Chan move. Tightening his lips just enough, he slid back until only the head remained. Then, tiny pulsing movements with his lips halfway down, as he'd practiced for so many years, followed by one long slide that

engulfed nearly all Hiru's dragon in his mouth. Hiru's groans and sharp breaths guided him, showed him the most sensitive parts, like the tiny stretch of skin on the underside of the head. When he licked that, Hiru seemed to go mad.

Lifting one hand from Hiru's hip, he cupped the man's *yang* sac. The weight rested heavily in his palm and he kneaded it gently against the rhythm of his mouth. Hiru nearly rocketed away from the vanity. Apparently, his *yang* sac was a highly erotic centre for him so Quan Chan slowed his rhythm, wanting only to milk every drop of pleasure Hiru's body could give him. Nothing less than that would do for this wonderful man.

"Quan-san, Quan-san." His name was a husky chant in the air, urging him on. Until strong hands on his upper arms pressured him backward then lifted him until he was standing in front of Hiru. Hiru's cheeks were darkly flushed, his eyes full of hunger. "Quan-san," he breathed, "I want you." He tugged in the direction of the door. "Let's go to bed."

But Quan Chan stood firm. His consciousness was in the flow now and words slipped easily from him. "Stay here, Hiru-san." He leaned over the counter, staring at their reflections. His own smile was mischievous, his face also dusky with need. "I want to watch us," he breathed and reached for a bottle of lotion on the vanity. He squeezed some into his palm, then reached back to coat his puckered opening. "Take me here," he ordered softly.

Always obedient, Hiru grasped Quan Chan's hips and pushed the head of his dragon where Quan Chan guided him.

"Oh, Quan-san." Hiru's eyelids dropped lower at the contact and he thrust his hips. The movement made his cock slip in. Another thrust embedded Hiru deep inside, so deeply he could pull Quan Chan against his front.

Quan Chan let out a shuddery breath. Sheer pleasure blurred the reflection of their joined bodies in the vanity mirror. Hiru's brawny arms were closed around Quan Chan's front, blocking the leaping tiger on his belly. Quan Chan gripped the edge of the counter, bracing himself for the sweet pounding he knew was to come. "We look good together, Hiru-san, don't we?" he said, his voice teasing and husky. Seeing his slimmer form in front of Hiru's, surrounded and filled by Hiru's male strength was one of the hottest things he'd ever experienced.

Hiru's eyes practically glittered with carnal need. "Yes, we do," he breathed, hot against the side of Quan Chan's neck.

Quan Chan pushed his ass back against Hiru. Sparks of please invaded his lower body, at every point their bodies touched. Hiru groaned. He slid his hands to Quan Chan's hips and pulled back, slamming them together again. More sparks exploded through Quan Chan's jade gate. Delicious heat fanned through his ass, up to the tip of his dragon and deep in his belly. He squeezed the ring of muscle around Hiru's dragon, inviting him to thrust again. Which he did and nearly sent them both toppling over the counter.

Quan Chan's mind darkened, as it always did now from long time practice and his body fell into the rhythm of Hiru's thrusts, moving with Hiru's body or against it depending on the flow of the moment. Through his haze of vision he saw

their two forms together in the reflection and locked onto Hiru's face, flushed and concentrated, lost in pleasure.

"Hiru-san, stop." Quan Chan knew what he wanted to do now.

Hiru's gaze met his in the mirror as their bodies slammed together. The man's eyes widened momentarily and he stopped, panting heavily against Quan Chan's back. "Did I hurt you?"

"No." He covered Hiru's hands with his, laced their fingers together and leaned back against Hiru's chest. Steam and perspiration mingled on their skin, fusing them together like one body. "Try not to move, Hiru-san," he breathed. "And just watch." Closing his eyes, he focused his attention on his lower body, on the fullness of Hiru's dragon in his tight channel.

The awareness alone made a current of heat swirl through his ass, down into his *yang* sac and up the shaft of his dragon, all the way into the head. He pulled in a deep breath, focusing the energy into the current. "Just feel me surrounding you, Hiru-san," he said in a husky whisper. "The power of our bodies together will bring ecstasy."

Hiru's broad chest heaved against his back. Each inhalation made Hiru's dragon nudge Quan Chan's prostate, forcing Quan Chan to summon every ounce of discipline he'd ever gained through so many years of practise. Why he wanted to do this so badly now, he wasn't sure. To impress Hiru-san, perhaps, to bind them together in some way he couldn't explain ... he didn't know. He'd earned his tiger tattoo this way and was using this technique as a parlour trick now, but

it didn't matter. Anything that would impress or excite Hiru-san was all that mattered.

The energy intensified. Heat swirled down in his *hara*, travelling in imperceptible chords from his gut to his *yang* sac then into his dragon. Another deep breath mustered more energy until he gained the sensation of an invisible hand stroking his dragon while another invisible hand kneaded his *yang* sac.

Quan Chan opened his eyes briefly. Hiru was staring at him in the mirror, his eyes glazed with wonder and desire. Hiru's dragon remained firmly embedded deep inside him, intensifying the ghostly caresses on Quan Chan's dragon.

Breathing steadily now, Quan Chan could control the speed of the invisible strokes. The faster he breathed, the faster the energy pumped up and down the length of his cock. He squeezed Hiru's fingers with his, as much to anchor himself as to keep either of them from breaking and stroking him. "Keep watching," he panted.

"Yes, Quan-san." Hiru's voice, too, was deep velvet, like cream being poured over Quan Chan's body. He imagined it coating his body, dripping over his nipples and down the centre of his abdomen. He imagined Hiru's dragon cloud pouring into him, filling him with gushing heat, mixing with his *yin* essence, entwining their souls forever.

That did it. The explosion of pleasure erupted deep in his *yang* sac and shot up the stalk of his dragon. One intensely pleasurable spasm after the next shook him and when Quan Chan opened his eyes, his dragon's cloud oozed on his skin, on the vanity and had even shot onto the mirror before them.

Hiru's eyes were wide. Sweat and mist gleamed on his face and his fingers squeezed Quan Chan's. "That was incredible," he breathed.

"Did it excite you?"

Hiru leaned over and licked a hot kiss on Quan Chan's shoulder. When he looked up again, his expression was feral. "Words can't describe what it did to me, Quan-san." His dragon twitched inside Quan Chan and pulsed with renewed force. Without being prompted, he released Quan Chan's hands, gripped his hips again and started thrusting.

Quan Chan closed his eyes and clutched the vanity, pushing back against Hiru's cock. So thick and full that cock was, deliciously hard, caressing and stroking his deepest insides. He squeezed with each thrust, making Hiru moan and groan until the warm gush he'd fantasised about now filled him in hot spurts.

Hiru collapsed gently over his back, arms around him again, lips resting on Quan Chan's skin. His embrace was warm, encompassing, even when Hiru was simply recovering from passion. A pang squeezed Quan Chan's chest and he prayed he'd not have to let Hiru go after this weekend.

After several moments, Quan Chan felt Hiru lift his face. "Quan-san," he whispered.

"Yes?" He looked up and pulled in a breath. The passionate yet sweet look in Hiru's eyes rocked him to his toes.

"About growing your hair, Quan-san. It makes no difference. You'll be beautiful no matter what you do. When I look at you, I see the entire universe in your eyes."

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Chapter Eleven

"Here is your new room." Jin gestured Wu Li through the door late Sunday afternoon. His heart pounded like a fierce claw ripping at his chest.

Wu Li hung back, the wariness in his look mingled with the hurt that had been there since Jin told him about the change to come. "This is what you wanted to show me?"

Jin nodded. "Yes. The room you'll be sharing with Quan Chan."

Wu Li's eyes hardened. He let out a small huff and marched across the sitting room through the doorway into the bedroom. Wheeling around, he fixed Jin with a look, his graceful hands balled into fists. The intimate décor of colourful silk pillows arranged on the huge bed went ignored. "How do you know he'll even come here?"

Jin stood in the doorway, his hands folded in front of him. "Because I know him. Once I tell him about Sun Lau, he'll want to come immediately."

Wu Li seemed to consider that answer for several moments. Then his shoulders slumped and the fierce look drained from his beautiful features. He sank down onto the edge of the bed, still ignoring the luxuriously appointed room of traditional Chinese décor, carved nightstands, lanterns and carpets, done especially for Quan Chan. "Maybe I won't be here when he gets here. Maybe I'll go somewhere else."

The words made Jin's heart lurch. Why hadn't he considered this? Not for a second had he entertained the

thought that Wu Li would leave, even *if* he'd had anywhere else to go. The impulse rose to order Wu Li not to leave. But of course he couldn't do that. Wu Li wasn't a prisoner here. Besides, giving such an order would only make Wu Li more mutinous.

"Please don't leave, Wu Li." Jin fought to keep his rising panic from his voice. In spite of the fact that Quan Chan would have Wu Li, he couldn't imagine life here without the beautiful young man.

Wu Li's face softened. His eyes burned with a light of hope. But then he pulled back, hardened again. He squared his shoulders and stared into Jin's eyes. "You're just afraid Sun Lau would be angry at you if I left."

"No." Jin returned his gaze. Just looking into the other man's fathomless eyes weakened him. "That's not it. I don't want you to leave because ... *I want you here.*" *I love you with my whole heart and soul.*

The devotion that had once burned in Wu Li's eyes for him now flared again, as if reborn. "Then don't do this, Jin. Keep me."

Jin's gut tightened. He steeled himself against the plea in his lover's sweet voice. "I can't. You know that. Please, I beg you, try to understand."

Wu Li remained silent and Jin watched the distance grow again between them. He could feel Wu Li's emotions, the way he was pulling back, hardening his heart in an obvious attempt to repel the pain of betrayal. Finally, Wu Li crossed his arms, making the silk sleeves of his jacket rustle. "Fine." Another moment passed and he bounced several times, as if

testing the mattress. His eyes glittered now with a dreadful look.

Jin had never seen this look on Wu Li's face in the whole time they'd known each other and he wished the earth could swallow him whole just to avoid that angry look. "Wu Li, I don't want—"

"Don't worry. I'm not leaving. Besides..." He uncrossed his arms and ran a hand over the soft comforter on the bed. "If Quan Chan is as wonderful as you say he is, then I'll be happier with him anyway."

Wu Li's head snapped to the side with a cracking sound. Jin's palm stung and his hand was up in the air before he realised what he'd done. Wu Li's eyes were wide, his lips parted. Jin looked at his hand then at the redness blooming on Wu Li's cheek from his slap. "Wu Li, forgive me. I didn't mean it."

Tears shimmered in Wu Li's eyes. He narrowed them, cupping his hurt cheek. "I hate you," he whispered.

Jin reached for him but Wu Li was too fast. He scrambled up onto the bed and back, so quickly he was already backed against the ornately carved headboard, an oriental screen like the windows of the temple.

"Stay away from me." Wu Li's hand went back to his cheek and he turned away.

Jin's heart pounded. His beautiful Wu Li was gone, lost to him forever. Suddenly nothing else mattered, not Sun Lau's wishes, not his own desire to please Sun Lau, nothing. "Wu Li, I beg you, don't do—"

"Jin! Jin!" His name echoed in the hallway.

Shit. He looked over his shoulder. "I'm in here!"

Footsteps echoed in the hallway, coming closer, and then Chow Chow, the cook, appeared in the doorway. "Jin, I've been looking for you. Please come now."

Out of long-standing habit, Jin rose, putting his attention onto the urgency at hand. "What is it?" As if he didn't know.

"Sun Lau. He's ... taken a turn for the worse."

* * * *

"Welcome to my apartment." Hiru unlocked his door and held it open for Quan Chan. He'd just introduced Quan Chan to his elderly neighbour, Mrs. Yamada, and it had made him feel sweet, sharing his little world with the other man.

He and Quan Chan had spent a lazy Sunday morning, lolling about in bed with each other, making love and snuggling. Of course they'd showered and had a leisurely late breakfast during which Hiru asked Quan Chan about the White Tiger temple in Shanghai. Quan Chan had told him all about his life there, about his mentor Sun Lau, about a man named Jin who'd been his first lover. Then Quan Chan had asked Hiru to stay in his room with him that night. Of course, Hiru had agreed immediately so they'd come back here so he could get a change of clothes.

"Wow, Hiru-san, this is beautiful!" Awe laced Quan Chan's voice and he walked slowly into the little flat.

Hiru hung back, watching Quan Chan take in the studio apartment. There wasn't much to see really, a *soji* screen in the corner, offsetting a black futon and low coffee table. Some artwork and a couple of plants by the windows warmed

the tiny place, as did a few built-in bookshelves. Good thing he'd made sure it was clean and in order before leaving for the weekend. "Thank you. If you asked Koji, he'd tell you the place was very messy." He grinned, knowing he looked sheepish. "We were both pretty messy. But in the months since he moved into the White Tiger, I had more time on my hands. I cleaned it up."

Quan Chan turned back to him, his face shining. Hiru's knees weakened at the sight. God, he was so beautiful. "Really, Hiru-san. It's incredibly pretty. Very similar to the White Tiger. So tasteful."

Hiru's cheeks warmed. "I ... did it myself."

Quan Chan nodded. "I'm not surprised at all. You're very talented."

He bowed. "That's kind of you, but really, I wouldn't have been able to make it this pretty without my father's help. He's a tatami mat and furniture dealer. He let me use whatever I wanted from his warehouse."

Quan Chan stepped in closer. "You're father seems like a kind man," he said softly. "He didn't want you to have to worry about anything, did he?"

Hiru looked at him, moved as always by the man's sensitivity. "Yes, that's right. The accident changed him, too." He led Quan Chan over to the futon and sat next to him. "He stopped putting any pressure on me to succeed after that. He always said all that matters is that I was alive." He looked down. "Megumi's parents weren't so lucky."

Gentle fingertips caressed Hiru's cheek. He looked up, into Quan Chan's sympathetic gaze.

Hiru smiled at him. "I'm sorry."

"For what? For giving me one of the best weekends I've ever had?"

Those words made a surge of passion course through him. He leaned over and kissed Quan Chan's lips. For several delicious moments he lingered there, softly tasting the other man's full, velvety mouth. His cock sprang to life, immediately pushing against his boxers and pants to get to Quan Chan. When he finally pulled away, Quan Chan's eyes were dusky, his lips swollen. Their breathing filled the air, the only noise apart from the traffic on the street below.

Hiru was about to descend for another kiss when his cell phone rang. With a sigh, he sat back and pulled the phone from its clip. His stomach lurched when he saw the number on the ID screen. "It's my father. I'd better take it."

Quan Chan nodded. "I have to go to the bathroom."

Hiru pointed and watched Quan Chan slide the door shut behind as he pressed the talk button on his phone. "*Moshi moshi*."

"Hiru-chan, how are you?"

"Hi, Dad. I'm all right." Hiru shifted in his seat. His erection had already shrunk down but he needed to prevent himself from getting up and pacing. "I'm sorry I haven't called you. I was ... busy. Visiting Koji. I hadn't seen him in a long time."

"That's fine, son."

"How's Mom?"

"She's well. How's Koji?"

Hiru cleared his throat. His hand sweated around the phone. He'd never lied to his father, even as a teenager. Well,

unless not speaking about his recent feelings for Koji could be considered lying. "Very well. He's so happy now."

"I'm glad to hear that. I've always thought he was a fine person."

"He is."

A moment passed with neither speaking and Hiru's heart pounded so hard he almost lost his breath. He glanced at the bathroom door. Quan Chan was still in there. Probably just being polite and giving him privacy to talk to his father. Hard to do in this cubbyhole of an apartment.

"Are you all right, Hiru-san?" his father asked.

Hiru sat up as if hit with a cattle prod. "Uh, yes." He rubbed his free hand over his face. What timing!

"Would you like to come to dinner tonight? Your mother is making her special *yakitori*. Your favourite."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I can't. I'm..." He exhaled. Best just to come out with it now. Otherwise he'd torment himself. After all, his father wasn't Koji's father. Yota Sanada had never raised a hand to him while Koji's father had whipped Koji so hard he still had the scars. "Dad, I have something to tell you."

He heard a small intake of breath. "Hiru-chan, are you all right? You're not hurt are you?"

"No, nothing like that."

"Oh, thank God." His father's relief was palpable. "What is it?"

Hiru took a deep breath and braced himself. "I'm going to be staying at the place where Koji lives. I might move there. I ... met someone there. Someone special." He squeezed the

phone, waiting. Since his father knew about Koji and Naoto, he'd understand immediately what Hiru meant.

His father was quiet for several moments. "You mean, a man, Hiru-chan?"

"Yes."

Quiet again from his father. Now was the time to tell it all.

"And, he's ... Chinese."

More silence. Hiru held his breath. The room tilted this way and that, as if he were on an amusement park ride. Time seemed to pass and pass without his father's response. *Shit.*

"Dad? Are you there?"

"I'm here."

"Are you angry?"

A long shivery breath followed. "No, Hiru-chan. I could never be angry with you. I was just shocked a moment. I promised myself a long time ago I would always remember what was important, no matter what you might tell me. You're my precious son. Nothing can change that."

Hot tears flooded Hiru's eyes. "Thank you, Dad. Thank you." A brief vision rose in his mind, of waking up in his hospital bed, in traction, tubes and needles everywhere in his body. The first person he'd seen was his father, standing over him, his wide face tearstained.

"There's nothing to thank me for, Hiru-chan. I trust you. If you like this man, he must be special."

The tears blurred Hiru's vision. The only time he'd felt more relieved was when Koji showed him he hadn't killed Quan Chan the other day. "He is special. He's helped me ... deal with problems I hadn't faced since Megumi."

"Well, then, I'm grateful."

Wow, his father really *had* changed.

Another quiet moment passed. "Hiru-chan, don't you worry. Just call me soon, okay?"

"Yes. I'll call you tomorrow." Hiru ended the call and sat, taking one deep breath after the other. In the background, he heard the bathroom door slide open.

A few seconds later, Quan Chan materialised by the futon. "Hiru-san, are you all right?" He sat back down, filling the space between them with his gentle yet vibrant presence.

Hiru looked up at him and smiled. "Yes. My father, he was very understanding. I ... told him about you." He shook his head. "I couldn't believe it. I knew my accident had changed him, softened his heart. I just didn't know how much."

Quan Chan's smile widened. "I'm very glad for you. I hope to meet your parents some day."

"Really?" Hiru's heart flipped. If Quan Chan wanted to meet his parents, it meant he wanted to be in his life, didn't it?

Quan Chan nodded. "Of course. I wouldn't just say it."

Joy surged through him. Without thinking, he leaned forward and kissed the other man's lips. When he pulled back, Quan Chan's eyes looked velvety.

"Hiru-san, you should get your things so we can go back."

Hiru felt that statement right to the tip of his cock. All he wanted just then was to be in bed, naked with Quan Chan's sleek, muscular body against his. He forced himself to stand up. "All right. I'll just be a minute." Quickly, he threw his old things into the hamper and stuffed new socks and

underclothes into his bag, along with a carefully folded shirt for work. He could wear the same slacks as Friday. Zipping up the bag, he went back over to where Quan Chan sat, waiting. "Ready."

Quan Chan nodded and stood up. Hiru led him to the door. His hand was halfway to the knob when his cell phone rang again. He pulled it off the clip and looked at the ID window, frowning when he saw the number. "It's someone from the White Tiger," he said and pushed the button. "*Moshi moshi*."

"Hiru-san, this is Kiku."

Kiku's voice was heavy and made Hiru's stomach flip over, the way it had when his father had called him. Something was definitely wrong. "Hello."

"May I please speak with Quan Chan?"

"Of course." He handed the phone to Quan Chan. "It's Kiku for you."

Quan Chan's brow furrowed as he accepted the phone and answered.

The ensuing exchange was in Chinese, but even though Hiru didn't understand the words, something bad was obviously happening, judging by the way Quan Chan's face paled and lines of tension creased his smooth forehead.

Quan Chan ended the call and looked at Hiru. His hand still gripped the phone. "I must get back immediately, Hiru-san."

The flipping sensation in Hiru's gut tightened into a fist-sized knot. "Let's go." Gently he retrieved the phone from Quan Chan then opened the door for him.

Quan Chan stood in the hall, waiting, his face almost ashen now. Hiru put an arm across his shoulders and led him to the

elevator as if Quan Chan were a small child. Of course, he was madly curious to know what Kiku had told Quan Chan but didn't dare ask. Quan Chan would tell him if he needed to.

Once inside the elevator, the doors slid closed. Hiru gently released Quan Chan and pressed the button for the ground floor. He felt his own stomach drop as the car began its descent. Heat erupted under his collar, much the way it had the other day when he'd first met Quan Chan. Only then, life had been so different. Nothing bad had been happening then, the way it was now.

Quan Chan lifted his solemn gaze. "My *sifu*, I mean, my *sensei* in Shanghai is dying," he said, his voice tight and small.

"I'm sorry." He reached again for the slimmer man, squeezing his shoulder gently. The movement of the elevator, though smooth, made his balance feel off and he leaned against the back wall, leaving his hand on Quan Chan.

"I mean, I call him *sifu*, but really, he's been like a father to me." Quan Chan sounded miserable.

Just then, they reached the ground floor and the doors opened. "Come, Quan-san," Hiru said, leading Quan Chan the way he had before. Somehow, being in motion made things clearer. At the curb, he hailed a taxi, opened the door for Quan Chan then slid in beside him. He gave the driver the address and reached for Quan Chan's hand.

Quan Chan looked down at their joined hands and gave Hiru a wan smile. His fingers curled around Hiru's as if to keep himself from drowning. "He's been ill for a while," Quan Chan went on finally. "They all kept it hidden from me." His

gaze remained on Hiru's, his large eyes haunted. "Why did they lie to me?"

