

CONCUBINE

1.

Once again, Jia-Ling had taken the alley shortcut that went behind the Yee brothers' house. And again they had noticed her, and had begun a raucous game of keep-away. Shiao-Shiao could hear Jia-Ling begging and – oh no. Was she crying already?

Shiao-Shiao sighed in annoyance. Jia-Ling deserved it. Shiao-Shiao had told her cousin a thousand times not to use the alley. Yes, it was a bit shorter, and it did go by the Chen family's berry bushes, which now hung heavy with ripe, sweet blackberries. But the Yee brothers...

Shiao-Shiao thought about rescuing Jia-Ling again, as she had a thousand times before. The Yee brothers would never defy Shiao-Shiao directly – after all, they were only eleven, and Shiao-Shiao had just turned fifteen. But she had taken the road home from the street market, and going to the alley would mean an extra kilometer of walking.

It served Jia-Ling right. Perhaps this time she would learn her lesson. Honestly, for a girl who did so well in school, Jia-Ling could be quite an idiot.

Shiao-Shiao's only good grades were in English, since it was the only class she cared about. When she had been much younger, when her parents still lived, her father had told her, "English will let you see the world." Ever since she had moved in with her aunt and uncle, English had become a ticket out of their house, out of their town, out of God-forsaken China.

By the time Jia-Ling came home she had stopped crying, but dried tears flecked her cheeks and her nose was running. Dusty mud covered half of her school bag, but it had remained intact.

"Haven't I told you not to take the back alley home?" Shiao-Shiao asked her. Jia-Ling looked up at her, eyes glimmering. "You knew? Did you hear me?" Shiao-Shiao gazed back indifferently. "Obviously."

A tear spilled over and ran down Jia-Ling's cheek. She took a hesitant step

toward Shiao-Shiao. "But why didn't you come? The Yee brothers always listen to you."

Shiao-Shiao shrugged. "It was out of my way. Besides, it serves you right for not listening in the first place."

At that, Jia-Ling began to sob. *Not this again.*

"What's wrong, sweetheart?" Auntie Shu-Jen came running into the room.

Jia-Ling hugged her mother, burying her face in the side of her mother's faded pink cotton housedress. "Shiao-Shiao heard the Yee brothers bullying me, and she didn't do anything."

Auntie Shu Jen looked worriedly at Shiao-Shiao. "Shiao-Shiao, is that true?"

Shiao-Shiao glared back angrily. "It serves her right. I told her not to take the alley."

"Shiao-Shiao," her aunt chided. "She's your sister."

Shiao-Shiao clenched her teeth. "Cousin," She retorted in English.

"What was that?" Auntie Shu Jen snapped.

"Cousin," Shiao-Shiao repeated in Chinese. "She's my cousin. And she should have listened."

Auntie Shu Jen sighed. "She is your family. Even when she makes a mistake, Shiao-Shiao, Jia-Ling is your family. You have to look out for your family."

Shiao-Shiao looked vaguely at Jia-Ling, who was still hugging her mother. "Ok, I'm sorry." Shiao-Shiao tried to sound sincere, but she doubted she was fooling anyone.

Auntie Shu Jen stroked Jia-Ling's hair comfortingly, and shook her head. "You are stingy with your love, Shiao-Shiao. And you are spoiled."

At that, Shiao-Shiao laughed. *Spoiled? No parents, no money, no jewelry, and I'm spoiled?*

"You don't have to be rich to be spoiled, Shiao-Shiao," Auntie Shu Jen persisted. "You think only of yourself. Jia-Ling would never have left you like that. Yes, I know she's younger, but she would have tried to help you. And you won't walk a few steps out of the way to help your own sister. Or cousin. But your

cousin never treats you as anything less than a sister.”

“Look, Jia-Ling, I’m sorry I didn’t help you.” Shiao-Shiao didn’t know if she meant it, but at least this time it sounded convincing. Jia-Ling seemed mollified, and Auntie Shu Jen nodded once, extricated herself from Jia-Ling, and left the room.

That night, the need came on her again. It had been coming more and more frequently of late, and this time it came hungrily. She had the picture – the white sofa, marble floors, the giant windows overlooking the giant yard. And the woman – elegant and Caucasian in her white shimmering sleeveless silk dress, looking down and to the side, at home in her mansion.

It wasn’t that she was attracted to the woman – Shiao-Shiao was not a lesbian. It was the world she lived in and embodied, the world that Shiao-Shiao had always dreamed of in some secret corner of her mind.

Wei-Jun had told her how to do it a few months ago, and now Shiao-Shiao was well practiced, her fingertips barely brushing the skin through the downy hair, barely more than a breath. She closed her eyes, and she was in the place in the magazine photo, feeling the light touch of the silk against her breasts, against the nipples that she now grazed with the back of her hand. The fingers of the other hand grew more daring, until her ring finger scarcely grazed her inner lips, feeling the warmth more than the wetness, and then, barely touching, moved up toward that magic spot, stopping short to extend the tease. Her legs spread wider, her knees rose, and her back arched as the finger traced delicately along the slippery, warm, and soaking wet inside of the lip, up toward the spot, only to turn away at the last possible second. She felt a wave of wet warmth down there. Some part of her knew that it would get on the sheet, but she didn’t care as now two fingers traced a playful pattern on the inside of her lips, teasing, tempting, touching as they moved closer to – oh yes closer – to that

KNOCK KNOCK!

NO! NOT NOW!

“WHAT?!” she demanded. *Why? Why now?*

“Shiao-Shiao, Wei-Jun is here,” came Jia-Ling’s voice.

Of all possible times. She reached for the worn white underwear “Hold on, let me get dressed.”

“Why aren’t you dressed?” came the reply from behind the door.

Shiao-Shiao pulled on her pants. “Because I’m changing.”

Wei-Jun was physically the opposite of Shiao-Shiao. Where Shiao-Shiao had almost white porcelain skin, with barely a hint of freckles, Wei-Jun was dark, with a complexion that was almost Southeast Asian. Where Wei-Jun was waifish and lithe, Shiao-Shiao had been weighed down by a round butt and large, full breasts since she was twelve. And while Shiao-Shiao’s expression was generally serious, Wei-Jun’s default expression was a wicked grin. The one she currently had was particularly impish.

“Guess what I discovered?” she asked, as she closed the door behind herself.

Shiao-Shiao half-shrugged indifferently. “A new way to cheat on math tests?” she ventured.

“Hold on.” Wei-Jun sniffed the air. “What were you doing when I came here?”

“Nothing.” Shiao-Shiao felt her face warm, and knew her cheeks were turning red. That was the one thing she hated about having fair skin.

Wei-Jun smiled devilishly. “You were not doing nothing!” she exclaimed triumphantly. “I know what you were doing.” She jumped onto Shiao-Shiao’s bed, spread her legs, put her hands on the crotch of her pants and whispered, passionately, “Oh, Mr. Shu.”

Shiao-Shiao giggled, grabbed a pillow, and swung it at Wei-Jun’s face. Wei-Jun blocked it and grabbed it, and then used the momentum to throw Shiao-Shiao onto the bed.

“You’re gross,” laughed Shiao-Shiao. Mr. Shu, their math teacher, was at least seventy, crabby, and spoke only in a high pitched whisper.

“I know that you are in love with him, Shiao-Shiao.” She pulled her legs under her to sit cross-legged. “Ok. You know what I heard? There are Americans coming to town. Here. And they are looking for pretty girls, and they are going to take one back to be a wife or a mistress of some wealthy guy.”

Shiao-Shiao looked at her skeptically. “Ok, so?”

Wei-Jun grabbed Shiao-Shiao’s hand, and stroked the back of it playfully. “Well, you always wanted to move to America, right?”

Shiao-Shiao pulled her hand away. “Oh for God’s sake – not like that. I don’t want to be married to some eighty-year-old pervert.”

“He’s not eighty. He’s like forty.” Wei-Jun pulled a folded piece of paper from her pocket. “And look.”

Wei-Jun unfolded the piece of paper. Shiao-Shiao could barely make out what might have been a man wearing a suit. Or perhaps just a smudge from underneath Wei-Jun’s shoe – with the quality of the printout, it was hard to tell.

She peered at it closely as Wei-Jun bounced over to look over her shoulder. “Is that him? I can’t see anything.”

Wei-Jun rested her chin on Shiao-Shiao’s shoulder. “You can see that he is rich and not fat. Yet. What else do you need?”

Shiao-Shiao ducked her shoulder out from under Wei-Jun’s chin and faced her. “What else? Are we actually talking about this?”

Wei-Jun pouted at her. “Well, you don’t have to go to America.” She folded up the paper and put it into her pocket. “But you do have to come with me tomorrow. I’m going to try out.”

Shiao-Shiao pressed her palm to her forehead. “This is ridiculous,” she muttered.

“Nope.” Wei-Jun grinned at her wickedly. “I *am* going to try out. And that means you are going to try out.”

A half-hour bus ride brought them to the hotel. An Indian woman a bit younger than her aunt ushered them into a bathroom, and watched while they removed the makeup they had spent almost an hour applying that morning. The only consolation was the makeup remover, which foamed softly and smelled of rain and lilacs.

They waited with about thirty other girls, most of whom were at least a couple years older. And most were, Shiao-Shiao realized, prettier than either

Jia-Ling or herself. And more elegant. They sat like women, not like girls. That somehow made her feel competitive, even though she had no desire to be some stranger's mistress. She adjusted the way she sat, trying her best to copy the one that sat most elegantly.

