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Yehonala

It was April in the city of Peking the fourth month of the solar year of 1852 the third month of the moon year the two hundred and eighth year of the Manchu, the great Ching dynasty *Spring was late and the northern winds carrying* their load of fine yellow sand from the Gobi desert blew cold winter over the housetops Sand drifted down into the streets sand whirled in eddies and filtered through doors and windows It silted into corners and lay upon tables and chairs and in the crevices of garments it dried upon the faces of children when they wept, and in the wrinkles of old people

In the house of the Manchu Bannerman Muyanga in Pewter Lane the sand was more than usually tiresome for the windows did not fit tightly and the doors hung loose upon their wooden hinges On this particular morning Orchid his niece and the eldest child of his dead brother was wakened by the noise of wind and creaking wood She sat up in the large Chinese bed she shared with her younger sister and frowned when she saw the sand lying upon the red quilt like tinted snow In a moment she crept out softly from the bed clothes so that she might not awaken the sleeper Under her bare feet she felt the sand on the floor and sighed Only yesterday she had swept the house clean, and all was to be swept again as soon as the wind died

She was a handsome girl this Orchid, seeming taller than she was because she was slender and held herself erect Her features were strong but not coarse her nose straight her brows clear her mouth well shaped and not too small Her great beauty lay in her eyes They were long and large and exceedingly clear the black and the white pure

arate Yet such beauty might have been meaningless; for the natural spirit and intelligence that informed h ture being although she still was very young She was ea controlled her strength apparent in the smoothness of her movements and the calm of her manner

In the sand gray light of the morning she dressed herself swiftly and noiselessly and putting aside the blue cotton cur tains that served as a door she went into the main room and from that into the small kitchen adjoining it Steam rose from the large iron cauldron set into the earthen stove

Lu Ma, so she greeted the serving woman You are early this morning Self-control was in the extreme gentleness of her pretty voice held resolutely low

From behind the stove a cracked voice replied I could not sleep Young Mistress What shall we do when you leave us?

Orchid smiled The Emperor s Dowager Mother may not choose me—my cousin Sakota is far more beautiful than I am She looked behind the stove Lu Ma was crouched there feeding wisps of dried grass into the fire making the most of every blade of the scanty fuel

You will be chosen The old woman s tone was definite and sad and emerging at this moment from behind the stove looked desolate a small hunchbacked Chinese her blue tton garments faded and patched her bound feet stumps face shrunken into a net of brown wrinkles o ithined with le sand Sand lay on her gray hair and frosted her eyebrows and the edge of her upper lip

"This house cannot do without you she moaned Second Sister will not so much as sew a seam because you have al ways done everything for her Those two boys your bro wear out a pair of shoes apiece in every moon month And what of your kinsman Jung Lu? Are you not as good as be trothed to him since your childhood?

In a manner we are betrothed Orchid replied in the sam pretty voice She took a basin from the table and a iron ladle from the platform of the stove and dipped the h water from the cauldron Then reaching for a small gr tow el that hung on the wall she put it in the water a wringing it steaming dry she wiped her face and neck wrists and hands Her smooth oval face grew pink with

damp heat and she looked into the few inches of mirror that hung above the table There she saw only her extraordinary eyes lively and dark She was proud of her eyes although she never allowed a sign of pride to escape her When neighbor women spoke of her moth eyebrows and the leaf shaped eyes beneath them she seemed not to hear But she heard

"Aie the old woman said, staring at her I did always say that you have a destiny It is in your eyes We must obey the Emperor the Son of Heaven And when you are Empress my precious you will remember us and send down help

Orchid laughed soft controlled laughter I shall be only a concubine one of hundreds!

You will be what Heaven ordains the old woman declared She wrung the towel out of the water and hung it on its nail Then she lifted the basin and went to the door and poured the water carefully on the earth outside

Comb your hair Young Mistress she said. Jung Lu will come early this morning He said that today he might be the bearer of the golden summons

Orchid did not reply but she walked with her usual grace into her bedroom She glanced toward the bed Her sister was still sleeping the slight form scarcely rounded under the quilt Quietly she unwound her long black hair and combed it through with a Chinese wooden comb perfumed with the fragrant oil of a cassia tree Then she wound her hair in two coils over her ears and into each coil she put a small flower of seed pearls surrounded with leaves of thin green jade

Before she had finished she heard the footsteps of her kinsman Jung Lu in the next room and then his voice deep even for a man's voice asking for her For the first time in her life she did not go to him at once They were Manchu, and the ancient Chinese law and custom forbidding the meeting of male and female beyond the age of seven, had not kept them apart. She and Jung Lu had been playmates in childhood and cousin friends when childhood was past He was now a guardsman at the gates of the Forbidden City and because of his duty there he could not come often to Muyanga's house Yet he was always here on feast days and birthdays and at the Chinese feast of the Crack of Spring two months ago he had spoken to her of marriage

On that day she had neither refused him nor accep-

She had smiled her brilliant smile and she had said You must not speak to me instead of to my uncle"

We are cousins he had reminded her

Thrice removed she had rejoined

Thus she had replied without yes or no and remembering now what had passed on that day and indeed she thought of it always whatever she did she put aside the curtain There in the main room he stood tall and sturdy his feet planted well apart On another day he would have taken off his guardsman's round cap of red fox fur and even perhaps his outer tunic but today he stood as though he were a stranger holding in his hand a packet wrapped in yellow silk

She saw it at once and he knew she saw it They caught each other's thought, as always

He said You recognize the imperial summons"

It would be foolish not to know it she replied

They had never spoken with formal address nor used the courtesies and small talk of man and woman They knew each other too well

He said his eyes not moving from hers Is Muyanga my kinsman awake?'

She said not moving her eyes from his "You know that he does not rise before noon

Today he must rise Jung Lu retorted I need his signature of receipt as guardian in your father's place

She turned her head and called Lu Ma wake my uncle! Jung Lu is here and must have his signature before he returns to the palace

Aie yi the old woman sighed

Orchid put out her hand Let me see the packet

Jung Lu shook his head It is for Muyanga

She let her hand fall Yet I know what it says I am to go to the palace with my cousin Sakota nine days from now

His black eyes glowered under heavy brows Who has told you before me?'

She looked away from him her long eyes half hidden under the straight black lashes "The Chinese know everything I stopped yesterday on the street to watch their wandering actors They played *The Emperor's Concubine*—that old play but they made it new In the sixth moon on the twentieth day the play said, the Manchu virgins must appear before

the Dowager Mother of the Son of Heaven How many of us are there this year?"

Sixty" he said

She lifted her straight long lashes black above her onyx eyes I am one of sixty?"

I have no doubt that in the end you will be first he said

His voice so deep so quiet, went to her heart with prophetic force

Where I am" she said you will be near me That I shall insist upon Are you not my kinsman?"

They were gazing at each other again forgetful for the moment of all except themselves He said sternly as though she had not spoken I came here purposing to ask your guardian to give you to me for my wife Now I do not know what he will do

Can he refuse the imperial summons?" she asked

She looked away from him and then, her smooth grace accentuated she walked to the long blackwood table which stood against the inner wall of the room Between two high brass candlesticks under the painting of the sacred mountain of Wu T'ai a pot of yellow orchids bloomed

"They opened this morning--the imperial color It is an omen" she murmured.

Everything is an omen now in your mind" he said

She turned to him her black eyes bright and angry Is it not my duty to serve the Emperor if I am chosen?' She looked away from him and her voice lowered to its usual gentleness If I am not chosen certainly I will be your wife"

Lu Ma came in peering at one young face and the other "Your uncle is awake now Young Mistress He says he will take his food in bed Meanwhile your kinsman is to enter

She went away and they heard her clattering in the kitchen The house was beginning to stir The two boys were quarreling in the outer courtyard by the street gate In the bedroom Orchid heard her sister's plaintive call

Orchid--Elder Sister! I am not well! My head aches--"

Orchid Jung Lu repeated It is too childish a name for you now"

She stamped her foot. It is still my name! you stay? Do your duty and I will do mine"

She had smiled her brilliant smile and she had said "You must not speak to me instead of to my uncle

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ment Sakota too was wakeful Somewhere in the silent hours she had heard footsteps and recognized them

Sakota! she had cried

In the darkness her cousin's soft hand felt her face

Orchid I am frightened! Let me come into your bed

She pushed aside her younger sister lumpish in sleep and made room for her cousin Sakota crept in Her hands and feet were cold and she was trembling

"Are you not afraid?" she whispered cowering under the quilts against her cousin's warm body

No" Orchid said. "What can harm me? And why should you be afraid when your own elder sister was the Emperor's chosen one?"

"She died in the palace Sakota whispered "She was unhappy there—she was sick for home I too may die

I shall be there with you Orchid said She wrapped her strong arms about the slender body Sakota was always too thin too soft never hungry never strong

What if we are not chosen into the same class?" Sakota asked

So it had happened They were separated Yesterday when the virgins appeared first before the Dowager Mother of the Son of Heaven she chose twenty eight from the sixty Sakota because she was the sister of the dead princess was placed in P'ei the first class and Orchid in Kuei Jen the third

She has a temper the shrewd old Dowager said staring at Orchid Otherwise I would put her in the second class of P'in for it is not fitting to put her with the first class with her cousin and the sister of my daughter in law who has passed to the Yellow Springs Let her be in the third class for it is better if my son the Emperor does not notice her

Orchid had listened in seeming modesty and obedience Now a virgin only of the third class she remembered her mother's parting words Her mother was a strong woman.

A voice called through the sleeping hall, the voice of the chief tiring woman, whose task it was to prepare the virgins

"Young ladies it is time to rise! It is time to make yourselves beautiful! This is your day of good fortune

The others rose at once upon this summons did not Whatever the others did she would would be separate she would be alone. She lay

all but concealed beneath the silken quilt, and watched the young girls shivering under the hands of the women servants who came to attend them The early air was cool, the northern summer was still new and from the shallow wooden of hot ater the steam rose in a mist.

"All must bathe the chief turing woman commanded. She sat in a wide bamboo chair fat and severe accustomed obed enc

The young girls now naked stepped into the tubs and serving women rubbed their bodies with perfumed soap and washed them with soft cloths while the chief turing woman stared at each in turn Suddenly she spoke

"Twenty eight were chosen from the sixty I count only twenty seven She examined the paper in her hand called the names of the virgins Each virgin answered where she stood But the last one did not answer

"Yehonala! the old woman called again

It was Orchids clan name Yesterday before she left house Muyanga her uncle guardian had summoned her his library to give her a fathers counsel

She had stood before him and he not rising his large clad in sky blue satin and overflowing the seat of his easy chair gave his advice She felt an easy humor toward him for he was negligently kind but she did not love him for he loved no one being too lazy for love or hate

Now that you are about to enter into the City of the Emperor he said in his oily voice you must leave behind your little name Orchid From this day you will be called Yehonala

Yehonala! Again the chief turing woman shouted and still she did not answer She closed her eyes and pretended to be asleep

Has Yehonala escaped? the old woman called

A serving woman answered Mistress she lies in bed"

The chief turing woman was shocked. Still abed? And can she sleep?"

The servant went to the bed and looked She is sleeping"

"What hard heart is this? the old woman cried Waken her! Pull away the quilts pinch her arms!

The servant obeyed and Yehonala feigning to wake opened her eyes What is it?" she asked drowsily She sat

up her hands flying to her ch eks Oh—oh— she stamm ered, her voice as soft as that of a mourning dove How could I forget?"

"How indeed! the chief turing woman said, indignant Do you not kno v the Emperor s command? In two hours from now you must all be ready in the Audience Hall e ery vir gin at her best—t vo hours I tell you in which you must be bathed and perfumed and robed your hair coiled your break fast eaten

Yehonala yawned behind her hand How I slept! The mattress is m ch softer here than on my bed at home

The old woman snorted It can sc rcely be magin d that a mattress in the palace of the Son of Heaven would be as hard as your bed

So much softer than I imagined Yehonala said

She stepped upon the tile f floor her feet bare and strong The virgins ere all Manchu and not Chinese and their feet were unbound and free

Come come the chief turing woman sa d Hasten your self Yehonala! The others ar nearly dressed

Yes Venerable she said

But she did not hurry herself She allo ved a woman to undress her putting forth no effort to help he and h n she v as naked she stepped into the shallo v tub of hot wat r and would not lift her hand to wash her own body

"You! the woman said under her breath. Will you not help me to get you ready?

Yehonala opened her large eyes black and brilliant. What shall I do?" she asked helplessly

No one should guess that n her home there vas no servant except Lu M in th kitchen She had al vays b thed not only herself but her younger sister and brothers She had washed their clothes with her own and she had carried them as ba bies on her back, strapped there with broad bands of cloth while she went hither and thither helping her mother about the house and running often to the oil shop and the veg table market Her only pleasure was to stop on the ar watch a troupe of wandering Chinese actors

Muyang al ays kind allowed he to be
own children by the family tutor although the

sen ible fem ale creature" she announced Nevertheless after a moment she turned her head to whisper to one of the serv ing women Look at her great eyes! She has a fierce heart this one—"

The woman grimaced A tiger heart she agreed "Truly a tiger heart—

At noon the eunuchs came for them led by the Chief Eunuch An Teh hai He was a h ndsome still you thful fig ure wrapped in a long pale blue s tin robe girdled t the waist with a length of red silk His face was smooth the f a tures large the nose curved dow nward the eyes black and proud

He gave orders half carelessly for the virgins to pass b fore him and like a petty emperor he sat in a great carved cha r of blackwood and stared at e ch one as she passed se m ing at the same time to be only contemptuous B side him was a blackwood table upon which were placed his tally book, his ink brush and box

From u nd r her long eyel ds Yehon la watched him She stood apart from the other virg ns half hiding herself behind a curtain of scarlet satin hun g in a doorwa The Chief Eunuch marked with a brush and ink the name of each vir gin as she pas ed

"There is one not here he announced

Here am I Yehonal said She moved forward shyly her head bent her face turned away her voice so soft it could scarcely be heard

"That one has been late all d y the chief tur g woman said in her loi d voice She slept when the others rose She would not wash or dress herself and she has eaten enough food for a peasant woman—three bowls of millet she swal lowed down! Now she stands th re stupid I do not know wheth r she is a fool

"Yehonala the Chief Eunuch read in a h gh harsh voice "elde t daughter of the dead Bann rman Chao Guardian the B nn rman Muyanga She was egistered at the Northern Palace two years ago aged fifteen She is r ow seventeen

He l ft d h s head and sta ed at Yehonala stand ng him her head drooping modestly her eyes fixed on

Are you this very one?" he inquired

I am she Yehonala said

Pass on the Chief Eunuch commanded But his eyes followed her Then he rose and commanded the lower eunuchs Let the virgins be led into the Hall of Waiting When the Son of Heaven is ready to receive them I will announce them myself one by one before the Dragon Throne

Four hours the virgins waited The serving women sat with them scolding if a satin coat were wrinkled or if a lock of hair were loosened Now and again a woman touched a virgin's face with powder or painted her lips again Twice the virgins were allowed to drink tea

At noon a stir in distant courtyards roused them Horns sounded drums beat and a gong was struck to the rhythm of footsteps coming nearer An Teh hai the Chief Eunuch came again into the Hall of Waiting and with him were the lesser eunuchs among whom as one young and tall and lean and though his face was ugly it was so dark and so like an eagle's in its look that Yehonala's eyes were fixed upon him involuntarily In the same instant this eunuch caught her look and returned it with insolence She turned her head away

But the Chief Eunuch had seen Li Lien ying he cried sharply why are you here? I bade you wait with the virgins of the fourth class the Chang Tsai

Without a word the tall young eunuch left the hall

The Chief Eunuch then said "Young ladies you will wait here until your class is called First the Fei must be presented to the Emperor by the Dowager Mother then the Pin Only when these are reviewed and the Emperor's choice is made may you of the third class who are only Kuei Jen approach the Throne You are not to look upon the imperial face It is he who looks at you

None answered The virgins stood silent their heads drooping while he spoke Yehonala had placed herself last as though she were the most modest of them all but her heart beat against her breast Within the next few hours within an hour or less depending on the Emperor's mood she might reach the supreme moment of her life He would look at her appraise her weigh her shape and color and in that little moment she must make him feel her powerful charm

She thought of her cousin Sakota even now passing before the Emperor's eyes Sakota was sweetly simple gentle and

childlike Because she was the sister of the dead princess whom the Emperor had loved when he was prince it was all but sure that she would be among the chosen That was good She and Sakota had lived together since she was three years old when her father died her mother had returned to the ancestral home and Sakota had always yielded to her and leaned upon her and trusted her Sakota might even say to the Emperor My cousin Yehonala is beautiful and clever It had been upon her tongue that last night they slept together to say to her Speak for me— and then she had been too proud Sakota though gentle and childish had a child's pure dignity which forbade advance.

A murmur fluttered over the group of waiting virgins Someone had caught a whisper from the Audience Hall The Fei were already dismissed. Sakota had been chosen from among them to be the first Imperial concubine The P'in were few in number Another hour—

Before the hour was ended the Chief Eunuch returned It is now the time for the Kuei Jen he announced Arrange yourselves young ladies The Emperor grows weary

The virgins arranged themselves in procession and the tiring women put the last touches on hair and lips and eyebrows Silence fell upon all and laughter ceased One girl reached fainting upon a serving woman who pinched her arms and the lobes of her ears to restore her Inside the Audience Hall the Chief Eunuch was already calling their names and ages and each must enter at the sound of her name and her age One by one they passed before the Emperor and the Dowager Mother But Yehonala the last drifted away from her place as though forgetfully to pet a small palace dog who had come running through an open door The creature was a sleeve dog, one of those minute beasts that Court ladies keep half starved in puppyhood and dwarfed enough to hide within a wide embroidered sleeve At the door the Chief Eunuch waited

"Yehonala! he called

The tiring women had already scattered and she was left alone playing with the dog She had almost deceived that indeed she had forgotten where she was and held back the dog's long ears and laughed into face no larger than the palm of her own hand Sh

of these little dogs that looked like lions but no commoner was allowed to keep them and she had never seen one until now

Yehonala! An Teh hai s voice roared into her ears and she stood up quickly

He rushed at her and seized her arm Have you forgotten? Are you mad? The Emperor waits! He waits I tell you—why you deserve to die for this—

She wrenched herself loose and he hurried to the door and shouted out her name again Yehonala daughter of the Bannerman Chao now deceased, niece of Muyanga of Pewter Lane! Her age seventeen years three months and two days—

She entered without noise or affectation and walked slowly down the length of the immense hall, her long Manchu coat of rose red satin touching the tip of her embroidered Manchu shoes set high on white soles and center heels Her narrow beautiful hands she held folded at her waist, and she did not turn her head toward the Throne as she passed slowly by

Let her pass again the Emperor said

The Dowager Mother stared at Yehonala with unwilling admiration I warn you, she said this girl has a fierce temper I see it in her face She is too strong for a woman"

She is beautiful," the Emperor said

Still Yehonala did not turn her head. The voices fell disembodied upon her ears

What does it matter if she has a temper? the Emperor now inquired She can scarcely be angry with me

He had a youthful petulant voice thin and boyish in its quality His mother s voice answering him was full and slow wise with age

It is better not to choose a strong woman who is also beautiful," she reasoned "There is that other one Pou Yu whom you have seen in the class of Pin A sensible face good looks but—"

A coarse skin, the Emperor said rebelliously "Doubtless she had smallpox as a child In spite of the powder on her face I saw its marks

Yehonala was now directly in front of him Stay he commanded her She stopped, her face and body in profile her

head lifted, her eyes gazing into distance as though her heart were somewhere else

"Turn your face to me he commanded

Slowly as though indifferent she obeyed In decency in modesty in all that she had been taught, a virgin does not fix her eyes higher than a man's breast Upon the Emperor she should not look higher than his knees But Yehonala looked full into his face and with such concentration that she saw the Emperor's eyes shallowly set beneath youthful scanty eyebrows and through her own eyes she poured into his the power of her will He sat immobile for a long instant Then he spoke

"This one I choose

If you are chosen by the Son of Heaven," her mother had said serve first his mother the Dowager Mother Let her believe that you think of her day and night Learn what she enjoys seek out her comfort, never try to escape her She has *not many years to live There will be plenty of years left for* you"

Yehonala remembered these words On that first night after she had been chosen she lay in her own small bedroom within the three rooms given her to use An old tiring woman was appointed by the Chief Eunuch to be her servant Here she must live alone except when the Emperor sent for her That might be often or never Sometimes a concubine lived within the four walls of this imperial city virgin until she died forgotten by the Emperor unless she had means to bribe the eunuchs to mention her name before him But she Yehonala would not be forgotten When he was weary of Sakota, to whom indeed he owed a duty he might, he must think of her Yet would he remember? He was *accustomed to beauty* and even though their eyes had met could she be sure that the Son of Heaven would remember?