Hiru shook his head and cupped the other man's cheek. Who cared if the taxi driver saw? Poor Quan Chan was suffering. "I don't know." Tension clamped the back of his neck like a vise.

"It's all right," Quan Chan murmured. "I wouldn't expect you to." He looked down. "They're not like Kiku and Naoto and Koji," he went on. "They play so many games." His shoulders sagged.

Several moments passed before Quan Chan looked up again, his brow furrowed.

The tension in Hiru's neck worsened. He knew where this was going.

"Hiru-san, I'm returning to Shanghai tonight. Kiku is arranging it right now." He paused and glanced away. "He's going with me."

The fist in Hiru's gut punched him. Strange how much gloomier the streets of Tokyo looked in spite of the rosy sunlight of late afternoon. "I'll come with you, too, Quan-san," he said.

A brief look passed over Quan Chan's face, what looked like relief mixed with gladness. His eyes misted over and he smiled again, this time less wanly. "You are a dear, sweet man, Hiru-san. I'd love nothing more." But then his smile faded and he squeezed Hiru's hand gently. "But I don't think you should. I'm sorry." He looked down again.

Hiru pulled in a breath, forcing himself not to blurt out, "Why not?" When Quan Chan looked up again, Hiru's stomach lurched. That kind of look was never good.

"I can't lie to you," Quan Chan continued after a torturous moment of quiet. "Sun Lau wants to give me a gift. A strange gift. A ... a man, named Wu Li."

Hiru's blood felt suddenly cold in his veins. "He's giving you a ... person?" Hiru thought back on the things Quan Chan had told him about Sun Lau this morning while they were snuggling together. From the bit he'd heard, Sun Lau could be a cold-hearted man at times in spite of everything he'd done for Quan Chan. "A person is ... human."

Quan Chan's shoulders sagged again. "I know. Of course, a human being can't give another human being away, like a thing, but Sun Lau has always done whatever he's wanted."

Hiru's facial expression must have darkened, for Quan Chan fixed him with a pleading look. "Please, don't think Sun Lau is a monster. He's not. He's done much good in his life for many people, especially me. But..." He paused and sighed. "I was told this on Friday, in a letter, before I even met you. And then when you and I ... when we ... found this connection between us, I was prepared to refuse Sun Lau, to tell him I have a special student." Quan Chan glanced out the window. The cab was around the corner from the White Tiger now. "Apparently, this gift of his is a wish from his deathbed. I don't see how I can refuse him. I owe him my life."

Hiru stared at Quan Chan while a darkly familiar sensation whirled around in his brain. The world was slowing down, becoming like a burst of frightening sparks, the way it had

done during the accident. In those moments, he'd known his helplessness, his utter and complete powerlessness as he watched Megumi, in slow motion, the crumpling of her face, the pitch of her screams, the screech of metal as it crushed her. Thank God, nothing like this was happening to him and Quan Chan in this moment, but the feelings were the same. Quan Chan was being thrown from him, spun in the roiling events of life, slipping away and no grip strong enough would hold him close.

Quan Chan's lips were moving, his eyes still pleading, but Hiru only heard sounds, no individual words. As the time-slowness sensation faded a bit, he could hear Quan Chan, although he'd missed everything the man had just said after the bit about him owing Sun Lau his life.

Hiru blinked several times and forced his attention back to Quan Chan. Now was sure as hell not a time to freak out. He bowed his head. "I apologise, Quan-san, I didn't hear what you just said."

Quan Chan's hand landed on his arm. That sweet touch made hot tears sting in Hiru's eyes. That sensation jolted him. Until this weekend, the years after the accident had left him virtually unable to produce tears. Quan Chan's presence had taken a hammer to the shell around him and now, in the space of two days, the water flowed.

"It's all right," Quan Chan said softly. "I was saying that you should stay in my room at the White Tiger." His fingers tightened a bit on Hiru's forearm. "I know it's not the same, but ... well, my energy will be there." He glanced down again.

"And truthfully, Hiru-san, I'd be comforted to know you're there. I know it sounds strange."

Hiru stifled the urge to lean over and kiss the other man's lips. "I'd do anything for you, Quan-san," he murmured.

Again, a blend of emotions passed through Quan Chan's eyes. His gaze intensified, the way it had been when he'd commanded Hiru to grapple with him. "Your answer tells me the truth," he said. "There's a bond between us now, Hiru-san. I can't deny it. Sudden and mysterious, but real." His eyebrows rose, making his expression tentative. "You feel it, don't you?"

Hiru swallowed past the tightness in his throat. Quan Chan seemed to be telling him something or wanting to tell him something he couldn't say out loud. "Yes. Absolutely." He glanced again toward the front seat. No doubt, the cab driver's ears were burning, but Hiru's and Quan Chan's joined hands were well below the other man's line of sight.

Before Hiru could answer, the cab turned a corner and came to a stop in front of the White Tiger. Hiru paid the driver and slid out with his overnight bag before Quan Chan and followed him to the front door.

As soon as they walked into the front vestibule, the door to the interior slid open, revealing a gathering. Naoto and Koji were in front, the twins, Basho and Timothy, behind them. All wore grim expressions.

"Do you need help packing?" Naoto asked, placing a hand on Quan Chan's arm.

Quan Chan shook his head. "No thank you, Nao-chan. I don't have much to pack." He patted Naoto's hand and moved

forward, only to be surrounded by the others, especially the twins who hung on either arm as he went toward the elevator.

Hiru caught Koji's eye. Koji smiled at him sympathetically and walked next to him as they followed Quan Chan to the elevator. The twins still clung to him as if they were children. It couldn't be more obvious how beloved Quan Chan was here. Hiru's chest felt hollowed out and he looked down at his socks. If he felt this way after only one weekend, he couldn't even imagine how the others felt, having lived with Quan Chan for so long and being such close friends. Indeed, even the air in the place felt emptier just knowing Quan Chan was leaving.

"You'll be back soon, won't you?" Tatou asked. His handsome face was a mask of misery.

Quan Chan looked at him, his expression surprisingly calm underneath the lines of distress around his eyes. He cupped Tatou's cheek briefly. "That's my intention, dear one," he said softly just as the elevator doors slid open.

"Don't be selfish, you two," Naoto scolded, though his voice held no anger. "Chan Chan needs your support now."

"It's all right, Naoto," Quan Chan said. He passed a gentle hand over Mod's dark hair. "They're good boys."

"I know. I'm sorry," Naoto murmured.

"It's all right. Now, I need a few minutes with Hiru, okay?"

Mod and Tatou both nodded, reluctantly letting go of his arms so he could precede Hiru into the elevator.

Hiru followed him in, getting a last glimpse of the small crowd of unhappy men become hidden by the elevator doors.

His heart pounded as a sense of finality closed torturously in. When he turned to Quan Chan, the other man was already looking at him, his eyes reflecting how troubled he must feel. "You're very loved here," he murmured.

The shadow of a smile passed over Quan Chan's lips, just before sadness took over. "I'm so sorry, Hiru-san," he said finally.

Hiru stared at him. "What could you possibly be sorry for? You've been nothing but good to me from the first moment we met."

The other man's shoulders sagged. "I was arrogant in my approach to you." The elevator stopped and the doors opened but Quan Chan didn't move.

When the doors started to close, Hiru reached out and stopped them, keeping his hand in the sensor so they'd remain open. "What do you mean?"

Quan Chan released a sigh. "I read Sun Lau's letter just after Kiku asked me to care for you this weekend. I was troubled about the letter and then ... well ... later that day, when I saw how incredibly hot you were, I decided that this weekend would just be completely for enjoyment, nothing else." He looked down. "I didn't expect ... this. I should have remained humble. And now, I'm leaving you when you need me."

The words caused a wave of sadness through Hiru's whole being. He reached for Quan Chan, tugged him out into the hallway, then pulled him close. The warmth of Quan Chan's body pressed into his and the man's clean, herb-like scent

filled him. "You couldn't possibly have known about any of this, Quan-san."

Quan Chan closed his eyes and let himself rest a few moments against Hiru. That broad chest was like a haven, especially with such a good, kind heart beating inside it. A shiver passed through Quan Chan and he breathed in the other man's scent. He hadn't even left yet and he missed Hiru.

Hiru was right, of course. Neither of them could have known there would be this connection between them. And, how could he ever have imagined there would be someone after Kiku who'd be a source of comfort to him this way?

Bracing himself, Quan Chan pulled gently away from their embrace. He took Hiru's hand and led him down the hallway. "This is where we all have our rooms," he said. "Kiku and Yuzo are in this first room. Then Ryu and Nat." Like a tour guide, he explained as they passed each room. "Naoto and Koji next, then the twins, and now, mine at the end." He stopped and slid back the *soji*. A wave of sadness gripped him. "It's very good that you'll be surrounded by friends." He squeezed Hiru's hand. "They are your friends even though you've only known Koji until now. I promise. You'll see."

Hiru nodded and followed him like an obedient child. The energy of Hiru's thoughts and emotions roiled in the air around them.

Gently he took Hiru's bag from him and set it aside, wanting only to comfort his new lover. "Hiru-san," he said softly, "things will work out. We're being guided by a force bigger than all of us." He knew it was true, knew it in his

bones, even though so many times in his life he'd felt nothing but doomed. Now, however, life had brought Hiru to him when he'd felt doomed again. He'd just have to trust that life wouldn't abandon either of them, even if it meant they wouldn't be together.

Hiru nodded, but his eyes reflected sadness and worry.

Quan Chan patted his cheek gently, loving the rough-smoothness of the man's clean-shaven skin. "I must pack now."

"Do you need help?"

"No, thank you. I just need your company." *For the time we have left.* He turned away from Hiru before he got lost in the man's gaze and quickly threw the few changes of clothing he owned along with his passport into his knapsack. Going into the bathroom, he gathered together his shaving kit and stuffed that into his bag. The few other worldly possessions he'd collected over the years, his spiritual books, his photographs of Kiku and the others, he'd leave here. Somehow, leaving those items in the room gave him the same feeling as having Hiru stay in the room—the hope that he'd be coming back.

Hiru had remained standing by the foot of the bed, watching him, his large hands hanging by his sides. His expression was of sadness and longing.

Quan Chan set down his knapsack and went to Hiru. There was time enough for one last embrace, one last kiss. One last chance to feel Hiru's broad physique against his. He slid his arms around Hiru and pressed against him. "Hiru-san, please kiss me. You want to, right?"

Hiru's large hands cupped his cheeks and the larger man's gaze simmered down into his. "I'd kiss you forever if I could," he murmured.

The words sent a pleasant ripple through Quan Chan's entire body. No matter how much he'd practised, meditated and schooled himself in the scriptures, the romantic part of him had never gone away. He tilted his head back and accepted the softest, sweetest brush of Hiru's lips across his.

A tiny murmur escaped him. He clutched at Hiru's back, demanding more. In the next second, Hiru captured his lips, stole between them, tasting him with deep strokes of his tongue. Like the first kiss when Hiru had flipped him onto the bed and pounced on him, their lips chafed together, they tasted each other deeply, with the desperation caused by Quan Chan's imminent departure—

A knock sounded on the frame of the screen. They pulled apart, breathing heavily. Hiru's full lips had that swollen look from kissing and his pale skin was flushed.

"Chan Chan, are you in there?" Kiku's voice sounded on the other side.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry. If you're packed, we need to leave. The flight is in a little over an hour. A taxi's outside."

"I'm ready." Quan Chan looked at Hiru. Hiru stared at him, his dark eyes mournful beneath the flush of passion. *I love you, Hiru-san*. Quan Chan didn't dare say the words out loud. Bad enough he'd been saying them in Mandarin each time Hiru had been on top of him, pounding into him. All Hiru had to do was ask someone for a translation...

He retrieved his knapsack from the floor, still looking into Hiru's eyes. His heart pounded in way it hadn't in so long. He remembered that feeling—the one he'd experienced when Jin had thrown him out of his bed, the one he'd experienced when Kiku's visions had ended their love affair—as if his heart were being ripped from his chest. For years, he'd been able to spend months at a time away from Sun Lau, with only a short visit here and there, yet after only two days with Hiru, he didn't want to be away from the man for a minute. "Hiru-san, will you ... come to the airport with me?"

"Of course. I was hoping you'd let me."

The answer made him wince, reminding him of how he'd refused to let Hiru travel to Shanghai with him and Kiku. How awful that must make Hiru feel. However, how could he bring Hiru with him knowing that Wu Li was there? "Thank you," he whispered and went to the door.

Hiru followed him down the hall and into the elevator. Hiru put an arm across his shoulders, the way he had that first night in the bath, showing the others, as well as Quan Chan, that they were together. That they'd found something. Something unexpected. Something hot. Something wonderful. "I'm here for you, Quan-san," he said softly. "Whatever you need. Always."

There was no time to answer. The elevator reached the ground floor. Hiru leaned over and kissed him softly just before the doors opened, revealing the entire population of the White Tiger, all gathered, all looking mournful. They crowded around him, hugging him and kissing his cheeks, especially the twins who were unabashedly selfish about not

wanting him to go. That was fine. He loved them and would never be able to repay how loving and supportive they'd been to him through some of the most depressing heartache he'd ever gone through. He made Naoto promise not to get angry at them while he was away and to look over everyone. Then Kiku underwent the same affectionate send-off. Poor Yuzo looked absolutely miserable as he walked with them to the cab and squeezed into the front seat with Kiku.

Hiru took Quan Chan's hand and held it the entire ride to the airport. The closer the cab drew to Narita, the more Quan Chan's mind filled with the thoughts of what awaited him in Shanghai. He found himself surreptitiously pressing into Hiru's side, instinctively seeking the protection the large man offered. How naturally they'd found their level with each other. Hiru was a protector by nature. He'd just been out of touch with it and their first encounters had almost immediately released his nature as a man.

Hiru seemed to sense what was going on, for he squeezed Quan Chan's hand gently and turned his body so that Quan Chan could fit more snugly into the crook of his arm.

All too soon, the airport loomed ahead, marked by the take-off of a jet in the air overhead. Kiku turned to Yuzo in the front seat. "Yuzo-chan, please look after Hiru, you and the others. Make him feel welcome, and help him ease into the routine, the way you were helped when it was your turn. Okay?"

The other man nodded. "Yes, Kiku-chama." Yuzo was pretty and small with shaggy hair. He looked like a character

right out of a graphic novel with the huge eyes and androgynous face. Right now, his eyes were very sad.

"I have faith in you, little one," Kiku went on, his voice softer. He was obviously completely taken with Yuzo, just the way he looked at the man.

Only now, with Hiru holding him, Quan Chan didn't get that excruciating ache in his chest, the one that had plagued him for the last few months.

"I already feel welcome, Kiku-sama," Hiru said.

Kiku looked over the seat and smiled at him. "I'm glad. It's just that, even though every man who comes to the White Tiger is important, you have a special place there now."

"Oh, thank you." Hiru bowed his head.

Moments later, the taxi came to a stop at the terminal. Kiku told the driver to wait at the curb for two returning passengers.

On the sidewalk, Quan Chan stood before Hiru. If only he could kiss him good-bye the way he wanted to. He'd have to let that last kiss in his room be the good-bye. And why did this good-bye have to feel so permanent? He *was* coming back after Sun Lau's funeral, whenever that was. "Hiru-san, thank you for everything. I couldn't have imagined a better weekend. I'll miss you."

Hiru's eyes glistened. He looked like he was about to break into tears. Instead, he reached out and pulled Quan Chan into his arms. "I'll miss you too, Quan-san."

Quan Chan surrendered to the embrace, letting himself rest against Hiru's broad chest this one last time. When they pulled away, he looked up into Hiru's eyes. Those eyes were

the kindest, sweetest eyes he'd ever looked into. "I want to come back."

Hiru nodded once. He squeezed Quan Chan's shoulders one last time and stood away. Quan Chan shouldered his knapsack and waited for Kiku to pull away from Yuzo. Kiku went to Hiru and gave him a hug. He seemed to whisper something to Hiru before pulling away from him, but it was inaudible over the traffic noise around them. Then Kiku turned to Yuzo. "Go back now, little one, you and Hiru. I'll call as soon as we land."

Yuzo nodded and stood beside Hiru, watching them.

Quan Chan looked one last time at Hiru. He waved then forced himself to turn and walk beside Kiku into the glass terminal building, feeling Hiru's gaze on him until they were well inside.

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Chapter Twelve

Why doesn't he defend himself? Wu Li peeped through the carved wooden screen window between Sun Lau's sitting room and bedroom and watched Jin receive sharp reprimands from Sun Lau. Apparently, Sun Lau hadn't wanted Jin to tell Quan Chan about his illness. But why? Jin's action seemed reasonable. Then again, after the way Jin had agreed to hand him over to Quan Chan...

From his vantage point, Wu Li could only see Jin. Jin stood there, head bowed, hands folded in front of him, and took the verbal lashing. Not once did he defend himself or make Sun Lau understand why he'd gone against the old man's wishes. Instead, all he did was bow and silently leave when dismissed.

Wu Li backed into the shadows as Jin approached the doorway. Peeping and eavesdropping had been a terrible habit of his since childhood and Jin had chastised him for it the few times he'd caught him. But Jin had relinquished his right to discipline as far as Wu Li was concerned. In a few hours, Quan Chan would be here and would take Wu Li for his own. The only reason Wu Li didn't want to get caught right now was to avoid coming to Sun Lau's attention.

Jin reached the doorway, but at Sun Lau's call, he stopped and turned back around. Wu Li's ears pricked up. He heard his name mentioned. Sun Lau wanted to see him! *Shit!* Wu Li scrambled out of the room into the hallway. There wasn't

time to bolt without being seen so he pretended to be passing by just as Jin emerged.

Jin's face was pale and his worry lines seemed to have deepened in even the last few hours. "Wu Li."

Wu Li halted and looked up. "Yes?" His heart pounded. He did *not* want to see Sun Lau.

"Sun Lau wants to speak with you."

Wu Li cleared his suddenly dry throat. "About what?"

Jin frowned, a silent reminder that it wasn't for Wu Li to ask, just to go. "I don't know." He gestured to the doorway of Sun Lau's quarters. "Go in. I have work to do in the office." But instead of continuing on, he stood there, looking at Wu Li. His lips quirked as if he were about to speak and then changed his mind. "Good luck," he said softly.

"Thanks." Slowly, Wu Li turned and went back in. Each step he took made him feel as if he were marching to face a firing squad.

Sun Lau's bedchamber smelled like death. Wu Li hung back in the doorway. The smell was like nothing he could describe, but he'd detected that odour many times on his parents' farm plot when his father had slaughtered a pig or chicken. To his own shame, Wu Li had always run away and hid, unable to bear the squeals and squawks of the terrified animals.

That was how he felt now, peering at Sun Lau's chalky face against the bed pillows. Though Sun Lau had summoned him, the elderly man now appeared to be sleeping and even from the short distance of the doorway to the bed, the dim light in

the room made it difficult to tell whether Sun Lau's eyes were actually open.

Wu Li felt a tiny ray of hope to escape. Maybe he'd be lucky and Sun Lau was asleep, allowing him to avoid this visit. The old man had frightened him since their first meeting and still did, even in his weakened state. Only regular meals, warm bed and clothing had kept Wu Li here in spite of Sun Lau's frightening weirdness. And then, his devotion to Jin had held him in this place.

What was keeping him here now? Now that Jin had pushed him off onto a stranger at Sun Lau's whim? Wu Li didn't know.

He waited another moment. No movement from the old man except the faint sound of his raspy breath. He was definitely asleep. Relieved, Wu Li turned to go.

"I'm awake, Wu Li."

Shit. Wu Li froze. Slowly he turned around.

Sun Lau's eyes were open and he gazed steadily at Wu Li. "Come here, please."

With his heart pounding, Wu Li approached the bed. He forced himself to take deep breaths in an effort to hold back the panic that fanned through his chest. Up close, Sun Lau appeared completely drained. Only the sign of life in his deep set eyes let Wu Li know the man was alive.

"Water," Sun Lau said.

Wu Li reached for the glass on the bedside table. Someone had put a bending straw in it. He held the glass close to the elderly man's mouth and slipped the straw between his lips. He watched the fluid travel through the clear plastic and

heard the slow gulp as Sun Lau swallowed. "Is that enough, *sifu*?"

Sun Lau nodded, staring straight ahead, as if drinking that bit of water had been a monumental effort. Carefully, Wu Li let the straw slip from Sun Lau's mouth and set the water aside.

Then Sun Lau turned his head slightly. "Sit."

Wu Li's chest tightened. Sitting meant he had to stay in the room with Sun Lau, however, he wasn't at liberty to argue. Not with Sun Lau. Gingerly he perched on the edge of the nearby chair, forcing himself to maintain eye contact with the elderly man.

Sun Lau blinked and continued staring at him.

What do you want from me? The angry words formed in Wu Li's mind. Had this been Jin, he would have said them.

"You're so much like Quan Chan." Sun Lau's face took on a strange look. For the first time since Wu Li had met Sun Lau, the man's face softened around the edges.

The way Jin's face softened when he looked at me. Wu Li looked down. The old man's expression was painful now for more than one reason.

"You have his fire," Sun Lau's voice made Wu Li look up. Sun Lau gave a small cough and turned his head so he stared straight ahead again.

"I'm not Quan Chan, *sifu*." The words popped out before he realised he was going to speak. His heart lurched. Surely he'd be punished for being fresh with the master of the temple.

"No, you're not." Sun Lau breathed heavily, a rattling sound that chilled Wu Li's bones. "Wu Li, I'm everything you think I am."