Wei-Jun made her go first to prevent her from chickening out. Inside the room, an elderly, white-haired Caucasian man and regal old Caucasian woman sat behind table. Behind them three large, broad men in black suits stood guard. Shiao-Shiao suppressed a laugh. Were some girls so dangerous that the old couple needed three bodyguards?

"Please turn to the right," directed the woman, in heavily accented Chinese. Shiao-Shiao did so.

"And to the left." Shiao-Shiao obeyed again.

"Do you have any scars or birthmarks?"

"No," she replied with a hint of haughtiness.

They turned off the lights, and the man took out a small flashlight. He and the woman stood up and shined it at her face. The light had a purplish tinge.

"Freckles," observed the man, in English. "But cute, not obtrusive."

"Her hair is brown, not black," observed the woman, also in English.

"Do you dye your hair?" she asked in Chinese.

"No," Shiao-Shiao replied in English.

The woman raised an eyebrow. "You speak English?" she asked in English.

"Yes," Shiao-Shiao replied.

The woman looked at her with the expression of a scientist examining a slide under a microscope. "For anyone else, that would be a major positive. But Mr. Yeres, of course, does not care."

Of course? "Why not?" Shiao-Shiao demanded.

The woman seemed more surprised by the question than by the fact Shiao-Shiao spoke English. "Because, sweetheart, he's too rich to care." She smiled, almost sadly. "If he wants you to speak English, he will hire the best English teachers in the world, and you will speak it fluently in a month. You all," she

turned towards the bodyguards, “may turn around now.” Two of them turned their backs, as did her male companion. One remained facing forward. Shiao-Shiao realized with a start that the remaining bodyguard was female, despite her short, spiky hair and powerful shoulders.

The woman turned on the light. “Please disrobe.”

Shiao-Shiao felt paralyzed. “Now?” She asked, her voice suddenly a lot smaller.

The woman looked at her with an expression somewhere between condescension and contempt, and nodded once, sharply.

Shiao-Shiao wanted to run. But then she managed to calm herself, and, with a false nonchalance, removed her clothing. The woman gazed at her dispassionately, the way one might look at a loose diamond, or an animal.

“Quite a small waist, and slender legs,” she remarked to herself. “Hmmm... along with those breasts.” She looked directly into Shiao-Shiao’s eyes. “Are you a virgin?”

Shiao-Shiao blushed. “Yes.”

After the embarrassing inspection, which involved looking at her armpits, soles of her feet, and even her privates, she was allowed to get dressed again.

“You were in there for a while,” whispered Wei-Jun. “I think that’s a good sign.”

Then it was Wei-Jun’s turn. Minutes passed. Shiao-Shiao felt like slouching and fidgeting, but she forced herself to sit like the elegant girl.

Finally, Wei-Jun returned, smiling wickedly. “I know they loved me,” she proclaimed.

She was right, as it turned out. The Indian woman asked Wei-Jun, Shiao-Shiao, and the elegant girl to come to another room. There, each of the girls underwent several medical tests with complicated equipment, and then followed the old woman to another room to wait.

When had the nervousness become anticipation? Shiao-Shiao wanted to win, of course. She wanted to be the most beautiful. She wanted these Americans and this rich and powerful American man to want her to come to America.

But now, as she sat in the conference room with her best friend and the elegant stranger, and gazed at the red painted wall and gleaming black lacquered planter with the decorative fruit tree, she realized that wasn't the whole story. Some part of her wanted to go. Some part of her wanted to try a new life, and that part of her might have been bigger than she had thought.

The Indian woman, the old man, and the old woman entered, flanked by bodyguards.

The old woman regarded the three for a moment. "Please write your home addresses down," she instructed, and then handed a pad of paper to the elegant girl.

They came that evening. Uncle Kai-Ming yelled through the locked door that they had no money when he saw the assembled group, but finally relented, perhaps having noticed that the clothing and demeanor of each of the strangers suggested that they each had a lot more money than anyone inside.

When the old woman introduced the offer, Uncle Kai-Ming responded angrily, telling them that his daughter was no whore, and not for sale. The old woman, who already knew that Uncle Kai-Ming was not Shiao-Shiao's father, calmly replied that perhaps he had misunderstood, and that no one would dare to consider a concubine of Mr. Yeres a whore.

When she told him about the money, he actually seemed confused. He had, of course, heard rumors of sex slave traders, who duped young women with elaborate promises. But if so, how could these Americans ever hope to recoup the amount of money they had offered?

And when the old woman, whose name was Ms. Aila, explained that Shiao-Shiao would be allowed to leave if she ever chose to, and to call home if she wanted, he became genuinely flustered, as if he could not grasp what elaborate game was being played. And Uncle Kai-Ming, who had been a Colonel in the Army and considered himself an excellent judge of character, could not understand how anyone could seem so believable without being honest. That left the one possibility that he hadn't considered, that the offer was genuine.

Eventually he let out a resigned sigh and sat back in his chair. "Shiao-Shiao,

daughter. What do you want to do?”

Shiao-Shiao looked at the finely tailored clothes, the jewelry worth more than their house. Her vanity basked in their gazes, as she thought about how they thought she was prettier than every other girl in that room. She looked at the dim, old house in which she had spent the last five years, and thought about the picture of the mansion that she kept in her room. She thought about masturbation, and realized that she was curious about sex. And then, for all the wrong reasons, Shiao-Shiao answered, “I want to go.”

The rest was details. Her uncle made a half-hearted attempt to haggle. The old woman politely agreed to the modest increase in payment. The currency was verified the next day at the bank.

She felt small, sitting in the giant seats in the first class section of the plane. Her clothes seemed shabby. Ms. Aila sat in the seat in front of her.

“Can I ask you a question?” Shiao-Shiao leaned forward.

“Of course, Shiao-Shiao,” she replied, turning her head slightly to look back out of the corner of her eye.

“What did Wei-Jun’s parents say?”

Ms. Aila smiled and turned her head back forwards. “We never spoke to them, Shiao-Shiao. You were our first choice.”

Flattered, she leaned back contented, and then suddenly sat up. She hadn’t spoken to Wei-Jun either. She hadn’t bothered to say goodbye.

In her mind, she heard her Aunt admonishing her. “You only care about yourself, Shiao-Shiao.”

2.

The photo she had of the woman in the mansion seemed pathetic in front of this *palace*. Ms. Alia and her entourage lead her past the giant vaulted windows to a giant copper and brass front door. Inside waited gleaming floors of white and black marble, exquisite chairs of dark woods and leathers, tables of rose quartz and glass, finely woven thick carpets, and glittering chandeliers. And yet the effect was not at all busy, but instead harmoniously balanced and tranquil. Ms. Alia instructed a red and black uniformed house servant to lead Shiao-Shiao to her room, which was on the second floor, at the end of a long corridor with slate blue walls and polished white marble floors.

There wasn't much in her suitcase to unpack, so she explored the room instead. The bed was sized for one person, and had a mahogany frame that matched the armoire and chest of drawers. There were two closets. The last tenant's clothes still filled the smaller closet, so she put her suitcase in the larger, empty one.

She browsed through the clothes in the other closet. Whoever had lived here before had had a lot of clothes. A lot of expensive clothes, she realized, as she flipped through the labels. There was a silky deep green blouse that Shiao-Shiao couldn't resist trying on. It fit her like a glove.

"Excellent. I am glad the measurements I sent were accurate."

Shiao-Shiao turned. Ms. Aila stood at the door, her eyes smiling despite the formal expression. "The tailor will build a complete wardrobe once you have gotten settled. But those should last you a few days."

"These are mine?" She asked in disbelief.

At that Ms. Aila grinned. "Of course, child. Who else's would they be?"

She spent an hour in the bathroom, playing with the shower, which could be adjusted to create a variety of different massages, and trying out the different shampoos and soaps. She played with the moisturizers and lotions and toners

and creams. Then she tried on clothes until she had had enough. She hadn't even gotten through a third of them.

There was a knock at the door. Shiao-Shiao opened it, wearing a pale purple cashmere sweater and black and white pinstriped Capri pants.

A slender girl who looked about two years older than Shiao-Shiao with pale skin, a heart-shaped pixie face, fiery red hair, dark blue eyes, and a silky white dress stood at the door. Shiao-Shiao stared, forgetting to speak. This girl was not just beautiful. She was the most stunningly intensely gorgeous human Shiao-Shiao had ever seen.

"Hi, I'm Marisa. Can I come in?" She asked, her accent clearly American.

Shiao-Shiao stepped to the side. "Yes, of course," she replied.

Marisa eyed the clothes strewn on the bed. Shiao-Shiao hastily began picking them up and putting them back on their hangers. Marisa laughed.

"Don't worry, everyone does it," she informed her as she grabbed a hanger and pulled a pale silk blouse onto it.

Shiao-Shiao smiled. "I guess that makes me feel better."

"So anyway," Marisa continued as she strolled to the closet with a mass of clothes and hangers. "I'm your unofficial guide for the next couple of days. And I'm also your next door neighbor." Her fingers brushed Shiao-Shiao's arm, gently drawing her towards the bed which was now clear of clothes.

"The rules are simple," she asserted as she gently brushed a hair away from Shiao-Shiao's face. "You really are quite stunning, by the way," she interjected.