She lay upon the brick bed, made soft by three mattresses and considered. Day by day she must now plan her life and not one day could be wasted, else she might live solitary a virgin forgotten She must be clever she must be careful and the Imperial Mother must be her means She would be useful to the Dowager Empress *affectionate unfailing in* constant attentions And now beyond this she w

be taught by tutors She knew already how to read and write thanks to her uncle s goodness but her thirst for real learning was never satisfied Books of history and poetry music and painting the arts of eye and ear these she would ask to be taught For the first time since she could remember she had time to possess for her own leisure in which to train her mind She would care for her body too eat the best meats rub her hands soft with mutton fat perfume herself with dried oranges and musk, bid her serving woman brush her hair twice daily after her bath These she would do for her body that the Emperor might be pleased But her mind she would shape to please herself and to please herself she would learn how to brush characters as scholars do and to paint landscapes as artists do and she would read many books

The satin of her bedquilt caught on the roughened skin of her hands and she thought I shall never wash clothes again or fetch hot water or grind meal Is this not happiness?

Two nights she had not slept In the last night in their home when she and Sakota had lain awake talking and dreaming and she comforting the gentle one and again in the last night with the waiting virgins who could sleep? But tonight all fears were over She was chosen and here in these three rooms was her little home They were small but luxurious the walls hung with scrolls the chair seats covered with red satin cushions the tables made of blackwood and the beams overhead painted in bright design The floors were smoothly tiled and the latticed windows opened into a court and upon a round pool where goldfish shone under the sun Her woman servant slept on a bamboo couch outside her door She had no one to fear

No one? The narrow evil face of the young eunuch Li Lien ying appeared suddenly against the darkness Ah the eunuchs her wise mother had warned her of the eunuchs—

"They are neither men nor women They destroy themselves as men before they are allowed to enter into the Forbidden City Their maleness stemmed and denied turns evil in them It becomes malice and bitterness and cruelty and all things vile Avoid the eunuchs from the highest to the lowest Pay them money when you must. Never let them see that you fear them.

"I will not fear you," she said to the dark face of Li Li n ying

And suddenly because she was afraid, she thought of her kinsman Jung Lu She had not seen him since she entered the palace Then always bold, she had moved as de the cur tain of her sedan chair an inch or two as it approached the great vermilion gate Before them the imperial guardsmen stood in yellow tunics their broad swords dra n and held upright before them At the right, next to the central gate Jung Lu stood tallest among them all He gazed straight ahead into the swarming cro vds of the street and not by the slight est sign did he let her know that to him one sedan was differ ent from another Nor could she make a sign Half wounded she had put him out of mind No and she would not think of him even now Ne ther she nor he could knov when they might meet again Within the walls of this Forbidden City a man and a woman might li e out their lives and ne er meet.

Yet why had she thought of him suddenly wh en she re-membe ed the dark face of the eunuch? She sighed and wept a few tears surprised that she did and she ould not inquire into her elf to know the cause of her tears Then being young and very weary she slept.

The vast old palace library was cool even in midsummer At noon the doors were closed against the outdoor heat and the glittering sun shone dimly through the shell l ttices No sound d sturbed the stillness e cept the low murmu of Yeho nala s voice as she read aloud to the aged eunuch who was her tutor

She was reading from *The Book of Changes* and absorbed in the cadences of its poetry she did not notice that her tutor was silent too long Then, glanc ng upward as she turned a page she saw the old scholar asleep his head sunk upon his breast his fan slipping from the loosened fingers of his right hand The corner of her mouth twitched in a half smile and she read on steadily to herself At her feet a little dog slept. It was her own given her by the Imperial Keeper when she sent her serving woman to beg for a pet to mend her loneli ness

Tv o months now she had been in the palace and she received no summons from the Emperor She had not

her family not even Sakota nor had Jung Lu come near Since she had not left the gates she had not passed him as he stood on duty In this strange isolation she might have been unhappy except for her busy dreams of the days to come Some day some day she might be Empress! And when she was Empress she would do as she liked If she wished she could summon her kinsman into her presence for a purpose any purpose such as the bearing of a letter to her mother

I put this letter into your hands myself she would say and you are to bring back a letter from her in reply

And none but they two would know whether the letter was for her mother But her dreams waited upon the Emperor and meanwhile she could only prepare herself Here in the library she studied each day for five hours with her tutor the eunuch who held the highest degrees of scholarship In the years when he was still a man he had been a famous writer of eight legged essays and poems in the T'ang style Then because of his fame he had been commanded to become a eunuch in order that he might teach the young prince now the Emperor and after him the ladies who were to become his concubines Among these some would learn and some would not and none the old tutor declared learned as Yehonala did He boasted of her among the eunuchs and gave good reports of her to the Dowager Mother so that one day when Yehonala waited upon her the Dowager Mother even commended her for industry

"You do well to learn the books she said My son the Emperor wearies easily and when he is weak or restless you must be able to amuse him with poetry and with your painting

And Yehonala had inclined her head in obedience

At this moment while she mused upon a page she felt a touch upon her shoulder and turning her head she saw the end of a folded fan and a hand that she had come to know at sight a large smooth powerful hand It belonged to the young eunuch, Li Lien ying She was aware and had been aware for weeks that he was determined to be her servant It was not his duty to be near her he was only one among many of the lesser eunuchs but he had become useful to her in many small ways When she longed for fruits or sweets at

was he who brought them to her and through him she heard the gossip of the many halls and passageways the hundreds of courts of the Forbidden City Gossip she must hear for it was not enough for her to read books she must know also every detail of intrigue and mishap and love within these walls To know was to acquire power

She lifted her head her finger on her lips her eyebrows raised in question He motioned with his fan that she was to follow him into the pavilion outside the library Silently his cloth soled shoes noiseless upon the tiles he led the way and she followed until they were beyond danger of rousing the sleeping tutor The little dog waking, followed her without barking

I have news for you," Li Lien ying said He towered above her his shoulders immense his head square and large his features roughly shaped and coarse a figure powerful and crude She might have been afraid of him still except that now she allowed herself to be afraid of no one

What news?" she inquired

"The young Empress has conceived!

Sakota! She had not once seen her cousin since they entered the gates together Sakota was Consort in her dead sister's place while she Yehonala was only a concubine Sakota had been summoned to the Emperor's bed and she had fulfilled her duty If Sakota bore a son he would be heir to the Dragon Throne and Sakota would be raised to the place of Empress Mother And she Yehonala would still be only a concubine For such small price would she have cast away her lover and her life? Her heart swelled and all but burst against her ribs

Is there proof of the conception?" he demanded

"There is he replied Her waiting woman is in my pay This month for the second time there was no show of blood"

"Well?" she asked Then her life long control took hold. No one could save her except herself Upon herself alone she must now depend But fate might be her savior Sakota might give birth to a girl There would still be no heir until a son was born whose mother would then be raised to Empress

And I might be that mother she thought Upon the glimpse of sudden hope her brain grew calm her heart grew still

"The Emperor's duty to his dead lady is done" the went on Now his fancy will wander

She was silent It might fall upon her!

You must be ready he went on My reckoning is that within six or seven days he will think of a concubine.

How do you know everything? she asked half fearful in spite of her will not to fear

"Eunuchs know such things he said, leering down into her face

She spoke with dignity You forget yourself before me

I offend you he said quickly I am wrong You are always right I am your servant your slave

She was so solitary that even though he was frightening she compelled herself to accept his assurance "Yet why she now inquired do you wish to serve me? I have no money with which to reward you"

It was true that she had not a penny of money Daily she ate of the most delicate dishes for whatever the Dowager Mother left was given to the concubines and there was abundance of every variety of food The chests in her bedchamber were filled with beautiful robes She slept between silken quilts and she was waited upon day and night by her woman Yet she could not buy so much as a handkerchief or a packet of sweets for herself And she had not seen a play since she entered the Forbidden City The Dowager Mother was still in mourning for the dead Emperor T'ao Kuang her son's father and she would not allow even the concubines to enjoy themselves in a play and this lack made Yehonala more lonely than the loss of her family All her life whenever her tasks were heavy her mother scolding her days without joy she had escaped to watch the actors playing on the streets or in the courtyard of a temple If she had a penny by chance she saved it for the play and if she had none then slipped away before the basket was passed among the crowd.

Do you think I ask for gifts? Li Lien ying said "Then you misjudge me I know what your destiny is You have a power in you that is in none of the others Did I not perceive it as soon as my eyes fell upon you? I have told you When you rise toward the Dragon Throne I will rise with you always your servant and your slave

She was shrewd enough to know how skillfully he used her beauty and her ambition for his own ends while he knit the ties of obligation between himself and her If ever she reached

the throne and surely she would some day he would be there to remind her that he had helped her

"Why should you serve me for nothing?" she asked indifferently No one gives without thought of return

"We understand each other" he said and smiled

She looked away "Then we can only wait" she said

"We wait" he agreed and bowed and went away

She returned to the library very thoughtful, the little dog padding after her The old tutor still slept and she sat down in the chair she had left and began once more to read. And everything was as it had been before except that her heart, in this short space of time was no more the soft heart of a virgin She had become a woman bent upon her destiny

How could she now consider the meaning of ancient poetry? Her whole mind was playing about the moment when she would be summoned And how would the summons come? Who would bring the message? Would she have time to bathe and perfume her body or must she hasten as she was? The imperial concubines gossiped among themselves often and when one had gone and come back again, the others questioned to the last shred of memory to know what had passed between her and the Emperor Yehonala had not questioned but she had listened Better to know!

"The Emperor does not wish you to talk," a concubine had said Once she had been the favorite but now she lived forgotten, in the Palace of Forgotten Concubines with others whom the Emperor had not loved for long or else who were the aging concubines of his dead father Though she was not yet twenty four years of age this concubine had been chosen and embraced and rejected For the rest of her life she would live neither wife nor widow and since she did not conceive she had not even the solace of a child She was a pretty woman, idle and empty talking only of the one day when she had lived in the private palace of the Emperor That brief story she told again and again as the new concubines waited to be chosen

But Yehonala listened and said nothing She would divert the Emperor She would amuse him and tease him and sing to him and tell him stories weaving every bond between them of mind as well as flesh She closed *The Book of Changes* put it aside There were other books forbidden books I

of the Red Chamber Plum Flower in a Golden Vase White Snake—she would read them all commanding Li Lien ying to bring them to her from bookshops outside the walls if she could not find them here

The tutor waked suddenly and quietly as the old do waken the difference for them between sleep and awakening being so slight He watched her without moving

How now? he asked *Have you finished your portion?*

It is finished she said And I wish for other books story books tales of magic something to amuse me"

He looked stern and he stroked his hairless chin with a hand as dry and withered as a dead palm leaf Such books poison the thoughts especially of females" he declared You will not find them here in the Imperial Library no there is not one among all the thirty six thousand upon these shelves Such books ought not even to be mentioned by a virtuous lady"

Then I will not mention them she said playfully

And stooping she gathered the little dog into her sleeve and went away to her own chamber

What she had known in the afternoon of one day was by the next day known everywhere Mouth to ear the gossip flew from courtyard to courtyard and excitement rose like wind In spite of his Consort and his many concubines the Emperor had never had a child and the great Manchu clans were restless If there were no heir then an heir must be chosen from among them and princes watched each other closely guarding themselves and their sons jealous of where the choice might fall Now since Sakota the new Consort had conceived they could only wait If she had a daughter instead of a son the strife would begin again

Yehonala herself belonged to the most powerful of these clans and from her clan three Empresses had already risen Should she not be a fourth? Ah if she were chosen if she could conceive immediately if she had a son and Sakota but a daughter the path of destiny would be clear indeed—too clear perhaps for who had such good fortune that one step could lead so swiftly to another? Yet all was possible

In preparation she began from that day on to read the memorials that came from the Throne studying every word

of the edicts the Emperor sent forth Thus she might inform herself concerning the realm and so be ready if ever the gods willed to send her forward And slowly she began to comprehend the vastness of the country and its people Her world had been the city of Peking wherein she grew from child to maiden She knew her ruling race the Manchu clans who from their invading ancestors had seized and held the power over a mighty people who were Chinese Two hundred years the northern dynasty had built its heart here in the imperial city its red walls four square inside the capital The Emperor's City it was called, or the Forbidden City for he was its king its solitary male and he alone could sleep here at night At twilight the drums beat in every lane and cranny to warn all men to depart The Emperor remained alone among his women and his eunuchs

But this capital this inner city so she now comprehended was but the ruling center of a country eternal in its mountains rivers lakes and seashores In the endless numbers of its cities and villages in the hundreds of millions of its various people its merchants farmers scholars its weavers artisans smiths and innkeepers men and women of every sort craft and art Her bright imagination flew from the gates of her royal prison and traveled everywhere that her eyes led upon the printed pages of her books From the imperial edicts she learned yet more She learned that a mighty rebellion was rising in the south the hateful fruit of a foreign religion These Chinese rebels called themselves T'ai P'ing and they were led by a fanatic Christian surnamed Hung who imagined himself an incarnated brother of the one called Christ, son of a foreign god by a peasant woman This birth was not strange for in the ancient books were many such stories A farm wife could tell of a god who came before her in a cloud while she was tilling the field and by magic he impregnated her so that in ten moon months she bore a godly son Or a fisherman's daughter though still a virgin would tell how a god came up out of the river while she tended her father's fishing nets and by his magic she was impregnated But under the Christian banner of T'ai Ping rebels the restless and the discontents were gathering themselves and unless they were quelled, these men might even overthrow the Manchu dynasty T'ao Kuang had been a weak emperor

so now was his son Hsien I eng whom the Dowager Mother commanded as though he were a child.

Through the Dowager Mother then Yehonala must find her access and she made it her daily duty to wait upon the elder lady appearing with a choice flower or a ripe fruit plucked from the imperial gardens

It was now nearly the season of summer melons and the Dowager Mother loved very well the small yellow fleshed sweet melons that grow on dung heaps where in the spring the seeds are sown Yehonala walked daily in the melon rows and searched for the first sweet melons hidden under the leaves Upon those most nearly ripe she pasted bits of yellow paper brushed with the name of the Dowager Mother so that no greedy eunuch or woman servant would steal them Every day she tested the melons with her thumb and forefinger and one day seven days after Li Lien ying had told her of the news concerning Sakota she heard a melon sound as empty as a drum It was ripe and she twisted it from its stem and carrying it in both hands she went to the courtyards of the Dowager Mother

Our Venerable Mother is asleep" a serving woman said She was jealous of Yehonala because the Dowager Mother favored her

Yehonala raised her voice Is the Dowager Mother sleeping at this hour? Then she must be ill It is long past the hour when she wakes—

She had when she wished a thrush clear voice that carried through several rooms Now it reached the ears of the Dowager Mother who was not sleeping but sat in her bedroom embroidering a gold dragon upon a black girdle which she wished to present to her son There was no need for her to do such work but she could not read and she liked to embroider She heard Yehonala's voice and since she was growing weary of her needle which she soon did she put it down and called

Yehonala come here! Who says I am sleeping is a liar!

Yehonala made a coaxing smile for the serving woman who frowned No one says you sleep Venerable she called in reply It is I who heard it wrong"

With this courteous lie she tripped through the rooms holding her melon until she reached the bedchamber of the Dow-

ager Mother where the old lady sat in her undergarments because of the heat, and to her she presented the melon with both hands

Ah the Dowager Mother cried and I sat here thinking of sweet melons and wishing for one and you come at the very moment!

Let me bid a eunuch hang it in one of the northern wells to cool it" Yehonala said

But the Dowager Mother would not allow this No no" she argued if this melon falls into the hands of a eunuch he will eat it secretly and then when I send for it he will bring me a green one or he will say the rats have gnawed it or it has fallen into the well and he cannot get it up I know those eunuchs! I will eat it here and now and have it safely in my belly

She turned her head and shouted to any serving woman who was near Fetch me a large knife!

Three or four women ran for knives and in a moment they were back and Yehonala took a knife and sliced the melon delicately and neatly and the Dowager Mother seized a piece of it and began to eat it as greedily as a child, the sweet water dripping from her chin.

"A towel Yehonala said to a serving woman and when it was put in her hand she tied it about the old lady's neck to keep her silken undervest from soiling

Save half of it" the Dowager Mother commanded when she had eaten as much as she could "When my son comes to present himself this evening as he always does before I sleep I will give it to him But it is to stay here beside me or one of those eunuchs will snatch it

"Let me— Yehonala said

And she would not allow a serving woman to touch the melon She called for a dish and placed the melon into it and then she called for a porcelain bowl and this she placed over the melon and the dish was set into a basin of cold water All this trouble she took that the Dowager Mother might mention it to the Emperor when he came and so her name would fall somewhere into the Emperor's hearing

While she worked in such ways Li Lien ying worked in his also He bribed the menservants in the Emperor's private courts to watch their lord and when the monarch

restless his eyes moving this way and that after a woman the eunuch bade them speak the name of Yehonala

Thus in one way and another it was done and the very day after the presentation of the melon Yehonala found in the pages of her book when she opened it in the library a sheet of paper folded small Upon it were written two lines in rude handwriting They said

"The Dragon awakes again
The day of the Phoenix has come"

She knew who had written the words Yet how did Li Lien ying know? She would not ask him What he did to fulfill her purposes must be secret even from herself and quietly she read her books while the old tutor eunuch slept and woke and slept again until hours passed But this was the day when she received her usual painting lesson in midafternoon and she was glad for her mind diverted here and there and she could not keep her thoughts upon the calm words of a dead sage Upon painting she must keep her mind fixed for her teacher was a woman not yet old and very exacting She was Lady Miao a widow a Chinese whose husband had died in youth Since it was not usual for Chinese ladies to appear in the Manchu Court this lady was allowed to unbind her feet to comb her hair high as Manchu ladies do and to put on Manchu robes so that at least she looked a Manchu and she was thus permitted because she was perfect in her art She came of a family of Chinese artists for her father and her brothers were artists too but she excelled them all especially in the painting of cocks and chrysanthemums and she was employed to teach the concubines her art Yet she was so skilled and impatient that she would not teach a concubine who had no will to learn or no talent Both will and talent Yehonala had and when Lady Miao discovered this to be so she devoted herself to the proud young girl although she continued insistent and severe as a teacher Thus she had not as yet let Yehonala paint anything from life Instead she compelled her to study ancient woodcuts and the prints of dead masters so that she might engrave upon her mind the strokes they made, the lines they drew the colors they mixed After

such study she allowed Yehonala to begin to copy and still forbade her to work alone

This day Lady Miao arrived as usual upon the exact hour of four There were many clocks in the Imperial Library gifts of foreign envoys in past centuries and so many in the palace that it was the entire duty of three eunuchs to keep them wound This Lady Miao however looked not at the foreign clocks but at the water clock at one end of the hall She did not like foreign objects for she said they disturbed the calm needful for painting

She was a slight and almost beautiful woman the smallness of her eyes being her defect Today she wore a plum colored robe and upon her hair combed high the beaded headdress of the Manchu A eunuch followed her and he opened high chest and took from it brushes and colors and water bowls Meanwhile Yehonala rose and remained standing in the presence of her teacher

Be seated be seated Lady Miao commanded

She seated herself so that Yehonala could also sit Now Yehonala saw from yet another window the vast country and its people at whose center she lived and the art of centuries stretched out before her as her teacher spoke from the most famous of Chinese artists Ku K'ai-chih living fifteen centuries before this day Especially did she love the paintings of the early artist for he painted goddesses riding above clouds their chariots drawn by dragons And he made pictures of imperial palaces painted on a long hand roll of silk upon which the Imperial Ancestor Ch'en Lung had set his private seal a hundred years ago and had written with his own hand these words "The picture has not lost its freshness The scroll was eleven feet long nine inches wide the color brown, and of the nine royal scenes it portrayed Yehonala's favorite was the one wherein a bear breaking free from gamers to amuse the Court rushed toward the Emperor and a lady threw herself across its path to save the Son of Heaven This lady Yehonala thought was like herself Tall beautiful and bold she stood with folded arms and fearless looks before the beast while guardsmen ran forward with their outthrust spears And yet there was another scene she pondered on the Emperor and his Empress and their two sons Ma tutors stood beside these boys and all was family w

life the younger boy so mischievous grimacing and rebellious while a barber shaved his crown that Yehonala laughed to see him Such a son she would have too if Heaven willed

But today s lesson was of Wang Wei a physician born thirteen centuries ago who gave up his ancestral skills and turned poet and artist

"Today Lady Miao was saying in her sharp silvery voice "you will study these sketches by Wang Wei Observe the bamboo leaves so delicately drawn against the dark rocks Observe the plum blo soms mingled with chrysanthemums

She allowed no conversation that had not to do with paint ing and Yehonala always docile in the pr sence of her teach ers listened and observed Now she spoke

"Is it not strange that plum blossoms and chrysanthemums are upon the same page? Is this not to confuse the seasons?"