Wu Li's heart lurched. "I don't ... I—"

"Hush. I don't care. What's important is that I don't try to change or hide it." He turned again so their gazes met. "I want that freedom for you, Wu Li. Jin cannot teach you that freedom. Quan Chan can." To Wu Li's surprise, the old man smiled. His face transformed, in spite of his condition. "The only person in my entire life I can speak with, one human being to another, is Quan Chan." Love and admiration filled his voice. This wasn't the dragon man Wu Li had come to be afraid of. This was a man who loved someone so much, the love filled him, softened his hard edges.

Sudden tears stung in Wu Li's eyes, but he fought them back. "What about Jin?" His own question startled him. Why was he *defending* Jin?

Sun Lau's face hardened again, like a cloud covering the sun. "What *about* Jin?"

Wu Li cleared his throat. His heart hammered now. His fear of the dying man was suddenly gone and boldness gathered him up, as if on a giant wave. So what if Sun Lau was ill? The old man had just torn Jin several new assholes a few minutes ago, shamed the man for doing what had seemed to be an act of love and decency. In spite of the cancer eating his body, Sun Lau always had enough energy to criticise Jin. It wasn't right.

Wu Li's blood flowed hot now. In spite of what Jin had done, Wu Li found that his feelings for the man hadn't died.

Not at all. "He's ... been here for you ... for me, *sifu*." When Sun Lau didn't answer, he went on. "Jin has taught me the White Tiger path. He's devoted to you."

Sun Lau stared at him a moment. "Jin is my great failure," he said finally.

The words sliced through Wu Li as if they were knives thrown at him. All he could do was return the old man's stare, feeling his own mouth hanging open. He glanced towards the doorway, terrified a moment that Jin would be eavesdropping. He prayed Jin hadn't heard this conversation, even though Jin had hurt him so badly.

"I don't care if he hears us," Sun Lau said, as if reading Wu Li's mind. "He knows how I feel and yet, he does nothing about it." Sun Lau's gaze was on him now, hard and strong, as if in defiance of his weakened state. "You understand me, don't you?"

Wu Li's heart raced. His mouth went dry and moisture invaded his palms and underarms. *No!* he thought. *You don't understand Jin, you old mean dragon. Jin is a good man.* However, to his own horror, he nodded. Because he understood exactly what Sun Lau was saying. Jin had good qualities but he was weak. Wu Li's breathing tightened and he fought the impulse to jump up and run out. All he wanted to do was go to his garden, to hide among his plum and apple trees, his giant pots of scallions, tomatoes and beans, his gifts to the men of the White Tiger temple for what he'd been given.

As if this weren't bad enough, a tear escaped his eye and ran down his cheek.

"No need for tears, Wu Li," Sun Lau said, his voice raspy and weary again. "I'm pleased with you. Now, I'm tired. Let me rest."

* * * *

Quan Chan stared ahead at the seat in front of him. The plane engines were loud, a constant grinding hum in the background, but not loud enough to drown out the torrent of thoughts and emotions pulsing through him. Never before had the two and a half hour plane flight between Tokyo and Shanghai seemed interminable. How could he have stayed away for so long?

Come here, child.

The first words Sun Lau had ever said to him. Quan Chan had both bristled at being called a child and had felt drawn from the doorway where he hesitated, like a freezing person in the snow to a roaring fire. Sun Lau had been sitting, having tea in his quarters when he'd asked to see the undernourished, raggedly-dressed youth who'd shown up on the doorstep of the tearoom, offering to sweep the floors in return for a bowl of *congee*.

Sun Lau's look had made him feel as if his innards were being examined. The examination had seemed to go on forever, but it probably had just felt that way because Quan Chan's stomach had been growling so badly.

"I see the fire in your belly," Sun Lau had said. "As well as the hunger. Come, sit." Sun Lau had poured a cup of tea for him and let him devour every last pastry and meat pie that accompanied the pot of tea on the tray. When Quan Chan was

good and full, Sun Lau had summoned Jin and ordered him to give the child a bath and look after him from there on in.

And so Quan Chan's new life at the White Tiger temple of Shanghai had begun. Truth was, Sun Lau had asked so little of him in return, nothing really, but to meditate and help his brothers take care of the place. He'd served tea in the front room, swept the floors, washed the bathrooms and kitchen, as well as tended the kitchen garden in the rear of the courtyard. It was Jin, then only seventeen and non-threatening, who'd been the one to practise the erotic exercises of the White Tiger path with him. Sun Lau hadn't ever demanded or expected sexual favours from Quan Chan, nor had he even hinted that the future would hold such expectations.

And what had he given Sun Lau in return? Abandonment. Nothing but putting his own desires ahead of Sun Lau's welfare. He'd allowed his passion for Kiku to overwhelm him, to turn him completely from his proper duty to the man who'd saved his life. Sun Lau had helped him when Meilan had been unable to give her son life she wanted to give him. The fact that Sun Lau had been so kindly, generously willing to let him go, and never guilted him for staying away, only made it worse.

"This has got to stop."

Kiku's deep voice next to him made him turn. Kiku was looking at him with that sympathetic softness he had in crucial moments. The warm strength of Kiku's hand closed over his. "Stop tormenting yourself, Chan Chan. You've been

a good son. You've honoured Sun Lau as well or better than any natural son could have."

Quan Chan stared at him.

A smile quirked at Kiku's lips. "You were thinking very loudly."

Of course. Kiku was practically a mind reader with that bizarre sixth sense of his.

Sighing deeply, Quan Chan sagged back in his seat. He turned to his friend. "After everything Sun Lau did for me, how could I not come back? I've been so selfish." He looked down. "I put my own happiness before doing my duty to him."

"Don't go there, Chan Chan. Listen to me. What does Lao Tzu say about duty? Honesty and fealty gone to waste. Don't you think Sun Lau understands that?" He sat forward. "Your boldness is probably something he admires and loves you for. I can't speak for Sun Lau, of course, but I believe I know how he feels about you. The way I feel about Ryu, like he's my precious son and I couldn't want enough happiness and goodness for him, no matter where in the world he had to go to find those things. Even if it meant he'd be far away for a long time." Kiku nodded. "That kind of love, Chan Chan, is what he has for you. Don't you worry about it for another second."

Quan Chan looked at him. Bless Kwan Yin for having brought Kiku into his life. Tears burned in his eyes. "Thank you," he said softly.

"You're welcome." Kiku sat back, keeping his hand over Quan Chan's.

Quan Chan glanced around. As much as he wanted the comfort, he didn't want looks from people around them, wondering at two men holding hands. However, no one seemed to notice and Quan Chan surrendered to the warmth of Kiku's gesture.

They sat quietly like that for several minutes before Quan Chan thought of something else. He turned to Kiku again. "I'm thirty-seven years old," he said, "and until now, I've never ... lost anyone so close to me. Not to death, I mean."

Kiku's fingers tightened over his hand. "I know."

"Most everyone else I know has lost someone. You. Naoto. Koji. Basho." He looked down. "Hiru." Like Basho whose parents had been murdered before his very eyes, Hiru had been forced to watch his loved one die in that car crash, powerless to stop it. For a long time Hiru had allowed his own survivor's guilt to keep him in a shell. But this past weekend, their lovemaking had moved him to embrace that powerlessness. Hiru had been able to reconnect with his nature, that of a strong, loving, protective man with a sense of devotion that had made him surrender completely to his affection for Quan Chan. Perhaps that was why Hiru's comfort, Hiru's sympathy were so powerful, why Hiru had made him feel so safe, so ... consoled, when nothing else and no one else had been able to console him. For the first time, he'd had someone who just wanted him, who wanted simply to be in his presence, who revelled in receiving his mere smile. Perhaps it was wrong to want such things from another human being, but he wanted them, so much, and Hiru had been willing to give them, at least for a little while. Dammit,

why had he told ... no ... basically *ordered* Hiru to stay in Tokyo?

Kiku nodded. "Yes. It's one of the things we're all sure to go through at some point. No one escapes." He squeezed Quan Chan's hand again. "I feel for you." He leaned closer. "Maybe you should have Hiru come to Shanghai."

A pang squeezed Quan Chan's chest and he tried not to think of how damn good it had felt to be in Hiru's arms. If not for the whole matter of Wu Li...

He held up his other hand in a gesture of frustration. "I don't see how I could have him be there, Kiku. It wouldn't be fair to him. Do you understand?"

Kiku smiled gently. "Of course I understand," he said. "But really, does it matter? You and he seemed to be so good for each other. I swear, this weekend you were the happiest and lightest I've seen you in ... well ... years. And Koji said the same about Hiru. Besides, this matter of the Golden Dragon—you really don't know what's going to happen. You don't even know if he really exists. Or ... are you afraid of something else?"

Quan Chan frowned at him. "What something else?"

"Well, if I know you, there's probably part of you that doesn't want him to see where you come from. Maybe you fear he'll lose respect for you, or pity you. Maybe you fear it will change how he feels about you." A shadow darkened Kiku's handsome face. "The way my visions hurt our relationship," he murmured.

Quan Chan sighed. "I certainly have thought those things over the weekend. I don't know." His very soul ached to feel

the comfort he did with Hiru. And Hiru had wanted to come to Shanghai. In fact, Hiru's immediate willingness to go with him had been so...

No. Not going there. He sighed. "I'll see what happens. I need to see Sun Lau first, before anything else."

Kiku gazed at him and then squeezed his hand. "It's all right, Chan Chan," he said gently. "You're going through a lot. I didn't mean to burden you with more. Sun Lau has really been your father in this life. This is a big deal. The rest will take care of itself. Don't concern yourself with anything. I'm here for you."

Tears stung in Quan Chan's eyes again and he resisted the urge to put his head on his friend's shoulder. Not in the middle of a jet full of people. "Thank you," he whispered.

Just then, the pilot announced their landing. As soon as the plane had come to a stop at the gate, Kiku took out his mobile phone and called home.

Quan Chan's stomach tightened. What if Hiru wanted to speak to him?

"Yuzo-chan, hi. We're here safely. I just wanted to let you know." Kiku's voice softened, as it always did when he spoke to Yuzo, except when he was scolding his lover for something impulsive he'd done. Yuzo was given to acting sometimes when pausing first and thinking things through was crucial. "I miss you too, little one." Kiku glanced at Quan Chan then turned back to his call. "Listen, we're just getting off the plane and need to go through customs and all. There's no time to chat right now. We'll call later to speak with everyone." He paused, listening to something Yuzo was

saying, then nodded. "Good. I'm glad he's settling in. Please tell him Quan Chan says hello but that he can't get on the phone right now."

Quan Chan breathed a sigh of relief. Until he'd seen Jin and Sun Lau, he couldn't speak with anyone else, especially Hiru whom he felt so guilty towards right now.

Another pause while Yuzo spoke on the other end. Kiku laughed softly. "That sounds good, sweetheart. I love you too. Send our love to everyone. Bye." He pressed the button and gathered his knapsack just as their row was clearing out. "I hope that was all right, Chan Chan," he said as they moved out into the aisle. "I got the sense you aren't ready to talk at the moment."

He nodded. Kiku most always was tuned in. "That was perfect, thank you."

Kiku smiled sympathetically and put a hand on his shoulder, ushering him down the aisle.

He remained in the same quiet state as they went through customs and then out into the main area.

"Xiao Chan!"

Turning, Quan Chan saw his mother and the professor waiting on the side. His mother was waving to him as she moved towards him. Meilan was a beautiful vision in a dark slacks suit. She never left her house without being perfectly dressed, her long hair in a neat bun. The second he drew close, she held out her arms.

Like when he was little, he went into her embrace, resting his cheek on her shoulder.

"My beautiful son," she murmured, squeezing him tight. The embrace evoked a poignant memory of his young mother, holding him in the ratty "tea" room, promising him a better life before shoing him out to let a customer in. He'd known even then that all she suffered was to protect him, her precious treasure.

When she released him, the professor greeted him with a hug. The older man was slim and attractive. His silver hair, spectacles and tweed suit made him the stereotypical image of a college professor and Quan Chan had guessed long ago that the professor reminded his mother of her girlhood love.

Both Meilan and the professor embraced Kiku before leading them out to a taxi stand.

In the cab, Meilan held Quan Chan's hand the way Kiku had done on the plane. She well understood the many things this impending loss meant to her son. Next to Kiku, she was his best friend and had been all through his childhood, into his adolescent years, a time that more often separated parents and children.

Usually, this friendship led them to chat and catch up with all the gossip in their lives as soon as they were together. Today, however, she seemed to understand his need for quiet and the cab ride passed mostly in silence except for his mother's asking Kiku after the men back in Tokyo. She'd visited several times and had a special place there because she was Quan Chan's mother. Just like Hiru had earned a place of honour at the White Tiger by virtue of his love and caring treatment of Quan Chan.

Under normal circumstances, he'd have been so happy to tell Meilan all about Hiru. She'd be so glad to know he'd found such a good man. Now, he couldn't bear to speak Hiru's name, knowing he probably wouldn't be seeing Hiru again. He stared out the window instead. How much this city he'd grown up in had changed. In just a few years, Shanghai, the once communist port town, now looked much like any shiny ultra-modern city of sky scrapers, swanky cafés, and fashionably-dressed people.

Meilan squeezed his hand. With her other hand, she stroked his cheek. "My son is so much bigger than I am now, but he's still a loveable child in so many ways," she said gently.

Kiku smiled at him from Quan Chan's other side. "That he is."

He sighed and looked at his mother. "Thank you, Ma Ma. But I'm ashamed to say that in spite of following a path all these years, I feel completely unable to deal with death."

To his surprise, she laughed softly, then kissed his cheek. "When you find a way to deal with it, Xiao Chan," she said, as always addressing him with her childhood affectionate name for him, "please, let the rest of us know because I've yet to meet the person who does feel able to deal with such a great mystery."

* * * *

As the cab pulled up to the curb in front of the White tiger temple, Quan Chan's stomach tightened painfully. The first thing he noted after such a long absence was that in spite of

the now-burgeoning gay scene in Shanghai, the White Tiger had retained its hidden façade, established in the days just following Maoist China when Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms relaxed strictures on prostitution as well as homosexuality. In subtle ways, sexual favours could be bought and sold. Still a nondescript tea room on the outside, a man could come in to be served tea and negotiate a massage as well as other services. Only the person who could recognise the small White Tiger carved into the wooden sign would know that behind the tea room were baths, massage rooms and practice rooms tucked away in nooks and crannies, all connected by a warren of underground corridors. The only exterior part of the place was the courtyard in back that had always been used to grow herbs, hang out laundry and practise martial arts.

Kiku held the door open for Quan Chan, Meilan and the professor, then took his place beside Quan Chan, ever protective and supportive. Quan Chan took a deep breath. He was going to need the support more than ever. Jin would probably be out any second now, seeing as Kiku had called ahead from the cab, letting him know they were close by.

In seconds, the curtain separating the tea room from the rest of the place moved aside. Jin emerged and their gazes met. Jin's expression shifted, as if the calm demeanour he'd intended to maintain had evaporated without his consent. "Quan Chan," he whispered, staring at him now. Emotions passed over Jin's wide features in rapid succession. His *qi* emanated, filling the room. Sorrow, regret, relief, and even joy seemed to dance in the air between them.

Quan Chan felt his own emotions shift. The anger he'd nursed towards Jin for hiding Sun Lau's condition from him also melted. He'd never been able to stay angry at Jin, not even when Jin broke his heart. "Hi, Jin." He couldn't help smiling as he moved towards the other man with the intent to embrace him.

Drawing closer, he saw Jin's stress showing on his face. Dark circles under his eyes, lines in his forehead and around his mouth. Jin's dark hair, slightly grown out as if he hadn't taken the time to shave it, was shot through with flecks of gray. Still, Jin had been his first love. Nothing would ever erase the nights Jin had held him in the warm curve of his body, easing his trembling and nightmares.

Jin didn't mean to stand like a wooden post as Quan Chan came towards him. He couldn't help it. That sweet look shining from the other man's eyes immobilised him. After all this time, after everything that had passed between them, was it possible Quan Chan *still* felt he could do no wrong? It seemed so. Jin had never quite gotten used to that—being someone else's hero. Sort of.

He blinked and Quan Chan was standing right in front of him, gazing up with those eyes. The eyes of a doe, Jin had always thought. Like Wu Li's eyes, yet with the years of struggle that also tempered his innocence with melting depths of wisdom and compassion.

Quan Chan had never lost his innocence. If anything, it had deepened.

Quan Chan's life force made a sweet pool of energy around them, releasing them both, it felt like, from their

circumstances. They were now just two old friends, each other's first love, having a reunion. The space of gentle energy gave Jin the freedom to reach out and pull Quan Chan into his embrace. For a few moments, he let himself feel Quan Chan hugging him back, the one person in the world aside from Sun Lau who knew his entire life inside and out, darkness and all. Unlike Sun Lau, however, Quan Chan still loved him. That was everything. Especially now. Even though he was giving up his beloved Wu Li to this very man.

When they pulled back from the embrace and looked at each other, the loving space around them remained. Quan Chan was still smiling, the skin at the corners of his eyes crinkled. "I'm so glad to see you, Jin."

Those simple words made Jin's heart squeeze. He cupped Quan Chan's cheek. Something about Quan Chan had always inspired him to do that. "Same here," he said softly.

The moment shifted and Jin became aware of the others Quan Chan had come in with. Kikuchiya, the Japanese gangster, Quan Chan's mother and her husband. Jin went to them and greeted them with his usual hospitality though inside he was mourning the passing of that moment between him and Quan Chan. Kikuchiya shook his hand, courteously putting aside the tension between them.

"I have a guest room prepared for you," he told Quan Chan's former lover. Months ago in one of their phone conversations, Quan Chan had shared with Jin what had passed between him and Kikuchiya.

Kikuchiya bowed. "Thank you, Jin."

Jin already knew that Quan Chan's mother and stepfather wouldn't be staying over and so hadn't prepared a room for them.

The curtain rustled behind them and Jin felt Wu Li's energy close by. His gut tightened. Why must Wu Li spy on them now? Would he ever give up that nasty habit of his?

Jin turned and saw his ... lover lurking in the darkness of the back room. Wu Li's curiosity practically filled the air. "Wu Li, come here please," he said, beckoning the youth from the shadows. Best to get this over with.

Obediently, Wu Li emerged, looking beautiful in a dark blue silk mandarin outfit, his long hair in a neatly braided queue down his back. He'd obviously taken pains to make himself presentable to Quan Chan.

Wu Li moved towards them, wearing that wide-eyed look of undisguised curiosity he naturally had. If he felt any bitterness about this moment as he'd expressed over the weekend, it didn't show in his demeanour. Wu Li stopped just behind Jin, as if shielding himself from the future. "Quan Chan, this is Wu Li." He looked at Wu Li. "Come say hello." *To your new master.*

Wu Li took a couple of hesitant steps. His gaze, curiosity now mixed with a touch of apprehension, still rested on Quan Chan. He bowed. "Hello, Quan Chan *sifu*," he said quietly. "I'm pleased to meet you."

Quan Chan bowed in return. "Thank you. I'm pleased as well." He returned Wu Li's curious yet apprehensive gaze.

Jin started at Quan Chan's innocent expression. Not the lustful stare he'd been expecting. Then again, how could he

not have thought Quan Chan would feel anything but eagerness about Wu Li? He'd just assumed Quan Chan would want Wu Li after just hearing about him, but as he'd seen a few moments earlier, he'd allowed the long periods of separation from Quan Chan to darken his view of the man. Quan Chan didn't take advantage of people.

He cleared his throat. It was time for Quan Chan to see Sun Lau. "Wu Li, please take Quan Chan's bag to ... his room, and Kikuchiya's to his. Make sure everything is ready for them. I'm taking Quan Chan in to Sun Lau."

Wu Li nodded and obediently retrieved the two bags, then disappeared behind the curtain.

Jin sighed and turned to Quan Chan again. "I hope you'll be happy with him," he said, using the tone he'd practised many times before this moment. Quan Chan was ultra-sensitive and the slightest waver in voice or gesture would definitely clue him in to his and Wu Li's connection.

Quan Chan didn't answer. He glanced away a moment to Kikuchiya and to his mother. After receiving their sympathetic encouragement, he turned back to Jin. A different look of apprehension had settled over his smooth face. "I'm ready to see him now, Jin."

Looking into Quan Chan's face, another tiny moment opened up between them as it had before. Sun Lau had been their first teacher, their *sifu*, the father Quan Chan had never known and the father that Jin had lost, murdered—like Quan Chan's father—during the Cultural Revolution when Jin was a child. Whatever conflicts were between them, Sun Lau was a

deep bond they shared, the meeting point they'd had for each other. The one light in the dark world of their youth.

"Come, Xiao Chan," he said softly, "I'll take you in."

* * * *

Quan Chan pulled in a breath at the sight of Sun Lau. This was not the same man he'd last seen a year and a half ago. That Sun Lau had been vigorous ... elderly yet full of life, the temperamental, flamboyant, unpredictable actor who'd changed all their lives.

"Xiao Chan." Sun Lau's voice was weak but still had the power to unroot Quan Chan from the doorway and propel him to the bedside.

He knelt down and leaned over, scooping up Sun Lau's frail-looking hand. He kissed it, feeling the tendons press into his lips, then held it to his cheek. "*Sifu*," he said in a whisper. His emotions poured out as if dumped from a vase. "I'm so sorry. Forgive me."

Sun Lau's watery gaze rested on him a moment then shifted to the doorway. "Leave us," he said.

Quan Chan turned. Jin had been standing in the doorway, Kiku and his parents behind them. Jin ushered them back into the sitting room and held open the door for the attendants to leave as well, then closed it. Knowing Kiku, he'd probably insist on them all staying in the sitting room just outside the bedroom. That was fine. Knowing they were there helped him feel stronger. He turned again to Sun Lau who was watching him now.

"My precious boy," Sun Lau said, each word seeming laboured. "I never wanted you to see me like this."