Shiao-Shiao felt her face warm, and prayed that her cheeks weren't turning too obviously pink. "Thanks," she mumbled. "You're very beautiful too."

Marisa tilted her head coyly. "Of course I am," she declared with a shameless smile. "Otherwise, why would I be here?" she grabbed Shiao-Shiao's hand with both of hers. "Anyway, as I was saying, the rules are simple. First, don't go off the premises without an escort. Second, remember the hierarchies. As concubines, we are ranked formally above everyone but the wives. And Mr. Yeres, obviously. So you can tell anyone to do whatever, but the wives can do the same to you.

Within reason, obviously. And third, and this is by far the most important. Do not get in First Wife's way. Avoid her when you can, and for God's sake, never do anything to make her mad."

"Ok," nodded Shiao-Shiao. "But I don't totally get the part about First Wife. She's--"

"She's a horrible, cruel, selfish bitch." Marisa coughed delicately, putting her hand demurely to her mouth. "The other wives are okay. First Wife – just don't go near her if you can help it. Don't make eye contact. Don't talk to her. Don't do anything to make her notice you. When you meet her, speak politely and formally. Trust me on this." She jumped to her feet and pulled Shiao-Shiao up with her. "Ok, time to eat. Let's go to the kitchen."

Shiao-Shiao realized that she was actually quite hungry. "That sounds nice. Let me change."

Marisa stood up, strolled to the closet, and picked out a pair of dark blue jeans. "Keep the same top, but put these on."

Shiao-Shiao got up and took the jeans. Marisa plopped down on the bed, and looked right at her.

"Aren't you going to turn around?" Shiao-Shiao asked.

Marisa shook her head slowly and winked. "Nope," she quipped, smiling evilly. "A girl has got to have her fun, doesn't she?"

Shiao-Shiao looked at her skeptically. "Wait, you're joking?"

"Nope. And since I am senior to you, you won't be able to have any of the guards throw me out. Escort me out, I should say." Marisa smiled smugly, and leaned back on her elbows. "The sooner you change, the sooner you eat."

There was something flattering about having the beautiful red haired pixie watch her undress.

"Wow," Marisa exclaimed as Shiao-Shiao stepped out of her pants. "I can see why they chose you out of so many."

"It wasn't that many," replied Shiao-Shiao, as she pulled on the jeans. "It wasn't much more than thirty."

Marisa laughed. “Thirty? Shiao-Shiao, they were gone for three months. They were supposed to be gone for six. They came back early.”

Three months? “But – wait. I thought it was – they only had three of us write down our addresses.”

Marisa stood up and shook her head. She walked over to Shiao-Shiao, grabbed the front of her jeans, and deftly buttoned them. “Maybe in that one town. There were a lot more than three addresses.” She zipped up Shiao-Shiao’s jeans, the other hand grazing Shiao-Shiao’s belly as it grabbed her hand. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

Marisa’s room was similar to Shiao-Shiao’s, but the furniture had been rearranged. A laptop computer sat open on the bed. “Help me with this.” She gestured at the mahogany chest of drawers that was identical to the one in Shiao-Shiao’s room. Shiao-Shiao helped her push the chest of drawers to the side, revealing a small grate, which Marisa pried off the wall. She took a light blue cord, connected one end to the laptop, and the other she snaked into the opening in the wall.

After a few minutes of fiddling inside the wall, she proudly announced, “Now we are connected to the secure internal network.” She dusted herself off as she got up.

Shiao-Shiao gaped at her. “How do you–”

“My older brother is a bit of a computer hacker. He taught me a few tricks.” She picked up the laptop, sat down on the bed, and clicked a few keys as she traced the touchpad. “Let’s see – this should be it. And... here we go.” She grabbed Shiao-Shiao and pulled her down on the bed next to her. “Look.”

It was list of names and addresses. As Marisa scrolled down names and addresses flashed past. There were hundreds. Maybe a thousand.

Marisa’s fingers danced on the keyboard in a rapid blur of clicks. “Here you are. Ranked # 1.”

Sure enough, there was a ‘1’ next to her name. She smiled proudly to herself.

“Can you find my friend? Wei-Jun Cheng?”

Marisa tapped rapidly. In a moment, she had highlighted a row that contained Wei-Jun's name and address. She was ranked 244. For some reason, that made Shiao-Shiao feel guilty.

Marisa reached over and squeezed Shia-Shiao's knee. "Don't worry, beautiful. It's an honor to be on that list at all!"

The house bustled with uniformed staff and black-suited guards, who nodded politely as Marisa and Shiao-Shiao walked past. Marisa led her through a large kitchen into a smaller one behind it. A tall African woman, with reddish black skin, a full, voluptuous mouth, and wide exotic eyes looked up from the open fridge as they entered.

"Hi Yeni," called Marisa, as they walked in. "This is Shiao-Shiao."

"Hello Shiao-Shiao," she replied. Shiao-Shiao's mouth fell open at the sound. If a normal voice sounded like a single note, hers sounded like a chord. It was like listening to an angelic choir; it would have made a goddess jealous.

"Hello Yeni," she replied, unpleasantly aware of how flat her own voice sounded.

"What's for lunch?" asked Marisa as she slid past Yeni to look in the fridge.

The three ate a saffron-flavored Indian fish curry, a rice dish with a bright red vegetable Shiao-Shiao had never seen before, boiled spinach, and finally a strange brown fruit with a hard shell and a white citrusy inside. Marisa called it a mangosteen.

Hypnotized by Yeni's voice, Shiao-Shiao could barely focus on the actual words. She did hear that Yeni had grown up in Kenya, and heard her joke that Marisa was no doubt pleased to see Shiao-Shiao, since that meant that Marisa was no longer the most junior concubine.

To Shiao-Shiao's surprise, Marisa announced after the meal that it was time to study. Marisa took great delight in Shiao-Shiao's consternation. "Don't worry," she teased. "It's math today. Aren't all Chinese people good at math?"

Shiao-Shiao groaned internally. There was nothing she hated more than math.

3.

Although the evening's exercise class had thoroughly exhausted Shiao-Shiao, her body refused to sleep, stubbornly holding onto her old time zone. She glanced at the small digital clock on her dresser. It was 2:45 am. She sighed, gave up on trying to sleep, and walked out of the room.

She snuck down the dim corridor until she reached the dark wooden staircase. Slowly, silently, she stepped down the staircase, and then walked down the hall to the enormous living room.

A bit of movement caught her eye, and she froze. Slowly, she pressed her back against the wall and looked out on the living room.

Someone hung from a large metal sculpture in the center of the room. Could a burglar have slipped past? She stepped a bit closer to get a better angle, and saw that the man was exercising. He was barefoot, wearing black pants and a white undershirt. The hard, sinewy muscles strained as he pulled himself up and then slowly lowered himself, repeatedly. She watched the muscles work, guessing by their size that the man was a household guard.

If anyone caught him exercising on the sculpture, he would be fired. That, she supposed, took a kind of reckless daring.

But what if someone saw her? Silently she tiptoed backwards.

The man leapt down, turning in the air so that he was facing her when he landed. His eyes were sharp, pale, and amused. He winked at her, and beckoned with a quick tilt of the head. She didn't move.

"It's okay," he whispered dramatically. "I'm allowed to be here. Only," he glanced behind him, at the large metal sculpture. "Don't tell First Wife you saw me here. And in exchange, I," he pointed elaborately at himself, "won't tell First Wife you were sneaking about."

"I wasn't sneaking," she retorted. "I couldn't sleep. Jet lag. And shouldn't you be more afraid of Mr. Yeres finding out that you were hanging on his sculpture?"

The guard grinned. “Nope. I’m definitely more worried about First Wife. You’re Shiao-Shiao, right?”

“Yes,” she replied. “And you are?”

“Stan,” he replied. “Do you like music?”

Shiao-Shiao glared skeptically. “What does that have anything to do with—”

Stan shrugged nonchalantly. “Just making conversation. Do you?”

Shiao-Shiao narrowed her eyes. “Yes, I suppose. What does that have—”

He grinned again. “Then come with me.” He turned to leave. She hesitated. He looked back over his shoulder, and winked. “It’s okay. I’m part of the household.”

Shiao-Shiao stood still, unconvinced. “Who seems to have no respect for the rules of the household.”

“Says the girl who was sneaking around,” he quipped.

“I wasn’t sneaking,” she whispered back, fiercely. “I thought you might be a burglar or something.”

He smiled winningly. “How do you know I’m not?”

Shiao-Shiao paused. “Well. Why would a burglar exercise on a sculpture instead of, well, stealing.”

“I really like your accent,” he replied, his voice suddenly serious.

“What does that—”

“The point is, you trust that I’m not a burglar. Now you just have to trust my taste in music.” He turned back.

Annoyed, she followed him down another hallway to a locked door, which he opened with a set of keys. Inside a silver wall of audio equipment, covered with dials and meters, reached the ceiling, and several black speakers towered around the room.

Stan wordlessly opened a case, pulled out a CD, and put it in a player. A gentle electronic, opening developed a slow hypnotic rhythm. Stan didn’t turn around to face her, but instead stood still, listening.

Finally he turned, leaned back against the edge of a steel table covered with CD’s and electronic components. The pale mischievous eyes mocked her, and the

square-jawed angular features hinted at a smile beneath his jet black curls. Shiao-Shiao guessed that he was probably in his late twenties.