Lady Miao was not pleased It is wise not to mention confusion when speaking of Wang Wei, she said If t master wishes to place plum blossoms among chrysanthe m ums this is to convey a meaning It is not a mistake Con sider that among his most famous paintings is the one of banana leaves under snow Can it be possible that snow lies upon banana leaves? If Wang Wei paints it then it is possible Pray meditate upon its poetry Some declare Wang Wei more poet than painter I say his poems are paintings his paintings poems and this is art To portray a mood and not a fact— this is ideal art"

While she talked she mixed the colors choosing brushes while Yehonala watched You will inquire why I ask you to copy the work of Wang Wei the lady said I wi h you to *learn precision and delicacy You have power But power* must be informed and controlled from within Then only ma it be genius

"I would ask my teacher a question Yehonala said

"A k" Lady Miao replied She was brushing fine quick strokes upon a large sl eet of paper spread upon a square table which the eunuch had brought to her side

"When may I paint a picture of my own?" Yehonal a asked

Her teacher held her hand poised for an instant an d cast a sidelong look from her narrowed eyes When I can no longer command you

Yehonala did not reply The meaning was clear When

was chosen by the Emperor then Lady Miao could not com mand her for then no one could command her save the Em peror himself She would be raised too high for any other to be above her She took up her brush and began carefully to copy plum blossoms among chrysanthemums

Sometime in the night she did not know the hour she was wakened by hands shaking her shoulders She had not been able to sleep early and when at last her eyes had closed she had fallen deeply into sleep Now she came up from a well of darkness and struggling to open her eyes she heard the voice of her serving woman

"Wake wake Yehonala! You are summoned! The Son of Heaven calls—

She woke instantly Her mind leaped to alertness She pushed back the silken quilts and stepped down from the high bed

I have your bath ready the woman whispered Quick—get into the tub! I have poured perfume into the water I have put out your best robe—the lilac satin—

Not lilac Yehonala said I shall wear the peach pink"

Other women were coming into the chamber waked from their sleep and yawning the dressing woman, the hairdresser and the keeper of the jewels Concubines were not given im perial jewels until they were summoned

Yehonala knelt in her bath and her woman soaped her body well and washed away the foam

Now step out upon this towel the woman said I'll rub you dry The seven orifices must be perfumed the ears especially—the Emperor loves a woman's ears You have small and beautiful ears But do not forget the nostrils—and the privacies I must attend to myself

To all such ministrations Yehonala submitted without a word Haste—haste was the necessity The Emperor was awake he was drinking wine and eating small hot breads filled with flavored meats The news was brought again and again to the door by Li Lien ying

Do not delay he hissed in a hoarse voice through the curtains If the one he wants is not ready then he will call for another His dragon's temper is easily roused, I can tell you

"She is ready" the serving woman cried She thrust two jeweled flowers behind Yehonala s ears and pushed her out the door

Go my precious my pet she whispered

Oh my little dog Yehonala cried. The small creature was at her heels

No no Li Lien ying shouted "You may not take your dog!

But Yehonala suddenly afraid stooped and gathered the minute beast into her arms

I will take him she cried and stamped her foot

No! Li Lien y ng bellowed again

Oh Lord of Hell the serving woman roared in distraction let her take the dog you piece of cobbler s wax! If you cross her she will refuse to go and where are we all then?'

Thus it was that Yehonala went to the Emperor at midnight bearing in her arms h r little lion her toy dog and from th t day on Li Lien ying who was indeed apprentic d to a cobbler before he cut himself into a eunuch was nicknamed Cobbler s Wax by those who feared and hated him

In the dark softness of the summer night Yehonala followed Li Lien ying through the narrow passageways of the city He held an oiled paper lantern and the candle within it threw a dim circle of light to guide her Behind her came her serving woman The stones upon which they walked were damp with dew and this dew like l ght hoar frost lay upon the small weeds between Silence surrounded them except that somewhere a woman wailed

Though she had never been to the Emperor s palace yet Yehonala knew as did every concub ne that it was n the heart of the Forbidden City in the midst of imperial gardens and in the shadows of the triple shrine the Tower of Rain and Flowers whose roofs were upheld by pillars of gold circled with dragons In this shrine stood three altars where the Emperor worshipped the gods alone and so all emperors had worshipped since the time of the great K ang Hsi and the gods protected them

She passed the shrine and came to the gate of the entrance courtyard of the Emperor s private palace It opened silently before her and the eunuch led her through a vast inner courtyard and into a great hall and through this hall again by

passageways silent and empty except for watchful eunuchs until at last she reached high double gates carved with golden dragons Here the Chief Eunuch An Teh hai himself stood waiting, a tall and splendid figure his proud face set his arms folded. His long robe of purple brocaded satin girdled about the middle with gold glittered in the light of the candles flaring in high candlesticks of carved and polished wood. He did not speak to Yehonala or make a sign of recognition as she came near but by a gesture of his right hand he dismissed Li Lien ying who fell back in deference

Now suddenly the Chief Eunuch saw the head of the toy dog peering out from Yehonala's sleeve "You may not take the dog into the Emperor's bedchamber he said sternly

Yehonala lifted her head and fixed her great eyes upon him "Then I will not enter either she said

The words were brave but she spoke them in a soft indifferent voice as though she did not care whether she entered or did not

An Teh hai looked his surprise Can you defy the Son of Heaven?" he demanded

She made no reply and stroked the little dog's smooth head with her other hand

Elder Brother Li Lien ying now said, this concubine is very troublesome She speaks like a child but she is more fierce than a female tiger We all fear her If she does not wish to enter it is better to send her home Truly it is not worth while to compel her for her mind is more stubborn than a stone

A curtain behind An Teh hai was now pulled aside with a jerk and a eunuch's face thrust itself out. It is asked why there is delay he cried. It is asked if he himself must come and settle affairs!

Elder Brother let her go in with the dog Li Lien ying urged She can hide it in her sleeve If the beast is a nuisance it can be taken away and given to the serving woman who will set here outside the door

The Chief Eunuch scowled, but Yehonala continued to gaze at him with her great eyes wide and innocent and what could he do but yield? He grunted and quarreled under his breath but he yielded and again she followed through yet another room at one end of which hung thick satin

imperial vellow with dragons embroidered in scarlet silk Be hind them were heavy doors of carved wood The Chief Eu nuch put the curtains aside he opened the doors and motioned to her to enter This time she went alone The curtains fell behind her and she stood before the Emperor

He sat upright in the huge imperial bed upon a raised platform This bed was of bronze the pillars of bronze and upon them were carved climbing dragons From the top of these pillars connected by a framework of bronze there hung nets of gold thread woven into patterns of fruits and flowers among curling five clawed dragons The Emperor sat upon a mattress covered with yellow satin and his legs were covered by a quilt of yellow satin embroidered in dragons and behind him were high cushions of the same yellow satin to support him as he sat erect He wore a bed shirt of red silk sleeved to his wrists and high about his neck and his smooth slender hands were folded She had seen him only the once when he chose her and then he wore his royal headdress Now his head was bare and his hair was short and black His face was long and narrow sunken beneath forehead too full and overhanging They gazed at each other man and woman and he motioned to her to come near She walked to him slowly her eyes fixed on his face When she was near she stopped again

"You are the first woman who ever came into this chamber with her head lifted" he said in a high thin voice "They are always afraid to look at me"

Sakota she thought Sakota had surely come in with her head drooping Where was Sakota? In what room did she sleep not far away? Sakota had stood here submissive frightened speechless

"I am not afraid" Yehonala said in her soft definite voice "See I have brought my little dog"

The forgotten concubines had told her how to address the Son of Heaven One must never speak before him as though he were only a mortal—Lord of Ten Thousand Years the Highest the Most Venerable these were the words of address But Yehonala behaved toward the Emperor as though he were a man

She stroked the little dog's smooth head again and looked down "Until I came here" she said "I have never had a dog

like this I used to hear about lion dogs and now I have one for my own"

The Emperor stared at her as though he did not know what to say to such childish talk

Come sit on the bed beside me" he commanded her "Tell me why you are not afraid of me

She stepped up on the platform and sat on the edge of the bed, facing him and she held her little dog The small c ea ture sniffed the perfumed air and neezed and she laughed What is this perfume at which my dog sneezes?" she in quired.

It is camphorwood the Emperor said But tell m why you are not afraid

She felt his eyes were upon her sea ching her f ce l er lips her hands as she stroked the little dog a d she trem bled with sudden chill though it was midsummer and the dawn wind had not yet risen She bent her head agai as if to see the dog then she forced herself to look up at the man and she forced herself to speak sweetly and shyly and still as though she were a child

I know my destiny she said

And how do you kno v your destiny?" he dem nded He began to be amused, his thin lips curving upw ard his shad owed eyes less cold

When I was summoned from my home sh s d in the same shy sweet voice I went into the court of my uncle s house who is my guardi n because my father is dead and I went to the shrine that stands bene th the p megranate tree there and I prayed to my goddess the Kuan Yin I lit the incense and then—

She paused her lips quiv red she tried to smile

And then?" the Empe or inquired his heart enchanted by the b autiful face so soft so young

"There was no wind that day she said "The smoke from the burn ing incense rose straight heavenward from the altar It spread into a fragrant cloud and in the cloud I saw a face—

A man s face he repe ted

She nodd d her head, as a child nods when she is to speak.

"Was it my face?" he asked
Yes Majesty she said Your imperial face!"

Two days two nights and she was still in the royal bed chamber Three times he slept and each time she went to the door and beckoned to her serving woman and the woman came creeping through the curtains to the boudoir beyond There the eunuchs had prepared a ready bath a cauldron of water upon coals so that the woman needed only to dip the water into the vast porcelain jar and make her mistress fresh again She had brought clean garments and different robes and she brushed Yehonala s hair and coiled it smoothly Not once did the young girl speak except to give direction and not once did the serving woman ask a question Each time when her task was done Yehonala went in again to the imperial bedroom and the heavy doors were closed behind the yellow curtains

Ins de that vast chamber she sat upon a chair near the window to wait until the Emperor woke What had been done was done She knew now what this man was a weak and fitful being possessed by a passion he could not satisfy lust of the mind more frightful than lust of the flesh When he was defeated he wept upon her breast This this was the Son of Heaven!

Yet when he woke she was all duty and gentleness He was hungry and she sent for the Chief Eunuch and bade him bring the dishes that his sovereign enjoyed And she ate with the Emperor and she fed the l ttle dog with bits of meat and released him now and then into the courtyard outside the window When the meal was over the imperial man commanded his Chief Eunuch once more to draw the curtains over the window and hide the sunlight and he bade them leave him alone and not come unless summoned nor would he meet his ministers that day or the next and not until he felt inclined

An Teh hai looked grave Majesty evil news has come from the south for T'ai P'ing rebels have seized the half of another province Your ministers and princes are impatient for audience"

I will not come" the Son of Heaven said peevishly and fell back upon his pillows

The Chief Eunuch then could but leave the room

Bar the doors the Emperor commanded Yehonala

So she barred the doors and when she turned to him again he was staring at her with fearful and unsatisfied desire

Come here" he muttered I am strong now The meats have made me strong

Again she must obey This time it was true that he was strong and then she remembered something the ladies who lived in the Palace of Forgotten Concubines had told her in their gossip They said that if the Emperor delayed too long in his bedchamber a powerful herb was mixed in his favorite dish which gave him sudden and unusual strength Yet so dangerous was this herb that he must not be roused too far for then exhaustion followed so extreme that it could end in death

On the third morning this exhaustion fell The Emperor sank into half fainting silence upon his pillow His lips were blue his eyes half closed he could not move his narrow face set slowly into a greenish pallor which upon his yellow skin made him seem dead In great fear Yehonala went to the door to summon help Before she could call she saw An Teh hai the Chief Eunuch approaching expecting the summons

Let the Court physicians be immediately called" she commanded

She looked so proud and cold her great eyes so black, that An Teh hai obeyed

Yehonala returned to the bedside The Emperor had fallen asleep She looked down on his unconscious face and suddenly she longed to weep She stood there shivering in the strange chill which had fallen upon her again and again in these two days and three nights and she went to the door and opened it enough to let her slender body through Outside it her serving woman sat nodding on a wooden stool weary with waiting and Yehonala put her hand on her shoulder and shook her gently

Where is your little dog?" the woman asked

Yehonala stared at her unseeing I put it in the courtyard some time in the night—I forget

Do not mind the woman said, pitying her Come with me—take your old woman's hand—

And Yehonala let herself be led down the narrow passageways It was dawn and the rising sun shone upon the rose red walls along the way and thus she came again to her solitary home And while the serving woman made herself bustling and busy she talked to comfort her mistress

They are saying everywhere that never has a concubine stayed so long with the Son of Heaven Even the Consort spent only a night with him at one time That eunuch Li Lien ying says that you are the favorite now You have nothing more to fear"

Yehonala smiled but her lips trembled "Do they say so? she said and she held herself straight and moved with her usual smooth grace

Yet when she was bathed and clothed in sleeping robes of softest silk in her own bed though the curtains were drawn the serving woman gone away she fell into shivering and deathly chill Silent she must be so long as she lived for to no one could she speak Oh there was none for what friend had she? She was alone and never had she dreamed of such loneliness as now was hers There was not one—

Not one? Was Jung Lu not still her kinsman? He was her cousin and the ties of blood cannot be broken She sat up in her bed and dried her eyes and she clapped her hands for her serving woman

"What now?" the woman asked at the door

"Send to me the eunuch Li Lien ying" Yehonala commanded her

The serving woman hesitated Upon her round face the doubt was plain enough

"Good mistress she said do not be too friendly with that eunuch What can he do for you now?"

But Yehonala was stubborn Something that only he can do" she said

The woman went away still doubtful to find the eunuch who came in great haste and elation

"What what my lady Phoenix?" he inquired when he came to her door

Yehonala put the curtain aside She had dressed herself in a dark and somber robe and her face was pale and grave Beneath her eyes were shadows but she spoke with high dignity

"Bring to me here my kinsman" she said, "my cousin-brother Jung Lu

"The Captain of the Imperial Bannermen?" Li Lien ying asked surprised

"Yes she said haughtily

He went away wiping the smile from his face with his sleeve

She let the curtain fall and heard the eunuch s footsteps go away When she had the power she told herself she would raise Jung Lu up so that no one not even a eunuch could dare to say the guardsman She would make him at least a duke a Grand Councilor perhaps And while she cherished these thoughts in her mind she felt such a yearning arise in her heart that she was frightened for herself What could she want of her kinsman except the sight of his truthful face the sound of his firm voice while he told her what now she should do? Oh but she was wrong to send for him, for could she tell him what had befallen her in these two days and three nights and how she was changed? Could she say to him that she wished she had never come to the Forbidden City and beg him now to help her to escape? She let herself sink to the floor and she leaned her head against the wall and closed her eyes A strange pain deep in her vitals swelled up into her breast She hoped he would not come Vain hope for she heard his footsteps He had come instantly he was at the door and Li Lien ying was calling through the curtain

Lady your kinsman is here!

She rose then and without thinking to look at her face in the mirror Jung Lu knew her as she was There was no reason to be beautiful for him She went to the curtain and put it aside and he was there

Come in cousin she said

Come out, he said We must not meet inside your chamber"

Yet I must speak with you lone she said, for Li Lien ying waited his ears outstretched and greedy

But Jung Lu would not come in and so she was forced to leave her chamber and when he saw her face how white it was and how pale were her lips and dark her eyes he concerned for her and he went with her into the

and she forbade the eunuch to follow there Only her serving woman stood on the steps nearby so that it could not be said that she was alone with a man even her cousin

Thus she could not touch his hand nor allow him to touch hers sorely as she longed for his touch She moved as far from the door as she could and she sat down upon a porcelain garden seat under a clump of date trees at the far end of the courtyard

"Seat yourself" she said

But Jung Lu would not sit down He stood before her as straight and stiff as though he were only a guardsman by the Emperor's gate

"Will you not sit down?" she asked again and looked up at him with pleading in her eyes

"No" he said "I am here only because you sent for me"

She yielded "Have you heard?" she asked so softly that a bird upon a branch above her could not have known what she said

"I have heard" he said not looking at her

"I am the new favorite

"That too I have heard"

It was all told in these few words and what more was there to be said, if he would not speak? She kept looking at his face the face she knew so well comparing it with that thin narrow sickly face upon the imperial pillow This face was young and handsome the dark eyes large and powerful the mouth set full and firm above the strong chin Here was a man's face

"I have been a fool" she said

He did not answer this What could be answered to it?

"I want to go home" she said

He folded his arms and looked carefully above her head into the trees

"This is your home" he said

She bit the edge of her lower lip "I want you to save me"

He did not move If one watched him he would have said that Jung Lu stood subordinate to the woman who was seated there under the date trees But he let his eyes slide down to her lovely uplifted face and in those eyes she saw his answer

"Oh my heart, if I could save you, I would. But I cannot.

The heavy pain inside her vitals suddenly eased "Then you do not forget me!