The words touched off that sensation of emotional pouring again. Quan Chan hugged the man's hand to his cheek more firmly. "Is that why you didn't tell me you were sick?"

Sun Lau's face darkened And Quan Chan saw that the stubborn, vivacious tiger he'd always known remained within the weakened exterior. "Yes."

The message was clear. Jin had been under strict orders to keep this secret. Jin had obviously gone against Sun Lau's wishes. No small feat for Jin who obeyed his master to the last word.

"*Sifu*, it doesn't matter. I'd have wanted to see you." He kissed the elderly man's hand again, wetting it with a tear.

"Please, Xiao Chan. Don't. You know I can't bear pity."

Quan Chan didn't answer. He gazed at Sun Lau, feeling a familiar frustration. Sun Lau had a way of blocking everything out except what he wanted.

"How have you been?" Sun Lau was changing the subject and that was that.

Quan Chan sniffled. This was no time to blubber. "I'm well."

Sun Lau made a strange snort. The recognizable sound he made when he didn't believe Quan Chan. "You think I'm blind, even though you're miles away? I know that Japanese gangster dumped you."

Quan Chan's heart lurched. "*Sifu*, please. It's more complicated than that."

That sound again and a sarcastic smile. "Everything is more complicated, isn't it?" Sun Lau heaved a breath, with which the energy in the room shifted. The elderly man's emotions softened. Regret filled the space, replacing the indignation. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't speak that way of a man who's brought the White Tiger path to Japan. It can't have been easy for him." He took another laboured breath. "It's just that ... no one's ever been good enough for you, my precious Xiao Chan. Not in my eyes."

That simply wasn't true. Jin had been wonderful. So had Kiku. And Hiru. Hiru was amazing. Wonderful. Beautiful. But now wasn't a time to convince Sun Lau. There was another purpose in what he was saying. "Why do you say that, *sifu*?"

Sun Lau blinked and his rheumy eyes appeared even more watery, with a melting look. "Because I've had too much time to lie here like a rag and understand things about my life I never did. Not in all these years. Stupid."

That was horrible. "Never say anything like that about yourself, *sifu*. You're the best. I love you." Quan Chan couldn't help the pouring out even though Sun Lau would probably not like it. There was no time left. Death stalked the room like a starving alley cat around a garbage can.

"No. You're wrong." Sun Lau swallowed, a strained sound that matched the look of pain in his eyes. "Listen to me, Quan Chan. I tore you and Jin apart."

"You didn't—" The words sank in, cutting him off. What the hell was Sun Lau saying? Quan Chan's breath tightened. Sun Lau must be suffering from dementia. Perhaps that was a

symptom of his illness. An effect of the pain he was in. "Sifu, you should rest. This is—"

"Hush, Xiao Chan. You're not listening. I worked on Jin, day after day. Told him he was a terrible student—disobedient and reckless—that he was breaking his teacher's heart by going against the path." The words seemed too much for a man in Sun Lau's condition but he'd gathered momentum, Quan Chan could feel, from a place deep inside, a place that made him terrified of leaving the world without setting things right.

Quan Chan sat, staring. Time seemed to have halted. He waited, waited for Sun Lau to admit his own ravings, but the determined look of confession did not leave Sun Lau's face. He returned Quan Chan's steady gaze, as if the silence would impress upon Quan Chan the truth.

"He promised he would do the right thing," Sun Lau whispered. He looked the closest to tears Quan Chan had ever seen him. "I didn't understand why I'd done it," he went on after several laboured breaths. "I never would have made him leave you had I known."

Just then Quan Chan remembered to breathe. Tears stung in his eyes and he held onto Sun Lau's hand as if that would keep the dying man from slipping away. Surely Sun Lau was raving. He'd been madly in love with Ming for decades. The two men had been through hell together and never let go until Ming's death separated them. "I know that, *sifu*."

"Hush, I haven't finished." Sun Lau fixed him with a look, that powerful look that could always silence anyone. "I wanted you for myself. I was jealous of Jin. How could he

have you, the most beautiful treasure, my precious blooming lotus?"

Quan Chan's mind clouded. Sun Lau had never touched him except for an occasional embrace or a kiss on the forehead.

"Don't be confused, Xiao Chan. I needed to stay on the path myself. Romantic attachment has no place, in spite of what you believe. I came to understand that after Ming's death. That's why, when you wanted to stay in Tokyo, I was so agreeable. It was easier to stay on the path with you so far away." Sun Lau squeezed his hand. "I hope you can forgive me. I never understood. But leaving you this place and giving you Wu Li are the only ways I can make any amends. Promise me you'll accept both. I beg you, Xiao Chan. Let me leave this life knowing you've accepted my gifts."

Quan Chan fought for breath. The room tilted and blurred. Could this possibly be true or was it Sun Lau's impending death making him speak in ways he wouldn't normally speak? "*Sifu*, I need to—"

"Promise me, Xiao Chan. Please."

Quan Chan's chest constricted. He needed time to process Sun Lau's confession, to make sense of it. Yet the glaze of Sun Lau's death mask told him in such a horrifying way that there was no time.

What about Jin? The question spiralled suddenly through Quan Chan's mind as he stared at Sun Lau. Of course, Sun Lau had been jealous of Jin all these years and still resented him. So strange for a man of such inner power. Quan Chan sighed. He'd learned long ago that great men had blind spots

and those blind spots were made great by that same intensity. The thought of telling Sun Lau about Hiru flashed through his mind. Perhaps that would persuade Sun Lau to change his mind. Before he could speak, however, Sun Lau went on.

"Promise. I beg you. Quan Chan, you are a true White Tiger, my prize. The heir to the teaching. It lives in you, I see it. Take Wu Li to your bed. Teach him. He has the gift. I see it in him. This is the only way. Promise me."

Quan Chan stared at him, his heart pounding. "I promise, *sifu*. I promise." Even on his deathbed, Sun Lau had the power to exact the nectar from a man's heart. If he'd been anyone else, the plea would be meaningless, but Sun Lau had saved their lives, given them a home, a path, a purpose. Everyone in Quan Chan's life, including Kiku and Hiru had come from his association with Sun Lau.

Relief washed across the elderly man's face. For the first time, peace settled over his pale, parched features. "Thank you, Xiao Chan. Thank you." He heaved another breath. "Now, please, let me sleep. Come back later. Will you?"

"Of course, *sifu*." He had to hold back the tears for only a few more moments, just until he was out of the room. Gently he settled Sun Lau's hand onto the bed and rose, retreating as Sun Lau's breath fell into the rhythm of sleep.

Kiku rose and went to him as soon as he passed through the doorway. The attendants tiptoed back in, leaving them in the sitting room. Kiku's large hands closed on his arms, supporting his weight. Only then did he realise he was faint. Kiku's touch infused him with strength. He blinked several

times as his consciousness absorbed the shock. "He's sleeping now."

Kiku's dark gaze searched his, examining him in that concerned way he had. "What about you?"

Quan Chan suddenly became aware of Wu Li. He'd been on the sofa, next to Meilan. His mother approached him, too, a gentle hand on his back. "I'll be fine." His voice wavered, feeling as tremulous as his body. "I just need to rest. Where's Jin?"

"He was pacing in front of the bedroom door and suddenly excused himself," Kiku said.

Quan Chan's shoulders sagged. Jin was the one person who could tell him if Sun Lau's confession was true. All these years he'd thought Jin had initiated their break-up. Was it really possible he'd broken both their hearts because Sun Lau had forced his hand? Had Sun Lau really caused them all that needless suffering because he was jealous? And if so, Quan Chan didn't even have the time to be angry with him. His last moments with his spiritual father could not be filled with anger.

Quan Chan looked at Wu Li again, this time longer. The promise he'd just made echoed in his mind. It was so characteristic of Sun Lau to raise turmoil around those in his life. And such a paradox that he could bring such depth of goodness to them at the same time.

Kiku's hold remained on his arms, a comforting reminder of the direction his life had taken. Events, even heart-wrenching ones like his own childhood and Sun Lau's betrayal

had eventually led to goodness, friendships, spiritual awakenings. Quan Chan *had* to remember this now.

One breath passed into the next and suddenly, the world came into sharp focus. His roiling emotions remained but now against a backdrop of wide, ocean-like calm. He didn't know what would happen, but he could take each small step.

"Kiku," he said.

"Yes?" Kiku brushed his thumbs over Quan Chan's biceps.

"When you call home, please send my love to everyone."

"Of course."

"Tell Hiru he's in my heart and I miss him but I can't speak with anyone right now."

Kiku's hand left his arm and several warm fingertips brushed his cheek. "I'll do that, of course," he said.

"Kiku," he went on, his chest tight, air constricting now, "He begged my promise I would take over here. I ... I can't go back."

Kiku's face darkened. His fingers pressed possessively into Quan Chan's arm muscles. He took a deep breath, visibly collecting himself. "I thought he might."

Quan Chan felt as if his blood were draining rapidly from every vein in his body. "Kiku, I feel so ... oh shit. Everything is so wrong. Everything."

Kiku pulled him close again. One large hand rubbed his back. "Don't worry about that now, sweetheart. I'm here for you. Your mother and the professor are here. We'll help you."

Quan Chan gripped Kiku's arms, clinging to him. His friend couldn't make the problem go away, but his solid strong

presence, his firm reassurance helped Quan Chan pull himself together. There was too much to deal with to fall apart now.

Pulling in a deep breath, he lifted his head from his friend's shoulder. "And please, Kiku, look after Jin. Tell him I'm worried about him. I want to sit and talk with him but I have something to do first. Don't let his attitude stop you."

Kiku grinned. "Have I ever?"

Quan Chan returned the smile in spite of himself. "Thank you." He turned to his mother. "I need to go now." He heard the apology in his tone. "I'm so sorry." His mother had done so much for him and now he was just leaving her too.

His mother kissed his cheek and then hugged him. "Don't you apologise for anything, Xiao Chan. We'll be back first thing in the morning." She kissed him again and the professor patted his shoulder.

"Thank you, Ma Ma." He smiled at the professor and watched the two of them leave.

Quan Chan's heart lurched. Now for the next step.
He turned.

Wu Li hung back, his eyes wide.

"Wu Li, please, come with me."

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Chapter Thirteen

Hiru turned out the bathroom light and went over to the bed. Slowly he sank down onto the edge and closed his eyes. Gentle energy hummed in the air, like a chorus of far away crickets. Quan Chan had said his energy would be in the room. Was that what he'd meant?

Hiru sighed and listened for what felt like a long time. In spite of the ache in his chest, his shoulders unclenched and he began to breathe more deeply. His mind softened and quieted until his thoughts seemed to ebb away like the tide on a beach.

When he opened his eyes again, he definitely felt calmer, more centred.

But no less aching for Quan Chan.

He turned to the small collection of framed photographs on Quan Chan's bedside table. His gaze fell on the first photo, one of Quan Chan and Kiku. The two men were smiling, leaning toward each other, over a table of food and tea. Seeing Quan Chan, the ache intensified. There hadn't even been time for Quan Chan to tell him who some of the other people were with him in those photos. He leaned over and studied each one more closely. Out of respect for Quan Chan's belongings, he didn't touch them or pick them up. In one, Quan Chan sat next to an older woman, his arm across her shoulders. They were smiling and the woman's pretty face was beaming, as if she were showing him off. From the unbelievable resemblance, Hiru guessed the woman was

Quan Chan's mother. She still lived in Shanghai with her husband, a professor of classic Chinese poetry at Fudan University, Quan Chan had told him.

Hiru felt a pang. Was it really just this morning he and Quan Chan had been snuggling together, talking about their lives, laughing, making love and feeding each other breakfast with their fingers?

He sighed and continued looking at the photographs. Several more of them were of Quan Chan with Kiku and then with the other guys he'd met here. In every photo, they were all smiling, arms draped over each other's shoulders. Hiru forced himself to look at the next picture. In this one, another group of men was assembled. They all wore baggy pants and tunics, all with their heads shaved the way Quan Chan's head was, all were smiling though the expressions looked posed, not spontaneous as in the other photos. Except for Quan Chan's smile, which was radiant, unable to hide his inner beauty. He looked younger than he did now, and stood in the middle next to a powerful, stern-looking man much older than he. That had to be Sun Lau, the actor whose skill, cunning and well-connected lover had helped him survive Maoist China. Hiru perused the other faces in the photo but couldn't place any of the names Quan Chan had mentioned to him with the faces, although somewhere within that picture was Jin, Quan Chan's first lover.

Hiru's gut tightened with the turn of his thoughts. Quan Chan and Kiku had landed safely in Shanghai hours ago. Kiku had called here briefly, letting everyone know and promising

he and Quan Chan would call later to say good night and hopefully stay on a bit longer.

Hiru tried not to let his mind go to what was possibly happening with Quan Chan in the interim. Would Quan Chan be reunited with Jin now? No. It was worse. There was that Wu Li person that Sun Lau was waiting to give to Quan Chan. Quan Chan felt guilty towards his godfather and obligated to accept Wu Li. *Shimatta*. Giving someone a person as a gift was preposterous enough. People weren't things. But worse that Quan Chan was the one receiving the human gift. Just when Quan Chan and he had found each other...

Hiru looked away and heaved another sigh. Resting his elbows on his knees, he hunched over and raked a hand through his hair while that powerless sensation overwhelmed him again.

A sudden knock on the screen made him look up.

"Hiru-chan, it's me and Naoto."

"Come in."

The door slid back and Koji smiled at him. "We came to check on you," he said. "May we come in?"

"Of course." He stood up but Koji motioned for him to sit back down. He and Naoto came over and knelt down nearby. Both men looked subdued yet concerned. "How are you doing? Are you comfortable?"

"I'm comfortable, thank you, but ... troubled."

Koji nodded and reached out, covering his hand briefly. "I understand. I'm sorry."

Hiru sighed again. "I feel badly for Quan Chan, but ... well ... I know it's selfish, but I can't stand this thing about the Golden Dragon."

Understanding lit both the other men's expressions. "Yes," Koji said softly.

Hiru looked at him and Naoto. "Just before Quan Chan and Kiku went into the airport today, Kiku told me to follow my heart, no matter what happens." He shoved his fingers through his hair again. "But this ... Golden Dragon person ... Quan Chan told me I shouldn't be there because he doesn't want me to be hurt. It confuses me."

"In the *Tao te ching*," Naoto said quietly, "Lao Tzu says that when a man is roiled like a torrent, he must stay patient until the stream clears." He leaned forward. "Stay patient, Hiru-san, meditate. When your mind clears, you'll know what to do."

Hiru nodded. Naoto's words definitely brought a sense of relief. "Thank you so much."

Naoto bowed. "You're welcome."

They sat quietly for several moments. That's when Hiru thought of something else. His heart beat a tiny bit faster. "Do either of you know any Chinese?"

Koji shook his head, but Naoto nodded. "I know a few words. My first partner was from Beijing."

"Why, Hiru-chan?" Koji asked.

"Something Quan Chan said to me a bunch of times over the weekend. I asked him what it meant and he asked if he could tell me another time." His shoulders drooped. "I don't know now whether there will be another time."

"What did he say?" Naoto asked. "I'll try to tell you if I can."

"He said..." Hiru brought to mind one of those moments. Of course, he felt the heat rise in his cheeks. His cock had been deep inside Quan Chan, their naked bodies sliding together, sweating, pleasure exploding in every inch of his body and soul. "He said, '*wo ai ni mei nanren*.'"

Naoto's eyes widened. "Oh, really?"

Hiru stared at him. His heart pounded now. "Yes. Was it bad?"

Naoto shook his head. "Not at all." The already intense look in his eyes deepened. "He said, 'I love you, beautiful man.'"

Hiru's breath caught. His heart felt like it halted beating for a long moment. Energy cascaded over the tops of his hands, up his arms and through his chest. Quan Chan loved him! "I had no idea." He looked briefly away, glancing at the photos on the bedside table. A wave of sadness followed his sudden elation. If Quan Chan had wanted him to know what he was saying, he would have said the words in Japanese. Quan Chan obviously hadn't been expecting a response or even wanting one. His shoulders sagged again. "I love him too," he said softly.

"Perhaps you don't need more clarity than that, Hiru-chan."

Hiru looked up. Koji had spoken and the man's dark eyes were shining as they looked at him.

Koji's hand touched his again. "You know my father, right?"

"Yes." Koji's father was a bitter, violent man who blamed Koji for having stolen his wife's love from him.

Koji nodded. "So you know how terrified I was for him to know anything important about me. I tried to hide how I felt about Naoto and do what my father wanted of me no matter what it cost, even though I could barely breathe when I was out of Naoto's presence."

"I remember, Koji-chan." Of course he remembered glancing over at Koji, sitting at his desk working, all that time tormented inside and unable to have what he truly wanted deep in his heart.

"Well, I just reached a breaking point where nothing could stop me from being with him. I couldn't live any other way." Behind him, Naoto was gazing at Koji with a soft, smitten look.

Koji's words rang deep inside him, but again, doubts rose. Quan Chan had been so certain, so ... adamant when he'd told Hiru not to come. In spite of the gentle way Quan Chan spoke, the firmness in his words had been clear. "I don't mean to be stubborn," Hiru said, "but I surrendered myself to Quan Chan as my *sensei*. How do I know that I'm simply being disobedient?" The confusion was maddening, but he couldn't let it go.

Koji squeezed his hand then pulled away. "I know you a little bit, Hiru-chan. Well enough to know you always try to do the right thing." His gaze grew pointed. "But there's right and then there's *right*."

Hiru looked at him another moment, then glanced at the photos. All he could do was heave another sigh. "I appreciate

everything you've done for me," he said, looking at Koji and Naoto again. "All of you. I can't believe my good fortune."

Koji rose up on his knees and hugged Hiru. Hiru hugged him back, reluctantly giving in to the impulse to breathe in Koji's clean scent. How many times had he not known the right thing to do where Koji was concerned, not only about his attraction to Koji but about watching Koji suffer for so long and not offering him more than someone to hang out with and watch TV? Not once had he ever defended Koji from his father, the way Naoto had.

When Koji pulled away, he was smiling. "I have faith in you," he said softly. He touched Hiru's arm. "I'll let you get some rest. If you need anything, don't hesitate to come get us."

"Thank you so much. Good night."

To his surprise, Naoto approached him too and gave him a quick embrace.

When they'd left, Hiru pulled back the covers. He turned off the light and meditated for a while before sliding down and pulling the cover up over him. Rolling onto his side, he pressed his face into the pillow and breathed in. Quan Chan's scent lingered on the soft material. He took several deep breaths, unable to ignore the distinct tingling in his cock.

Moving to the other pillow, he took that one and hugged it to his chest, still breathing in his lover's aroma. *His lover*. Even the thought caused his ... dragon ... to tighten and throb. The way his life had been going since Megumi's death, he'd never thought to have someone again, especially someone like Quan Chan.

The tingling spread into his balls, his ass and thighs, then fanned up his stomach, and into chest, causing his nipples to tighten. His fingers clutched into the pillow and he pulled it tighter against him. It was a piss-poor substitute for the real man, but...

Maybe this was Quan Chan's energy, the residue of his life force in the room, in the bed, in the air, that was making Hiru's energy centres tingle to life with such demand, the way they did in Quan Chan's actual presence. One memory after the other streamed through his mind, as if someone had shot a film of him and Quan Chan over the weekend, capturing in vivid detail, everything they'd done. Only unlike a film, these memories brought in all his senses—the scent of Quan Chan's skin, the salty-sweet flavour of it under Hiru's tongue, the velvet of Quan Chan's lips and tongue when they kissed, Quan Chan's moans and sighs, the flex of his muscles under Hiru's hands, the appreciative, passionate caresses and strokes on Hiru's hips and ass as Hiru rode him, the generous, sweetly open way Quan Chan yielded to him. Delightfully strange that Quan Chan could be so male and yet so like a flower at the same time...

Pleasure encircled Hiru's cock, delicious cascades that held him prisoner. Only then did he realise he'd reached into his shorts and started stroking himself, trying to make the memories real. From head to base, his palm slid along the hardness, his imagination trying so hard to transform his hand into the silken glove of Quan Chan's passage, the way Quan Chan squeezed him close, milked ecstasy from his body

while his beautiful hands clutched Hiru's hips and his eyes stared up at Hiru, glazed with delight.

Hiru groaned. One spasm after another released the pressure and he felt the hot splash of cum on his stomach.

Quan Chan's smile, his eyes, his flawless skin and sculpted body remained in Hiru's mind, keeping the energy points tingling until his cock was empty. While tiny spirals of heat passed through him, Hiru lay there, breathing heavily in the darkness of the room. Only the soft lighting in the hallway let him know the rest of the world was still there.

Turning his head to the side, he stared at the rice paper screen, at the mild glow behind it. He could have sworn a shadow was passing across it, stopping at this room.

"Hiru-san? It's Yuzo. May I come in?"

Hiru jumped up and flicked on the light. "Just a moment."

"I'm sorry."

"No problem." He snatched up tissues and wiped himself off, pulling up his shorts so as to appear to have just been sitting. He took a deep breath. "Come in, please."

The door slid back and Yuzo padded in. The light from the hallway outlined his slim form in a tank shirt and baggy pants. He was built like a dancer, graceful and willowy. In one hand he carried a phone. He approached the bed and knelt down, the way Koji and Naoto had.

Up close, Hiru saw the tattoo on his chest, peeping from under the material of his shirt, the marking that the *yakuza*, Taro Suzuki had had done on Yuzo by force to show the world he was Suzuki's property. Koji had told Hiru the whole story, about how Yuzo had drugged Suzuki's *saké* and escaped him,

running here to the White Tiger where Kiku had protected him and they'd fallen in love.