He raised an eyebrow. "Well?" he asked.

"Well what?" She replied.

"Well," he drawled, slouching nonchalantly against the table, "aren't you going to ask me to dance?"

She took a step back. "Are you crazy?"

He looked at her innocently. "What's the big deal?" His face fell dramatically. "Oh, you don't think I'm good looking?"

She clenched her fists in frustration. "Look, Stan. You are obviously very attractive, and despite your inappropriateness, I do find you interesting. But I am a concubine of Mr. Yeres. And that means I can't dance with you. I shouldn't even be here with you."

He grinned, obviously pleased with himself. "You think I'm attractive?" He asked, coyly.

She let out a sound that was halfway between a sigh and a groan. "That misses the entire point of what I just said."

He stepped deliberately towards her. Heart thumping nervously, she stepped back right into the wall behind her. He put his hand on the wall to the side of her head. His eyes glittered. She looked down, unwilling to meet his gaze.

"Do I make you uncomfortable?" he whispered.

Shiao-Shiao looked down at his knees. "No. Yes. I don't know. Look, please, I have to go now."

"Why?" he whispered innocently. "You're attracted to me, right?"

Her heart pounded. She nodded, and her eyes darted to her left, looking for a way out.

"And I think you are beautiful, right?" His face moved closer.

"Ok." She still refused to meet his eyes.

His smile hinted at something sinister. "And a dance is just a dance, right?" he whispered.

Shiao-Shiao shook her head slowly, still looking down. "I don't think so. I'm pretty sure Mr. Yeres wouldn't approve. If he found out, he would fire you, and probably send me back to China."

"What if he didn't find out?" Stan whispered, inching closer.

Shiao-Shiao turned her head away. "Please, Stan, please stop doing this," she whispered.

"Besides," he insisted, "even if he did find out, I doubt he would mind."

Puzzled, she looked up. "Why not?"

He grinned. "Shiao-Shiao. I'm Stan Yeres."

Shiao-Shiao's mouth opened in furious shock. "WHAT? You're related to him? What are you, his brother? His *son*?" What kind of a pervert would try to seduce his-

Stan started laughing so hard that he had to sit down on one of the deep leather chairs in the room. "Shiao-Shiao, I am Mr. Yeres. My oldest son is 6 years old."

Shiao-Shiao gave him a skeptical look. "You're lying."

Stan reached into his pocket and pulled out a black wallet. He looked through it for a moment, and then-

"Here you go," he smirked, handing her a white plastic card.

She examined what turned out to be a driver's license. Stanley Yeres. She did some math. He was 38. He looked younger than what she thought a 38 year old would look like. Maybe it was the muscles.

"Oh," she finally responded.

"Oh?"

"I just didn't think you would be so..." So what? She hesitated, searching for the right word.

"Beautiful?" he offered.

"Well...yes, I suppose. I just didn't think you would be, well-"

"Hanging like a monkey in my own entertaining room?"

"Well, yes." She didn't know whether to look him in the eye or not, so she settled on looking at his chin.

He leaned against a wall. “So does that mean you are going to ask me to dance?”

She laughed. This was ridiculous. “Ok. Would you like to dance?”

“I can’t!” He crowed triumphantly.

“What? Why not?” Shiao-Shiao searched his eyes, confused.

The eyes mocked her. “Because I,” he announced with affected delicacy, “am now tired.”

Inexplicably, she actually felt rejected. She looked down.

“Well?”

Shiao-Shiao looked at the thick white carpet. “Well what?” she muttered.

“Now you have to say, ‘How about just one dance?’”

She didn’t know whether to smile or groan. “Ok. How about just one dance?”

He stroked his chin as he considered. “Well,” he finally replied, “I suppose I could do just one.”

He held her at a polite distance, one arm around her waist, the other holding her hand. He ducked down to place her other hand on his shoulder, and slowly began to lead her around the room. The warm smell of an exotic and masculine cologne enwrapped her as he pulled her forward. She moved closer until her breasts pressed into him, and her cheek rested against his chest. Leaning into the slow, calming rhythm of his heart beating against his chest, Shiao-Shiao closed her eyes.

4.

“Wake up,” a soft female voice whispered. Shiao-Shiao held her eyes shut, clinging to sleep.

“Wake up, sleeping beauty.” A hand shook her bare shoulder gently and then fingertips ran down her bare arm. Shiao-Shiao’s eyes remained closed.

Suddenly someone growled in her ear. “Wake up or I swear to God I will rape you.”

Her eyes flared open to see Marisa grinning impishly down at her.

She sat up. Marisa casually adjusted Shiao-Shiao’s nightshirt and pushed the hair away from her face, the fingers casually stroking Shiao-Shiao’s ear.

“What time?” Shiao-Shiao asked, sleepily.

Marisa handed her some folded clothes. “Yoga time. Get changed. Don’t worry, I won’t watch.”

Shiao-Shiao stood, made sure that Marisa had turned her head closed her eyes, and then turned around and stepped out of her nightshirt and underwear.

“Nice.” She turned her head to see Marisa gazing right at her, smug and unapologetic.

Mortified, Shiao-Shiao ran into the closet and closed the door.

“You said you wouldn’t watch!” she called as she hurriedly pulled on the spandex exercise clothes.

“Oh yeah, about that,” Marisa replied from right behind the closet door. “As it turns out, I was totally lying. Also, I am going to be right behind you in yoga class.”

“Why?”

“To see you do downward dog.”

Marisa held her hand down the marble corridor and up the wooden stares to the exercise room, a square room with one mirrored wall and blue padded mats covering the floor. True to her word, Marisa staked out a place right behind her. Shiao-Shiao felt acutely aware of Marisa leering at her when she did the

downward dog pose, a pose that involved standing on her hands and feet and sticking her butt in the air.

There were ten women in the room, not including the instructor. Never had she seen such an attractive group of people in her life. They moved through the poses with an easy grace that made her feel awkward and uncoordinated. Most of the poses she couldn't do at all, and the ones she could do she did gracelessly. The instructor, an older woman, repeatedly adjusted her positions.

After class she showered (alone, despite Marisa's insistence that they shower together). Then, with Marisa's help, she picked out an elegant green dress and a silver braided necklace for her welcoming banquet.

She had thought the other concubines were beautiful. And in their evening attire, gathered around the long banquet table, they were radiant, a collection of exotic gems from around the world. The Kenyan girl, Yeni, shimmered resplendent in a form fitting ivory silk dress, and Marisa wore a gown of the same deep blue as her eyes. Others, women whom she barely recognized from the yoga class, stood around the table, dazzling in their evening dresses and glittering jewelry.

But next to the four wives, the concubines looked like awkward children. The flawless cuts and elegant lines of the wives' clothes made the concubines' gowns look like rented costumes. The jewelry they each wore made the concubine's necklaces and bracelets look like cheap trinkets. But the confident grace with which they stood and moved truly set them apart.

Later, she would learn the significance of the jewels the wives wore. She would learn that the jewels they wore to formal banquets were never gifts, and had been bought with money that the wives had earned on their own, through the jobs they had had in the past and the businesses they ran now. But at the moment Shiao-Shiao could only stare, dazzled by the size of the perfectly cut diamonds, the bright hues of the rubies and emeralds. With each hypnotic motion, their jewels glimmered.

First Wife easily surpassed the other three. Pins set with emeralds, intensely

green as the eyes that owned the room, held her white-blond hair in an elaborate bun. Her dress, almost the same ivory color as Yeni's, had such superior quality that it made Yeni's look childish in comparison. She wore a single bracelet on her left wrist, a silver band with a single green emerald. Later, Shiao-Shiao would learn that the silver band was actually platinum, and the emerald was actually a green diamond worth almost a million dollars.

But had she been wearing a t-shirt and glass beads, First Wife would still have put everyone else in the room to shame. She radiated a terrifying beauty, an inhuman elegance.

Not until the deadly green eyes landed on her did Shiao-Shiao realize that she had been staring openly. Quickly, she looked down and pretended to examine her silver place setting.

Last to arrive, Mr. Yeres wore a finely tailored black suit over a smooth white shirt. She looked at the man uneasily as she understood that her friend Stan had not entered the room. Instead, in his place stood a physical embodiment of the kind of power that had made this world possible. His eyes might have hinted at playfulness, but the rest of his face held such emotionless intensity that it seemed carved from granite. No, this man at the head of the table, between First Wife and the auburn-haired wife, this man was not her playful friend, Stan. This was not the man who had climbed on his own sculpture to exercise in the middle of the night, or who had spent an hour teasing her and then dancing with her. This was Mr. Yeres. Nervously, she avoided his gaze.

After a few words of welcome from Mr. Yeres, First Wife formally welcomed her to the family. She spoke in cold, regal tones that hinted at cruelty, and Shiao-Shiao began to understand why Marisa had warned her.

In her honor, the banquet featured Chinese cuisine, but she had certainly never seen food like this in China. Silver platters and trays full of beautifully arranged food covered the polished black granite table. At the center waited a bowl of delightfully thin-skinned dumplings, filled with broth, shrimp, and something crunchy that she didn't recognize. A rectangular silver platter held

giant shrimp the size of lobsters, cooked simply with ginger and green onions. Another, smaller square platter held rolls stuffed with exotic vegetables, and another identical square platter held beautifully arranged fruits, many of which she had never before seen. Her favorite turned out to be a soup with tofu and some kind of spice that she could not name, something that might have been a distant relative of saffron. Never had she so badly wanted to stuff herself, but she followed the example of everyone around her and ate moderately. Still, by the time desert came, her stomach felt pleasantly full (but not so full that she could not enjoy the chocolate and raspberry mousse, and the jasmine flavored ice cream).