"Night and day I do not forget, he said

"What shall I do?" she asked

"You know your destiny he said "You chose it"

Her lower lip quivered and tears shone silver in her black eyes

"I did not know how it would be she faltered

"There is no undoing what is done" he said. No going back, no being what you were"

She could not speak Instead she bent her head to keep the tears from running on her cheeks and she dared not wipe them lest the eunuch lurked near enough to see

"You have chosen greatness he said in her silence "Therefore you must be great

She sw allowed down her tears and still d d not dare to lift her head Only on your promise she said, her voice small and trembling

"What promise?" he said

"That you will come when I s nd for you she said "I must have that safety and that comfort. I cannot be always alone

She saw the sweat start out on his forehead as the sunlight fell through the tre s upon his face I will come to you when you call" he said not moving If you must then send for me But do not send unl ss you must I will bribe this eunuch —a thing I have never done before—to bribe a eunuch! It puts me in his power But I will do it

She rose I have your promise she said

She gave him one long look and held her hands hard clasped together so that she could not put them forth to him

"You understand me?" she asked

I do he said

"It is enough she said and passing him she left him there and went directly to her chamber Behind her the curtain fell again

For s ven days and seven nights Yehonala would not leave her bed The palace corridors ere busy with whispers that she was ill that sh e was angry that she had tried to swallow her gold earrings that she would not yi ld again to the

told her what was going on and how Yehonala although she knew her power would not obey the Emperor

"I have never heard of such a woman in all our dynasty the Dowager Mother exclaimed with energy Let the eunuchs take her by force to my son!

The Chief Eunuch hesitated Venerable he said I question this method. She must be won and persuaded for I do assure you, Venerable that she cannot be forced She is so strong being both taller and heavier than the Son of Heaven though slender as a young willow tree that she will not hesitate to bite him or scratch his face when they are alone

"What horror! the Dowager Mother exclaimed She was old and she had an illness of the liver and spent much of her time in bed and was indeed now lying in the recesses of a bed so large that she seemed to be looking from a cave

She pondered "Is there no one inside the palace who can persuade her?" she inquired

"Venerable the Consort is her true cousin" the Chief Eunuch suggested

The Dowager Mother remonstrated It is not usual for the Consort to urge a concubine upon her own lord the Emperor"

Neither usual nor proper Venerable" the Chief Eunuch agreed

The old lady remained silent for so long that he thought she had fallen asleep But she had not She lifted her sunken eyelids after a time and she said "Well then let this Yehonala go to the Consort's palace

"And if she will not go Venerable?" the Chief Eunuch inquired

"How—if she not go?" the Dowager demanded

"She has refused to go to the Son of Heaven himself An Teh has reminded her

The Dowager Mother groaned I tell you I have never seen so fierce a female! Well, then the Consort is gentle Suggest to her that Yehonala is ill and should be visited

"Yes Venerable" the Chief Eunuch said These were the instructions he wanted and he rose to obey Sleep in peace Venerable he said

Go away the Dowager Mother replied "I am too old the troubles of men and women"

He went softly as she fell asleep and he went at once to the palace of the Consort and there found Sakota embroidering tiger faces upon a pair of shoes for her child when it should be born

When he had been announced and presented he exclaimed upon this work

Does the Imperial Consort not have many women to embroider for her?' he asked

I have Sakota replied But then I myself have nothing to do I am not clever like my cousin Yehonala. I do not wish to study books or learn painting"

Ah" he said standing before her With a gesture of her little hand she now bade him sit Upon the middle finger of this hand was her thimble a ring of gold at the second joint

It is about your cousin that I come before you Lady he went on still standing "and at the command of the Dowager Mother"

She lifted her pretty eyes Oh?'

The Chief Eunuch coughed Your cousin gives us much trouble"

Indeed?" Sakota said

She will not obey the imperial summons he went on

Sakota's little head drooped over her embroidery and she blushed as pink as a peach blossom "Yet I heard--my women told me--

She has won the Emperor's favor" he agreed "but she will not return to him.

The peach blossom pink deepened 'What has this to do with me?" Sakota asked

"It is thought that she might listen to you the Consort he suggested

Sakota pondered this embroidering slowly and with the utmost delicacy about the yellow eye of the tiny tiger on the shoe "Is this a proper request to make of me?" she inquired at last

The Chief Eunuch was blunt Indeed it is not Lady You must all of us remember that the Son of Heaven is not common man He is not to be refused by anyone"

"He likes her so much! Sakota murmured

Can she be blamed?" he asked in reply

The little creature sighed and folded her embroidery and

put it on the inlaid table near her Then she put her hands together We have always been sisters she and I" she said in her sweetly plaintive voice If she needs me I will go to her"

"Thank you Lady" the Chief Eunuch said. I will escort you there myself and wait for your return

So it happened that Yehonala lying on her bed that same day tearless and in despair looked up and saw her cousin standing in the doorway By now she felt she hated all her life and she was sorry that she had chosen greatness for she did not wish such greatness when she knew the price of it.

Sakotal she wailed and held out both her arms

Sakota flew to her at once melted by such a cry and the two young women clasped each other and wept mutual tears Neither dared to speak of what both remembered and Sakota knew that the memory was as hateful to her as it was ò Yehonala

"Oh poor Sister she wept. "Three nights! I had only one"

I will not return to him Yehonala whispered She all but strangled her cousin so tightly did she hold her by both arms around the neck and Sakota sank down into the bed.

Oh Sist r but you must! she cried Else what will they do to you my dear? We are not our o n now

The Yehonala always whispering because of the listening eunuchs revealed her heart Sakota it is worse for me than you. You love no man do you? Alas I know now that I do love Here is the misery! If I did not love I could be careless What is a woman s body? It is only a thing to be kept or given away There is no pride in it when one does not love It is only priceless when one loves—and is loved again"

She had no need to speak the name Sakota knew it was Jung Lu

It is too l te Sister" Sakota said She stroked Yehonala s smooth wet cheeks "There is no escape now Sister

Yehonala pushed her hands away "Then I must die she said her voice breaking for truly I will not live." And she put her head down on her cousin s shoulder again and wept

Now this little Sakota had the soft heart of a w whom is only gentleness and so while she soothed Y

with her hands stroking her forehead and her cheeks she plotted in her heart as to what she could do to help her To leave the palace or even the Forbidden City was not possible If a concubine escaped there was no place for her in the kno n world If Yehonala returned to her uncle s house, who was Sakota s father then the whole family might be killed for her sin Yet where else can a runaway woman hide? If she mingles with strangers do they not all inquire to know who she is for is it not told everywhere with noise and commotion if a concubine runs from the palaces of the Dragon Emperor? Whatever h lp whatever comfort must be found only with in the walls themselves Intrigue there was a plenty and though no man could sleep within the walls of this city at n ght save only the Son of Heaven nevertheless v omen had their lovers by day

Yet ho v could she the Imperial Consort stoop to bargain w th eunuchs and so put herself in their power? She cou not do this Not only fear but delicacy too forbade

Dear Cousin she said hiding her thoughts you must speak with Jung Lu Ask him to tell my father that you can not st y where you are Perhaps my father can buy you free or exchange you for some other one or he can say you have gone mad Not now you understand Cousin for indeed I hear that our lord is much in love with you But later Cousin when your turn is over and another takes your place perhaps it can be done

Sakota said this innocently for she loved no man and was not jealous but Yehonal felt a prick of pride What was she to be displaced? If Sakota said this then it must be that she had heard it already murmured among the women and the eunuchs She sat up in bed and pushed her tumbled hair away from her face

I cannot ask my kinsman to come to me—you know that, Sakota! Gossip would flare from court to court But you may send for him Sakota He is your kinsman too Send for him and tell him I will surely kill myself Tell him that I care nothing for anyone only to get myself free again Here is a prison Sakota—we are all in prison!

I am happy enough, Sakota said mildly It is pleasant here I think!

Yehonala turned her eyes sidewise on her cousin "You

happy anywhere—so long as you can sit in peace and embroider bits of satin!"

Sakota's eyelids fell and her small mouth curved down. "What else is there to do Cousin?" she asked sadly

Yehonala flung back her hair and caught it in one hand and twisted it into a great knot behind her head "There—there—there—" she cried It is what I am saying! There is nothing to do—I cannot go on the street I cannot so much as put my head outside the gate to see if there is a play at the corner I have not seen one play since I came here and you know I have ever loved to see a play My books yes—my painting? Well I paint For whom? Myself! It is not enough—not yet! And at night—

She shivered and drew up her legs and laid her proud head down upon her knees

Sakota sat silent for a long moment Then knowing that she had no comfort for this young and stormy woman whom indeed she could not understand since not by storm can a woman change what she is born she rose

Cousin my dear she said in her most coaxing voice I will go away now so that you can be bathed and dressed and then you must eat some food something you like And I will send for our kinsman and you must not refuse to see him if he comes for it will be because I have so decided for your sake And if there is gossip then I will say that it is I who bade him come

She put her hand so lightly on Yehonala's head still bent on her knees that it felt no heavier there than a leaf and then she went away

When she was gone Yehonala flung herself back upon her pillows and lay stone still her eyes open and staring into the canopy above her A fantasy wove itself in her mind a dream a plan a plot possible only if Sakota protected her Sakota who was the Imperial Consort, whom no one could accuse

When her serving woman peered in, afraid to speak or call Yehonala turned her head

"I will have my bath now she said "And I will put on something new—say my green robe the apple green then I will eat

"Yes yes my queen, my pet," the woman

pleased She let the curtains fall and Yehonala heard her feet trotting down the corridors hastening to obey

Sometime in the afternoon of that day two hours before the curfew fell when all men must leave the Emperor s city Yehonala heard the footsteps for which she waited She had spent the day alone in her own rooms after Sakota left her forbidding the entrance of anyone Only her serving woman sat outside the door To her Yehonala said honestly

I am in sore trouble My cousin the Consort knows my woe She has commanded our kinsman to come to me to hear me and to carry my trouble to my guardian uncle While he is here you are to stay by the door You are not to enter nor let anyone so much as peer into my court You understand that it is by the Consort s command that he comes

Lady I do understand the woman said

Thus the hours had passed she at the door and Yehonala inside the closed door behind the dropped curtain She sat idle in body but her mind was exceedingly busy and her heart was in turmoil Could she prevail upon Jung Lu to forsake his rectitude? It was her will so to prevail

He came at last two hours before the curfew She heard his footsteps the firm pace measured to his height She heard his voice inquiring whether Yehonala slept and her woman s reply that she waited for him

She heard the door open and close and she saw his hand that large smooth hand she knew so well lay hold upon the inner curtain and hesitate She sat rigid in her chair of carved black wood waiting and motionless Then he put the curtain aside and stood there looking at her and she looked at him. Her heart leaped in her breast a thing alive and separate from her and tears welled to her eyes and her mouth began to quiver

Whatever she could do this that she did shook all his will. He had seen her weep in pain and he had heard her sob with rage but he had never seen her sit motionless and weep without a sound helplessly as though her very life were broken

He gave a great groan and his arms went out to her and he strode across the floor And she seeing only those outstretched arms rose blindly from her chair and ran to him

and felt them enclose her fast Thus locked together in silence and in fearful ecstasy they stood how long neither knew Cheek to cheek they stood until their lips met by instinct Then he tore his mouth away

You know you cannot leave this place he groaned "You must find your freedom here within these walls for there is no other freedom for you now

She listened hearing his voice from afar knowing only that within his arms she held him

"The higher you rise he told her the greater will your freedom be Rise high my love—the power is yours Only an Empress can command

But will you love me?" she asked her voice stifling in her throat

"How can I not love you?" Thus he replied "To love you is my only life I draw my breath my every breath to love you"

"Then—seal me your love!

These were the bold words she spoke but in so soft a whisper that he might not have heard them except she knew he did. She felt him motionless then he made a sigh She felt his shoulders shiver and his muscles loosen and his bones yield

If once I am made yours she said barely even here I can live"

No answer yet! He could not speak. His soul was still not yielded

She lifted her head and looked into his face "What does it matter where I live if I am your? I know you speak the truth There is no escape for me except by death Well I can choose death It is easy in a palace—opium to swallow my gold earrings a little knife to open my veins—can I be watched day and night? I swear I will die unless you make me yours! If I am yours I will do what you say—forever and my whole life long I will be Empress

Her voice was magic, lovely with pleading deep and soft and gentle warm and sweet as honey in the summer sun Was he not a man? He was young and fervent still virgin because he had loved no one but her whom he now held within his arms They were prisoners trapped by old way of life jailed within the imperial palace He was no

free than she was Yet only she could do what she would. If she said she would be Empress then none could hold her back And if she chose death then she would die He knew her nature And would he not devote his life to help her live? And h d not Sakota herself imagined some such scene as this when she had bade him come here? At the last moment the Consort had laid her hand on his arm and she bade him do all he could— whatever Yehonala asks —those were Sakota s very words

His soul s voice was stilled he felt his conscience die and he lifted the beautiful girl in his arms and carried her to the bed

The drums of curfew beat th o igh the courtya ds and the corridors of the city of the Son of Heaven It was the hour of sunset when every man must be gone from w thin the walls The ancient command fell upon the e s of lovers hidden deep within the secret rooms and in Yehonala s bed chamber Jung Lu rose and drew h s garments about him while she lay half asleep and smiling

He leaned over her Are we sworn?' he asked

Sworn she put up her arms and drew his face down to hers again Forever forever!

Th drums died down and he made haste and she rose quickly and smoothed her robes and brushed back her hair When her woman coughed at the door she was sitting in her chair

"Enter she said and she took her handkerchief and pre tended to wipe her eyes

"Are you weeping again lady?" the woman asked

Yehonala shook her head I am finished weeping" she said in a small voice "I know what I must do My kinsman has made me see my duty"

The woman stood peering and listening head to one side like a bird s

"Your duty lady?" he repeated

When the Son of Heaven summons me" Yehonala said, "I shall go to him I must do his will

The heat of summer lingered late in the Forbidden City One brilliant day followed upon another the p laces stood in the living light of the naked sun and no rains fell So hot

was the stillness of high noon that princesses and Court ladies eunuchs and concubines went to the caves in the imperial gardens and there spent the hours of the full heat These caves were built of river rock brought from the south upon barges floating up the Grand Canal The rocks were shaped by men s hands yet so cunningly contrived that they looked worn by winds and waters Crouching pine trees hung over the entrances to these caves and inside them hidden fountains dripped down the walls and made pools where goldfish played In the coolness the ladies did embroidery heard music or played at gambling games

But Yehonala did not enter the caves She was now always busy at her books always smiling silent more often than speaking as she studied her books Seemingly her rebellion was forgotten When the Emperor summoned her she allowed herself to be bathed and dressed afresh and she went to him His favor did not falter and this compelled her prudence for waiting concubines grew restless for their turn and Li Lien ying contended among the eunuchs to keep himself her chief servant Yet if Yehonala knew of strife she did not let it be known that she knew unless it could be guessed from her faultless courtesy to all and from her careful obedience to the Dowager Mother Each day when she awoke she went first to the Dowager Mother to inquire of her health and happiness The old lady was often ill and Yehonala brewed herbs in the tea to soothe her and if she were restless she rubbed the withered feet and hands and soothed the Dowager by brushing her white scanty hair in long and even strokes No task was too small or too low for Yehonala to perform for the Dowager Mother and soon all perceived that the handsome girl was not only the favorite of the Son of Heaven but of his mother too

Thus Yehonala knew how eagerly the Dowager Mother waited for the birth of Sakota s child and it was part of Yehonala s duty daily to accompany the Dowager Mother to the Buddhist temple and wait while she made prayers and burned incense before the gods beseeching Heaven that the Consort might have a son Only when this was done did Yehonala return to her own chosen tasks which were as ever in the library reading and studying under eunuchs who were scholars of learning music and sh

herself in learning how to write with the camel's hair brush after the style of the great calligraphers of the past

Meanwhile she had a secret or thought she did until one day her woman spoke out It was a usual day the air cooler at night and morning than it had been but still hot at noon Yehonala slept late for she had been summoned by the Emperor the night before as many nights she had been summoned and always she obeyed

Mistress the woman said when she entered the bedroom on this day and closed the door carefully behind her have you not marked that the full moon has come and gone and you have no show of crimson?"

Is it so?" Yehonala asked as if she did not care Yet how greatly did she care and how closely she had observed her own person!

It is so the woman said proudly The seed of the Dragon is in you lady Shall I not carry the good news to the Mother of the Son of Heaven?"

"Wait Yehonala commanded "Wait until the Consort has borne her child If he is a son does it matter what I bear?"

But if she bears a daughter?" the woman inquired cunningly

Yehonala threw her a long teasing look Then I will tell the Dowager Mother myself she said "And if you tell even my eunuch she said and made her eyes big and fierce then I will have you sliced and the strips of your flesh hung up on poles to dry for dogs food

The woman tried to laugh I swear by my mother that I will tell no one But who her pale face asked could know when this concubine too beautiful too proud might turn teasing into truth?

While the Court waited then upon the Consort, each concubine woke in the morning to ask if there were news and the princes and the Grand Councilor Shun before they entered the Audience Hall at dawn demanded from the eunuchs whether the birth was begun And still Sakota's child was not born In his own anxiety the Emperor commanded the Board of Astrologers to study the stars again and to determine from the entrails of freshly killed fowls whether his child would not be a son Alas they saw confusion Th

signs were not clear The child might or might not be a son It was even poss ble that the Consort would give birth to twins boy and girl in which misfortune the girl must be killed, lest she sap the life of h royal brother

The autumn deepened and the Court phy icians grew anxious for the health of the Consort She as worn with waiting her frailty much increased because th child ould not be born ar d she could not eat or sleep Once Yeho ala went to see her but Sakota ould not receive he She was too ill the eunuch in attendance said She should see no one And Yehonala went away in doubt Illne s? Ho could S kota be too ill to see her own cousin sister? For the first time she wished Sakota did not know th t Jung Lu had come to her in private True she knew no more but even to know so little put a weapon in Sakota s hand—a we k hand that might be used by a tronger one as yet unknown Al is she knew by now that intrigue was everywhere th oughout the palaces and she must be strong enough to break th ough its me hes Never once again not for an hour would she put a weapon of secret knowledge into another s hand

The days went on each lo ig and all om ns were dire Evil news came from everywhere throughout the Empire The long haired Chinese ebels in the south had seized the southern capital Nanking and many peopl had b en killed So ferocious were those rebels that the impe al sold ers could not win a single battle And as a furthe sign of evil trange swift winds blew down upon the c ty comets c ossed the skies at night and in many places rumors ro e that women gave birth to twins and monsters

On the last day of the eighth moon month th e appe red at noon a thunderstorm which chang d itself into a typhoon more fit for southern seas than for the dry northern plains upon wh ch th e city stood Even the elders h d ne er seen such l ghtning nor he rd such crashing oaring thunder and hot winds blew f om the south as though devils rode upon the clouds When rain fell at last it c me not in a gentle downpour upon the dried fields and dusty streets but in such floods and l shings and fury that torrents ate th earth away Whether from fright or deep despair Sakota upon that day felt the pains of birth begin inside he body and no s did she cry out than the news spread everywhere th

the palaces and all stopped whatever they were doing to wait and hear

At this hour Yehonala was in the library and at her usual books The sky had grown so dark that eunuchs lit lamps and by her lamp she was writing under the eye of her tutor as he read aloud an ancient sacred text for her to copy Thus he read

Chung Fung the minister of the House of Chi asked for advice upon the art of government The Master said Learn above all how to use your subordinates Overlook their lesser weaknesses and raise up only those who are honest and able

At this moment Li Lien ying appeared at the curtain and behind the tutor's back he made signs to Yehonala whose meaning she understood at once She laid down her brush and rose

Sir" she said to her tutor I must hasten to the Dowager Mother who has sudden need of me

Long ago she had planned what she would do when Sakota was in labor She would go to the Dowager Mother and stay with her soothe her and amuse her until it was known whether the birth was of a female or a male Before the tutor could reply she had left the library and was walking ahead of the eunuch toward the Dowager Mother's palace The lightning darted above the treetops and the courtyards sprang into livid light as she went and through the roofed passageways the wind blew the rain like spray from the sea But Yehonala hurried on and behind her Li Lien ying followed

When she reached the palace she went in without speaking to any of the waiting women The Dowager Mother had gone to bed as she did always in a thunderstorm and now she lay raised on her pillows her hands clasped about a jeweled Buddhist rosary her thin face as white as mutton fat jade When she saw Yehonala she did not smile In a solemn voice she said How can a sound child be born at such a time? Heaven itself rages above our heads."