"I just spoke with Kiku," Yuzo said. "He called to say good night."

Hiru's heart lurched. "How are they?"

Yuzo smiled. "They're fine. Kiku gave me a message for you from Chan Chan. It was that you're in his heart and he misses you, but that he wasn't able to get on the phone himself and tell you right now." Yuzo's smile faded. "He'd been in to see Sun Lau and apparently Sun Lau is ... you know ... near the end."

Hiru nodded. His palms felt suddenly damp and an eerie cold heat invaded his skin. His heart pumped and his stomach danced with butterflies. "Thank you, Yuzo-san. I appreciate it. Did he say anything about ... the Golden Dragon?"

Yuzo shook his head but the look in his eyes showed that there was something he wasn't saying. "He hasn't mentioned it. But you shouldn't be frightened about that, Hiru-san," he added quickly. "Chan Chan is an amazing person. There's no situation he can't deal with creatively and compassionately."

The assurance did bring some relief, but not completely. "If there's anything I should know, Yuzo-san, please tell me."

Yuzo looked up at him. The beauty of his delicate features was striking. "I really don't know anything else. Kiku hadn't spoken to Chan Chan except briefly to get this message from him."

Hiru's chest tightened, constricting his breath. His vision blurred. Something was wrong, he just knew it. He'd always

had pretty good instincts and that, combined with the look on Yuzo's face, roused his worst fears.

"Well, there is something. I wasn't sure if I should tell you. But it doesn't seem right to keep a secret."

Hiru's blood ran cold. "What is it, Yuzo-san? I beg you, tell me."

Yuzo's brow furrowed. "Sun Lau made Quan Chan promise to ... take over the White Tiger there in Shanghai, after the hundred-day mourning period is over."

Hiru stared at him. Had he heard correctly? Quan Chan wouldn't be coming back?

"I swear that's all I know, Hiru-san." Yuzo's eyes looked pained. "I'm so sorry."

Hiru's heart pounded painfully. He'd sensed this would happen in spite of Quan Chan's assurances that he would be coming back at some point. *Kuso!*

His confusion returned, making his mind feel as if someone had stuffed cotton batting into his head. This was how he'd been since the accident, immobilised, frightened, allowing his fears to restrain him. For a couple of days this weekend, with Quan Chan, he'd become again the man he'd been with Megumi, the man on the judo mats, able to evaluate an opponent with one glance and then take him down no matter what. The man he'd been would move Heaven and Earth to get what his heart wanted. The man he'd been would go to Shanghai and leave his life in Tokyo behind, no questions asked. That was the man he'd been and wanted to be again, dammit!

Koji's words came back to him. *There's right and then there's right.*

"Hiru-san, are you all right? I understand, you miss Chan Chan. I know how you feel. I miss Kiku. I'm miserable. I know I shouldn't be, really because ... oh forgive me. I do this sometimes. You know, babble."

"It's all right." He sat up and leaned forward. "Yuzo-san, do you have a passport?"

Yuzo's brows went up. "Yes. I haven't used it since I went to Europe with my uncle when I was sixteen. But it should be good. My uncle's Noh-Kabuki theatre troupe went on a tour to France and England and I got to go with him—"

"That's okay. I'm sorry. I have one too." He'd kept it updated in case Toshio Systems ever needed him to attend a conference outside of Japan. "Do you think there are enough people here to take care of this place if you and I go ... to Shanghai?"

Yuzo's face lit up and he rose up on his knees. Yuzo was like a human sparkler the way he crackled with constant life. "I think so. I'll check with the others, but, yeah. When would we go?"

A gust of strength coursed through Hiru. He'd been reborn. "Well, tomorrow, of course, on the first flight possible."

Yuzo nodded, beaming. "Of course. You're right. I'd better go pack. I mean, after I speak with Naoto."

"Thank you, Yuzo-san." Again, the men of the White Tiger were there for him. Though he was a virtual stranger in their midst, they'd immediately made him one of them and it felt right. Completely, absolutely right.

His blood flowed hot through his veins now, the way it had when Quan Chan was in his arms. And would be again, he prayed. First though, he'd need to make sure Koji could check in on Mrs. Yamada every so often for him and help him arrange an emergency leave of absence with their boss, Miosuke. He waved. "See you in the morning then," he said.

Yuzo was already to the door, but he turned and winked. "First thing."

* * * *

Quan Chan stared at his reflection in the bathroom mirror. His ear remained trained on the sitting room, as he waited for Wu Li to get back. After leaving Sun Lau's quarters, Wu Li had insisted on helping him, bringing him a pot of tea and some pastries. Though Quan Chan had refused at first, wanting to get their first meeting over as soon as possible, Wu Li had persisted, probably in response to the pale-faced, trembling condition Quan Chan found himself in.

Wu Li had been gone a while, making Quan Chan wonder if he'd travelled to the mountains to pick the tea first and dry it before making the pot. But soon enough he heard tiny noises beyond the bedroom, the sound of a tray being set on the low table in the sitting area, followed by the clink of porcelain.

Pulling in a deep breath, Quan Chan turned and went to join him.

Then froze.

Wu Li had removed his jacket and knelt in front of the table, bare-chested. Quan Chan's mouth went dry. Wu Li's slim, v-shaped torso moved with grace. Built similarly to Yuzo

with the perfectly etched musculature of a dancer, he seemed absorbed in his task of setting the cup at a place for Quan Chan. Wu Li's long braid hung over his front, drawing Quan Chan's eyes to the man's chest, where the queue of hair brushed over one dark brown, perfectly round nipple.

Wu Li looked up. For a moment their gazes locked. Wu Li stared back, his cheeks darkening a tiny bit. Then he seemed to remember himself and gestured toward the table.

"Here's your tea, *sifu*." Wu Li poured the steaming amber liquid into the tiny porcelain cup. He set the pot down, each movement graceful and generous, then sat back on his heels.

Quan Chan watched Wu Li's hands float down and rest in his lap. Jin—for that was surely who'd trained Wu Li—had done an excellent job. Wu Li was as refined at serving as any of the men at the White Tiger back in Tokyo. And just as beautiful. Too beautiful for a lonely, distraught man. "Wu Li," he said softly, "Please, put your jacket back on."

Wu Li looked down. "I'm sorry, *sifu*, I didn't mean to—"

"Don't apologise. You've done nothing wrong. It's just that..." He fell silent and rubbed a hand over his face. This was too much. He came over the sofa and lowered himself into the cushions while Wu Li retrieved his blue silk jacket and did up the frog closures with nimble fingers. When he'd finished, he lowered his hands to his lap again and sat quietly, the perfect servant.

Finally, Quan Chan reached for his cup and brought it to his lips, working to steady the trembling in his hand. The delicate aroma of Oolong leaves wafted upward. Jin's special blend. Jin was a master at blending tea and had a unique one

he'd always made especially for Quan Chan. "Thank you, Wu Li." He blinked, working to erase the memory of that perfect, slim body underneath the blue silk. If he hadn't normally been drawn to men much larger and broader than himself, things would have been a lot worse right now.

Wu Li looked down. "You're welcome."

Quan Chan took a sip and closed his eyes. The warm liquid slipping down his throat already eased some of the shaking in his bones. He set the cup down and heaved a sigh. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to be so ... sharp. I'm not usually this way."

Wu Li looked up, staring at him as if the words he'd just spoken were floating in the air between them. He nodded. "I understand," he said softly.

It sounded true, and the gaze in Wu Li's eyes was sincere enough from what Quan Chan could tell. He took another sip of tea. The aroma and taste made him bring Jin to mind. Jin. The poor man. All these years...

The horror of the situation made him shudder. He prayed that Sun Lau's words were untrue, the ravings of a dying man. Though now, faced with Wu Li, Quan Chan knew that the elderly man's confession was real. Jin had obviously been ordered to give up a second lover. No doubt, Wu Li and Jin were lovers, if the *yang* force swirling between them earlier in the tea room was any indication.

And seventeen years earlier, Jin had broken up with him at Sun Lau's command.

Quan Chan sighed, once again at the edge of tears. There was no one to be angry with, no one to blame. Jin had been young then too, young and eager to please the master who'd

saved his life. Quan Chan rubbed at his stinging eyes with thumb and forefinger. Sun Lau's confession had been like a stick, digging deep into the pond of Quan Chan's emotions, stirring everything that had taken years to settle.

"Are you all right, *sifu*?"

Wu Li's voice made him look up. Quan Chan stared into the other man's eyes. "Tell me, Wu Li," he said, his voice scratchy from emotion, "are there ... feelings between you and Jin?"

Wu Li's gaze slid away and he bowed his head. "I don't know what you mean," he murmured.

The lie gave Quan Chan that crazy in the head feeling. A tear slipped from his eyes. He wiped it away with the heel of his hand. No more lies! Especially not now. More tears brimmed and fell over. "Wu Li, I beg of you, no games, no lies. My heart is so broken, I can't bear it. I need to know. Just tell me the truth."

Wu Li looked back up at him, eyes wide. He'd clearly not expected such a response. "Yes."

"Are you lovers?"

At this, Wu Li's delicate face hardened the tiniest bit. His new master's tears seemed to have unnerved him and he was obviously trying to remain sympathetic. "We were. That is, until this past Friday."

Friday. The day he'd received Sun Lau's letter. *Shit*. He heaved a deep breath and rubbed at his tears with the heel of his hand. "Neither of you chose to end it," he pressed. "Is that right?"

"Sun Lau told him to give me to you, *sifu*." Wu Li's voice trembled slightly in his effort to remain calm and proper.

"I thought as much." He sat back, glad for the soft cushions that absorbed his tired weight. He wiped at the last of his tears. Wu Li's honesty had gone far toward calming him. It gave him clarity and direction in the midst of this shit storm. Before speaking again, he heaved a deep sigh and sipped more tea. "I can't, in good conscience, keep you here with me, Wu Li," he said. "Please, go back to Jin. Tell him what I've said and that I want you to be together." In spite of his promise to Sun Lau, he could not be a party to hurting these people this way.

Wu Li shook his head. "I can't do that. I mean," he looked down briefly, "That's so kind of you, but..." His face hardened again, more this time, showing bitterness. "Jin doesn't love me anymore. He ... gave me up rather easily." The tone in Wu Li's voice showed that he still loved Jin yet was terribly wounded by what had happened.

Quan Chan certainly understood. However, he wasn't going to let Jin suffer another loss. Not if he could help it. "Jin loves you," he said softly. "You can believe me. I've known him since I was fourteen. I know him very well."

Wu Li's face remained hard. "It's not possible, *sifu*."

Sighing, Quan Chan drank the last of the tea in his cup, letting Wu Li refill it for him. He wasn't going to argue with Wu Li right now, especially not now. "Please, Wu Li, will you have some tea?" He noticed a second cup on the tray and leaned forward, pouring tea into it before Wu Li could answer.

Obediently, Wu Li lifted the cup.

"Sniff the aroma before you sip it," Quan Chan told him, feeling stronger now. Following his conscience always made

him stronger. He watched Wu Li obey, the man's long brush-like lashes resting on his cheeks as he looked down into the cup and breathed in the curling steam. "Good. Now, take a sip." He looked at Wu Li's nicely shaped fingers against the white porcelain. Wu Li didn't have delicate fingers. His hands, though small, like the rest of him, looked strong, like the hands of a man who digs in the earth.

Wu Li swallowed and lowered the cup.

"What do you think?"

"Of the tea?"

"Yes."

"It's beautiful. Like rain on the side of a mountain in spring."

Quan Chan smiled. "That's a beautiful image."

Wu Li blushed. "Thank you, *sifu*."

"Jin blends that tea himself. His touch is delicate, is it not?"

Wu Li stiffened perceptibly, though the blush remained in his cheeks. "Yes."

Quan Chan sipped again, savouring Jin's work. "From love, Jin handles the tiny delicate leaves, putting just the right amount of different ones together to achieve the perfect balance," he said, watching Wu Li's face for his response.

Feelings shifted across Wu Li's refined features as he spoke.

Quan Chan continued. "Which is why whenever I was sick, with a fever or cold, Jin's tea made me feel better. It healed me, like potent medicine, because it was made and offered to me from love." He took the last sip and held the cup, enjoying

the lingering warmth against his palms. "Why am I telling you this when Jin has hurt you so much? And I know he has. He broke your heart, sweet one."

Sudden tears shimmered in Wu Li's eyes.

Quan Chan set down the cup and leaned forward. "I'm telling you this because I know that even when Jin makes a mistake, his intention is always right. Love and truth. Those are the principles he lives by, strives for in every movement, every thought. I promise you, that's true."

One tear escaped Wu Li's eye. It trembled momentarily on his lashes then ran down his cheek, dropping onto his blue silk.

"Take another sip, Wu Li. Drink the entire cup. It'll help you."

Wu Li nodded wordlessly and lifted the cup to his lips. When he'd finished, he set the empty cup down. "I still don't understand," he said. He still sounded hurt though much calmer at the same time.

Quan Chan refilled the cup for him, then refilled his own. Indeed, Jin's tea was soothing and Quan Chan couldn't get enough of it now, especially when he didn't have Hiru's arms to rest in. "What don't you understand?"

Wu Li looked up, brow creased. "I'm sorry. I should be quiet. It's not my place."

"I'd never be angry at you for speaking your mind, Wu Li." Quan Chan felt suddenly desperate for Wu Li to understand. One more moment of anything but what was real felt unbearable. "I ... want us to be friends."

Wu Li appeared uncertain, yet leaned forward, as if anxious to spill out his question. "What I don't understand is, how could giving me away have been from love? It felt like hate."

Quan Chan paused. Wu Li was obviously intelligent and perceptive. He'd picked up on the hate. Then the words formed in his mind. "It wasn't his hate, you felt, Wu Li. It was Sun Lau's."

Wu Li's brow furrowed. "Sun Lau hates me?"

"No, not at all. Listen, I'm going to tell you something and you can't tell anyone else, all right?"

Wu Li's eyes widened. "All right. I promise, I won't tell anyone." He seemed to like the fact that Quan Chan would share a secret with him.

Quan Chan paused again. There was more to tell Wu Li before sharing the things he was going to share with him. "First, I must ask you something."

Wu Li nodded, though apprehension emanated from him, filling the space between them. "Of course, *sifu*."

"How much do you know about Sun Lau?"

Again, Wu Li appeared taken aback. He gave a small shrug. "I know that he was an actor and that a wealthy patron had bought him this place before the Communists took over."

"That's right. Chen Ming, a prominent investment banker. He and Sun Lau were lovers. Mao Zedong had allowed Ming to retain his fortune, declaring him a 'democratic patriotic personage' because he'd denounced Chiang Kai Shek in the 1940s." The mention made Quan Chan remember the times

when Sun Lau spoke of Ming, always with great affection and with a tender look that would infuse his eyes.

Sudden tension clenched Quan Chan's shoulders. Perhaps, deep down, Sun Lau had wished to spare Quan Chan the grief of loss when he forced him and Jin apart all those years ago. At that time, he and Jin had not been lovers for a very long time, not the way Sun Lau and Ming had. Sun Lau had never recovered from losing Ming. As Quan Chan's godfather, he'd want to spare his son the unmitigated pain of losing a lover he'd had his entire life.

This realisation took a bit of the sting out of Sun Lau's confession. He pulled in a breath and put his attention back on Wu Li.

Wu Li appeared fascinated. His deep, velvety eyes were locked on Quan Chan now. "I didn't know all that."

"It's important. Ming lived here with Sun Lau, passing Sun Lau off as his personal assistant and manager of this property. Secretly they practised the White Tiger path together even though they were forced to open up this house to families being relocated from other neighbourhoods. But Ming was older and not in the best of health. The stress they lived under, the fear of discovery by colleagues and family took their toll and he grew ill and died. You see, if Sun Lau and Ming had been caught together, they would probably have been put to death."

Wu Li's eyes widened. He was young enough not to know that the Maoists had considered homosexuality punishable by death. "That's terrible," he breathed.

"Yes, it is. Persecution in any form is a stain on humanity."

Wu Li nodded. "I understand what you mean," he said, his voice soft yet tinged with an undercurrent of enthusiasm, a lonely person who'd found someone to talk to. "In Huating, where I'm from, the older guys will throw rocks at someone if they think that he's ... you know, biting the peach. Others will turn their backs, glare at a person, make them feel like garbage. It's horrible."

"I know." Quan Chan had gotten more than one roughing up on the streets by older boys for coming off as gay.

"That's why I came here," Wu Li went on. "I was sure it would be better in the city. The collective farm my family worked on was very large and trucks would take the vegetables into Shanghai to sell at market and to restaurants. I caught a ride one day and didn't go back."

Quan Chan fixed him with a look. Inwardly, he admired Wu Li's bravery, but there was too much at stake now to take the time for praise. "Yes," he said, "you do understand. But it's also important to understand that because of Sun Lau, we all have a safe place to live and to be who we are. Even when the communist regime softened its stance on homosexuality and reduced it to the status of mental illness or a misdemeanour, life was hard and much of it had to be hidden. The Cultural Revolution was over and the swarms of people living here returned to their previous homes. Sun Lau had the place back to himself and made it into this tea room and bath house." He stopped and felt how hard his heart pounded. Yes, he was defending Sun Lau to Wu Li, but also, he noticed, to himself. Remembering Sun Lau's life, the hell he'd faced, the

losses he'd endured, it was nearly impossible to stay angry at him either.

Wu Li's face clouded. "I haven't felt very safe these past few days," he said with surprising candour. Quickly he bowed his head. "I'm sorry, *sifu*. I know I can be so rude. I have much to be grateful for."

Quan Chan smiled. "You're not rude, Wu Li. I'm honoured that you felt safe enough with me to voice your feelings. But you're also safe with the others here, believe it or not. No one here would ever knowingly hurt you, especially not Jin."

Wu Li's bottom lip trembled. "I know," he murmured.

"Now, it's time to tell you the private things. I needed to make sure first that you understood more about Sun Lau. It's unfair to judge a man before you know as much as possible about his life."

Wu Li bowed his head again. "I promise I won't tell anyone."

"All right. The secret has two parts." Quan Chan's heart pounded again. "The first part is about Jin."

Wu Li's brow furrowed. "Jin?"

"Yes. Has he ... told you about his life? His childhood?"

Wu Li shook his head. "No. I asked him once, not that long ago. I wanted to know more about him, but he got all uptight and wouldn't answer. He said it doesn't matter. I could tell that wasn't true." Wu Li sounded mournful. Understandable. Jin had a way of keeping people at arm's length. Unlike Kiku who'd shared a lot about his past only a short time after Quan Chan had known him. And then, Hiru. Well, he'd opened up like he'd been blasted with dynamite.

"I knew Jin for ten years before he said anything," he told Wu Li. "It's too painful for him. He hasn't really faced it yet." *Maybe you'll be able to help him someday.*

Curiosity lit Wu Li's eyes. "What happened?"

Quan Chan cleared his throat. It was a violation to be telling Wu Li this without Jin's permission, but the situation was dire. The path between Jin and Wu Li had to be cleared and this was the only way he could see to do it under the circumstances. "Jin's father was a middle class landlord," he began. "When Jin was small, during the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guard came to his father's home and arrested him, declaring him an enemy of the People's Republic of China. They dragged Jin's father into the street and beat him publicly, to make an example of him. In the years to come, his father was sent in and out of labour camps. He'd come home for short periods then have to go back while his mother worked in a factory. One day, when he returned for a visit, he had a terrible cough. He grew sicker and sicker over the next few days until he died. He might have gotten better but Jin could see that his father had lost the will to live. Jin grew up watching his father die by degrees."

"Oh!" Wu Li's face filled with horror.

"After that, Jin's mother was sent to work on a communal farm in the countryside and he was sent to live with his aunt and uncle who were staunch Maoists and ensured that he was put into the Little Red Guards while he went through school. Until he was fourteen, he was part of this organisation and then, until he was seventeen, he went into the Red Guards.

"He did his best simply to distribute flyers and put up banners, marching and singing and appearing to be what they wanted him to be, but inside he was horrified. He was part of the very organisation that had murdered his father. He stalled for time by searching for his mother. He found her eventually. She had remarried a farmer and had several children by him. Legally, she was obligated to remain in the country, but Jin never got over that. In his mind, he felt completely betrayed that she'd never tried to find him and seemed to have simply gone on with her life, caring only for her own survival." Quan Chan heaved a deep sigh. "As far as I know, he still won't speak to her or acknowledge his brothers and sisters. This haunts him, but not as much as his participation in the Red Guards. He feels it as the deepest, darkest stain on his soul."

Struck with urgency, Quan Chan reached out and covered one of Wu Li's hands. "Do you understand, Wu Li? This is why he has borne everything Sun Lau has ever done or said to him, because Sun Lau gave him a new life, a path of spirit, a way that Jin sees to undo his horrible karma. Jin would reach into the darkest corners inside himself to make whatever sacrifice he could to make up for what he considers the evil he's done. What better way to do it than to give up what's most precious to him? You."

Tears freely ran down Wu Li's cheeks now. Dark spots dotted the front of his mandarin jacket where the tears fell. "I never knew," he said, voice trembling. "I couldn't have imagined."

Quan Chan squeezed his hand gently before sitting back. "I hope that gives you insight into his actions. Perhaps if you understand, the path back to him will be cleared."

Wu Li's face paled. "Oh!" He closed his eyes and rocked back and forth, sobbing freely. Shame and self-loathing emanated into the air from Wu Li's life force.

Quan Chan got up and knelt by him, pulling him into an embrace. "Shhh," Quan Chan crooned, close to the man's sleek hair. "It's all right."

Wu Li pulled back, visibly forcing himself to stop crying.