Classes filled the next day. She was supposed to learn a new language, and decided to study Spanish, mostly because Marisa was also studying it. Then came math, always an unpleasant ordeal. Marisa was studying calculus, but Shiao-Shiao still needed to work on algebra.

She also had to study a dance form, and chose to study modern dance, again following Marisa's lead. Finally, at the end of the day she attended aerobics class led by a middle-aged, muscular woman with short, boyish hair dyed a purplish auburn.

She had an early dinner with Marisa and Yeni in the back kitchen. Marisa managed to spend most of the meal playing footsie with both Shiao-Shiao and Yeni, until finally Yeni stomped on Marisa's foot.

While Shiao-Shiao reclined in her bed afterwards, there came two firm knocks at her door. A man wearing the red and black uniform of the house stood with a formally straight posture, like a soldier standing at attention.

"Miss Shiao-Shiao," he addressed her, maintaining his rigid posture. "You are requested to attend the master in his quarters at eight p.m."

"Okay," she replied, a bit puzzled. It wasn't even six o'clock yet, and it could hardly take her more than five minutes to walk to -

Oh god, his quarters. His BEDROOM.

Her heart raced. "Yes," she replied. "Yes, of course. I will be there at eight. Sharp. On the dot. Please tell him that. I will be there. At eight." The servant nodded once and then walked away. She listened by the door until she could no

longer hear his footsteps, and then she raced over to Marisa's room and pounded on the door.

Marisa opened the door languidly. "Have you come at last to give me my heart's desire?" she asked, her eyes seductively half-closed.

"Not now, Marisa." Shiao-Shiao grabbed the redhead's hand, and pulled her out the door and into Shiao-Shiao's own room. Once she had closed the door, she hurriedly reported, "He called me to his quarters. Tonight. In two hours."

"Eeeee!" shrieked Marisa, as she threw open the closet doors. "We need to find you the right clothes to wear. Ok, go shower. I'll pick the clothes."

It took her less than forty five minutes to get ready, even with Marisa shouting instructions through the locked bathroom door. Marisa chose tan flowing silk pants, and tight fitting sky blue scoop necked blouse that cinched around her breasts, making them look quite enormous. She completed the outfit with a pair of tan strappy sandals.

Then Marisa spent the next hour fixing her hair while explicitly describing her various secret bedroom tricks – how to touch him *there* with her hand, how to use her mouth, her breasts, how to kiss, how to enhance his pleasure in different positions, how to enhance her own pleasure, anal sex, massage, massage with breasts, erotic zones, different touches. And then, as her brain frantically tried to remember all of that information, Marisa began to talk about women.

"It's your first night, so it will probably be just you and him. That's how it usually is – that's how it was for me, Yeni, and the rest of the concubines as far as I know. But, just in case," she began. In her nervousness, Shiao-Shiao barely heard her, registering only snippets of advice about erogenous zones behind the elbows and knees, inner thighs, breasts, ears, how to kiss and lick a woman *there*, the G-spot, teasing, until she finally she had to say, "Marisa, you have to stop. I'm confused enough as it is, and now I'm pretty sure I'm going to end up trying to elbow his G-spot and make a fool of myself."

Marisa laughed and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. "Okay, then I'll just massage you to help you relax."

Despite her skepticism, she had to admit that Marisa certainly knew how to give good shoulder massages. Shiao-Shiao had to swat away her hand when it began to stray down her chest, but she did feel less tense by the time five minutes to eight arrived.

“Good luck,” Marisa whispered as she hustled Shiao-Shiao out the door.

Her heart thudded in her chest and her palms began to sweat as she walked down the hallway. Her knees trembled as she walked up the stairs, and by the time she got to the high door of solid black ebony, she could barely bring herself to knock.

“Come in,” called a warm, deep, masculine voice. She pushed the door open.

Stan Yeres lay sprawled on top of giant bed with a glossily polished ebony frame and a cover of thick black silk embroidered with a pattern of red vines and leaves. He wore black silk pajamas and a black silk shirt, which lay open and unbuttoned, revealing his muscular chest and rippling abdominal muscles. Thick, curly chest hair became a thin black line down his stomach, disappearing into his pajama pants. In his hand he held a remote control. She glanced at the black flatscreen television mounted on the wall, and saw that he was watching a cartoon. “Come in, beautiful,” he invited, patting the bed next to him. His eyes flicked back to the screen.

Shiao-Shiao wasn't sure what she had expected, but it hadn't been this. Perhaps she had expected Mr. Yeres, but this was clearly Stan. She smiled despite herself and walked in, closing the door behind her, and froze.

Sitting in a plush, black leather chair, holding a book, her legs elegantly crossed, was First Wife. The inhuman green eyes regarded Shiao-Shiao, and for a moment Shiao-Shiao forgot to breathe. Frantically, she tried to remember what Marisa had told her about women, but her mind had gone suddenly and completely blank.

I can't do this. It took every ounce of determination not to run as she forced herself across the room and onto the bed, where she sat down cross legged beside him, resisting the urge to pull her knees to her chest.

“First Wife doesn’t like cartoons,” Stan intimated amiably. “She prefers to read books in other languages.”

First Wife looked up coldly from her book, her green eyes glittering venomously. “Shakespeare wrote in English,” she informed him in the same icy, aristocratic voice that had welcomed her yesterday. But it was far more terrifying in the intimate setting than it had been in the large banquet hall.

Stan snorted. “Could have fooled me. Tell me, Shiao-Shiao, do you like Shakespeare?”

Shiao-Shiao turned her head to face him. “I don’t know,” she responded, unable to keep her mind on anything but First Wife, who continued to regard her like a predator or serpent. “I don’t think I have read it.”

Stan gestured vaguely with his open hand. “Oh, don’t worry, you will soon enough. Perhaps First Wife will teach another seminar?”

First Wife watched him silently for a moment, and then simply stated, “Perhaps.”

Stan’s catlike hazel eyes met Shiao-Shiao’s. “And you will, of course, attend it, Shiao-Shiao?”

“I would be honored to,” she managed to squeak.

Stan clicked off the TV with the remote control, and Shiao-Shiao noticed with surprise that his other arm had maneuvered around her, protective but not touching. She slid back slightly, until her butt barely touched his bicep.

“First Wife,” Mr. Yeres directed calmly. “Will you please come over here for a moment?”

She stood slowly, deliberately, like a predator rising for the hunt. She wore a pajama set of green silk, and her green eyes shone hypnotically as the light dimmed. She walked around the far side of the bed, and slowly lit a candle before crawling menacingly onto the bed. Shiao-Shiao pushed back into Mr. Yeres’ arm, her left hand seeking his, her right hand resting against his open black silk shirt, seeking safety.

First Wife handed Shiao-Shiao a heavy gold lighter. “Shiao-Shiao, would you

please light that candle?” It was a command, not a request, and her eyes flicked toward a candle on a small stand on Shiao-Shiao’s side of the bed.

Wordlessly, Shiao-Shiao got up and did so. She turned back, and passed the lighter back to First Wife over Mr. Yeres’ reclining body as she climbed onto the bed. Shiao-Shiao’s knees dug into the deep bedspread as she adjusted her position, moving closer until her knees rested against the man’s muscular torso.

The lights dimmed further, and soon the only light in the room came from the two dancing candle flames. Stan’s left hand delicately traced the back of hers, sending a tingling shiver up her arm and down her spine. She pulled her hand back to intertwine her fingers with his, surprised at the size of his hands. They could crush her hands like an egg, she realized, but they were gentle, warm, and hard. She unlaced her fingers and took his hand in both of hers, brought it to her lips, and kissed the back of his fingers gently.

She had already gotten wet between her legs – embarrassingly so. Undoubtedly, she had soaked through the white cotton panties that Marisa had chosen. Silently she prayed that her silk pants had not gotten more than a little damp, or at the very least that she would be able to hide it in the dim candlelight.

Her eyes met his, and she saw a flash of playfulness. She smiled, and he slowly turned his hand to grab both of hers. Gradually, he pulled her two hands towards his other hand, which she saw held First Wife’s left hand. She panicked for a moment, and then forced herself to be calm. *It will be okay. He’s here. She’s just scary, not dangerous – she won’t do anything.* She forced herself to meet the reptilian green eyes, which gazed back with cold superiority.

And then she gasped as her fingertips touched First Wife’s. First Wife’s eyes widened, and then Shiao-Shiao slammed her eyes shut.

It was like looking up and seeing the ground instead of the sky. It was like turning on the bathroom sink to see fire come out instead of water. The energy that blazed where their fingers touched had nothing to do with sex, or fear, or anything that belonged in this world. Her heart thudded, her mouth opened in a silent scream, and she tore herself away. The room spun as she collapsed onto

all fours, panting. Openmouthed, she looked at First Wife, who glared back, eyes wide with a hateful fury.

Stan Yeres looked uneasily from one woman to the other. Uncertainly, he gripped Shiao-Shiao's wrist with one hand and First Wife's with the other, and pulled them together again.