Yehonala ran to her and knelt beside the bed Be soothed Imperial Mother she coaxed It is not because of us that Heaven rages Evil men have rebelled against the Throne

and the child to be born will save us all Heaven is angry on his behalf and not against him or us

"Do you believe it so?" the old lady replied

I do Yehonala said and she knelt on speaking soothing words and rising only to fetch hot broth for the Dowager Mother to drink down and uphold her strength Then she found a pleasant book of tales to read and she played upon a lute and sang a song now and then and helped the old lady at her prayers and so the hours passed

At sunset the wind died down and a strange yellow light suffused the palaces and courtyards Then Yehonala drew the curtains and lit the candles and waited for she had continuing news which she did not tell the Dowager Mother that the birth was very near After the yellow light the darkness came down suddenly and when night fell the Chief Eunuch An Teh hai came to the palace of the Dowager Mother Yehonala went to meet him and from his face she saw the news was evil

Is the child dead? she inquired

Not dead he said heavily but it is a girl—a sickly female—

Yehonala put her handkerchief to her eyes Oh cruel Heaven!

"Will you tell the Venerable Mother?" he asked I must hasten again to the Emperor He is ill with anger

I will tell her Yehonala promised

And you the Chief Eunuch continued Make yourself ready to be summoned in the night The Emperor will surely need you

I am ready she said

Then slowly she went back to the Dowager's bedchamber and gave no heed to the waiting women who had guessed the news and stood with bowed heads and eyes streaming tears as she passed She entered the great bedchamber again and when the Dowager Mother saw her face she too knew all.

It is not a male child she said and her voice was weary with all the yearnness of her years of waiting

It is a female Yehonala said gently

She knelt beside the bed again and took the Do

Mother's hands and stroked them with her own strong young hands

"Why do I live?" the Dowager Mother inquired piteously

"You must live Venerable Mother" Yehonala said She made her deep voice tender "You must live—until my son is born

Her hope was revealed She had saved her secret and like a gift she gave it now to the Dowager Mother

That old face quivered and broke into a wrinkled smile "Is it true?" she asked Can this be Heaven's will? Yes it is so! The child will become from your strong body a son! Buddha hears! It must be so And I called you fierce I said that you were too strong Oh daughter how warm your hands are on me!

She looked down into the young and tenderly beautiful face so near her and Yehonala looking up saw adoration in the Dowager Mother's eyes

My hands are always warm she said It is true that I am strong And I can be fierce And I shall bear a son"

When the Venerable lady heard what Yehonala said she rose out of her bed with such energy that all around her were frightened

Save yourself Imperial Mother Yehonala exclaimed

She ran forward to support the Dowager Mother but the lady pushed her away Send eunuchs to my son she exclaimed in her quavering voice "Tell him I have good news"

The ladies in attendance heard these words as they waited outside They looked at one another with doubt and joy while in great commotion the eunuchs were summoned and sent off

My bath! the Dowager Mother commanded her women, and while they hastened to make the bath she turned again to Yehonala

And you my heart," she exclaimed "you are more precious to me now than any except my son himself You are the destined one I see it in your eyes Such eyes! Nothing evil must befall you Return to your own chamber my daughter and rest yourself I shall have you moved to the inner courts of the Western Palace where the sun falls upon the terraces And let the physicians be summoned without delay!

"But I am not ill Venerabl Yehonala said laughing "Look at m !

She stretched out her arms she lifted her head her cheeks were red her dark eyes bright

The Dowager Mother tared at her Beautiful beautiful" she murmured. "The eyes so clear the eyebrows like moths wings the flesh as tender as a child s! I knew the Consort would bear only a girl I told you so you women—do you remember I said a creature of such soft bone such slack flesh would bear only a girl?"

"Venerable you told us—you told us indeed the serving women said one after the other

And Yehonala said, I will obey you Venerable in all things

She made her obeisance and retired from the chamber Outside the doors her own woman waited and Li Lien ying also The tall eunuch was rubbing his hands and grinning and cracking his finger joints

"Let the Phoenix Empress command me he declared I wait for her commands"

Be quiet" Yehonala said You speak too soon

"Have I not seen destiny over your head?' he cried I see it there now with my naked eyes I say what I have always known"

Leave me Yehonala told him She walked away with swift grace her woman following After a few steps she paused and she looked back at the eunuch One thing only you may do she said You may go to my kinsman and tell him what you have heard

The eunuch stretched out his neck corded like a turtle s neck Shall I bid him come to you?' he asked in a hissing whisper

No Yehonala replied in a clear voice for anyone to hear It is not fitting that I should speak now to any man save to my imperial lord

And she went on her way her hand resting on her woman s shoulder

In her own bedchamber she waited expecting summons from the Emperor when he heard and her woman bathed her and put fresh inner garments on her and brushed her hair in coils to fit under her jeweled headdress

What outer robes will you wear now Venerable? the woman inquired fondly

Bring me the pale blue robe embroidered in pink plum blossoms and the yellow embroidered in green bamboo Yehonala said

The two robes were brought but before she could decide which one suited the color of her face today there was a commotion in the outer courts A sudden noise of wailing voices rose above the walls

What evil has befallen? the serving woman cried

She ran out leaving her mistress with the robes spread out before her on the bed and at the gate into the court she fell against the eunuch Li Lien ying He wore a face as green as a sour peach and his coarse mouth hung ajar

The Dowager Mother is dead he gasped and his voice came dry out of his throat

Dead! the woman screamed But my mistress was with her two hours ago!

Dead" Li Lien ying repeated She came tottering to the Audience Hall supported by her ladies and when the Emperor hastened to her there she opened her mouth to breathe as though her throat were cut Then she cried out that he would have a son and these were her last words for she fell dead into her ladies arms Her soul has gone to the eternal Yellow Springs

Oh Lord of Hell the woman wailed how can you bear such evil news?'

She ran back to her mistress but Yehonala hastening to the outer door had already heard

I brought the Imperial Mother too much joy" she said sadly

No but joy came too quickly after sorrow and her soul was divided" the woman said

Yehonala did not make reply She went back to her bedroom and stood looking at the two robes spread out before her

Put them away she said at last I shall not be summoned now until the Emperor's days of mourning are ended.

And the old woman sobbing and moaning at such ill for

tune folded the bright robes and put them away again in the red lacquered chests from whence she had taken them

The months slipped quietly into the Season of the First Cold The Forbidden City was stilled in mourning for the Dowager Mother and the Son of Heaven wearing white robes of death lived without women Yehonala missed the fondness of the dead Dowager yet she knew that she was not forgotten She was free and by the Emperor s command she was also guarded Whatever she asked for she had but she must obey the commands sent down to her Thus she was encouraged to eat the most delicate and delicious foods fish from the distant rivers preserved in ice and snow the yellow carp the smooth skinned eels Fish she craved for every meal *and she drank the soup made from crushed fish* bones Beyond this she asked only to eat the coarse sweets of her childhood that she used to buy at the street vendor s stall red sugar cakes sesame toffee and rice flour dumplings stuffed with sweetened bean paste such as peasants eat Fat pork and roasted mutton and browned duck and other palace meats she could not eat And most difficult of all to swallow were the herbs and medicines which the royal physicians brewed daily for her to drink down for they were continually frightened lest the child be born too soon or born deformed for which evil they would be blamed as they well knew

Each morning after Yehonala was bathed and dressed and before she had eaten the physicians waited upon her in number to feel her pulse and peer under her eyelids and examine her tongue and smell her breath Then they conferred for two hours concerning her condition that day and after they were agreed they prescribed and themselves prepared what they had chosen How vile were these bowls of green mixtures and black draughts! But Yehonala swallowed the liquors for well she knew that what she carried in her was no ordinary child but one who belonged to all the people as their ruler and not once did she doubt that she carried a male child She ate heartily and slept well and she kept down the medicines somehow and her young body
with health Throughout the palaces a grateful joy
like serene music and this flowed out over the

try People said to one another that the times had turned that evil was past and good was come again to the Empire

Meanwhile Yehonala herself was changed Until the day when she knew she had conceived she had been a girl willful and mischievous changeable and impetuous in spite of her love of books and her ambition to learn Now while she continued to read the ancient books and to brush the ancient characters whatever she learned she wove around herself and the child within her Thus when she came upon the words of Lao Tzu which are these Of all the dangers the greatest is to think lightly of the foe she was struck by their present meaning That wise man had lived how many hundreds of years before he and yet his words remained as fresh as though they were spoken to her this same day The foe? The realm her son might one day rule was presently beset by foes She had thought them no concern of hers but now she knew they were the enemies of her son and so her own She looked up from the page

"Tell me she said to her tutor who are our present foes?"

The old eunuch shook his head "Lady he replied I have no learning in affairs of state I know only the ancient sages

Yehonala closed her book Send me one to teach me who are my present foes she said

The aged eunuch was confounded but he knew better than to question her and he reported her command to An Teh hai, the Chief Eunuch who went to Prince Kung the sixth son of the last Emperor His mother was a concubine and he was therefore half brother by blood to the present Emperor Hsien Feng The two half brothers had grown up together studying their books and learning swordmanship under the same tutors Prince Kung's mind was good his face manly and good to see Indeed his wisdom and intelligence were so high and calm that ministers princes and eunuchs went to him secretly instead of to the Emperor nor did he betray anyone and all trusted him The Chief Eunuch An Teh hai, went therefore to the palace of this Prince which was outside the Forbidden City and he told him of Yehonala's visit and he begged Prince Kung himself to teach the young Favorite.

"For she is so strong" he said so filled with health her mind as clever as a man s that we do not doubt she will bear a son who will be our next Emperor

Prince Kung pondered for a while He was a young man and it was not seemly for him to come near a concubine Yet he was related to her now through his imperial brother and custom might be set aside They were not Chinese moreover but Manchu and Manchu ways were more free than Chinese ways And he remembered how dire were these times His elder brother the Emperor was dissolute and weak the Court corrupt and idle the ministers and princes lifeless hopeless powerless it seemed to stay the crumbling of the Empire The treasury was empty harvests failed and famines starved the people often And in their angry hunger the people made rebellion Secret rebel bands were everywhere plotting against the Dragon Throne the Chinese declaring that now was the time to drive out the Manchu emperors who had ruled them for two hundred years Drive out the Manchu! Restore the ancient Chinese dynasty of Ming! Already such rebels had gathered in a horde under the long haired madman Hung who called himself a Chinese Christ as if it were not enough that foreigne s were Christians and in the name of that same Christ seduced the young in schools and churches to desert their family gods! What hope then except to hold hard the remnants of the Empire until an heir was born strong son of strong mother?

"I will myself teach the Favorite he sa d "but bid her aged tutor stay in her presence while I am there

The next day then when Yehonala went to her books as usual in the Imperial Library she sa v there a man tall young and of powerful handsome looks beside her tutor With him was An Teh hai who presented Prince Kung say ing why he had come

Yehonala drew her sleeve across her face and bowed and Prince Kung stood sidewise his head turned away

B seated Elder Brother Yehonala said in her pretty voice and herself sat down in her usual chair while the old tutor took h s place at the end of the table The Chief Eunuch stood behind the Prince and her four lad es behind Yehonala

In this fashion Prince Kung began to teach the Imperial Concubine Without looking at her and his face turned away

he began the lessons which he continued one day in seven for many months He told her the entire state of the nation described how the weakne s of the Throne invited rebellion of its subjects and invasion from enemies beyond the northern plains and eastern seas He told her how these invaders three hundred years before were first men from Portugal seeking trade in spices By the riches of their lawless plunder they tempted other men of Europe to do as they had done and Spanish conquerors came and Dutchmen in Dutch ships and then the English making war for their opium trade and after these the French the Germans

Yehonala s eyes grew larger and more black Her face was pale and red by turns and her hands clenched in fists upon her knees And we did nothing?' she cried out

What could we do?' Prince Kung retorted We are not sea faring people as the Engl sh a e Their little lands lie circled by the sea barren and scanty and upon the sea they must forage or they starve

Nevertheless I do think—"

Thus Yehonala began but Prince Kung raised his hand

"Wait—there is yet more

And he told how continuously the English had made their wars each time victorious

"Why?" she demanded.

"They spend their wealth on war weapons" Prince Kung replied

And he told her how still another enemy came down this time from the north We have long known these Russians he told her Five hundred years ago Most Favored the great Kublai Khan who ruled here employed Russians to be his bodyguard and so did all the emperors of his dynasty Two hundred years after him one Yermak, Russian and land pirate a man of adventure and with a price upon his head led his wild band across the Ural Mountains to seek furs for those who hired him He fought the northern tribes who lived in the valley of the great river Ob and he took their royal city called Siber and he claimed it in the name of the ruler of Russia who is the Tsar and thereafter the whole region was called Siberia And for this deed of conquest his sins were forgiven him and his people call him great even to this day"

"I have heard enough" she said abruptly

Yet not enough Most Favored Prince Kung said courteously "The English did not let us be In the time of Chia Ching the son of the mighty Chien Lung the British sent an envoy Amherst by name This man when summoned to the Audience Hall at the usual hour of dawn refused to come saying that his garments of state had not arrived and that he was ill The Son of Heaven then ruling sent his own physicians to examine the foreigner and they returned saying that Amherst feigned illness The Son of Heaven then ruling was angry and ordered the Englishman to go home The white men are stubborn Most Favored They will not bend or kneel before our Sons of Heaven They tell us that they kneel before none but gods—and women

Women?" Yehonala repeated She was diverted by this image of white men kneeling before women and she put up her hand to hide her laughter behind her sleeve The sound of laughter escaped her nevertheless and Prince Kung turned his eyes sidewise and caught the mischief in her eyes and himself broke into soundless laughter Thus encouraged the Chief Eunuch laughed and then the Court ladies laughed holding up their silken sleeves too to hide their faces

"Will white men still not kneel to the Son of Heaven?" Yehonala asked when her laughter ended

"They will not kneel Prince Kung replied

Yehonala did not speak for a moment But when my son rules she was thinking they will kneel to my son If they will not kneel and bow their heads to the floor then I will have them beheaded.

"What now?" she asked Are we still helpless?"

We must resist Prince Kung said though not by arms or battles for we have not such means But we can resist by obstructions and delays We must deny the foreigners their wishes Now that these Americans newcomers and followers of the English insist, too upon the benefits of the treaties we have been forced to make with other Western people we have demanded that their government may not protect Americans who trade in opium and to this they have agreed

"What is the end?" Yehonala asked

"Who knows?" Prince Kung replied He sighed heavily and shadows fell across his face It was a bitter face for all

handsome looks a sad face the lines deep about the thin mouth and between the black brows

He rose and bowed It is enough I think for this one day" he said I have brushed a few lines from history for you Most Favored Now if you will I shall proceed to fill them out until all the truth is plain

I pray you do so Yehonala said and she rose too and bowed

Thus the day came to an end and that night she could not sleep What destiny was hers? Her son must take the Empire back again and drive his foreign foes into the sea

Yehonala now felt herself no more a prisoner within the palace She was the center of the people's hope What she ate whether she slept well did she suffer languor or pain her color her laughter her willfulness and whims—all were matters of concern In the glow of such importance the winter months came in and passed day following day and the clear sunshine of bright and cloudless skies enlivened the whole city The people were cheerful with their hope and business was good In the south the long haired rebels settled into the city of Nanking and rumors creeping northward said that the leader was taking many wives and corrupting himself with wines and fine foods But Yehonala received this good news with no more than mild pleasure for the Chinese rebel was not her true foe The foreigners the white men were the enemy And yet why the enemy? Let them return to their own lands and there need be no enmity even with them We want but our own Yehonala told herself

Indeed a mild mood pervaded her spirit in these days and never had she felt her body grow so sound and whol Whether it was as the brewed herbs she drank or whether it was her own full and vital energy flowering at the demand of motherhood she did not know Strangest of all she no longer hated the Son of Heaven True she did not love him but she pitied him the shell of a man wrapped in his golden robes of office She cradled him in her arms at night and by day she showed him extravagant respect and honor for was he not the father of her son? Was he the father of her son? The two-headed question hid in her heart For all the world to see and to believe he was the father of her son Her son must

have the Emperor for his father Yet secret in her own heart was the living thought of Jung Lu and the hour when he had come at her desire

Into her life there fed two streams the first her constant deepening pride that she bore within her the Heir to the Throne and the other her secret love For the one she studied zealously the history of the people whom her son would rule poring over many ancient books and putting her questions to Prince Kung Because of the other she perceived anew the beauty of the world to which one day she would bring her son Sometimes in the afternoon instead of closing herself into the libraries she spent the hours walking with her ladies her guardian eunuch Li Lien ying following behind Never did they go beyond the wall of the Emperor s city but within these walls was enough to see so that it would take her many years to know it all When the sun was high and no cold wind blew she walked among the courtyards down the corridors and between the high rose red walls of narrow streets that linked the palace courts together Circling the sacred city were triple walls and in the walls were set four gates facing the four points of the compass Within the great first gate were three inner gates leading to bridge and gardens in the palaces and throne halls these halls facing always south their colors the symbols of the elements Even now in winter the gardens were beautiful the northern bamboo green under snow and the Indian bamboo bearing scarlet berries under snow At the Gate of Heavenly Peace stood two winged pillars of white marble encircled by carved dragons and to these she returned often and why she did not know except that her spirit lifted at the noble sight of these white-winged pillars

Palace by palace the throne rooms many she learned to know the sacred polar city the center of the earth even as the north star is center of the sky and in splendid loneliness she walked among her ladies Ah she had chosen well to make this city her son s birthplace and his home!

In the third moon of the spring of the new year on a day chosen by what heavenly decision she did not know Yehonala gave birth to her son In the presence of the elder ladies of the Court who took the place of the dead Dowager Mother her son was born undisputably the heir and the mid

declared him While Yehonala crouched upon a stool a mid wife caught the child and held him up before the ladies

See Venerables she announced A male child in full health and strength!

And Yehonala half fainting looked up and saw her son. He lay in the midwife's hands he moved his arms and legs, and opening his mouth he cried aloud

When night fell the soft spring night the courtyard outside her little private palace was lit by the light of lanterns set upon an altar of sacrifice From her bed Yehonala looked through the low latticed windows upon the assembly of princes and ladies and eunuchs who stood beyond the table the candlelight flickering upon their faces and upon their many coloured robes of satin embroidered in gold and silver It was the hour of birth sacrifice to Heaven and the Emperor stood before the altar to give thanks and to announce his heir Upon the altar were three offerings the steamed head of a pig white and hairless a steamed cock naked of feathers except for its head and tail and between pig and cock a live fish struggling in a net of scarlet silk

The rite was difficult Yet none could make it except the Son of Heaven himself for this fish had been taken alive from a lotus pond and it must be returned alive again to that same water or the Heir would not live to reach his manhood Nor could the imperial father make haste or violate the solemn dignity of what he did lest Heaven be offended In deep silence he raised his arms in silence he knelt before Heaven, to whom he alone could make obeisance and he chanted his prayers Exactly at the right moment he ended and seizing the still living fish with both hands he gave it to the Chief Eunuch who hastened to the pool and threw it in waiting to see if it swam away If it did not then the Heir would die a child He peered into the water his lantern held high and in silence the Court waited and the Emperor stood motionless before the altar

The light fell upon a flash of silver in the water

"The fish lives Majesty" the eunuch shouted

And upon these joyful words the assembly began to laugh and talk Firecrackers were lit caged birds in all the palaces were freed and rockets sprayed the sky with light While Yehonala leaned upon her elbow the whole sky seemed to

split before her eyes and from the center she saw floating against the sparkling darkness a huge golden orchid its petals touched with purple

Lady this is in your honor! her serving woman cried

A roar rose up from the city when the people saw the sight and Yehonala laughed and threw herself upon her pillows How many times in her life had she wished she were a man but now how glad was she to be a woman! What man could know such triumph as hers that she had made a son for the Emperor?