Quan Chan reached for a tissue and handed it to him, watching the young man swipe at his face with the tissue. "I didn't tell you this to cause such distress, Wu Li," he said softly. Exhaustion overcame him in an intense wave and he scrubbed a hand over his face. "Forgive me. This is an intense time. I'm not thinking clearly. Perhaps it would be best to get some sleep." He knew he wouldn't sleep, but said it to end this conversation.

"May I stay here, with you, *sifu*?"

Quan Chan sat back on his heels. "Yes, as long as you understand that I'm not going to ... have you. I don't want to hurt Jin and I don't want to hurt you. Ever. Whom you share your body with should always be your choice, not someone else's command." On this he'd never waver, not after what his mother had gone through.

Wu Li nodded. "I understand," he said. "It's just ... I feel safe with you."

The blotchy, teary-eyed face staring back at him made him sigh. Jin's affection and desire for Wu Li were completely

understandable. "Of course, you may stay here." He stood up and held out a hand to Wu Li. "Come on. We can share the bed. It's huge enough."

Too tired even to brush his teeth, Quan Chan led Wu Li out of the sitting room to the bedroom. The covers had already been pulled back so he sat down, toed off his slip-on shoes and laid down, fully-clothed. Turning his head on the pillow, he watched Wu Li follow his lead and stretch out next to him, not too closely but far away enough that it was clear they weren't sleeping *together*.

Quan Chan pulled the covers over them and turned onto his side. "Are you all right, Wu Li? I fear I've overwhelmed you with everything." At this point, revealing Jin's past to Wu Li was sufficient. It probably wasn't necessary to tell him about Sun Lau's jealousy. At least not now.

Wu Li turned onto his side, facing Quan Chan. "I'm fine, *sifu*. I'm sorry I got so emotional."

Something about Wu Li's response hadn't only been from horror at Jin's past. Quan Chan sensed that Wu Li felt guilty, ashamed. He must have said something to Jin that made him believe there was no possibility of reconciling. In spite of that, Wu Li emanated inner strength and the ability to live by principle. Sun Lau was right about him. Still Wu Li was barely out of childhood and it showed in his face. Losing Jin had obviously devastated his heart and hopefully, he'd have the wisdom and determination necessarily to pull through.

"You've nothing to be sorry for, sweet one," Quan Chan said gently. "I just hope you won't be frightened off by anything I've told you. You're special, I can see it. This is a

very difficult time. I can't imagine what will be for me, for Jin, for the others here. Your understanding, your compassion are desperately needed. That's all I know right now." He watched his words sink into Wu Li.

A look of strength slipped across Wu Li's delicate features and into his eyes. He nodded. "I'll do whatever I can, *sifu*. You wouldn't have trusted me with such important things if I couldn't handle it."

Quan Chan breathed relief. "That's right." He smiled. "Wu Li, there's one thing to remember above all else. Love is the only thing that matters. If you can remember this, everything else will fall into place. I promise."

Wu Li nodded against the pillow. "Okay," he said quietly.

"Now, get some rest."

"Yes, *sifu*." Wu Li closed his eyes. In mere moments, his breathing settled into a deep rhythm and he sighed, turning onto his back, like a child.

Quan Chan watched him for several minutes, observing the way his brush-like lashes rested on his smooth cheeks, listening to the steady rise and fall of his breath. He looked incredibly innocent even though Quan Chan suspected he'd lost his innocence somewhere between coming to Shanghai and finding Jin. Still, Wu Li emanated a kind of child-like sweetness mixed with his iron inner-strength. Quan Chan could only hope that those qualities would keep him here and enable him to forgive Jin the way Quan Chan had been able to forgive Jin.

Finally, he turned off the bedside lamp and lay on his back, listening to Wu Li's soft breathing. The talk with Wu Li had

helped him process Sun Lau's revelation. Telling Wu Li about Sun Lau's past had tempered the wound Sun Lau had inflicted.

Then again, it wasn't Sun Lau's fault he'd been unaware of his deeper feelings. It was very possible he wasn't even aware of the other connection, the desire to spare Quan Chan grief the way Sun Lau had suffered over losing Ming. It took a lifetime, maybe more, to unearth everything that harboured in the human psyche, like a giant knot that can only be unravelled inch by inch over time.

There was no second-guessing what had happened. Had the events in their lives not happened this way, he might never have had a relationship with Kiku and then, not have met all the wonderful friends he had in Tokyo. Naoto, Koji, the twins, Basho, Ryu. *Hiru*.

For what seemed like a long time, these reflections coursed through his mind, untempered by the long day, the sudden flight, the shock of being called to Sun Lau's death bed. How pale the elderly man had looked. So unlike the vigorous, beautiful dragon he'd once been. When Quan Chan was younger, Sun Lau had allowed him to rifle through his closets, putting on the stunningly embroidered silk robes he'd once worn in his theatre roles. Sun Lau had risked his life also to save those robes as well as his stage makeup from the torches of the Red Guards who burned anything that had to do with the arts. Just knowing he had access to that part of Sun Lau's history had made Quan Chan feel so special. One special time, Sun Lau had done up Quan Chan's face in the style of one of the opera characters. The makeup had been a

pain in the ass to wash clean and took forever to apply, but he wouldn't have taken back one moment of the attention lavished on him.

Quan Chan sat bolt upright. What had he been thinking, lying here, ruminating when his beloved father was nearby, taking his last breaths? Shame burned in his cheeks even though Sun Lau had demanded of him to bring Wu Li to this room as soon as possible. Quietly, he pushed back the covers and slid from the bed, careful not to wake Wu Li. Wu Li sighed in his sleep and turned over, oblivious.

In the dark, Quan Chan put his feet into his slip-ons and padded silently out of the bedroom. He closed the door between the bedroom and the sitting room and continued out, on his way to say good-bye.

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Chapter Fourteen

In the doorway of Sun Lau's quarters, Quan Chan paused. Kiku and Jin were there, in the sitting room, a pot of tea and two small cups on the table before them. Kiku sat in a chair, Jin on the small sofa. Jin sat hunched over, hands on his scalp. A tiny pang squeezed Quan Chan's chest. How often he'd seen Jin in this pose of frustration over the years. Jin probably thought he'd been making love to Wu Li this past hour. The mere thought made Quan Chan's gut lurch.

As soon as he stepped into the room, Jin looked up and Kiku rose from his seat, coming towards him immediately to embrace him.

Kiku said nothing, but kissed his cheek and led him to the sitting area. Instead of retaking his chair, however, he excused himself to stretch his legs in the corridor. Kiku's incredibly sensitive way of giving him and Jin privacy yet still keeping an eye on them.

Quan Chan thanked him softly then perched on the sofa next to Jin. "I hope you don't mind that I had Kiku look after you," he said softly. "I was worried about you but unable to stay with you myself."

Jin gave him a knowing look and a strange energy rose up around him. "Worried? I'm tougher than shoe leather. You know that."

"No you're not, Jin." Tentatively he put a hand on Jin's forearm. "Jin, I haven't touched Wu Li, I swear. I won't touch

him. I told him that and I'm telling you that. I don't want to hurt either of you." He looked down briefly.

Jin released a deep breath. "I should have realised you'd respond that way. I ... I've turned you into someone else. In my mind." He looked at Quan Chan a moment longer. So many things went through his eyes. "Thank you, Quan Chan," he said finally. Relief was clear in his voice.

"You're welcome. But there's also ... someone else I don't want to hurt."

Jin's eyes lit with curiosity. "Kiku?"

He shook his head. "No. Someone else. A friend of a friend. It happened this weekend. I didn't expect it." His cheeks grew hot under Jin's look.

Jin stared at him longer while an array of emotions passed over his face. His face took on a hard edge, then softened, as if he'd decided to be kind when his impulse was to be petty and jealous. "That's good, Xiao Chan," he said in a quiet voice. "You deserve happiness. Probably the most of anyone I've ever known." At that, a look of deep, inconsolable sadness came over him. Once again, he took his posture of frustration and Quan Chan watched Jin's wide fingers agitate over his scalp. "Not that it matters. I fucked up both our lives, for nothing."

"Jin, that's not true. All is forgiven. Actually, forgotten, as if it never mattered."

Jin's head shot up, his eyes suddenly red-rimmed and shining with unshed tears. "I heard Sun Lau tell you today," he said, careful to keep his tone to a whisper. "I never wanted you to know that. I thought I was doing what was

right, what was true, but I was wrong. I gave you up for nothing. I hurt you. The look on your face that night haunts me to this day. You were my sweet little brother. My sweetheart."

Quan Chan leaned forward and grabbed Jin into a hug, squeezing him tight. "You couldn't have done anything different, Jin," he said close to Jin's ear. "You were young and frightened. We had nothing and no one else but Sun Lau. It's not your fault. It's ... what was meant to be." He rested his cheek against Jin's. "What's real between us has never been harmed, only deepened. I promise."

Jin's arms tightened around him. His large hands fisted Quan Chan's loose-fitting shirt. "You're the only person in my life who's ever really loved me," he said in a tight whisper. "You always forgive me, no matter what kind of bastard I've been."

Quan Chan gently pulled back and looked into Jin's eyes. "You've never been a bastard. Not to me." He smiled and cupped Jin's cheek. "I'm not the only one who loves you, either."

Jin returned his gaze, at first appearing confused. Then understanding lit his face. "You mean Wu Li?"

"Yes."

Jin shook his head and Quan Chan felt the other man's stubborn wall rise up. "You're wrong about that," he said.

"I'm not wrong. You'll see. Don't read Wu Li's outward behaviour in the same way as you've been able to read mine. Our natures are different. I'm a dog. He's a dragon. Dragons are fiery but no less forgiving."

That pulled a tiny smile from Jin. "A dragon breathing fire can burn a bridge," he said softly.

"Only if the bridge is made of weak material. Not if it's fireproof."

"Even if it is, a dragon can burn a goat to a crisp with one blow," he rejoined, referring to his own birth sign.

Quan Chan reached up and passed a hand over Jin's cropped hair. "Don't have everything so figured out, Jin. Don't you see what damage such close-mindedness has caused?"

Jin covered Quan Chan's hand and sighed. "Perhaps you're right."

"Mo ming qi miao," he added. *No one can explain the wonder and mystery of it all.*

Jin didn't answer in spite of the tiny spark of hope that lit his dark eyes. He lifted Quan Chan's hand away and held it. For one brief moment, something else passed across his face. His eyelids lowered, his face darkened. He leaned slightly forward.

Quan Chan caught his breath softly. He didn't move, but watched Jin lean closer, close enough so that their lips almost brushed together.

Suddenly Jin started and sat back, blinking. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "What was I thinking?"

"It's all right, Jin." Quan Chan wouldn't have refused his dear friend one soft kiss after all these years, especially not after Sun Lau's revelation. It wouldn't have been harmful, only sweet.

Jin lifted Quan Chan's hand to his face and pressed his lips into the knuckles, not unlike the tender, reverent way Hiru

had done the same thing. Then he released Quan Chan. "I hope you'll always be my precious little brother," he said.

That made him happy in the midst of this great unhappiness. Nothing could ever erase the bond between him and Jin. "I'd better be, that's all I can say."

Jin smiled again, this one a bit wider than the last.

A sound came from within Sun Lau's bedroom. Quan Chan glanced at the door. It was time to go in. He looked at Jin. "I hope you'll stay in here with Kiku while I'm inside."

Jin nodded. "If that's what you'd like, Xiao Chan."

"Yes, that's what I'd like."

Jin sat back, his hands on his lap. "Then I shall stay."

Quan Chan stood up. He exchanged a long look with Jin in which every last bit of tension that had ever been between them felt as if it had never existed. "Thank you." Then he turned and went to the bedroom door.

Sun Lau's raspy breathing filled the air. Quan Chan drew closer. As he reached the bedside, his heart lurched. Sun Lau's eyes were open, staring straight ahead. Only after Quan Chan had lowered himself into the chair and excused the attendant with a nod, did the elderly man turn his head slowly. What appeared to be a tiny smile curled his lips.

Quan Chan gazed back at him. The time was very close. "I'll get Jin," he said.

"Not ... yet." Sun Lau blinked, gazing up at him. "Sit with me." The words came slowly, each one laboured.

Suppressing the impulse to argue, Quan Chan remained in his chair and reached for Sun Lau's hand. The skin was dry, like paper. Tears burned in Quan Chan's eyes. When he gazed

back at Sun Lau, none of the elderly man's misguided hurts mattered. All Quan Chan saw was the man who'd offered him food when he was starving, a spiritual path when his soul was empty, Jin's embrace and bed when he'd been cold and lonely, and a safe home off the unforgiving, angry streets. A surge of sadness washed over his heart. Closing his eyes, he turned and pressed his lips into Sun Lau's palm, holding it there for long, achingly sweet moments.

"My ... precious ... child."

Quan Chan opened his eyes and looked at Sun Lau. The elderly man was staring back at him, eyes watery, breath rasping, lips parted with the effort. Sun Lau's face remained that way, his features seeming stiffened into place, skin waxy. He'd declined rapidly even in the few hours since Quan Chan's return to Shanghai.

Quan Chan fought back his tears, but his traitorous eyes wouldn't obey. Hot droplets slipped out and fell onto the silk-covered comforter. "Rest now, *sifu*," he whispered.

Sun Lau's even gaze remained on Quan Chan's face.

Quan Chan held his hand and watched him for what felt like a long time. He didn't even know what time it was. Not that it mattered. Watching Sun Lau, he could almost feel the soft strokes of the sponge on his cheeks and forehead as Sun Lau had applied the white paint to his face all those years ago, the base of the ornate, colourful mask he'd artfully created on Quan Chan's face.

"The white is only a background in your case, Xiao Chan," Sun Lau had said as he made up Quan Chan's face. "White implies craft, and you are not a crafty child." His dark eyes

always made Quan Chan feel safe and held even when his gaze was piercing and made others feel afraid. "For you, my blooming lotus, we use plenty of red." He'd smoothed the brush over Quan Chan's lips and then in a triangular pattern over each cheekbone. The bristles had tickled so pleasantly over Quan Chan's skin, he'd felt completely happy.

"Red symbolises utter devotion and loyalty. That's you, Xiao Chan. As loyal and true as the seasons." Sun Lau's voice had held so much tenderness, Quan Chan had sat perfectly still, wanting the older man to see how well he could behave, how grateful he was for the attention. "Now, the purple." The brush had tickled Quan Chan's forehead and eyelids, but Sun Lau was so gentle, so precise, Quan Chan had never worried that the makeup would go into his eyes. "Purple embodies fortitude and resourcefulness. You burn with these qualities, my beautiful child."

Quan Chan had bowed his head. "Thank you, *sifu*." In that moment, he thought he'd burst with happiness. Then he'd remembered to sit up straight.

"And finally, black." Sun Lau darkened and thickened Quan Chan's already thick eyebrows, streaking them upward in slants over his temples to points that ended nearly at his hairline. He continued with curves that followed the contours of his eyes, making them appear as large as plums and wild. "Black manifests faithfulness and integrity," Sun Lau had said, putting the finishing touches on Quan Chan's face. The older man finally set down his brush, then picked up one of his opera robes, holding it out.

Excited, Quan Chan had slipped off the stool and pushed his arms into the huge armholes, letting Sun Lau slide the robe onto his shoulders and close it for him. After that, the headdress, as wildly colourful and flamboyant as the robe, arching up toward the ceiling with strange swirls of fabric, and dangling tassels, as if Quan Chan were an emperor. "Now look at yourself, Xiao Chan." He'd stood aside, giving Quan Chan a full view in the dressing mirror.

Quan Chan had stared at himself. The makeup and gloriously ornate robe made him appear powerful, large, magical, as if he were a god streaming up from the centre of the earth. Sun Lau had done this for him. Sun Lau had inspired those feelings within him. His godfather had shown him the inner power he possessed as well as the way to draw from his inner strength...

"Xiao Chan," Sun Lau had said, watching his reflection with him. "Xiao Chan." His hand had rested on Quan Chan's shoulder.

Quan Chan had stared at his own reflection, wondering at the powerful beauty of the mask. He would have felt unworthy of such beauty, except that Sun Lau had done this for him. If Sun Lau felt him worthy, he could do anything, achieve anything ... even Buddhahood.

"Xiao Chan," Sun Lau said again. His large hand tightened on Quan Chan's shoulder. "Xiao Chan."

Suddenly, the mask was gone. Sun Lau behind him in the reflection of the mirror was gone but the pressure on his shoulder remained. Quan Chan's body ached. Something firm pressed to his cheek. He blinked several times.

"Xiao Chan." The voice was different. Not Sun Lau's voice. The pressure on his shoulder shifted. Whoever it was shook him gently. "Xiao Chan."

Jin. And his voice was a heavy whisper.

Quan Chan sat up quickly with the flood of consciousness. Everything grew clear in the space of one second. He'd fallen asleep while holding Sun Lau's hand and remembering the face-painting. The memories had continued into his dreams.

Slowly, without looking at Sun Lau, he turned to Jin.

Jin's eyes were red and tears shone on his cheeks.

Quan Chan's heart lurched. Only then did he become aware that he still held Sun Lau's hand. "No," he whispered.

Jin nodded and stepped closer.

That made Quan Chan angry. How dare Jin tell him his father, his *ba*, was gone! "No!"

Jin stood still and gazed down at him.

Whipping around, Quan Chan froze. Sun Lau's eyes were closed. He looked peaceful, though his mouth was still open. Sun Lau's last expression captured in time.

"*Sifu*." Quan Chan squeezed the elderly man's hand. No movement. He stared at Sun Lau's closed eyelids, at his motionless lips. No breath passed through them. "*Sifu*!" Quan Chan's throat and chest constricted. He gasped for breath. A gentle hand covered his shoulder and Jin's largeness filled the space close to him. "*Ba*! No!" He hadn't ever dared to call Sun Lau 'father' until this moment. Quan Chan's gasps intensified, wracking his body. His vision blurred with a torrent of tears. "No! No!" He was shouting now, but it was the only way he could get any breath into his lungs. "No!" He gripped Sun

Lau's hand. Once he released it, that was the end. His sobs escalated into wails while Jin stood quietly behind him, a hand still on his shoulder.

He slumped over, his face pressed into the pillow next to Sun Lau. Wild, guttural animal noises echoed around him, emanating from deep within him, a space so large, all the oceans in the world didn't have as many tears. Hunched over, all he had the strength to do was to wail.

In the back of his consciousness, he felt Jin's hand slip away and return again, this time resting in the centre of his back, between his shoulder blades. Jin's energy had softened, warmed, pressing closer to him. After several more minutes of Quan Chan's sobbing and wailing, that same hand rubbed gentle circles over his back. The touch alone made him rise up and turn. But the person standing there behind him wasn't Jin.

What? Still sobbing, Quan Chan blinked the tears from his eyes. The face staring back at him, radiating sympathy was...

"Hiru-san?"

Hiru's brow was furrowed. His eyes were misted. One hand reached up and smoothed over Quan Chan's brow. "It's me," he said softly. "I'm so sorry."

Quan Chan stared at him. Was he seeing things? It was quite possible, having happened to Kiku, when he'd sent Yuzo away to safety, so that Taro Suzuki couldn't find him. Kiku had missed Yuzo so terribly he'd hallucinated. Maybe it was happening to him now. Reaching out, he put a hand on Hiru's chest, over his sweater. Solid warmth met his palm.

Hiru covered his hand. His dark eyes shone on Quan Chan. "I'm really here, Quan-san," he said softly. "I promise."

The words released new tears. Quan Chan felt the hot moisture on his cheeks. He started shivering. The room felt icy. Icy from Sun Lau's absence. Not even Sun Lau's spirit seemed to be in the room, no lingering warmth of his presence. Quan Chan must have been asleep for hours after Sun Lau passed. "My father is gone," he heard himself say.

Hiru nodded. "I know. I'm sorry."

"Gone." Somehow the word sounded eerie. Final. Because it was final.

The reality slammed in, like a physical force that pushed him from behind, towards Hiru.

Suddenly, Hiru's strong arms were around him. Hiru's scent, clean, mixed with the city air from outside, surrounded him and the large man's broad hardness supported Quan Chan's sagging weight. "My father's gone, Hiru-san. Gone," he sobbed, clutching Hiru's sweater, as if holding on to him could hold back time, make it so that Hiru would never grow old and die too. "My father is gone." All he could do was cling to Hiru and sob like a lost child.

One of Hiru's hands cradled the back of his head while the other splayed protectively on his back. Hiru had come all the way to see him, to hold him like this, the one thing he'd needed so badly. "I'll be your father when you need me to be, Quan-san," he heard close to his ear.

The words caressed Quan Chan like silken waves, gentle and sweet. He lifted his head from Hiru's shoulder and

pressed his wet cheek to Hiru's. "Thank you," he whispered through his sobs.

Hiru smiled at him then pulled him close again, seeming to know without being told that Quan Chan needed to cry more. Which he did, until he felt empty of tears, until his soul felt calm enough and quiet enough to turn again to Sun Lau and watch his still face. Once again, he reached for Sun Lau's hand. Sun Lau's voice was inside him, speaking to him, making him remember something Sun Lau had quoted often to him from the scriptures of Lao Tzu. *Life and death, though stemming from each other, seem to conflict as stages of change.* If that was true, then somehow, Sun Lau was still here, that it was only his body that passed. Yet the grief remained, the grief that he'd never hear Sun Lau say his name again or peer into the older man's eyes and see the encouragement burning within them.

Someone moved close by. Quan Chan looked up. Quickly he turned, relieved when he saw Hiru standing close by, like a guardian angel.

Yet Jin had also returned, his eyes sorrowful, forehead lined. "Xiao Chan," he said softly, "I must prepare him for his wake."

Slight panic rose in his chest. He held Sun Lau's hand a bit tighter. Once he let go, that was it. Finally, he nodded. "Please, put him in his blue silk. He always loved that one the best."