The moment their fingertips touched, energy blazed and then tore up her arms, violent and hungry and terrifying, indifferent and merciless as it suffocated her lungs and clamped her muscles. Beneath the ringing in her ears she could hear her own panicked heart struggling to beat normally. As if observing from a great distance, some part of Shiao-Shiao realized she had drenching her panties, absolutely certain that she had soaked through her pants. But it was not sexual arousal; her body had no way of responding to this inexplicable energy, and had chosen to express itself by getting wet. She could have just as easily laughed hysterically or sobbed or screamed or vomited, or everything at once.

She panted. She needed air. *Please let it stop*, Shiao Shiao pleaded silently over the rush and ringing in her ears. *Please let it be over. Please let me go.*

And then he did. Shiao-Shiao jerked her hands back and fell to all fours, panting, eyes blurry with sweat. The ringing in her ears gradually subsided. First Wife held the hand that Shiao-Shiao had touched disdainfully away from her body, as if it was covered with filth.

Stan Yeres lay silent for some time, brows furrowed. "Will you kiss her?" he hesitantly asked First Wife.

Her usually deadly eyes pleaded for leniency. Stan smirked dangerously. "Ok, then," responded Mr. Yeres. "Shiao-Shiao, please stand up by the side of the bed. Good. First Wife, if you would be so kind, please undress her."

First Wife unbuttoned her blouse quickly and perfunctorily, like a mother impatiently undressing a toddler. She was careful to avoid any skin contact as she removed her bra, but the inside of her arm accidentally brushed against Shiao-Shiao's bare breast, sending an arc of energy that made Shiao-Shiao dry heave and lose balance. She steadied herself against the polished ebony bedframe.

It had gotten stronger. Even when First Wife stood close without touching, Shiao-Shiao felt the energy encroaching, pressing against her as if it sought a way into her body. When First Wife pulled off Shiao-Shiao's soaking panties and drenched pants in one quick motion, Shiao-Shiao's body shuddered with something almost like an orgasm.

Mr. Yeres maneuvered himself to a sitting position on the edge of the bed facing them, his feet planted on the thick silk carpet.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" he asked First Wife.

"If you say so," she muttered, shaken and nervous.

"I do say so. I asked you. Do you think she's beautiful?"

First Wife regarded Shiao-Shiao's naked body. Shiao-Shiao thought she saw her suppress a look of panic. After what seemed like a silent hour, she admitted, "She is physically aesthetic."

Stan laughed. "That sounds like something right out of a Hallmark Valentines card. 'Roses are red, violets are physically aesthetic.'"

Despite herself, First Wife smiled. Stan put one arm around Shiao-Shiao and the other around First Wife. He stood up, and Shiao-Shiao noticed that he was a full head taller than First Wife. "Shall I have her undress you, or will you undress yourself?"

"I am sure I can manage," she retorted aristocratically. She stepped out of his embrace, carefully avoiding touching Shiao-Shiao, and removed her clothes with an arrogant grace.

Shiao-Shiao caught her breath. The unearthly beauty – Shiao-Shiao averted her eyes, as if she was avoiding looking directly at the sun. Gingerly she turned back. First Wife's waist and torso formed a slim hourglass above her pale, slender legs. Shiao-Shiao's eyes followed the long, graceful fingers up her elegant arms, and then rested on the milk-white curves of her breasts and the pointy pink nipples. As she glanced down at the thatch of hair between her legs, smooth and white-blonde, Shiao-Shiao shivered; this woman was too perfect to be human.

First Wife stepped closer, until she stood about a foot away. Shiao-Shiao

could already feel that energy. First Wife held her body absolutely rigid as Stan brought them closer together, and then turned her head away, as though to avoid a kiss or eye contact as their breasts touched, and the energy roared between them. But this time it seemed more controlled. Shiao-Shiao could feel the hard pink nipples poking into the top of her breasts, and her own nipples pressing into the smooth and yielding skin under First Wife's breasts. Every muscle in her body tensed and locked as they tried to suppress the reaction, and she fought against the impulse to scream.

Still he pressed them closer together. Shiao-Shiao turned her head to the side, to keep her nose from pressing into First Wife, but instead her ear ended up pressed against the top of First Wife's chest. The heart beat hard and fast, and Shiao-Shiao knew her own heart pounded at the same frantic pace.

Please let it end. The muscles in her back and arm strained, and salty sweat ran down her forehead and stung her eyes. *Please let it end.*

"Shiao-Shiao," asked Mr. Yeres in a deep, quiet voice. "Do you know how to kiss a woman?"

Shiao-Shiao felt, rather than saw, First Wife's eyebrows arch dangerously.

"I'm not sure," Shiao-Shiao whispered.

"I mean to say, do you know how to kiss a woman *there*?" he nodded towards the smooth white-blonde hair between her legs. Pure malice flared in First Wife's eyes.

"I don't think so," she whispered.

His voice calm, deep, and commanding, Stan Yeres decreed, "Then you will learn by doing. Shiao-Shiao, please get down on your knees. First Wife, please spread your legs slightly."

Relieved that she no longer had to see First Wife's menacing expression, but terrified at what she now had to do, Shiao-Shiao sank down to her knees. Her knees pushed into the carpet as she leaned forward slightly, her nostrils filling with the musk emanating from under the blond thatch. She inhaled the scent of First Wife's femininity, something that recalled not flowers but sweat

under perfume or unwashed hair, an animal essence that hid under the layers of civilization. As Shiao-Shiao exhaled a warm, moist breath, First Wife's muscles tensed and her pelvis twisted slightly forward, almost against her will, bringing the thin pink lips into better view. Shiao-Shiao inhaled her scent and breathed forward again, and the pelvis squirmed. Shiao-Shiao could now smell the musky sexual scent of her own wetness, and it grew stronger with each breath. Warm slick rivulets began to run down Shiao-Shiao's thighs. She tilted her head back as the lips came closer to her mouth, and finally her tongue reached forward.

First Wife gasped and fluid spilled onto Shiao-Shiao's tongue and chin. It tasted thin and sexual, like the sweat on discarded panties; it tasted dark and secretive, like the sticky sweetness of ripe black figs or molasses. As her tongue grazed the lips, touching the thick wetness more than lips themselves, the energy prickled and then flared, jolting down her back and echoing in her limbs. Gasping, she pulled her tongue away.

Then, resolutely, she resumed, and pushed her tongue through the painful energy firmly against the lips, and determinedly drew her tongue upwards. As she fought through the energy a need began to spark, a need to know this perfect being, to reach inside her, to be part of her... She licked hungrily up toward that waiting magic spot. It took all of her willpower to turn back at the last moment, and then still more to keep the touch delicate and controlled when she wanted to fill her face with her lips, to stick her tongue *inside*, to –

She fought back the thoughts, keeping her touch the barest graze. First Wife's motions were becoming less and less controlled, almost desperate as Shiao-Shiao continued the tease, moving her tongue close to First Wife's achingly engorged clit and then turning back at the last second. The slick wetness covered her chin, and ran down her neck, where it mingled with her own sweat as it slipped between her breasts. From between her own legs fluid poured forth unchecked, soaking her bottom and the skin of her inner thighs.

Nervously, her tongue slipped up the lips and touched the hard clit. First Wife gasped and her legs shuddered as liquid gushed over Shiao-Shiao's face.

Her tongue continued to flick at First Wife's most sensitive spot. First Wife's legs shuddered again and she cried out as she came, her body convulsing. Shiao-Shiao lost her balance, and had to grab First Wife's legs to steady herself. The energy exploded where they touched, but Shiao-Shiao's tongue did not stop dancing on the lips, on the clit as First Wife's body shook in an uncontrolled seizure. Shiao-Shiao's tongue searched between the lips and reached *inside* of First Wife, causing more fluid to spurt over her face and into her hair. Her face soaked, she and continued to squirm her tongue over and between her lips until finally First Wife broke away.

One hand supporting her against the rounded ebony bedpost at the foot of the bed, her body half bent over, covered with sweat, breasts hanging forward, First Wife panted as if she had just sprinted fifty miles.

Shiao-Shiao gasped for air, still on her knees on the carpet, leaning sideways against the bed. Stan Yeres sat on the edge of the bed, his feet resting on the carpet. Gradually Shiao-Shiao's breathing returned to normal, and she rested her shoulder against Stan's legs. She could feel the sexual tension through the silk, and after the inexplicable energy between her and First Wife, it felt comforting. She understood it, and he understood it. She wanted him, and he wanted her. It belonged in normal universe.

First Wife began to recover. Soon she stood upright, her breathing deliberate and under control. She took an unsteady step forward and sat down on the bed next to Stan, who put his arm around her waist protectively. Shiao-Shiao could feel a faint hint of that energy, as if it passed between her and First Wife through Stan, like an electric current. Shiao-Shiao snaked her arm between his leg and the bed, wrapped it slowly around his leg, and leaned her breasts against the soft silk of his pajamas.

"Do you want to take her virginity?" he asked First Wife, mildly. Shiao-Shiao looked up, confused. How could First Wife – perhaps with a finger? The idea, which would have normally seemed relatively harmless, filled her with dread. She had barely been able to stand having their hands touch. Having First Wife's finger

inside her might make her head explode.

First Wife remained silent and still, contemplating. Silently, Shiao-Shiao prayed that Stan Yeres would do it himself. The idea of his manhood penetrating her, being inside her, frightened and thrilled her; the idea of First Wife inside her terrified her.