Is my cousin the Consort in the courtyard too?" she asked

The old woman peered into the lights and shadows of the courtyard I see her standing among her ladies she replied

Go out to her Yehonala commanded Invite her to come in Tell her I long to see her

The woman went out and approaching proudly she asked the Consort to come to the bedside of her mistress

She looks upon the Dragon Consort as her elder sister the woman said coaxing

But Sakota shook her head I rose from my bed to attend the sacrifice" she said, and to my bed I must return Indeed I am not well

She turned away as she said this and leaning upon two ladies and led by a eunuch with a lantern she walked into the darkness of a round moon gate

All were surprised at this refusal and the woman went back to Yehonala to report Lady the Consort will not come She says she is ill but I think she is not

"Then why did she not come?" Yehonala demanded

Who can tell how the heart of a Consort changes?" the woman replied She has a daughter The son is yours

Sakota is not so small in heart Yehonala insisted and yet while she spoke she remembered that her cousin held over her head the dagger of that secret knowledge

"Who knows the heart?" the woman replied and this time Yehonala made no reply

The courtyard was empty now the Emperor and his lowers gone to their feasts Everywhere tonight the [illegible] feasted and took time for joy From north to south from to west the doors of prisons were opened and all wit

freed whatever had been their crime In cities and villages no shops were opened for seven days no beasts killed for food no fish caught in river or pond and if they were caught already and still alive in tubs and vats in marketplaces then they must be thrown back into their waters Caged birds were loosed in homes as they had been in the palace and men of rank who had been banished could now return and take again their titles and their lands And all this was done in honor of the newborn child

Yet in her bed Yehonala felt strangely lonely Sakota had not come to see her or her son Sakota who was always gentle always kind What then? Eunuchs had been busy bodies surely they had carried tales doubtless and they had made Sakota think evil of her now that her son was born The upstart Grand Councilor Su Shun or his friend Prince Yi the nephew of the Emperor these two might be the evil ones for they were jealous of her Until she came Li Lien ying had told her it was they whom the Emperor trusted and they were close to him until he drew her closer still by his insatiate love

I never did them harm she thought and I have been more courteous than I needed to be

The Grand Councilor was haughty and ambitious though of low birth and yet she had taken his daughter Mei a young girl of sixteen to be her own Court lady But Prince Kung must be her friend She remembered his lean handsome face and she determined to make and hold him as her ally Lying in the shelter of the great curtained bed her son curled into the hollow of her right arm Yehonala pondered her destiny and his They were alone against the world she and her son The man she loved could never be her husband Alone she might have escaped by death if not by life but now death too was no longer in her reach She had borne a son and he had only her to keep him safe amid the tangle of intrigues within the palaces The times were evil the signs of Heaven portentous the Emperor was weak and only she could hold the throne secure for her son

In that night and in many nights thereafter as many nights indeed as she was to live there came the small dark hours when she faced her destiny with naked eyes and frightened heart knowing that only in herself was strength enough to

meet the dawn again She must defy them enemies and friends and even Sakota who knew her secret This child her son here in her arms must forever be the son of the Emperor Hsien Feng No other name could she allow Son of the Emperor and heir to the Dragon Throne! Thus she began the long battle of her destiny

2

Tzu Hsi

For his first month by ancient tradition her son was her own Not even in the arms of a nurse could he be carried from his mother s palace Here in this cluster of rooms around the courtyard bright with peonies Yehonala spent the hours of day and night It was a month of joy and pleasure a month when pampered and praised as the Emperor s Favorite she was named Fortunate Mother All came to look at the child and exclaim upon his size his ruddy color his handsome face his strong hands and feet All came except Sakota and here was the one lack in the young mother s joy The Consort should have been the first to see the child and acknowledge him the Heir and she did not come She sent her excuse that her own birth month by the stars was the enemy of the child s birth month How dare she then enter the palace where he was sheltered?

Yehonala heard without reply She hid her anger in her heart and there it grew for all the remaining days of the birth month But three days before the month was over she sent the eunuch Li Lien ying to Sakota with this message

"Since you Cousin have not come to visit me I must come to you to ask your favor and protection for my son for he belongs to us both, according to law and tradition"

Now it was true that the Consort ought to protect the Heir as her own child for this was her duty but Yehonala still feared that some secret jealousy or evil rumor fostered by eunuchs and princes contending among themselves had fed into Sakota s simple heart Such quarrels infested the Forbidden City and when lesser courtiers made war they sought also to divide the ones above them hoping that these too would take part in the endless struggle for power En

Yehonala in concern for her son determined that she would not allow Sakota to be divided from her She would compel her alliance were it not given freely

Therefore on this day she prepared to leave her own palace and go to Sakota Meanwhile she made every safeguard for the child She commanded Li Lien ying to buy from the best goldsmith in the city a chain of small but strong gold links and this chain hung about her son s neck and she fastened the two ends together with a padlock of gold Its key she put on a fine gold chain around her own neck next to her flesh and she did not take it off day or night Though her son was thus chained to Earth by symbol yet it was not enough She must offer the child as an adopted son by symbol to other powerful families in her clan Yet what friends had she? She thought and she pondered and she devised this plan From the head of each of the highest one hundred families in the Empire she required a bolt of the finest silk From the silks she commanded the palace tailors to cut one hundred small pieces and from these make a robe for he child Thus he belonged by symbol to one hundred strong and noble families and under the shelter the gods would fear to harm him For it is well known that gods are jealous of beautiful male children born of human women and they send down disease and accident to destroy such infants before they grow into godlike men

On the third day before the end of her sons first moon month Yehonala went to Sakota s palace She wore a new robe of imperial yellow satin embroidered in small flowers of pomegranate red and on her head a headdress of black satin beaded with pearls Her face was first washed with melted mutton fat and then with perfumed water and afterward powdered and painted Her fine eyebrows were drawn with a brush dipped in oil d ink Her mouth always lovely was painted a smooth red and this mouth betrayed her warm heart for it was full and tender Upon her hands she wore jeweled rings and one thumb ring of solid jade and to guard her long polished nails she wore shields of thin beaten gold set with small gems From her ears hung earrings of jade and pearls Her high soled shoes and headdress made her seem taller than she was When she was attired even her ladies clapped their hands to see her beauty

She took her son in her arms then he in scarlet satin from head to foot embroidered with small dragons of gold and with him she sat in her palanquin and they were borne, mother and son to the Consort's palace the eunuchs walking ahead to announce the arrival and the ladies following When they came to their destination Yehonala came down from the palanquin and stepped over the threshold There in the reception hall she saw Sakota Pale and yellow Sakota always was and now more than ever for she had not recovered from the birth of her daughter Her skin was withered and her little hands were shrunken into such that an invalid child might own

Before this small timid creature Yehonala stood strong and handsome as a young cedar tree

"I come to you, Cousin" she said after greeting I come on behalf of our son True I gave him birth but your duty Cousin is even greater to him than my own for is not his father the Son of Heaven who is your lord before he is mine? I ask your protection for our son

Sakota rose from her chair and she stood half bowed clinging to its arms "Sit down Cousin she said in her plaintive voice It is the first time you have walked outside your own courts for a month Sit down and rest"

I will not rest until I have your promise for our son Yehonala said

She continued to stand as she spoke and she looked steadfastly at Sakota, while she made her black eyes blacker still their pupils swelling and glowing

Sakota sank back into the chair "But—but why?" she stammered Why do you speak to me so? Are we not kin? Is not the Emperor our mutual lord?"

It is for our son that I ask your favor" Yehonala said and never for myself I have no need of anyone Yet I must be sure that you are for our son and not against him"

Each lady knew what the other meant In the division of continuing intrigue among the princes and the eunuchs Yehonala was saying she must be certain that Sakota would not accept the leadership of those who might plot to destroy the Heir and set another upon the Dragon Throne By her silence Sakota announced that there was such intrigue and that she did not wish to give her promise

Yehonala stepped forward while she gave her son to a lady to hold for her Give me your hands Cousin Her voice was smooth and resolute Promise me that none can divide us We must live out our lives together here within these walls Let us be friends and not enemies

She waited while Sakota hesitated and did not put out her hands Then suddenly her great eyes furious Yehonala leaned down and grasped those two small soft hands and crushed them so fiercely that the tears rushed to Sakota's eyes So Yehonala had used to do when they were children Whenever Sakota had pouted and rebelled Yehonala had crushed her hands until they ached

I—I promise Sakota said in a broken voice

"And I promise Yehonala said firmly

She put the two small hands on Sakota's satin lap again and she saw what all the ladies saw that the thin gold shields of her nails had cut red stripes into the tender flesh and Sakota put her hands together and let the tears of pain run down her cheeks

But Yehonala said no word of sorrow for what she had done She bowed she waved aside the bowl of tea that a lady offered her

I will not stay Cousin she said in her usual lovely voice I came for this promise and now I have it It is mine so long as my life lasts and so long as my son's life lasts Nor will I forget that I too have given my own promise

With surpassing pride this proud woman let her eyes circle from one face to another Then she turned and sweeping her golden robes about her she took back her son and went away

That night when she had seen her child fed and sleeping in the arms of his nurse she sent for Li Lien ying He was never far off from where he was and now when he had come she commanded him to bring to her the Chief Eunuch An Teh hai

"Tell him I have a trouble that I brood upon she said

So Li Lien ying went and in an hour or two he brought the Chief Eunuch who said after greeting Forgive me Venerable for delay I was busy in the Emperor's bedchamber and under his command

"You are forgiven Yehonala said She pointed her forefinger at a chair upon which he was to sit, and she sat

in her own thronelike chair by the long carved table set against the inner wall of the room Her ladies she had dismissed and only Li Lien ying and her woman remained with her

Li Lien ying now made pretense also to withdraw but Yehonala bade him stay

What I have to say is for both of you for I must count you two as my left hand and my right

She went on then to inquire of the intrigues which her ladies had whispered into her ears Is this true? she asked of the Chief Eunuch Are there those who plot to seize the Throne from my son if— She paused for none who spoke of the Emperor could say the word death

Lady all is true The Chief Eunuch nodded his handsome heavy head

Say on" she commanded

Venerable you must know he said obeying that no one among the mighty clans believed that the Emperor could beget a sound son When the Consort gave birth to a sickly girl certain of the princes took heart and they plotted how the moment that the Emperor departed for the Yellow Springs they would steal the imperial seal Alas—alas— again he shook his head we may not expect a long reign The Emperor is young in years but the Dowager Mother loved him too well He fed on sweets when he was a child and when he had pains in his belly she ordered opium for him Before he was twelve years of age he was debauched by eunuchs and by sixteen he was exhausted by women Let me speak the truth

Here the Chief Eunuch put his large smooth hands on his knees and he made his voice so low that Li Lien ying had to lean to hear it

In wisdom the Chief Eunuch said his wide face solemn "we must now count our friends and enemies

Yehonala sat without moving while he spoke It was her grace that she could sit for hours motionless and at ease an upright imperial figure She looked at him now without a sign of fear

"Who are our enemies she asked

First the Grand Councilor Su Shun the Chief Eunuch whispered

"Hel she exclaimed "And I have taken his daughter as my court lady and my favorite!

Even he the Chief Eunuch said gravely and with him the Emperor s own nephew Prince Yi and after him Prince Cheng These three Venerable are your first enemies because you have given us an heir

She bowed her head The danger was as great as she had imagined These were mighty princes related by blood and clan to the Emperor himself And she was but a oman

She l fted her head proudly And vho are my friends?

The Chief Eunuch cleared his throat Above all others Venerable Prince Kung the younger brother of the Son of Heaven"

"Is he indeed my friend? she exclaimed "Then he is worth all the rest She was still so young that any hope was hope enough and the red blood ran to h r cheeks

When Prince Kung saw you the Chief Eu uch declared "he said to a clansman standi g n ir who told me that you were a woman so clever and so beautiful that either you would bring good fortune to the realm or you would destroy the Dragon Throne

These words Yehonala received into h r tho ughtful mind She pondered them and for a space of time she s t entirely silent Then she drew her bre th u a long sigh

If I am to bring good fortune I must h ve my weapons she said

"True Venerable" the Chi f E nuch repli d and vaited

"My first v eapon she continu d must be the power of rank.

"True Venerable the Chief Eunu h sa d ag in and ited

"Return to the Empero Yehonala comm nded Put i to his mind that th e Heir is in d ng Put into his mind that only I can p otect our ch ld Put into his mind that he must raise my rank to equ l th t of the Con ort, so th t sh e cannot have po ver over the Heir or be used by those who rave such powe

The Chief Eunuch smiled at such cleverness and Li Lien ying laughed cracking his finger joints one after the other to show his pl asure

Lady the Chief Eunuch sa d I will put it in

peror s mind that he so reward vou on the Heir s first moon birthd w What day could be more auspicious?

None she agreed

She looked into l is small black eyes set deep beneath his high smooth forehead and suddenly her own face dimpled and sm iled and her great eyes shone with mischi f mirth and triumph

The first month of her son s life was completed The moon had been full when he wa born and it was full again Certain dangers were pas ed the danger of the ten day madness whereby infants die before ten d ys are spent the danger of flux whereby the bowels of an infant run out like water the dang r of continual vomiting the danger of cough and cold and fever At the end of this first mor th the Heir was fat and healthy his will already imperious and his hunger con tant so that his wetnurse must be r ady day and night for his demand This wetnurse Yehon la had cho en herself a strong young country housewife a Chinese whose child was also a first son and whose milk therefo e was suited to the royal ursling But Yehonala had not been co tent to have the ourt physicians judge the oman sound and healthy No she must herself examine the woman s body and taste the sweetness of her milk and smell her breath to discover any taint of sourness in it And she herself prescribed the wom an s di t and sa s to it that she was served only the best and richest foods Upon such milk the princeling throve like any pe sant s child

On this first moon birthday of his heir then the Emperor had decreed that feasts must be held throughout the nation Here in the Forbidden City the day was to be given over entire to feasting and to music and when he sent the Chief Eunuch to inquire of Yehonala what she would like for her o vn pleasure on this auspicious day she put her private crav ing into words

I do long to see a good play she told An Teh Hai Not since I came to li e beneath these golden roofs have I seen a play The Dowager Mother did not like actors and I dared not ask while she lived and in the months of mourning for h r I could not ask But now—will the Son of Heaven indulge me?"

An Teh hai could not but smile at the sight of her face flushed and ardent as a child s the great eyes hopeful

"The Son of Heaven will refuse you nothing now lady he told her and he blinked and nodded his head many times to signify that she would indeed rece ve reward far l rger than a play Then forthwith he hastened off to do her bidding

Thus it came about that on the day of feasting Yehonala had her lesser desire too while she waited for the greater the pleasure of a play as well as her increase in rank But first the gifts must be presented and received For these rites the Emperor chose the throne room named the Palace of Surpass ing Brightness Here at dawn there aited men f om all p arts of the realm and among them eunuchs passed to and f o to tend the huge lanterns swinging from the beams whereon were painted the imperial five cla ed dragons These lanterns were made of horn and they g ve forth such a light that fall ing on the robes of eunuchs and of guests it p cked out the gold embroideries and the encrust d jewels of the throne Every hue and color glowed at once the crimson and the purple deep and strong the scarlet and the bright blue ac centing and gold and silver gl tter ng for sharpness

In silence all waited for the coming of the Son of Hea en and when dawn broke across the sky the mperi l proces on appeared its banners streaming in the morn ng bre ze and carried by the guardsmen in their sca let tun cs Ne t came the princes then the eunuchs marching slo vly two by two in robes of purple belted v th gold In their midst t elve bearers bore the sacred yellow dragon palanquin in which sat the Son of Heaven himself Within the Throne Hall all fell upon their knees and knocked th eir heads n n times upon the floor and shouted out their g e ting 'Ten thousand years—ten th ousand years—ten thousand years!

The Emperor came down from his palanquin and with h s right hand upon his brothe s arm and his left upon the arm of the G and Councilor Su Shun he mounted the golden throne The e seated in precise dignity his hands p lms down upon his knees he received in order the p inces and the ministers who presented imperial gifts for the He Th r hands did not touch the g fts for these vere placed on trays and sil er plates and brought by bea ers but Prince K read the lists of gifts and whence they came from what

inces what ports and cities what country regions and the Chief Eunuch An Teh hu with brush and book marked do vn the name of the giver and what the gift was and how much was its worth and that he might set the value high the givers had earlier bribed him with secret gifts of goods and money

Now a screen stood behind the throne as usual a mighty stretch of scented wood most cunningly carved with five clawed dragons and behind it Yehonala and the Consort sat with their ladies When all the gifts had been accepted the Emperor summoned Yehonala to receive his own reward The Chief Eunuch brought the summons and he led her from her place and she approached the Dragon Throne She stood there for one instant tall and straight her head high looking neither to the right nor left Then slowly in obeisance she sank to her knees and laid her hands one on the other upon the tiled floor and put her forehead on her crossed hands

Above her the Emperor waited and now he began to speak I do this day decree that the mother of the Imperial Heir here kneeling is to be raised to rank of Consort equal in all ways to the present Consort That there be no confusion the present Consort shall be known as Tzu An the Empress of the Eastern Palace and the Fortunate Mother shall be known as Tzu Hsi the Empress of the Western Palace This is my will It shall be declared across the realm that it may be known to all people

These words Yehonala heard and her blood ran strong and joyful to her heart Who could harm her now? She had been lifted up and by the Emperor hand Three times and three times and yet three times more she touched her forehead to her hands Then rising to her feet she stood until the Chief Eunuch put out his right arm and leaning on it she returned again to her place behind the Dragon Screen But when she was seated she did not turn her head to look at Sakota nor did Sakota speak

While Yehonala had stood before the Dragon Throne the vast multitude in the Banquet Hall was silent Not one voice spoke except the Emperors and not one hand stirred And from that day she was no longer called Yehonala Tzu Hsi the Sacred Mother was her imperial name

That same night Tzu Hsi was summoned to the Emperor

For thre months she had received no summons the two months before her son s birth and the one month since But now the time was come She welcomed the call for it was proof that the imperial favor still was hers not only for her son s sake but for her own Well enough she knew that in these months the Emperor had made use of one concubine and another and each had hoped that she could displace her who was most favored Tonight would tell her whether any had succeeded and eagerly she made herself ready to follow the Chief Eunuch who waited in the entrance of her palace

Ah but now how hard it was to leave! The child s bed stood by her bed His own room had been prepared for him before his birth but she had not let him go from her even for a night nor yet tonight Ready and obedient in soft pink satin jewelled and perfumed she could not force herself away from the boy who slept replete with human milk upon the silken mattress Two women sat beside him one the wetnurse and the other her own woman

You are not to leave him for one breath of time she warned them If when I return though it be late do not mind you if he is hurt or weeping or if a pot of red is anywhere upon his flesh I will have you both beaten and if he should harmed at all your heads will be the price

Both women stared to see her look so fiercely at them the wetnurse awed and the woman amazed at the courteous mistress she thought she knew

Since the Empress of the Western Palace has borne the child he said in a mild voice she has become a great grass Be sure Venerable that we will guard him better even than you tell us how to do

But Tzu Hsi had more commands And Li Lien ying must sit outside and my ladies must not sleep soundly

It shall all be so the woman promised

Still Tzu Hsi could not go away She leaned above her sleeping child and saw his rosy face the pouting lips soft and red the eyes full and large the ears close to the head and set low the lobes long and these were all signs of high intelligence Whence did her child receive his beauty? Hers alone surely was not enough for this perfection His father—

She broke off thinking and reached for his hand first his right hand and then his left and gently pressing open

curling fingers she smelled the soft baby palms as mothers do Oh what a treasure no was hers!