Jin nodded. "I promise I will."

Quan Chan thought of all the beautiful clothes in Sun Lau's wardrobe, all the priceless items he'd risked his life to save

from the Red Guards. He grasped Jin's arms. "Don't let anyone burn Sun Lau's clothing. I beg you. I don't care what the tradition is. No one should touch anything. Please!" He watched Jin's face, desperate to know that Jin would promise. Emotions passed through Jin's eyes and Quan Chan could feel Jin remembering the sweetness they had shared earlier, before Quan Chan had come in here to sit with Sun Lau.

"For you, I will promise, Xiao Chan. No one will touch Sun Lau's things."

Quan Chan hugged him. "Thank you, Jin."

Jin returned the embrace for a moment, giving Quan Chan the sense he felt inhibited with Hiru standing there. No matter. Now that Hiru was actually here with him, the thought of being without him nearby, even for a moment, was unbearable. He pulled back gently, seeing the pain in Jin's eyes. Poor Jin would have to wash and dress Sun Lau. Jin had always been considered the first son, so preparing Sun Lau for his wake was Jin's responsibility. Quan Chan didn't mind honouring that tradition. He couldn't have borne performing such a task.

"Why don't you go rest?" Jin said. "Have something to eat, if you can."

Quan Chan nodded. "I will." All he really wanted to do was to lie in Hiru's arms and feel surrounded and comforted by him. He slipped his hand into Hiru's and led him through the door.

In the sitting room, Quan Chan saw all the people who'd collected while he'd been inside. His mother was the first to

approach him. Her eyes were red and her face tearstained. "Xiao Chan, I'm so sorry," she said and embraced him.

"Thank you, Ma Ma." When she released him, he saw her gaze go to Hiru behind him. His cheeks heated. "Ma Ma, this is Hiru. Hiru, please meet my mother."

Hiru bowed to her and she returned the gesture.

"I wanted to tell you about him when you picked me and Kiku up at the airport," Quan Chan said. "But I thought I'd never see him again and it was painful."

She nodded. "I understand." Then with a smile to Hiru, she added, "I'm pleased to meet you. A friend of my son's is most welcome."

Quan Chan translated for Hiru and saw Hiru's cheeks redden as he bowed his thanks.

Meilan then introduced Hiru to the professor who also embraced Quan Chan and expressed his sympathy.

Then Kiku.

Kiku held him tightly for several long moments before pulling back and looking down into his face. He said nothing but kissed Quan Chan on the forehead, just as Yuzo came forward.

"Hi, Chan Chan."

Quan Chan started. "Yuzo-chan! You're here too! How wonderful. I'm so glad." He stepped forward and hugged Yuzo. It really was an incredible relief to have his friends from Tokyo here with him.

Yuzo smiled at him when they pulled apart. "It was Hiru's idea. Kiku-chama said that since it was Hiru's idea and not just my impulsiveness, it would be okay for me to come too."

Quan Chan found himself smiling through his tears. No matter how sad he ever felt, it was impossible not to smile around Yuzo and be drawn into the light that practically shimmered from his being. He touched Yuzo's cheek briefly then reclaimed Hiru's hand. "I like that quality in you, Yuzo-chan," he said. God, he felt so strong, so able to face his loss now, with Hiru at his side!

Kiku squeezed his shoulder. "Go rest, Chan Chan. We'll all take care of everything."

"Thank you." Exhaustion was overcoming him. Plus, the others, Chow Chow and Beautiful Ping, who'd also been with Sun Lau all these years, would need their time to wail and grieve. Quan Chan hadn't even seen them yet but didn't have the energy to face anyone else right now, except for Hiru. There was just one thing he had to make sure of. "Kiku," he said, turning to his friend, "will you please make sure that no one burns any of Sun Lau's things? I want to keep them. Jin promised he wouldn't let anything happen to them, but he'll be busy. Please.

Kiku squeezed his shoulder one last time. "I promise. No one will touch anything of Sun Lau's."

When Kiku made a promise like that, Quan Chan knew he could rely on it to be kept. With one last look at everyone, he led Hiru out into the hallway.

"*Sifu*."

Wu Li came rushing up to him and stopped, flashing a quick look up at Hiru. Surprise passed over his face but he bowed. "*Sifu*, I wanted to express my deepest sympathy."

The words touched Quan Chan. In all of this, he'd completely forgotten about Wu Li, but Wu Li's sympathy was sincere and Quan Chan sensed the younger man's gratitude over the conversation they'd had the night before. He bowed in return. "Thank you, Wu Li. You're very kind." He tensed slightly, and would have felt more awkward about Hiru's presence, had he not already felt as if a gaping chasm had been blasted into his soul. "Wu Li, this is Hiru. I'm sorry I ... didn't tell you about him last night. There just wasn't a chance. Hiru is another person I didn't want to hurt. Please forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive, *sifu*." Wu Li bowed courteously to Hiru then looked at Quan Chan again. "I left that special tea for you in your room."

"Thank you, Wu Li. But what about you? I don't mean to displace you."

"Don't worry. I've already claimed the Lotus Room to stay in."

Quan Chan stared a moment at Wu Li. Another reason Jin was taken with the young man. He was beautifully kind in the face of everything he'd suffered. "Take the Blossoming Plum Flower room instead, Wu Li. It's much larger and the most beautiful of the practice rooms." In Shanghai, where housing was at a premium, it was unheard of for one young man to have such a large room all to himself, not without serious government connections.

Wu Li's eyes widened. "Really, *sifu*? Are you sure?"

"Yes. It's the least I can do for you. It will be your room for always. No one else's and you can change it however you'd like. Make it yours."

Wu Li bowed again. "Thank you so much, *sifu*. Thank you."

"You're welcome." Quan Chan touched his cheek briefly before excusing him. Hopefully, this gesture would soften the blows Wu Li had been taking these past few days.

When he and Hiru began walking again, Quan Chan translated the exchange he'd had with Wu Li.

"So he is the Golden Dragon?" Hiru asked.

Quan Chan stopped and put a hand on Hiru's arm. "Yes. But I swear, on my honour, Hiru-san, nothing happened between us. I didn't touch him. I wouldn't. It would have hurt everyone."

Relief spread across Hiru's boyish face. "I came prepared to share you with Wu Li if I had to, Quan-san."

Quan Chan looked up at him. Just like he had over the weekend, he wondered whether Hiru was real or an angel sent to watch over him. "I'm so glad you're here," he said softly. "I should never have told you not to come. I was so wrong. Please forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive, Quan-san. Your reasons were understandable. But I knew from the moment I left you at the airport and watched you walk away, that we weren't supposed to be apart. Ever."

Quan Chan's insides jumped. He'd felt the exact same thing at the exact moment. He'd worked to ignore the feeling, however, because he'd been so busy chastising himself over abandoning Sun Lau. His hand still rested on Hiru's arm and

he squeezed gently. "I knew it too." Hiru smiled at him and they stood, gazing at each other, both seeming at loss.

Then Quan Chan thought of something. "Perhaps it's time for you to call me Chan Chan. We're close enough now for that, aren't we?"

Hiru's brow furrowed. "Yes, we are, but is that Chan Chan? Or Chan-chan? Or maybe Chan Chan-chan."

Quan Chan laughed softly. "I suppose it doesn't matter. Seeing as you came all the way from Tokyo on a moment's notice to be with me, you can call me anything you want." He curled his fingers around Hiru's and led him again towards his quarters.

Hiru was silent until they reached the door, which Quan Chan held open for him. "I like calling you Quan-san," he said. "There's something sweet about it."

That made Quan Chan's heart flip over. No one else in the world called him Quan-san except for Hiru. "I agree completely." His cheeks tingled and they both hesitated before he gestured Hiru inside, through the sitting room and into the bedroom. "This is where we'll be staying," he told Hiru.

"It's beautiful," Hiru said, looking around at the bright silk coverings and ornately carved, heavy bed, dressers and tables.

"Yes, it is."

Someone had already brought in Hiru's bag and briefcase. A wave of guilt washed over Quan Chan at the sight of those things, followed by another wave of sadness. Hiru had said

they should never be apart, but Hiru would have to go back to work, wouldn't he?

Hiru's warm strength filled the space behind him and Hiru's arms pulled Quan Chan back against him, wrapping around him and gently squeezing. Soft lips pressed to his cheekbone.

Quan Chan closed his eyes and surrendered to the affection. His grief washed over him anew and tears came to his eyes. He turned in Hiru's arms and rested against the larger man's chest.

Hiru's squeezed him close, one hand cradling his head, the other caressing his back in those comforting circles.

Quan Chan's hands fisted Hiru's sweater. The reality of his loss seemed to come over him in waves. One moment he felt completely able to deal with life, the next, he was crippled with grief, able only to fall against Hiru's broad strength.

Hiru just held him, alternately pressing a soft kiss onto his head and rubbing his back. Finally, Hiru pulled gently away and led him over to the bed. He pulled back the covers, toed off his shoes and slid into the bed, tugging Quan Chan down onto the mattress. Quan Chan pulled off his slip-ons and got into bed, curling right up against Hiru. The strong warmth that surrounded him was like Heaven itself, yet he felt no arousal as he'd done when they were first together. Turning onto his back, he looked at Hiru. "Hiru, I don't know when I'll be able to make love again. I feel completely ... dead, like I don't have a body, just an aching heart."

Hiru stroked his cheek. His eyes radiated empathy. "I completely understand. Don't worry about that, either, Quan-

san. Such a response is normal. It happened to me too. Your drive will come back. When you're ready."

"I don't want to lose you. I don't want you to have to go to someone else." The fear surged intensely. Perhaps he needn't even think about such things now, but couldn't help it. Hiru was special. So good and kind. He heaved a sighed as more tears slipped down his cheeks, brushed away by Hiru's fingertips. He couldn't survive losing another lover, for any reason. Even though he and Hiru had barely begun, Quan Chan couldn't close his heart, couldn't protect himself by keeping an emotional wall up the way so many people did. So if he lost Hiru because he couldn't provide Hiru an outlet for his passions, he, himself, would just curl up into a ball and die. At least that's what it felt like.

Hiru storked his cheek some more, his touch warm and reassuring. Nothing but sweetness and devotion came through in that touch. "Don't worry about anything else. I adore you. I'm here for you."

Relief washed through him. He sagged against Hiru, into Hiru's embrace.

A pleasant shiver travelled through Wu Li's body, followed by a pang of envy. The sensation gripped his chest like icy fingers, reminding him of his loneliness. He crouched in the corner, peeping through the screen-like wall, mesmerised. Quan Chan and his boyfriend weren't doing anything, really, just lying in bed fully clothed, cuddled together. But the way Hiru was holding him, crooning to him and dropping soft kisses on his brow and cheeks ... Wu Li had never seen

anything so beautiful, not even the mountains in the distance over the fields he used to work in as a kid.

Guilt clawed him suddenly, like and icy voice scolding him, telling him what an evil boy he was to be spying like this. He couldn't help himself. After greeting Quan Chan in the corridor, he'd started back towards Sun Lau's quarters to see how he could be of service, but the *qi* between Quan Chan and his ... lover had pulled him into their wake. He'd waited outside the door until it had grown quiet then snuck in. The tea he'd left for them was untouched, and they were snuggled together on the bed in the next room.

Wu Li closed his eyes against another assault of envy. Jin had been like that with him, comforting him, holding him so close that he felt safe from everything, like nothing bad could happen to him anymore. The world itself had seemed a better place when Jin held him. That was over. But at least now he could be in the presence of people who had that. It gave him the hope that he'd have it again someday.

Hopefully. Maybe if he worked hard enough and behaved, and wasn't selfish, he'd earn enough good karma to have a love like that again.

Which meant he'd have to start right now. There was a house full of people, many of them grieving, who needed food, tea, and a clean room to stay in. He needed to be of service. Jin would probably need his assistance as well with various things. Going back would also give him a chance to get another look at Yuzo. That guy looked like a pop star, with his shaggy hair, fashionable clothes and willowy posture.

He was beautiful. And it was also nice to be around someone his own size for a change. Everyone else was so ... big.

Carefully, he unfolded himself from his crouching position and crept out of the room. His intention was to stay away from now on, not to spy on his *sifu* and his *sifu's* lover. However, he was weak, like Jin was weak with certain things and probably would come back to spy again, especially if there was any chance of seeing the two men naked together.

He made his way back to Sun Lau's quarters and offered to bring food for the people assembled there. Yuzo offered to help him. Turned out Yuzo was one of the cooks at the White Tiger in Tokyo and was glad to free up Chow Chow and the others to spend time at Sun Lau's wake.

Wu Li led Yuzo out to his garden to gather vegetables, proudly showing off his garden and explaining in his broken Japanese the tricks he'd figured out using mirrors to reflect sunlight and give his plants a longer growing season now that the weather was getting colder. Yuzo praised the garden with sincere admiration. The beautiful man was funny and lively and made this dreary, heartbreaking time more bearable. They spent a lot of time in the kitchen together over the next few days, cooking and laughing and Wu Li almost cried when Yuzo had to leave a week later to go back to Tokyo after the funeral, burial and initial period of prayers had ended.

Quan Chan looked terribly sad to see his friend Kikuchiya leave. But Kikuchiya promised to come back as soon as he could and to bring some of their other friends with him to visit. And he'd kept his promise. Over the next few weeks he came back, bringing a pair of twins with him. They were crazy

about Quan Chan and barely a moment passed they weren't hugging or kissing him. When they left, their faces tear-stained, others came—a big muscular guy with long hair and his lover, a slimmer handsome guy named Koji who also seemed to be very close friends with Hiru. When they left, they were all steeped in sadness, especially since they knew Quan Chan wasn't going back to Tokyo, even after the traditional hundred days of mourning were over. He was staying here because he'd promised Sun Lau to be his successor.

No surprise that Quan Chan was so popular and that so many people loved him. Just that first meeting they'd had when Quan Chan had told him about Sun Lau's and Jin's lives had shown him that Quan Chan was someone you could deeply trust.

The fact that he'd not taken Wu Li as Sun Lau had wanted him to had made Wu Li like and respect Quan Chan. Which made him feel all the guiltier for spying so much on him.

The White Tiger was still closed to regular business for at least another week, and so the place was quiet usually by nine o'clock every night. Wu Li waited until after everyone had gone back to their rooms.

Quan Chan and Hiru usually had a small lamp on next to the bed, just enough light to allow Wu Li to see them. From his vantage point, he had a clear view of the large bed. They usually took turns showering then they'd sit on the bed, talking quietly together, always dressed. From what Wu Li could hear, their conversations were mostly around Quan Chan's concern for Hiru's job, since he was staying here in

Shanghai so long, and Hiru's reassurances that everything would work out, that he could do his work from his computer and that his company had a branch in Shanghai. Then they'd gaze at each other a while before getting under the covers and going to sleep, snuggled together.

This went on for several weeks until Wu Li began to wonder what their relationship really was. Why weren't they having sex? Not that it mattered. Just being around them comforted him. He loved the tender way Hiru touched Quan Chan, caressing his cheeks, staring into his eyes, so romantic. A real love story.

Tonight, Quan Chan emerged from the steamy bathroom, wrapped in his silk robe. Hiru sat on the bed, typing into his laptop, but when Quan Chan approached the bed, Hiru set the computer aside.

"Am I disturbing you?" Quan Chan asked.

Hiru smiled. "Never." He patted the bed next to him and Quan Chan sat down, like an eager child.

Wu Li's heart squeezed. Even though he didn't understand everything they said because his Japanese was so limited, the interactions between the two men always got him, like watching the most wonderful film unfold, with characters he couldn't get enough of. Only these people were real. His friends.

"As usual, I'm worried, Hiru-san. I've been so selfish with you. You must miss your parents. Koji."

Hiru's brow furrowed. "You're not trying to get me to go back, are you? Don't you want me here?"

Quan Chan's shoulders sagged. "Of course. It's just..." He looked down. "The only person who's changed their whole life for my sake was my mother. You expect a mother to do that for her child. This is different. Do you know what I mean?"

Hiru gazed at him for several moments then picked up Quan Chan's hand. "Yes, I understand now. I hadn't seen it before. You feel guilty to me."

Quan Chan nodded. "Yes. My grief has dominated your life for weeks now. It's not fair to you. Especially since we haven't even made love."

Hiru brought Quan Chan's hand to his lips. Wu Li held his breath for every moment that the soft kiss lasted. When Hiru lowered his hand, Wu Li pulled in air. No film he'd seen had ever been this romantic. "I'm not going anywhere, Quan-san," Hiru whispered. "I'm staying here as long as you're here."

Quan Chan looked up at him. "Hiru-san, I promised Sun Lau I would take over here. That means ... I won't be going back to Tokyo. You understand that, don't you?"

Hiru smiled gently. "What part of 'I'm staying here as long as you're here' isn't clear?"

Quan Chan stared at him, eyes wide. "What are you saying, that you'd ... move here? Just like this?"

Hiru nodded. "I belong with you and that's that."

Quan Chan's eyes shone with tears. "But ... your work. Your parents."

"Shh." Hiru smiled gently and embraced Quan Chan, rocking him in his arms. "That will all be taken care of. It's certainly not for you to worry about at this time."

"Hiru-san, I can't believe it."

Hiru kissed Quan Chan's forehead. "Believe it." He brushed away Quan Chan's tears with gentle fingertips.

Wu Li's heart squeezed. Hiru was so tender, yet so ... manly.

"With all due respect, Quan-san," Hiru went on, "can we put this issue to rest now? I'm going to start worrying that you want to get rid of me."

"Oh, I don't want that." Quan Chan kissed Hiru's cheek. "I won't mention it again. I promise."

"Okay." With a smile, Hiru dropped a petal-soft kiss onto Quan Chan's lips.

Wu Li suppressed a deep sigh. Any sound he made would go right through the carved wood.

"I'm going to shower now." Hiru released Quan Chan and put away his laptop. Quan Chan sat on the bed, watching Hiru disappear into the bathroom. The door closed and the sound of the shower spray tinkled in the background.

Wu Li's stomach danced. Now was the part where Quan Chan took off his robe to put on his nightclothes. He and Hiru both always wore t-shirts and baggy pants. Quan Chan stood up and slipped off his robe. He had such a beautiful physique, like a martial artist, rounded and sculpted looking but not big or too thin. The dark golden hue of his flawless skin was also beautiful, and the white tiger leaping in ink across his front only made him look sexier.

However, tonight, instead of putting on his t-shirt and baggy pants, Quan Chan pulled back the covers and sat back against the pillows, waiting.

Wu Li held his breath again, his gaze captured by the sight of Quan Chan's naked body lounging back against the pillows. Wu Li's heartbeat increased with he heard the shower spray end and a few minutes later, saw Hiru emerge, his hair damp, pale skin red from hot water, a white towel wrapped around his hips.

Hiru stopped, staring at Quan Chan. He was obviously surprised too.

Quan Chan sat up. "I ... I'm ready again, Hiru-san," he said softly. "I hope that's all right."

Hiru's breathing had become a bit heavier. His dark eyes looked almost glazed. "Yes, of course it's all right," he said, his voice suddenly husky. "If you're sure."

Quan Chan nodded. "Yes, I'm positive. I want you."

Wu Li practically groaned. His own dragon was already tight. Painful. He hadn't used it since that last time with Jin. He'd played with himself a couple of times, but it just wasn't the same. His hand couldn't hold him afterward in a warm, safe embrace.

Hiru and Quan Chan were staring at each other as Hiru came over to the bed. Quan Chan slid forward and leaned over the edge of the bed. As soon as Hiru was close enough, Quan Chan reached out, pulled off Hiru's towel and tossed it to the floor.

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Chapter Fifteen

Wu Li's mouth went dry. He'd caught glimpses of Hiru naked in the past few weeks but not like this, up close, his whole body, including his thick, hard dragon. The veined member jutted from his broad, hard physique. He was built like a warrior-god, or at least how Wu Li imagined a warrior-god would be built.

Hiru climbed onto the bed, and lowered himself onto Quan Chan whose arms circled Hiru's torso in an eager embrace. Hiru caressed Quan Chan's hair, longer now, because it was not to be cut during the long mourning period. Quan Chan's thighs gripped the other man's hips, knees bent so that the soles of his feet rested on Hiru's ass cheeks. Their bodies fit together like interlocking pieces, as if they'd been made for each other.

"Quan-san," Hiru whispered and took the other man's lips, deep and hot. The room filled with the sound of the warm, wet suction of their lips and tongues.

Wu Li clamped a hand over his own mouth to stifle a moan. He stared, captivated by the way Hiru pulled from their kiss to drop a trail of tiny nibbles along Quan Chan's jaw and more soft kisses over his cheeks, as if he were worshipping Quan Chan. Hiru elevated a kiss to something holy the way he trailed those delicate kisses over the muscles of Quan Chan's throat, down to his collarbone.

Quan Chan's eyes were closed, dark lashes resting on his cheeks. A wide, contented smile stretched his lips. Quan Chan

barely smiled at all in his grief, but he was smiling now. The skin of his face glowed and peaceful joy radiated from him, the look of a man who was in the place he most wanted to be with the person he most wanted to be with.

Hiru had reached the centre of Quan Chan's chest. The moist pink of his tongue darted out and circled one dark nipple. Quan Chan's breath hitched and he arched his back. Hiru's large hands slid underneath, cradling his torso as he pressed more firmly down.

Wu Li suppressed another groan. His own body tingled madly. What he wouldn't have given in that moment to be underneath Jin, getting the same treatment. Jin was an incredible lover, and had so often done the same things to him that Hiru was doing to Quan Chan now.

His staring eyes followed the path of Hiru's mouth over to Quan Chan's other nipple, which he teased back and forth, licking and sucking until Quan Chan groaned loudly.