Nervously, she waited, while First Wife continued to say nothing. *Please let her say no. Please, please let her say no.* Finally, almost imperceptibly, she moved her head from side to side.

Relief flooded through her body, unclenching her tensed muscles. It would be okay. She and Stan would—

Mr. Yeres interrupted her thoughts. “Shiao-Shiao, you may return to your quarters.”

“What?” she blurted, stunned.

He looked at her formally. “Thank you for joining First Wife and myself this evening. Please return to your quarters, and have a good night.”

Stunned speechless, she stood up. Her underwear felt cold, wet, and slimy as she pulled it and her pants back on. She picked up her bra, and slowly clasped it, waiting and hoping to hear Stan telling her that he had been joking, that she just had to say, “How about just a little sex?” or some other absurdity. But the reprieve never came. She put on her blouse and buttoned it quickly. She hesitated at the door, giving him a bit of extra time to say something. Nothing. She opened the door, and walked back in a stunned trance.

She sat on her bed, knees curled up to her chin. Her cold, soaked panties felt disgusting, but she didn't change them, as if to punish herself for whatever she had done to deserve this. It was supposed to be her night, the night she became a woman, the night she gave him the priceless gift she could give only once. And he had, he had, he had...how could this have happened? He had called her beautiful. Even First Wife had agreed. Then why—

Someone knocked at the door. She ignored it. The knocking resumed, and she heard Marisa coyly calling “Shiao-Shiao,” as if her world could still have

happiness, as if her life had not just ended.

She managed the strength to whisper back, “Go away,” but the knocking continued. Louder she called, “Go away, Marisa.”

The lock clicked, and Marisa pushed the door open. She held an unfolded paperclip in her hand, and grinned impishly as she remarked, “These locks are a joke.” She flicked on the lights and her eyes widened with concern.

“Jesus, what the hell happened to you?” She closed the door behind her and sat down on the bed, next to Shiao-Shiao.

For a moment Shiao-Shiao sat silent and still. Then she shook her head. “I don’t want to talk about it,” she mumbled.

Marisa sidled closer, but not enough to touch her. “Did it hurt? He wasn’t rough – Stan is usually–”

Shiao-Shiao shook her head. “No it’s nothing like–”

“Oh no, was it anal – no? You didn’t throw up during oral sex or – you didn’t have your period during sex or”

“Stop,” Shiao-Shiao whispered as she pressed her palms against her eyes. “Please for God’s sakes stop. There was no sex.”

“What?” Marisa looked at her, nonplussed.

Shiao-Shiao stared at her knees. “There was no sex. He didn’t – he sent me away.”

“Oh God. Oh God, Shiao-Shiao, I’m so sorry.” Marisa’s seriousness only made her feel worse about everything. It was now officially horrible.

Marisa sniffed the air. She bent down and sniffed at Shiao-Shiao’s crotch. Shiao-Shiao lacked the energy to even respond.

“You smell fine – no yeast infection or anything. To be honest, you smell pretty good.” She took Shiao-Shiao’s arm in hers. “Let’s see...you aren’t a man, right?”

Despite everything, Shiao-Shiao couldn’t help giggling. “No.”

Marisa looked at her sternly. “And you *are* a virgin.”

Shiao-Shiao scowled. “Thanks for rubbing it in.”

“That’s not what I meant.” She touched the thigh of Shiao-Shiao’s pants. “Wow, when you get wet, you really get wet,” she teased. Then more seriously.

“You really wanted it, didn’t you.”

“Obviously.”

“I mean, because some people get nervous their first time. Ok, look, we have to get you out of those wet clothes and showered, or you *will* get a yeast infection.” Shiao-Shiao found she had the strength to swat Marisa’s leg. Marisa grinned back. “Ok, you shower, and I’ll pick your clothes. Then you’ll tell me everything.” Marisa stood up, grabbed her hand, and gently shoved her in the direction of the bathroom.

By the time she finished showering, she felt a bit better. Marisa had laid out pink cotton panties and a long royal blue silk nightshirt. Marisa actually turned away while she put on her underwear. But just as she started to slip on the nightshirt, she turned and commanded, “Stop. Wait. Don’t put that on.” Shiao-Shiao raised her eyebrows skeptically.

“I’m serious this time,” the redhead hurriedly insisted. “This is not just a way to spend more time looking at your tits, I promise. I’ll be right back.” She dashed out of the room.

She returned after a moment with a faded blue, almost white cotton t-shirt. She held it in front of her proudly.

On the front, faded lettering spelled out “Clearwater” above an almost invisible image that Shiao-Shiao could not begin to guess at. It was probably the single ugliest piece of clothing that Shiao-Shiao had ever seen.

“Ok, I know it doesn’t look like much,” Marisa patiently explained. “My older sister gave it to me one time when I was feeling depressed. Well, I sort of stole it, actually. But wearing it always makes me feel a bit better.”

She held it while Shiao-Shiao put it on. It felt worn, warm, and comfortable—a piece of Marisa’s family that smelled like childhood and safety. It felt like a comforting hug that promised that everything would be fine, that someone was there to look out for you, someone that would never leave no matter what. And then the tears began running down her cheeks, and Marisa embraced her, not caring that Shiao-Shiao’s tears were running down her neck or that her nose was

running on her shirt.

“Thank you,” Shiao-Shiao sobbed, looking up. “Thank you, Marisa.”

“Shhhhh,” Marisa kissed her gently on the forehead, and then full on the lips. Shiao-Shiao responded. It was not sexual, but a kiss of acceptance and comfort. Marisa wore some kind of lip gloss that tasted like a child’s candy, and the taste mingled with the saltiness of Shiao-Shiao’s tears. Marisa’s thin, wet, and warm tongue slipped into her mouth, and Shiao-Shiao let it glide against her own tongue. After a few moments, Marisa broke the kiss and pushed Shiao-Shiao’s head back down into the crook of her neck. She stroked Shiao-Shiao’s hair as she murmured, “It’s okay, beautiful. It’ll be okay.”

Shiao-Shiao cried until she had emptied herself of tears. She looked up shyly at Marisa, who smiled back and walked Shiao-Shiao to the bed.

“I’m going to get some tea,” she whispered. Then, a bit louder, she added, “You’ll need to be rehydrated after all that crying. And the – you know.” She nodded at the underwear and silk pants by the bathroom door. Shiao-Shiao managed a half smile.

A few minutes later, she huddled under the bedcovers next to Marisa, sipping the warm, lavender tea from a dark blue mug. She finished the mug, and then another, as she told Marisa the details of what had happened. Afterwards they placed the empty cups on the mahogany dresser and crawled back into bed. Marisa lay on her back, and Shiao-Shiao cuddled sideways against her, resting her head on Marisa’s arm.

Marisa turned her head towards Shiao-Shiao. “You know, sweetheart, I think there is more than we fully realize.” She pulled Shiao-Shiao closer. “And I don’t think he rejected you the way you think. Stan Yeres is a very careful man, at least about important things, and he never does anything until he understands the full consequences. I think that once he figures things out, he will devirginize you more than once.”

Shiao-Shiao cuddled closer, pressing herself against Marisa’s waiflike body. “That doesn’t make any sense, but thank you for saying it,” Shiao-Shiao replied.

Marisa grinned at her devilishly. “You have more than one hole to devirginize, my love.”

Shiao-Shiao rolled her eyes, and Marisa kissed her deeply before she could retort.

“Besides,” she added, pressing her forehead to Shiao-Shiao’s. “If it turns out that he doesn’t actually want you, then we’ll run away together, and elope.”

Shiao-Shiao found herself drifting into sleep. “You’re ridiculous,” she murmured. Marisa kissed her again, and she kissed her back sleepily.

She awoke to a bright, late morning sun. Marisa stood in the window, and Shiao-Shiao watched the sunlight glimmer in her fiery hair. “We have yoga in like half an hour,” Marisa announced, as she strolled towards the door. “Oh, also, since I’m letting you wear my shirt, I’m going to borrow something of yours.”

“Anything you want,” Shiao-Shiao replied, smiling groggily as she watched her.

“I was hoping you would say that,” Marisa grinned smugly as she waved Shiao-Shiao’s white underwear from the previous night.

“Hey, give that back,” protested Shiao-Shiao. “It’s dirty.”

“Not a chance,” Marisa replied, her hand on the door. “I’ll need it when I masturbate to you later on.” She turned and blew Shiao-Shiao a kiss as she strolled out the door.

5.

Shiao-Shiao avoided eye contact with everyone but Marisa the next day, half fearing that they would discover her secret shame if they looked into her eyes. Marisa brought lunch and then dinner into her room, to Shiao-Shiao's extreme gratitude.

The next day followed the same pattern, as did the next. By the end of the week, however, Marisa began forcing her to eat in the kitchen. When no one who looked at her discovered her secret, she began to relax around the other concubines again, and began to find their company enjoyable.

The secret, which still held her apart from the other concubines, brought her closer to Marisa. They spent almost every night in the same bed, but their friendship remained chaste. For all her talk, Marisa never went beyond a few deep kisses and the occasional quick fondle. Even when she tried to snake her hand underneath Shiao-Shiao's shirt, her attentions were merely playful, never sexual.