Venerable!

She heard An Teh hua s voice bumbling from the outer room The Chief Eunuch grew impatient not for his own sake but for her o n She knew by now that he was her ally in the secret palace war and he must heed him well She stayed then only to perform one more task From her dressing table she chose two gifts a ring of gold and a thin bracelet set with seed pearls These gifts she gave the two women the ring to her own woman and the bracelet to the wetnurse and thus she bribed them to their duty Then she hastened out and there was Li Lien ying her eunuch waiting with An Teh hai To her eunuch she gave a piece of gold without a word he knew what it meant and while he went with An Teh hai he stayed behind to guard her son

Inside the bosom of her robe she held gold in a packet for the Chief Eunuch too but she could not give it to him until she saw how the Emperor received her Did the night go well then he would have his prize And the Chief Eunuch understood this and he led her by the well known narrow ways to the imperial center of the Forbidden City

Come here to me the Emperor said

She stood at the threshold of his vast chamber that he might see her in all her strong beauty Upon his command she walked slowly toward him swaying as she went with that grace she knew so well how to use She was not humble but she feigned shyness and assumed a sweet coyness which was half real and half pretended For it was this woman s power that she could be almost what she feigned and planned to be and so she became nearly what she could be at any moment and in any place She was not deceiving for she deceived herself as much as the person before whom she appeared

Thus now when she approached the imperial bed as wide and long as a room inside the yellow curtains and the net of gold she felt sudden pity The man who waited for her here was surely doomed for death Young as he was he had spent his force too soon

She hastened the last few steps to him Ah" she cried, you are ill and no one told me my Lord of Heaven!

Indeed by the light of the great candles in their golden stand he looked so wan his yellow skin stretched tightly across the fine small bones of his face and frame that he seemed a living skeleton propped there against the yellow satin pillows His two hands palms upward lay lifeless on the quilt She sat down on the bed and put out her warm strong hands and felt his dry and cold

Have you pain?' she asked anxiously

"No pain" he said "A weakness—

But this hand she insisted She took up his left hand It feels different from the other—colder more stiff

I cannot use it as once I did he said unwillingly

She put back his sleeve and saw his bare arm thin and yellow as old ivory beneath the satin robes

Ah she moaned "ah why was I not told?"

What is there to tell?' he said Except I have a slow creeping coldness on this side

He pulled his hand away Come he said come into my bed None of them has been enough Only you—only you—

She saw the old hot light come creeping back into his sunken eyes and she made ready to obey And yet as the dark hours passed to midnight and then beyond she felt a sadness she had never known before Deep deep was the woe in this poor man who was the Emperor of a mighty realm. The chill of death had struck his inward life and he was man no more As helpless as any eunuch he strove to do his part and could not

Help me he besought her again and yet again Help me—help me lest I die of this dreadful heart unlocked

But she could not help him When she saw that even she was helpless she rose from the bed and sat by his pillow and took him in her arms as though he were a child and like a child he sobbed upon her breast knowing that what had been his chief joy could never be again Though he was young in years indeed his third decade not yet come he was an old man in body weakened by his own lusts Too early had he yielded to his desires too often had the eunuchs fed them too humbly had the Court physicians whipped his blood alive again with herbs and medicines He was exhausted and only death remained

This certainty overwhelmed the woman as she felt

man to her breast She soothed him with pleasant word she seemed so calm so strong that he was at last persuad d

You are weary she said you are beset by worries I know our many foes and how the Western men with all their ships and armies do threaten us While I have been living my woman s life such troubles hide inside your mind and sap your strength While I have borne my son you have bent beneath the burdens of the state Let me help you my lord. Throw half your burden upon me Let me always sit behind the screen in the Throne Hall at dawn and listen to your ministers I can hear the inner meaning of their plaints and when they are gone I will tell you what I think but leaving all decision to my lord as is my duty

From unsatisfied desire she wooed him thus away from love and to the affairs of the nation the threats of enemies and the strengthening of the Throne itself now that he had his Heir And she saw how weary was this man with all his burdens for he gave great sighs and then he lifted himself from her bosom and leaned against the pillow again and holding her hand with his own hand he tried to tell her his perplexities

"There is no end to my troubles he complained In the days of my for fathers the enemy came always from the north and the Great Wall stopped them men and horses But now the wall is useless to us These white men swarm up from the seas—Englishmen and Frenchmen Dutch and Germans and Belgians I tell you I do not know how many nations there are beyond the border mountains of Kun Lun They make war with us to sell their opium and they are never satisfied Now the Americans are here too Where did they come from Where is America? I hear its people are somewhat better than the others yet when I yield to those others the Americans demand the same benefits This is the year when they wish to renew their treaty with us But I do not wish to renew any treaty with white men

"Then do not renew it Tzu Hsi said impetuously "Why should you do that which you would not? Bid your ministers refuse"

"The white men s weapons are very fearful he moaned

"Delay—delay" she said Do not answer their pleadings ignore their messages refuse to receive their envoys "I

gives us time They will not attack us so long as there is hope that we will renew the treaty Therefore do not say yes or no"

The Emperor was struck with such wisdom You are worth more to me than any man" he declared even than my brother It is he who plagues me to receive the white men and make new treaties with them He tries to frighten me by telling me about their big ships and the long cannon Negotiate he says—

Tzu Hsi laughed Do not allow yourself to be frightened my lord even by Prince Kung The sea is very far from here and can there be a cannon long enough to reach as high as our city walls?"

She believed what she said and he wished to believe what she said and his heart clung to her more than ever He fell asleep at last upon his pillows and she sat beside him until dawn At that hour the Chief Eunuch came to waken the Emperor because his ministers waited for the usual early audience When he came in Tzu Hsi rose to command him while the Emperor still slept

From this day on she said I am to sit behind the Dragon Screen in the Throne Hall The Son of Heaven has commanded it"

An Teh hai bowed down to the floor before her and knocked his head on the tiles Venerable he exclaimed. Now I am happy"

From that day on Tzu Hsi rose in the darkness of the small hours before day In the candlelight her women bathed her and put on her robes of state and she entered her curtained sedan and Li Lien ying went before her with a lantern in his hand to the Throne Hall and she sat behind the great carved screen before which was the Dragon Throne and Li Lien ying was her guard He stood near her always a dagger ready in his hand

From this day too the Heir slept no more in his mother's bedchamber He was moved into his own palace and the Chief Eunuch was made his servant and Prince Kung the brother of the Emperor was appointed his guardian

The cold came soon that year No rain had fallen in weeks and already by midautumn the dry and bitter

blew from the northwest scattering their burden of pale s
from the distant desert The city was clothed in the faint
of the sand and the sun glittered upon the roofs of the house
where the sand drifted into the crevices of the eaves Onl
the porcelain tiles of the roofs of the Forbidden City rov
blue and imperial yellow shed the sand and shone clear in
the white glare from the sky

At noon while the sun still gave forth a mild heat old
people rapped in padded garments stirred out of their
houses and sat in sheltered corners between walls and chil
dren ran into the streets and played until the sweat streamed
down their brown cheeks Yet when the sun went away again
at nightfall the dry cold congealed the blood of young and old
alike Throughout the night the cold deepened until in the
hours after midnight and before dawn it reached its depths
Those beggars in the streets who had no shelter ran hither
and thither to keep alive until the sun came up again
even wild dogs could not sleep

In such a cold and silent hour and upon a day set by the
Board of Imperial Astronomers Tzu Hsi rose one day to take
her usual place in the Throne Hall Her faithful woman slept
near her When the watchman s brass gong sounded three
times three through the streets the woman got up from her
pallet bed and laid fresh charcoal on the brazier and she
on the coal a kettle of water When it boiled she made
in a silver and earthen pot and approaching the vast bed
where Tzu Hsi slept she put aside the curtains and touched
her shoulder It needed but a touch for though Tzu Hsi slept
well she slept always lightly No her great eyes opened
wide and aware and she sat up in bed

"I am awakened she said

The woman poured the infused tea into a bowl and presented it with both hands and Tzu Hsi drank it slowly
not too slowly gauging exactly the measure of the passing
time When she had drunk the bowl empty the woman took
it again In the bathing room the water was already poured
steaming hot into the porcelain tub Tzu Hsi rose her every
movement graceful and precise for grace and precision were
her habit and in a few minutes she was in her bath The
woman washed her gently and then dried her and put on her
garments for the imperial audience Her undergarments were

of perfumed silk and over these was a long robe of rose red satin lined with northern sable and buttoned at the throat and over this again a robe of pale yellow gauze embroidered in small blue medallions in phoenix design Upon her feet Tzu Hsi wore lined stockings of soft white silk and over them her Manchu shoes set on high double heels in the middle of the soles Upon her head when her hair was dressed the woman set a headdress made of figures and flowers of satin and gems and veiled with beads of fine small pearls

They moved in silence the woman silent because she was weary and Tzu Hsi silent because her mind was filled with somber thoughts The times grew more grave Only yesterday in private audience Prince Kung had said to her The people of any nation do not care who their rulers are if there be peace and order in the realm and if they can laugh and attend plays But if there be no peace and order is disturbed then the people blame their rulers It is our misfortune to rule in these times Alas that my imperial brother is so feeble! Today neither white man nor Chinese rebel fears the Throne

If these white-skinned foreigners had not come from across the seas" Tzu Hsi said we could quell the Chinese rebels

To this he agreed sadly and thoughtfully Yet what shall we do? he inquired "They are here It is the fault of our dynasty that our ancestors did not understand a hundred years ago that Western foreigners are different men from all others Our ancestors at first were charmed with the cunning and their clever toys and clocks and thinking no evil they allowed them to visit us expecting that in course they would then leave our shores We know now that we should have pushed them all into the sea from the very first man for where one comes a hundred follow and none goe away

"It is strange indeed Tzu Hsi observed that the Venerable Ancestor Chien Lung so great and so wise and ruling so many decades did not perceive the nature of the men from the West."

Prince Kung shaking his head went mournfully on Chien Lung was deceived by his power and by his own good heart It did not come to his mind that any could be his enemy Indeed he even likened himself to the American George Washington then living and he was fond of saying that

she would not recognize Ah yes ah yes the gossip of the women in the courts where there was little to do except to gossip had fluttered from mouth to ear ever since the first moon feast of the Imperial Heir and she had caught the rumor that Lady Mei had been seen to look more than once at Jung Lu, the handsome Chief of the Imperial Guard and kinsman of the Fortunate Mother Tzu Hsi heard this as she heard everything her mind always aware her eyes seeing her ears hearing whether she woke or slept Who could guess all that she knew who made no confidante?

"Venerable please I want no husband Lady Mei now murmured her cheeks suddenly pink

Tzu Hsi pinched the pretty cheek. No husband?"

Let me stay with you always Venerable the lady pleaded

Why not?" Tzu Hsi replied "That is not to say you shall not have a husband

Lady Mei went pale and red and then pale again Unlucky unlucky to talk of marriage! The Empress of the Western Palace had only to command her marriage to a man and she must obey whereas her whole heart was—

The gaunt shape of Li Lien ying appeared before them large and hideous the light from the lantern in his hand flickering upward against his coarse features

"The hour grows late Venerable he said in his high eunuch's voice

Tzu Hsi recalled herself "Ah yes and I must see my son"

For it was her habit every morning to see her son before she went to audience and she entered her sedan the curtains fell and the six bearers lifted the poles to their shoulders and marched forward in swift rhythm until they came to the palace of the Heir her lady following in a small sedan

At the entrance to the Heir's private palace the bearers set down their burden poles by habit and Tzu Hsi descended her lady waiting while she hastened to her son Eunuchs stood on guard and they bowed as she passed to the royal bedchamber There thick red candles of coarse fat in gold candlesticks stood on a table and by the guttering light she saw her child He was sleeping with his wet nurse and lingered by his bed of quilts laid upon the platform of the brick He was pillowed on his nurse's arm his cheek

her naked breast Some time in the night he must wakened and cried and the woman had suckled him and had both fallen asleep

Tzu Hsi gazed down upon them with strange and longing She it should have been who heard him weeping the night and she it should have been who suckled him then lay sleeping in deep peace Ah when she chose her destiny she did not think of such a price!

She forced her heart down again The moment of choo was gone By his very birth her son now confirmed her des tiny She was mother not to a child but to the Heir of th Empire and to that day when he would be Emperor of fou hundred million subjects she must give her whole mind Upon her alone rested the burden of the Manchu dynasty Hsien Feng was weak but her son must be strong She would make him strong To this end her whole life was directed Even the long and pleasant hours of study in the palace libra ies were fewer now and few too the painting lessons wit Lady Miao Some day it might be that she would have tim to brush the pictures which her teacher Lady Miao had neve let her make but not yet

She was soon in her sedan again the curtains drawn again the winds rising before dawn the sight of her sleeping bab warm in her heart She had been ambitious once to mak herself an empress How mighty was her ambition now wh must hold an empire for her son!

Through the shifting curtains of the sedan she could se the light of the eunuch s lantern flickering upon the cobbl of the road and by alleyway and courtyards she was carrie until the Throne Hall was reached and there by a side her sedan set down and the curtain lifted Prince Kung waiting to receive her

"Venerable you are late" he exclaimed

"I lingered too long with my son she confessed

He looked his reproach I hope Venerable that you d not wake the Heir It is necessary indeed that he grow str and full of health His reign will be most arduous

"I did not wake him" she said with dignity No wo passed more than these Prince Kung bowed and led the by an inner passage to the space behind the Drago Here shielded by the immense screen carved deep

bold design of dragons their scales and five toed cla s gilded and gleaming in the light of the great lanterns that hung from far up in the lofty painted beams Tzu Hsi took her seat. On her right stood Lady Mei, and on her left the eunuch Li Lien ying

Through the interstices of the screen she saw now that the wide terrace in front of the Audience Hall vast in shado s was already filled with princes and ministers who had come before midnight in their springless fur l ned cart to bring petitions and memorials to the Emperor himself While they waited in the courtyard for his arrival they sepa ated themsel es according to their rank and stood in groups together each group beneath its own banner of bright silk and dark velvet The darkness was still intense around a d above but the terrace s as lit by the flaming lanterns in the lo ver co rt yard There at the four corners stood bronze eleph nts filled with oil and this oil fed the torches wh ch the eleph nts held in their uplifted trunks and the fi e leaping toward the sky cast a fierce and restless light upon the scene

In the Aud ence Hall itself a hundred eunuchs mo ed to and fro mending the huge horn lanterns arr nging their vivid and jeweled robes s hispering now and then as they waited. No voice spoke aloud A strange silence brooded over all and as the hour fixed by the Board of Astrologers accord ing to the stars d ew near th s s lence deepened into some thing like a trance None mo ed ll f ce stiff nd gra e all eyes gazing straight ahead I the last moment before da n broke a courier blew his brass trump t loudl and this s a sign The Emperor had left his p lace and h s imperial p ocession was on ts way movi g lo ly thro gh the b oad lower throne halls passing th ou gh one great entrance and another into the higher halls to arrive at the ex ct hour of dawn

Now the couriers cried out together Behold the Lord of Ten Thousand Years!

At this cry the imperial p ocess on appe red at the en trance to the lower courtyard Banners of gold aved in the morning wind as the couriers mar hed onwa d B hi d them came the Imperial Guard in tun cs of red and gold and at their head Jung Lu walked alone Behind them bear rs yellow uniform one hundred in number carried the

or s palanquin of heavy gold and it in turn was followed by the Bannermen

Every man and every eunuch fell down upon his knees and shouted the sacred greeting Ten Thousand Years—Ten Thousand Years! Each bowed his face upon his folded hands as he knelt and thus remained while the bearers carried the imperial sedan up the marble steps to the Dragon Terrace before the Audience Hall There the Emperor descended wrapped in his robes of gold embroidered with dragons and passing between the red and gold pillars he walked slowly to the dais He mounted its few steps and seated himself upon the Dragon Throne his thin hands outspread upon his knees his eyes fixed ahead

Silence fell again The kneeling multitude their heads bowed upon their hands did not move while Prince Kung took his place on the right of the Throne and standing he read aloud the names of princes and ministers in the order of their rank and the time at which each should appear The audience had begun

Tzu Hsi, behind the screen leaned forward that she might not lose one word of what was said Thus leaning she saw only the head and shoulders of the Emperor above the low back of the throne upon which he sat Thus man whose front appearance was so pale and haughty was now betrayed Beneath the imperial tasseled hat his nape showed thin and yellow the neck of a sickly youth and not of a man and this neck sat between two lean and narrow shoulders stooping beneath the rich robes Tzu Hsi saw him with mixed pity and repulsion her mind s eye following those thin shoulders to the thin and sickly body And how could she keep her swift eyes from reaching beyond the Throne? There Jung Lu stood in the full strength of his youth and manhood Yet they were as separate she from him as north is from the south Ah but the hour had not yet come when she could raise him up! Nor could he so much as put out his hand to her Hers must be the hand to move but when would be the instant and the chance? Not and this she knew until she was strong enough in power to make all men fear her She must first be so high that none would dare accuse her or soil her name And suddenly guided by some instinct she would not acknowledge

her eyes slid sidewise toward Lady Mei There the girl stood her face pressed upon the screen staring at—

"Stand back! She seized Lady Mei by the wrist and pulled her twisting her wrist suddenly and cruelly before she loosed it.

The lady turned her head in fright, and her eyes met those eyes great and black and fierce with anger

Tzu Hsi did not speak again but she let her eyes burn on until the girl could not bear it Her head drooped and the tears ran down her cheeks and only then did Tzu Hsi turn her eyes a way But her will rose hard within her against her self She would not let her heart beguile her m nd Th s was the hour of learning how to rule She would not yearn for love

At this same moment Yeh the Viceroy of the K ang prov inces was before the Throne He had come by boat and by horseback from the south where he was the appointed gov ernor of those provinces Now kneeling he read loud from a scroll which he held in both hands He had a high level voice not strong but piercing and since he was a famous scholar he had written his wo ds in rhythms of four n the anc ent class c style Only the learned could unde stand vhat he said and Tzu Hsi herself listening with close care could not ha e comprehended except that she had so dil gently spent her time in studying ancient books He intell gence enl ghtened the words and she guessed hat she d d not know

Here was the purport The traders from th West vere pressing again in the south led by the wh te Englishmen who were angry and o er so small an affair that he the Viceroy vas a hamed to ment on it now befor the Dragon Throne Yet from such small matters in the p st wa s had been fought and lo t and he appointed by the Son of Heaven could not risk the danger of yet another war When ever the wh te men d d not get the w y he sa d immed ately they th eatened b ttle Th re was no eason g ith them fo they were barbarians and uncivilized Yet the trou ble was ove nothing mor th n a flag

The Emperor murmur d something and Prince Kung spoke for h m

"The Son of Heaven inquires the meaning of the flag" he said in a loud clear o ce.

"A flag Most High the Viceroy replied not lifting his eyes is only a banner"

The Emperor murmured again and again Prince Kung repeated what he said in the same loud clear voice

"Why should the Englishmen be angry over what is nothing more after all than a piece of cloth and therefore easily replaced?"