"Please, Hiru-san," he panted. "You're making me crazy."

Hiru lifted his face and smiled at his lover. "Whatever you wish, Quan-san."

Ai yī! Wu Li shifted his weight to relieve the pressure of his erection. Just looking at Hiru in everyday life, he wouldn't have guessed this mild-mannered guy could be such a commanding lover, but he was. Hiru dragged his tongue down the centre of Quan Chan's abdomen, circled his belly button several times then crouched lower, over Quan Chan's hard dragon. Hiru's large hands rested on Quan Chan's hips, holding him in place so he could close his lips over the head of the other man's cock.

Quan Chan cried out softly and lifted his hips as high as Hiru's large hands would let him.

Wu Li bit down on his bottom lip. Any second now he'd start groaning. He knew he should turn away before he made a noise that would alert them to his presence, but he couldn't. Hiru's mouth slid down the shaft of Quan Chan's stalk, taking him in to the base. Up and down he slid, pulling one pleasure cry after the next from Quan Chan. Quan Chan's fingers agitated in Hiru's hair, clutching and rubbing while his head tilted back. His breath came in quick pants, then quieted. The energy in the room shifted, softened.

Wu Li's breath caught. Quan Chan was going into bliss. Even from his position, Wu Li could see Quan Chan's eyeballs darting back and forth under the lids. If Hiru noticed the shift, Wu Li couldn't tell because his dark head continued to bob smoothly up and down his lover's dragon. When Hiru finally let it slip from his mouth, he went down lower and smoothed his tongue over Quan Chan's jade pearls, back and forth, a loving massage that seemed to deepen Quan Chan's ecstatic state.

Finally Hiru looked up. Wu Li froze. Did Hiru realise his lover's state? Hiru watched Quan Chan for several moments but then Quan Chan's eyes opened. Quan Chan heaved a deep breath and smiled up at Hiru who then slid back up into their original position. Quan Chan's hands slid down Hiru's broad back to Hiru's hips. No words were spoken but Wu Li sensed a kind of silent, private language between them. Hiru returned the smile. Yes, he'd understood.

Quan Chan reached into the bedside table and pulled out a bottle of oil, which he drizzled into his palm. He set the bottle aside and smoothed his hand over Hiru's thick dragon. The larger man groaned as the slippery oil covered his shaft. When Quan Chan had finished, he lay back again, reached down and smoothed the remaining oil over his own hole. His dark gaze was riveted on Hiru's flushed face. Then Quan Chan was ready. His legs reclaimed their clutch on Hiru's hips, pulling the other man forward.

Wu Li rose up on his knees and pressed closer to the screen, his own gaze riveted at the point of contact of Hiru's dragon with Quan Chan's entrance. The huge plump head pushed in. Quan Chan cried out softly and pulled Hiru closer using the bottoms of his feet on Hiru's ass.

Hiru sank in completely. Wu Li watched the thick shaft penetrate the small opening and disappear until their bodies met.

"Yes," Quan Chan whispered just before Hiru reclaimed his mouth. The erotic suction of their mouths together moved in rhythm with the gentle slap of their bodies as Hiru pulled back and sank in again, over and over.

Wu Li stared. He forgot his own physical existence. Barely needing breath, he watched the lovers, their bodies like two tigers wrestling, playfully locked together in a field of sun-ripened grass. No other words could describe such a vision.

Was this what he and Jin had looked like together?

Hiru's hips moved faster and harder. The slap of their bodies grew louder, as did the moist sounds of their kisses. In moments, Quan Chan moaned and the white cream of his

climax spurted between them, coating his chest and stomach. His hands clutched Hiru's back. "Don't stop, Hiru-san," he breathed. Obediently, Hiru sped up again, thrusting deep inside his lover. Suddenly Hiru groaned. His body froze into place, emptying its dragon's cloud into Quan Chan. Then he lay on top of Quan Chan, breathing heavily while Quan Chan caressed his back, gleaming from sweat.

Wu Li lowered back down, still staring at them. A ghostly whisper of sadness penetrated the ecstatic fog that had enveloped Wu Li. The pure act of watching was ebbing away, while the longing and loneliness he'd been feeling surged over him, inspired by the lovers' bliss so close. He could smell the musk of their bodies, feel their moans of pleasure vibrate through him, through his body and soul.

So many times over the last few weeks he'd wanted to run to Jin and beg his forgiveness, crawl into his bed in the middle of the night and curl up against him. Each time, the memory of their fight stopped him. Quan Chan urged him regularly to talk to Jin, to speak to him from his heart, but Wu Li just couldn't do it. If Jin refused to forgive him or didn't want him back, he wouldn't be able to bear it. Their interactions these days were minimal, concerning only the work they did in running the place. Yet each time Jin came into his view, Wu Li's chest ached.

The sadness was an unbearable wave now, causing terrible pressure behind his eyes and in his chest. Once again, he clamped a hand over his mouth as tears pushed from his eyes. As much as he'd loved to watch Hiru and Quan Chan together, some part of him knew it was a punishment for the

way he'd treated Jin that day. From now on, he'd have to watch others' happiness rather than have his own.

A gust of sobs wracked him. He couldn't get up and run. They'd hear him. The best he could do was to sit back against the wall, bury his face in his arms and cry as softly as he could.

Quan Chan stiffened. His ears pricked up. Tiny muffled sounds carried through the doorway. Someone was crying. Sounded like it was in the sitting room. "Do you hear that?" he whispered to Hiru who still rested on top of him, his dragon still buried inside Quan Chan's jade gate.

Hiru lifted his head. "Yes. Someone's in trouble."

Quan Chan put a finger to his lips then pressured Hiru's arm so that he'd let him up. "I think I know who it is." He rose and retrieved his robe from the nearby chair. Only one person would be in the sitting room. Wu Li. The young man had a penchant for spying. No doubt, he'd been watching them make love.

Hiru had risen, too, and put on his robe. He followed Quan Chan through the doorway, into the sitting room. Quan Chan signalled to him to hang back while he went around to the far side of the sofa. As he'd thought, Wu Li was there, huddled in the shadows, his head on his arms, slim shoulders quaking.

Quan Chan knelt down. "Wu Li," he said softly.

Wu Li's head shot up, eyes wide. He scrambled back, stopped by the wall. "*Sifu!* Please, don't be angry! I'm so sorry. I ... I know I shouldn't be here. I can't help it. I feel so safe when I'm near you ... and Hiru." Tears stained his smooth cheeks and his eyes were red and puffy.

Quan Chan's heart squeezed. He wasn't about to scold Wu Li when he understood exactly what the young man was going through. Reaching out, he placed a hand on Wu Li's forearm. "I'm not angry, Wu Li. I understand." He'd once been in Wu Li's position, heartbroken at Jin's hands, feeling completely alone in the entire world. For Wu Li, however, it was worse. He'd not had the close relationship with Sun Lau that Quan Chan had.

"You mean, you're not going to punish me?" Wu Li asked between heaving snuffles.

"Of course not. I know why you're here." He reached out with both hands. "Come."

Without hesitation, Wu Li knelt forward and let Quan Chan pull him into an embrace. The young man's slim form trembled against his chest and in his arms.

Quan Chan stroked his long loose hair. "It's all right," he crooned, feeling Wu Li's hands clutch at the back of his robe.

"I feel so alone," Wu Li said between sobs.

"You're not alone." Quan Chan cradled the back of his head. Wu Li's grief brought back his own heartache. He'd been the same age as Wu Li when Jin pushed him away. "You have my friendship and protection as long as you want it. And Hiru's too." He looked up. Hiru had sat on the nearby sofa, watching them. Quan Chan translated for Hiru who nodded.

"Of course you have my friendship, Wu Li." Hiru said.

Quan Chan smiled up his lover. As always, Hiru's presence made him feel stronger, more able to deal with any situation. Like a superhero with the devoted sidekick who'd never leave his side. Quan Chan suppressed a chuckle. Some superhero

and sidekick. He turned his attention back to Wu Li. He told Wu Li what Hiru had said.

The younger man's sobs had abated somewhat and he raised his face from where it had been buried against Quan Chan's chest. He looked at Quan Chan and then Hiru. "Thank ... you."

Quan Chan smoothed Wu Li's hair back. "Listen, sweet one," he said softly, "if you want to be with Jin, you and he will need to communicate. This immature game you two are playing is unacceptable. It's unworthy of men who are White Tigers."

Wu Li's eyes widened and that stricken look came over his delicate face again. "I know, but that's impossible! I said terrible things to him. He'll hate me forever."

"We need to discuss this." Quan Chan took the other man's hand and gently tugged him up, bringing him to sit on the sofa between himself and Hiru. In the meantime, Hiru had poured a glass of water which he handed to Wu Li.

Wu Li thanked him and gulped half the glass down then held it, his face tilted towards the floor.

"What did you say that was so terrible, Wu Li?"

Wu Li stared at the carpet for several moments. "When he brought me to this room and told me this was the room I'd be sharing with you, I was so angry I told him I'd probably be happier with you anyway." Wu Li looked up. "He slapped my cheek and then I told him I hated him." A long sigh escaped him. He shook his head. "How can that ever be made right?"

Quan Chan put a hand on his shoulder. "They're just words," he said. "You spoke them from deep hurt. Jin

understands that. Believe me. I've known him almost my entire life. If anything, he's ashamed of having hit you."

A bit of light infused Wu Li's huge, incredible eyes. "Do you think so?"

"I know so."

The light drained suddenly. "He won't want me back. He gave me away so easily. I think that's why Sun Lau felt the way he did about him. Sun Lau felt he was weak." Wu Li sounded absolutely mournful.

"No." Surprised at the indignation he felt, Quan Chan squeezed Wu Li's shoulder, not hard but firmly enough to convey his feeling. "Don't underestimate Jin, no matter what's happened. He loves you. I see it in his eyes. He made a mistake, but he did it out of loyalty to his *sifu*." He released Wu Li's shoulder and smoothed back his hair. "He's a man of truth, Wu Li. You're always safe with a man like that, even when he's misguided." Even in the depths of his own hurt around Jin, Jin's devotion to what he saw as his path had always been evident to him. Jin deserved the utmost respect for that.

Wu Li's brow furrowed and Quan Chan saw the emotions pass across his face. The younger man was obviously processing what he'd said, deciding whether he could believe him or not. Understandable. Jin had really broken Wu Li's heart, betrayed his trust when he was most vulnerable.

For a moment, it seemed Wu Li had decided to believe him but then his expression grew flat and Quan Chan felt him pull back, like a turtle receding into its shell. "I don't think he loves me that much," he said finally. He glanced at Hiru and

then turned back around. "Not the way you and Hiru love each other."

A ripple of warmth passed through Quan Chan. He looked up at Hiru. As always, he couldn't help smiling as their gazes met. Quickly he translated his exchange with Wu Li.

Hiru frowned. "I believe Jin loves him," he said softly. "Very much so."

Quan Chan nodded. "He does, but..." he tilted his head toward Wu Li so as not to say his name out loud, "understandably, he's afraid of being hurt again." Reaching out, Quan Chan touched Wu Li's hand. "It's time to speak with Jin. Hiru and I will go with you, all right?"

Before Wu Li could answer, someone tapped on the door to the sitting room. "Xiao Chan!" It was Jin. Even from the one word, Quan Chan could hear that Jin had been hitting the plum wine from the storeroom again. He'd known Jin to get drunk quite often in the past, whenever something was bothering him he didn't know how to deal with. Better this way, actually. Jin would be more honest under the influence of plum wine.

Wu Li started to get up, probably to bolt, but Quan Chan kept a hand over his and squeezed it gently telling him to stay put with a look. "Jin?"

"Yes. I'm sorry to bother you, Xiao Chan. I ... need your help."

Wow, Jin was more desperate than Quan Chan had ever known him. This was the first time he'd ever heard those words from the man. "Of course, come in." He looked at Wu Li. "Don't worry," he said to the frightened man, "Hiru and I

will help you." He saw Hiru put a large hand on Wu Li's shoulder just as the carved door swung open.

Jin's broad physique filled the doorway. Like Wu Li, he wore an undershirt and baggy pants. His unshaven face and growing hair emphasised the lines in his forehead and the dark circles under his eyes. He was clearly a man who'd been through the pits of hell. In spite of his inebriation, however, he was steady.

When his gaze landed on Wu Li, he stilled. "Wu Li," he said softly. His eyes darted from Wu Li to Hiru to Quan Chan. Then his expression hardened with the assumption he was obviously making about the three of them together.

Quan Chan frowned at him. The man had come for help and he was going to act this way? No. "Jin, stop that. You misunderstand."

Jin put a hand on the doorframe as if knocked off balance. "What else should I think under the circumstances?"

Beside him, Wu Li was trembling. Quan Chan gestured to a chair opposite them. "Please, come and sit down."

Slowly, Jin obeyed, his gaze never leaving them as he moved into the room and lowered himself onto the ornate cushions.

Quan Chan waited for Jin to settle in then continued. "Jin, what must you think of me that you believe I'd go back on my word? Do you think I'm an opportunist, that I'd take advantage of your loss that way?"

Jin looked down, his wide shoulders hunched. "No. I apologise." He smoothed a hand over his hair, now a soft brush of growth from not shaving it off during mourning. "It's

just, well, I can't imagine anyone resisting Wu Li." When Jin looked up, his red-rimmed eyes were misted. "He's the most beautiful man in the world to me."

Wu Li's energy shifted. Some of his doubt about Jin receded.

Quan Chan felt a flutter of hope. If he was careful, Wu Li would reclaim his proper place in Jin's life before the night was over. "He is beautiful, Jin." Quan Chan gestured toward Hiru. "The way Hiru is beautiful to me. As I told you before, I didn't touch Wu Li because I would never want to hurt you, him or Hiru."

Jin's eyes misted over. "You were able to break your promise to Sun Lau. I wish I could have done such a thing." It was more of a whispered statement than a question.

"That's the thing, Jin. I didn't break it. Yes, I promised to take Wu Li to my bed. Which I did. But I never promised to stay in the bed with him. I also promised to teach him. I didn't specifically promise to teach him the White Tiger path. So, I'm doing what I can to teach him by example. To be true to his heart." The fire of inspiration gripped him. "Wu Li loves you. That's what's in his heart. He wants nothing more than to be with you. But he's terrified that you hate him, because of the things he said to you one night."

Jin's eyes remained wide. He stared at Quan Chan. Slowly, his gaze moved to Wu Li. "Wu Li, do you really believe I hate you?"

Wu Li shifted forward, leaning slightly toward Quan Chan, as if gathering strength from him. "Well, you've barely spoken to me since ... our fight."

A look of horror came into Jin's eyes and he canted his gaze downward. "It's not because I hate you," he said softly. "It's because I'm ashamed. Horribly ashamed." He looked up again, his eyes glistening. "I should never have hit you. I'll never forgive myself."

Quan Chan looked at Wu Li. "You see? What I told you was true."

Tears filled Wu Li's eyes. "Yes," he whispered.

"Jin," Quan Chan said, "is this what you came to me for?"

Jin nodded. "I couldn't stand it anymore ... being apart from him. I just wanted to make peace. To know that he wouldn't leave my life, even if we couldn't be together." He looked at Wu Li. "I could never hate you, Wu Li." Suddenly he slipped off the seat and onto his knees in front of Wu Li. "What I did to you was inexcusable. All of it. I beg your forgiveness."

Wu Li's bottom lip trembled. Tears filled his eyes. In spite of the bitter way he'd spoken of Jin in the past, there was no trace of that hardness in his features now. He slipped off the seat, onto his knees, facing Jin. "It's all right," he said softly.

Jin's eyes were glistening. Raw emotion made his broad torso tremble. "My baby," he whispered and reached for Wu Li.

Wu Li fell into the embrace and the room filled only with the sound of Jin's sobs. One of Jin's large hands laced into Wu Li's hair and Jin rocked Wu Li in his arms. "I love you," Jin whispered over and over again, his eyes closed, cheek resting against the side of the other man's head.

After several moments, Jin turned and pressed a kiss into Wu Li's cheek. That kiss led to a second, then a third, closer to Wu Li's lips each time until they locked mouths in a deep hot kiss. Jin's sobs and whispered declarations of love were silenced by the erotic suction of their lips chafing together.

Quan Chan stared at them a moment then looked at Hiru. The larger man's eyes were wide and met his with a *what the hell should I do now?* expression. Damn, even Hiru's befuddlement was adorable.

Suppressing a chuckle, Quan Chan gestured towards the bedroom door with a tilt of his head. Silently, he and Hiru got up, careful not to disturb the lovers. Jin had his hands up Wu Li's shirt now, rubbing his back in passionate circles while he covered Wu Li's neck with a rain of open-mouth licks.

Quan Chan tiptoed around one end of the sofa, Hiru the other, then closed the bedroom door behind them. Picking up Hiru's hand, Quan Chan led him to the bed and urged Hiru to sit beside him. Through the carved screen door, Jin and Wu Li's love sounds carried easily. So as not to be overheard by them, Quan Chan slid close to Hiru and leaned into him. "I think that went well, don't you?"

Hiru grinned and nodded. Then his expression grew serious and he reached up, cupping Quan Chan's cheek. An immediate flush of pleasant heat spread through his skin under Hiru's touch. "You were amazing, Quan-san," he said in a whisper.

"I wish I could take the credit," he whispered back, "but I only let life speak through me."

Hiru didn't answer while his thumb brushed back and forth across Quan Chan's cheekbone. "Life will be better here now."

Quan Chan reached up and covered Hiru's hand with his. "About that. We can go back now."

Hiru started. "What?"

Quan Chan's heart sped up. "We can go back to Tokyo now. You ... and me." Finally he could have what he'd wanted deep in his heart all along. Jin's separation from Wu Li had been the one thing holding him here. The moment they'd forgiven each other and embraced, Quan Chan had felt something snap inside him, an invisible bond that was keeping him here. "Jin and Wu Li together will be able to run this place very well," he said softly. "They won't need me to stay."

Hiru's wide-eyed look returned. "What are you saying? That you're giving up your position here?"

"Yes, Hiru-san. Even if I weren't torn up about Sun Lau, I wouldn't have wanted this. I never did. My godfather allowed his misguided feelings to cloud his vision. Jin is the man to run this place. He's devoted his entire life to it since he was a teenager. He will make sure it's always cared for." He glanced towards the door, towards the source of the moans and sighs still emanating through the wood. "And he has Wu Li. Sun Lau was right about Wu Li. He's powerful. And wise. He just needs the right nurturing." He took Hiru's hand and held it on his lap. "The best man to teach Wu Li the White Tiger path is the man who loves him."

Hiru's returning gaze showed he understood the deeper meaning in the statement.

Quan Chan squeezed his hand. "Hiru-san, just the fact that you were willing to stay here in Shanghai with me, to make such a complete change in your life to be with me, means everything. That would have made it bearable to stay here. But you and Koji are in Tokyo, as are my dearest friends in the world, aside from you. My mother will come to see me every month, the way she did before, and I'll come here to see her and to make sure everything's all right here." It all sounded perfect, for just one thing. He looked at Hiru, his heart racing suddenly. "Are you sure this is what you want, Hiru-san? I mean, me? I'm a strange kind of monk, really, with a strange life and strange friends. I don't fit out in the world. I never have."

Hiru picked up his hand and pressed a kiss to his wrist. "I know that, Quan-san. And I want nothing more," he said softly. "I want nothing more than to go back to Tokyo and stay in your room with you so I can go to sleep next to you every night and wake up to you every morning."

Quan Chan closed his eyes a moment. Each word from Hiru's lips sent waves of warmth through his whole body. When he opened them and gazed at Hiru, the last piece fell into place. "You won't be staying in my room with me, Hiru-san," he murmured.

Hiru's eyes flew open. He looked about to protest but then stopped, clearly deciding not to question the man he'd taken as his spiritual guide as well as his lover. "All right, Quan-san."

"Aren't you going to ask me why not?"

"It isn't for me to question." Hiru's answer was sincere though his disappointment was clear in his sweet eyes.

Quan Chan grinned at him. "Go ahead, ask me. Ask me why you're not going to stay in my room with me."

Hiru cleared his throat and looked down briefly. "Why? Why am I not going to stay in your room with you, Quan-san?"

"Because, it's not my room anymore," he said. "It's *our* room. You and I are going to stay in our room together. Does that sound okay to you?"

A grin spread across Hiru's boyish face. His eyes lit up. In the next second, Quan Chan found himself on his back, pressed into the mattress under Hiru's large, warm, delicious body.

"That' very okay, Quan-san," Hiru said. "Very, very okay."

Hiru's heart was pumping. Quan Chan had given him quite a scare. But that was all fine now. So incredibly fine words couldn't describe it. He gazed down into Quan Chan's eyes. The man was so beautiful he took Hiru's breath away. But as beautiful as he was, he was even more exquisite lying on his back with that heavy-lidded, take-me-now look he was wearing.

Oh, and while they were at it, Hiru had his own little surprise for Quan Chan, the man he loved. Adored. Wanted to be with for the rest of his life. "Do you know why it's so very, very okay, Quan-san?"

Quan Chan's lids grew heavier and his lips parted. Ready for kissing. "Why?"

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Hiru grinned. "For this reason. *Wo ai ni, mei nanren*. I love you, beautiful man."

A small breath escaped Quan Chan. His cheeks flushed immediately, but Hiru captured his open lips before he could say anything and kissed him into delicious surrender.

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About the Author

Sedonia Guillone is a multi-published, award-nominated author of both m/f and m/m erotic romance. The man in her life is her inspiration and provides all the hands-on research she needs. When not writing, she's cuddling, watching samurai flicks and thinking about the next naughty, delicious tale she wants to write.

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