Shiao-Shiao and Marisa were not the same size – Shiao-Shiao had much larger breasts and butt than did the slender-hipped redhead, but they began sharing clothes anyway. Marisa had an easier time of it, but Shiao-Shiao felt comforted when she squeezed into Marisa's tighter clothes.

She snuck out of her room once in the middle of the night, just to see if she might run into Stan. But she came back into her room almost as soon as she left it, more afraid to see him than not.

Her desire, which had been so overwhelming the night she spent with Stan Yeres and First Wife, seemed to have vanished. She tried masturbating, but her body would not respond.

Great. Uncle Kai-Ming was afraid I would be turned into a whore. Instead I'm going to end up a frigid old maid.

Marisa showed her the new schedule of classes. A tai-chi/meditation class taught by a famous Buddhist monk caught her eye, but it was reserved for wives only. She ended up choosing the same classes as Marisa again.

One day Marisa bounded into her room, her face bright with excitement.

“Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God,” she bubbled. “You won’t believe it. Second Wife and Fourth Wife are getting married!”

Shiao-Shiao stared blankly. “Huh? To who?”

Marisa bounced down next to her on the bed. “To each other, obviously.”

“Ok, Marisa, I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about,” Shiao-Shiao stated, stretching her words out with deliberate patience to hide her exasperation. “Start at the beginning.”

“Right.” Marisa grabbed her hand. “Ok, see, wives and concubines can give each other gifts, and it’s no big deal, right? Like I can give you a necklace. For that matter I could even give a necklace to – ” She stopped herself before she could say “First Wife.”

Shiao-Shiao patted her knee. “It’s okay Marisa. I’m over it.”

Marisa looked her intently in the eyes. “Are you really?” she asked seriously.

Shiao-Shiao shook her head. “No. Not really. But it’s okay. I won’t start crying if you mention her name. So you were saying?”

“Oh right.” She bounced slightly on the bed. “Ok, so anyone can give anyone a gift. But some gifts are more meaningful.”

“Sentimental?”

Marisa shook her head. “No. Anything made with your own body, for example, is a much bigger deal.”

Shiao-Shiao grimaced. “Like what, a necklace of fingerbones?”

Marisa cocked her head, amused. “No, retard. It’s usually breastmilk.”

“Ohhh. That’s... well that’s something,” Shiao-Shiao replied, unsure of how to feel about that.

“Well, even that’s no big deal,” Marisa replied, grabbing Shiao-Shiao’s hands and interlacing their fingers. “When one of the wives is breastfeeding, she’ll usually let the other wives have a sip. Even a concubine, if she’s one of the wife’s favorites. But when you make something out of the breast milk, and give it as a formal gift, that’s considered symbolic.” She gave Shiao-Shiao’s hand a quick

squeeze. “Ok, but the ranking matters. If, for example, a lower ranked wife gives a gift to a higher ranked wife, she is showing extreme respect and deference. I mean, all the wives have given a small token like that to First Wife. But, when it goes the other way, it means a lot more. Basically, it means that the higher ranked person has given that kind of deference to a lower ranked person. It’s an act of extreme love, and it pretty much never happens.”

Shiao-Shiao tried unsuccessfully to extricate her hand. “And Second Wife gave a breast milk gift to Fourth Wife?”

Marisa gave her hand a quick peck. “Yup. Handmade milk chocolate. Then Fourth Wife formally accepted. So now they are married.”

“And so…”

“So a lot of things. They are now considered together. That means that Stan will sleep with them together or not at all.”

“He can’t have sex with just one of them?” Shiao-Shiao stroked the back of Marisa’s hand playfully with her fingertips.

“Well I suppose he technically could,” she replied. She let go of Shiao-Shiao’s hand, intertwined their bare arms, and interlaced their fingers again. “But he won’t. He respects the tradition way too much.”

Shiao-Shiao inclined her head. “What tradition? Since when?”

“It’s from a long time ago, love,” she replied, and kissed Shiao-Shiao’s hand softly. “Stan and First and Second Wife studied a lot of cultures before setting up, well, this,” she gestured expansively around the room. “It isn’t really that common in America anymore, so they had to start from history and imagination.” She leaned back to lie perpendicularly across the bed, pulling Shiao-Shiao with her.

Shiao-Shiao turned to face her. “So now they’re always together.”

Marisa nodded. “And it changes the rankings. Since she’s married to Second Wife, Fourth Wife is now technically ranked above Third Wife. Politics, you know. Stan will do what he usually does, which is treat Second, Third, and Fourth wife as equals. There won’t be arguments about rooms, since Fourth Wife has been sleeping in Second Wife’s room for about two years anyway.”

The politics were a pleasant distraction until Marisa revealed, "So anyway, that means we're going to have a formal banquet tomorrow."

Shiao-Shiao sat up, her heart pounding. That would mean facing First Wife and Stan again. "No," she whispered. "Marisa, I can't. You have to tell them I'm sick or something. I'm not ready to face them."

Marisa kissed her cheek gently. "Come on, sweetness. You have to face them eventually. You weren't planning to hide from them forever, were you?"

Shiao-Shiao leaned her cheek into Marisa's kisses. "Well, actually, that was pretty much my plan," Shiao-Shiao replied. "Damn. I have to go, don't I."

"Yup. And that means I can pick your clothes again!" Marisa bounded up and pranced to the closet.

The banquet buzzed with a more casually festive air than the one that welcomed her to the house, but the wives and concubines still dressed in formal evening gowns. The highest ranking guest of honor, Second Wife, had auburn hair and an aristocratic air that only First Wife's regality could surpass. From where Shiao-Shiao sat, her skin looked so smooth that it seemed almost plastic.

The exotic, raven-haired woman next to her had to be Fourth Wife. Shiao-Shiao guessed that she had some Middle Eastern or Indian blood, but her pale blue-green eyes hinted at other influences. Much later, Shiao-Shiao would learn that she had been born in the province of Kashmir, which India and Pakistan both claimed as their own.

First Wife sat at Stan's right across from Second Wife, but Shiao-Shiao studiously avoided looking in either her or Stan's direction. She made small talk with Marisa and Yeni, whom she sat between, and tried to make herself invisible as she ate and watched Second Wife and Fourth Wife hold hands and laugh together. They kissed playfully throughout the dinner, and put a few seductive kisses on Stan's cheek. Normally that wouldn't have been appropriate at a formal banquet, but they were married, in love, and the rules were a bit laxer tonight. Marisa had explained that they had spent the previous night together, and tonight they would be with Stan. Shiao-Shiao wondered what they felt when

they touched. It obviously wasn't the terrifying energy she had felt when she had touched First Wife. Was it something like what she felt when she touched Stan?

Why the hell am I thinking about that now? The last thing she needed was to start thinking about that and start crying. She forced herself back into the conversation around her with such a passion that she didn't even notice First Wife standing behind her, until First Wife tapped her on her bare shoulder.

"Shiao-Shiao, would you please sign this card for Second Wife and Fourth Wife?"

The fact that First Wife had made the request herself so startled Shiao-Shiao that it didn't hit her until she had signed the card and passed it to Marisa.

First Wife had touched her bare shoulder. And nothing had happened. No energy. No chemistry. No pain. No spark.

How? Inexplicably, she felt disappointed, and then relieved, and then confused. She had thought it was something innate and permanent. And now it had just vanished?

Maybe the touch hadn't been long enough. But the first time – it had been when their fingertips touched. Maybe she had to be aroused?

But why had First Wife come all the way to hand Shiao-Shiao the card directly? The other concubines were now passing it around. Why couldn't she have just passed it down the table?

It had to have been intentional. She had come just to touch her, just to see what would happen. She stole a glance at First Wife, who had returned to her seat and was now talking across the table to Second Wife. Something had subtly changed in First Wife's demeanor. It took Shiao-Shiao a few moments to recognize the look. It was subtle, but unmistakable. It was a look of triumph.

6.

A knock at her door the next day surprised her. No one ever visited her but Marisa, and she never knocked. She could bypass the lock on the door so easily that Shiao-Shiao no longer even bothered locking it.

A red and black uniformed servant stood at the door. “Miss Shiao-Shiao, First Wife requests your presence in her quarters at eight p.m.”

For a moment she stood silently stunned. “Yes, of course,” she finally replied numbly. “I will be there at eight.”

As soon as he left, she dashed over to Marisa’s room.

“Hmmm,” Marisa considered, her delicate fingers stroking her chin. “I’m not sure what to make of it. Maybe she wants you for sex. Or maybe to figure out about that energy—”

“It’s gone,” Shiao-Shiao interrupted. “At least, I am pretty sure it is.” She explained what had happened at the banquet the previous night.

“Hmm. Okay, first, go shower, while I pick out your clothes. Let’s see,” she muttered, tapping her chin. “Nothing green or white, since those are sort of *her* colors, and that might send a strange message. But not the opposite – ay! Why are you still here? Go shower!” She pushed Shiao-Shiao towards the bathroom and turned back to ponder the clothes.

She chose a deep blue silk set, with a subtle self-print visible in the reflection. The neckline showed the top of her cleavage, but the cut actually made her breasts look smaller.

After making sure the hallway was empty, she scampered nervously to the staircase, looking over her shoulder every few seconds to make sure no one was watching. Uneasily, she climbed the two flights of stairs until she had reached Stan’s floor, but followed the long marble corridor in the opposite direction. She passed door after door of polished woods of various colors, until she reached the pale birch door at the far end. She knocked twice at the hard, polished wood,