"Most High the Viceroy explained still not lifting his eyes the English are a superstitious people They are not men of learning and so they attach magic qualities to an oblong cloth, designed in colors of red white and blue It is a symbol for them sacred to some god they worship They will not tolerate lack of reverence for this piece of cloth Wherever they place it it designates possession In this case it was attached to a pole on the rear of a small trading vessel carrying Chinese pirates Now these Chinese pirates have been the curse of generations past in our southern provinces They sleep by day and by night they attack vessels at anchor and even coastal villages The captain of this small boat had paid a sum of money to the Englishmen to allow them the flag making that I the Viceroy would then not dare to command them to cease their evil trade But I the Viceroy unworthy servant of the Most High did not fear I arrested the vessel and put the captain in chains Then I commanded the flag to be taken down When the Englishman John Bowring the Commissioner of Trade for the British in Canton heard of this he declared that I had insulted the sacred symbol and he demanded that I apologize on behalf of the Throne"

Horror rushed over the entire assembly Even the Emperor was aroused

The Emperor sat up in his Throne and spoke for himself "Apologize? For what?"

Most High," the Viceroy said "those were my words"

Stand" the Emperor commanded.

Stand the Dragon Emperor commands you" Prince Kung repeated It was unusual but the Viceroy obeyed. He was a tall aging man a native of the northern provinces and a Chinese but loyal as all scholars were to the Manchu Throne since the Throne favored Chinese scholars and when they had passed the imperial examinations with honor employed them as administrators of government. Thus were the interests of

such Chinese cemented to the dynasty in rule and so it had been for many centuries

Did you apologize?" the Emperor asked again speaking not through his brother but directly to signify his deep concern

The Viceroy replied Most High how could I apologize when I however lowly am the appointed of the Dragon Throne? I sent the pirate captain and his crew to apologize to the English men Yet this did not satisfy that haughty and ignorant Bowring He sent the Chinese back to me declaring that it was I and not they whom he wanted Whereupon in extreme vexation I had them all beheaded for causing confusion"

Did this not satisfy the Englishman Bowring? the Emperor inquired

It did not Most High the Viceroy replied Nothing will satisfy him He wishes trouble so that he may have an excuse to make another war and seize still more of our land and our treasure This Bowring enlarges every cause for quarrel Thus although it is against the law to bring opium from India across our borders he encourages smuggling saying that as long as any Chinese trader smuggles Englishmen and Indians and even Americans may be allowed to smuggle the vile weed to demoralize and weaken our people More than that guns also are now being smuggled in to sell to the southern Chinese rebels and when the white men from Portugal kidnapped Chinese for the coolie trade Bowring declared that he would uphold the Portuguese Moreover he continues to insist that the English are not satisfied with the land we have allowed them to build their houses upon No Most High now they insist these English men that the gates of Canton itself must be opened to them and to their families so that they may walk upon our streets and mingle with our people the white males gazing at our women and the white females who have no modesty coming and going as freely as the males And what is granted to one white tribe will be demanded by all the others as they have done in the past Is this not to destroy our traditions and corrupt the people?

The Emperor agreed We cannot indeed allow strangers from other countries the freedom of our streets"

Most High I did forbid it but I fear the English

make whatever I forbid an excuse for yet another war and, small man that I am I cannot take responsibility

This is what Tzu Hsi heard behind the screen and she longed to cry out against the interlopers But she was a woman and must keep silence

The Emperor spoke Have you yourself represented our opinion to this Bowring Englishman?'

He was now so roused that he raised his voice to a feeble shout and this alarmed the Viceroy for he had never heard the imperial voice raised before and he turned his head toward Prince Kung not lifting his face to the Throne

Most High he said I cannot receive Bowring because he insists that he be allowed to call upon me as an equal. Yet how can he be my equal when I am the appointed of the Dragon Throne? This would be to insult the Throne itself I have replied that I will only receive him as I do others from tributary states He must approach me on his knees as they do This he will not

"You are correct the Emperor said with puny anger

Thus encouraged the Viceroy proceeded to further revela tion Moreover O Most High, this Bowring insists that I the people of Canton to print wall papers denouncing ne white strangers These papers Most High the Chinese paste upon the walls of the city and upon the city gates and Bowring is angry because they call his tribe barbarian and because they demand that all invaders leave our shores

"They are right " the Emperor exclaimed

"Entirely right Most High the Viceroy agreed And how can I forbid the people? It has been their ancient privilege and custom to say what they think and to make known their wishes to their rulers by public protest Am I now to say that the people may not speak? Is this not to invite fresh rebel lion? They were cowed last year when I ordered the provin cial armies to kill all rebels At that time eighty thousand rebels were killed as I reported to the Dragon Throne but if one rebel is left alive ten thousand spring up like weeds Is it not to put power into the hands of Chinese rebels who continually think that they should be ruled by Chinese and not by Manchus?"

His point struck home The Emperor raised his right hand to his mouth that he might hide the trembling of his lips He

feared the Chinese he ruled even more than the white men who pressed upon him His voice faded

Certainly the people must not be restrained" he muttered

Instantly Prince Kung took up the words and repeated them as was his duty Certainly the people must not be restrained, he said in his loud clear voice Over the kneeling multitude of ministers and princes approval rose in a subdued roar

I will send down my command tomorrow the Emperor said to the Viceroy when silence had fallen again

The Viceroy bowed his head nine times to the floor and gave way to the next minister But all knew why the Emperor delayed

That night when she was summoned Tzu Hsi knew what she must say All day she had remained alone and in thought and she did not even send for her son Her struggle was with her own anger Could she have yielded to her anger she would have the Emperor send his armies to attack the foreigners and force them from the shores of China to the last and youngest child never to return But the hour was not yet She understood well that she must first rule herself if she would rule others for had she not read in the *Analects* those very words? When a ruler's conduct is correct his government is effective without issuing orders If his personal conduct be not correct he may issue orders but they will not be followed" And if such words were true for a male ruler how much were they true for one who was a woman! How doubly rigorous must she be! Ah that she had been born a man! She would herself have led the Imperial Armies against the invaders What sins had she committed in some former life that she was born female in these times when strong men were wanted? She brooded upon the eternal question sending mind and memory far back into her deepest being She could not pierce beyond the womb She was what she was born and she must do with what she had man's mind in a woman's body Man's mind and woman's body she could combine to do that must be done

That night when the Emperor received her she who frightened for His Habitual lust, a desire

because his body could no more obey his mind He received her eagerly and in his eagerness she read his fear While he held her right hand in both his hands he caressed her palm, and asked her the question that he had waited to put to her

"What shall we do with this Bowring Englishman? Does he not deserve to die?"

He does" she said gently as any man deserves to die who insults the Son of Heaven But you know my lord that when one strikes a viper the head must be severed at the first blow else the creature will turn and attack Therefore your weapon must be sharp and certain We do not know what the weapon should be but we know this serpent is both wily and strong Therefore I beg you delay and make excuse never yielding but never refusing until the way is clear"

He listened his sallow face wrinkling with anxiety and every word she spoke he received as though he heard it from Heaven Indeed when she had finished he said very fervently

"You are Kuan Yin herself Goddess of Mercy sent to me by Heaven at this dreadful moment to guide and support me"

He had spoken many words of love to her he had called her his heart and his liver but what he now said pleased her beyond anything she had ever heard

Kuan Yin is my own favorite among the heavenly beings she replied and her voice sweet and powerful as it was by nature at this moment was also tender

The Emperor sat up in his bed with sudden energy "Bid the Chief Eunuch call my brother" he exclaimed Like all weak men he was impatient when a decision was made and overquick to act

Tzu Hsi obeyed nevertheless In a few minutes Prince Kung came in and she felt again as she looked at his grave and handsome face that this man she could trust Theirs was a common destiny

"Sit down—sit down" the Emperor said impatiently to his younger brother

"Allow me to stand" Prince Kung replied in courtesy and he remained standing while the Emperor spoke in his high voice nervous stammering seeking for words

"We have—I have—decided not to attack the white strang-

gers with one blow They deserve immediate death But when one steps on a viper—that is to say a viper should be killed instantly you understand his head crushed or cut off—the question being—"

"I do understand Most High" Prince Kung said It is better not to attack unless we can be sure of destroying the enemy instantly and forever

It is what I am saying the Emperor said peevishly Some day of course it is what we must do Meanwhile delay you comprehend not yielding but not refusing"

Ignoring the white men?" Prince Kung inquired

Exactly the Emperor said wearily He lay back on his yellow satin cushions

Prince Kung reflected Had his brother made such decisions alone he might have believed that it was from his habitual dread of trouble the constant lethargy which stayed action But he knew that this was Tzu Hsi's advice He heard it, knowing very well the powerful and reasoning brain that was hidden inside the beautiful and shapely head Yet she was very young—and a woman! Could this be wisdom?

Most High he began patiently

But the Emperor refused to hear him I have spoken!" Thus he cried in a high and angry voice

Prince Kung bowed his head Let it be so Most High I will myself take your commands to the Viceroy Yeh"

The brittle peace continued Upon a winter's morning in the last month of the old moon year and the first month of the new solar year when her son was nine months old Tzu Hsi woke and waking breathed a mighty sigh Again and again in the night her unsleeping mind had struggled through to consciousness She felt a loneliness so heavy that it seemed some monstrous and unsendinger from which she could not escape No more did she waken in the morning as she had once waked at her home in Pewter Lane her eyes opening on the calm morning sun shining through the latticed windows Her bed there shared with her sister was a refuge to which there was no return her mother a shelter that was hers no more Who in this vast tangle of walled passages courtyards and palaces cared whether she lived or Even the Emperor had his many concubines.

"Ah my mother she moaned softly into her satin pillows

No voice answered She lifted her head and saw the gray light of late dawn steal over the high walls of the courtyard outside her window Snow had fallen in the night and it lay thickly upon the walls and over the tiled garden The round pool was hidden beneath snow and the pine trees were bent under its load

I am too sad she thought I feel the very marrow in my bones cold with sadness

Yet she was not ill Her arms lying under the quilts were warm and strong Her blood flowed her mind was clear She was only heartsick

If I could see my mother she thought If I could see the one who bore me—

She remembered her mothers face sensible and good cheerful and shrewd and she longed to return to her mother and tell her that she was afraid and alone in the palaces In her uncles house in Pewter Lane there was no fear or foreboding no ominous future The morning dawned only to the simple necessities of food and the days work There was no splendor nor demand for greatness

"Ah my mother" she sighed again and she felt the yearning of a child for its own Oh that she could return to her source!

The need pervaded her she rose with it in her heart, and all day she was sad A sad day indeed the gray light struggling through the white fall of the snow so that even at noon the lanterns were still lit in the rooms She went nowhere except into her own library a place she had taken for herself in a small adjoining palace long unused Here she had commanded eunuchs to gather the books she liked best and the scrolls she liked to open and to ponder upon But books did not speak to her today and she sat the hours through with her scrolls unrolling one after another slowly until she found the one she sought a hand scroll seventeen feet long painted by the artist Chao Meng fu in the Mongol dynasty of Yuan This scroll five hundred years old and more had been inspired by her favorite the great Wang Wei master of landscape art who had painted the scenes from his own home where he lived for thirty years before he died Now behind the palace walls on this winters day where she could

see only sky and falling snow Tzu Hsi gazed upon the green landscapes of continuing spring One landscape melted into another as slowly she unrolled the scroll, so that she might dwell upon every detail of tree and brook and distant hill side So did she in imagination pass beyond the high walls which enclosed her and she traveled through a delectable country beside flowing brooks and spreading lakes and following the ever flowing river she crossed over wooden bridges and climbed the stony pathways upon a high mountainside and thence looked down a gorge to see a torrent fed by still higher springs and breaking into waterfalls as it traveled toward the plains Down from the mountain again she came past small villages nestling in pine forests and into the warmer valleys among bamboo groves and she paused in a poet s pavilion and so reached at last the shore where the river lost itself in a bay There among the reeds a fisherman s boat rose and fell upon the rising tide Here the river ended its horizon the open sea and the misted mountains of infinity This scroll Lady Miao had once told her was the artist s picture of the human soul passing through the pleasant scenes of earth to the last view of the unknown future far beyond

"And why" the Emperor asked her that night when the long lonely day was spent, why is your mind so far from me? I am not deceived by you Your body is here but it is lifeless

He took up her hand a soft and beautiful hand now its last roughness smoothed away the fingers delicate the palm strong

See this hand" he said I hold it, it grasps mine but it could be any woman s hand.

She confessed her humors I have been sad today" she said I have spoken to no one I have not even sent for the child

He continued to stroke the hand he held "Now why he asked, when you have everything should you be sad?"

She longed to tell her strange fears to him but he dared not. He above all must never feel fear in her upon whom he leaned for strength Oh how heavy a burden was this necessity to be strong! And from whom could she draw her strength? Above her there was none She was indeed

Tears filled her eyes against her will The F

them glitter in the light of the candles that burned beside his bed and he was frightened

What is this?" he cried I have never seen you weep

She drew her hand away and wiped her eyes gracefully on the edge of her satin sleeve I have yearned all day for my mother she said And I do not know why Can it be that I have somehow been unfilial? I have not looked upon her face since I entered these walls at your command I do not know how she is Perhaps she is dying and that is why I weep

The Emperor was all eagerness to please her You must visit her he urged "Why did you not tell me? Go go my heart and liver go tomorrow! I give you leave But you must come back again by twilight I cannot have you gone for a night

So it came about that Tzu Hsi once more returned to her mother for a day and the price she now paid to the Emperor was her grateful ardor Yet it could not be the next day that she go for the visit must be announced in order that her uncle's house could be prepared But the next day after it could be done and two eunuchs were sent early to say that she would arrive at midday What excitement now prevailed in Pewter Lane! Tzu Hsi too was warmed by her own eagerness and she rose on the chosen morning with such a heart as she had not known since she came She spent an hour deciding and then undoing her decisions as to what she should wear

I do not wish to be splendid she exclaimed to her woman for then they will think I have grown proud"

"Venerable you must be somewhat splendid the woman remonstrated lest they think you do not give them honor"

A middling splendor Tzu Hsi agreed

She looked over all her robes choosing this one and then that until she selected at last a satin of a delicate orchid purple lined with gray fur It was a fine robe its beauty in the perfection of its embroidered sleeves and hem and not in the boldness of its design She was pleased with herself when she was robed in it and she chose for ornaments her favorite jade

When she was ready and when she had eaten a few mouthfuls of food which her ladies pleaded with her to swallow

she entered into her sedan that stood waiting in the court yard, the bearers drew the yellow satin curtains close and so the journey was begun For a mile it lay within the walls of the Forbidden City and she gauged the courts through which she was carried, and the halls by which she passed, traveling always toward the south, for the Emperor in the excess of his love had granted her the privilege of using the chief gate called Meridian, by which usually only he himself could enter and leave his city Outside that gate she heard the Commander of the Imperial Guard shout for his guardsmen to stand attendance while she passed How well she knew that voice! She leaned forward in her chair and put aside the curtains a half inch and looking through the crack she saw Jung Lu standing not ten feet from her his face averted his sword held up before him his body taut and straight and at its full height. Neither to right nor left did he look when she passed but she knew by the dark flush on his cheeks that he had heard, that he knew it was she She let the curtain fall.

It was high noon when Tzu Hsi reached the entrance to Pewter Lane, and hidden behind the sedan curtains she knew that she was near her childhood home She smelled the familiar odors of salty crullers fried in bean oil the musky fragrance of camphorwood the reek of children's urine and the choking scent of dust. The day was dry and cold and under the feet of the bearers the earth was frozen hard as stone Upon this pale dry earth the shadows of the houses on either side of the lane were shrunken small and black against the walls and Tzu Hsi, peering downward between her sedan and the curtains guessed the hour So often had she run to and fro along this lane that she could tell within an inch what time it was the shadows heavy toward the west in the morning and bending eastward in the afternoon. Now in the light of the full sun her sedan approached the well known gate and she put her eye to the crack of the curtains again and saw that gate opened and her family gathered before it and waiting There to the right stood her uncle and her mother and with them the cousins of the generation and their wives and to the left she saw a young girl who was surely her sister and with

two brothers grown beyond her memories and behind them Lu Ma Against the walls on either side were the neighbors and the friends of Pewter Lane

When she saw their faces grave and welcoming tears watered into her eyes Oh she was the same to them and somehow she must make them know itl Inside her breast beat the same heart they knew so well Yet she could not open the curtains or cry out their name for whatever her h art was she was now Tzu Hsi Empress of the Western Palace and mother of the Imperial Heir and so she must carry herself wherever she was She made no sign and the eunuch led the way to the gate the Chief Eunuch first of all for the Emperor had commanded him to go with his treasure and never leave her presence Up the steps then and through the open gate the six bearers carried her and they crossed the entrance courtyard and set the sedan down at last before the house There the Chief Eunuch himself put aside the satin curtains and Tzu Hsi stepped out into the sunlight and saw before her the wide and open doors of her old home The familiar room was there the main hall its tables and chairs polished and clean and the tiled floor swept. Often it had been her task to sweep and clean and set the chairs straight and dust the furniture and now all was done as though she were still here A vase of red paper flowers stood on the long table against the wall and fresh candles in the pewter candlesticks and in front of the square table, between the ceremonial chairs were small covered dishes of sweetmeats a teapot and bowls

She placed her hand upon the lifted arm of the Chief Eunuch and he led her to the highest seat to the right of the square table and she sat down and put her feet together on the footstool He arranged her skirts and she folded her hands upon her lap Then the Chief Eunuch returned to the gate and announced that now the family could approach the Empress of the Western Palace One by one they came her uncle first and then her mother and then the elder cousins of the same generation and their wives and after them her brothers and her sister and the younger cousins of their generation and each bowed down before her while behind her stood the eunuchs and at her right hand the Chief Eunuch.

At first Tzu Hsi behaved indeed as an Empress must. She received the obeisances of her family with dignity and grave looks, except that when her uncle and her mother bowed before her she motioned to the Chief Eunuch to lift them up and invite them to be seated. When the ceremonies were complete no one knew what to say next. All must wait for the Empress to speak and Tzu Hsi looked from face to face She longed to come down from her high place and speak as she used to do and she longed to run about the house and be free as once she had been free. But the Chief Eunuch stood there watching all she did. For a while she considered how she could accomplish what she wished. All were arranged according to the generations the elders seated and the young ones standing and still they waited for her to speak first, and how could she speak as her heart longed? Suddenly she tapped her shielded fingernails upon the polished table at her right and she nodded at the Chief Eunuch to signify that she had something to say to him He came near and leaned down his ear and into this ear she spoke.

"You are to stand aside you and these eunuchs! How can I enjoy myself when you hear every word I speak and see every motion that I make?"

The Chief Eunuch was concerned when he heard such a command. "Venerable the Son of Heaven bade me never leave your side" he said in a loud whisper

Tzu Hsi was instantly incensed She tapped her foot on the floor and drummed her golden finger shields upon the table and she shook her head at the Chief Eunuch so that the pearls of her headdress trembled on their wires Her own eunuch, Li Lien ying, who stood near to hold her jeweled pipe and fan and toilet case saw her fury rising and, knowing very well what it foretold, he plucked the sleeve of the Chief Eunuch.

"Elder Brother it is better to let her have her way he whispered "Why do you not rest yourself? I will stay near enough to watch over her

Now whether the Chief Eunuch would have obeyed Tzu Hsi or the Emperor cannot be known, but he was easily weary and already tired of standing on his feet and grasped the chance to withdraw to another room gone Tzu Hsi considered her mentor had left her

that he is such a child as would delight your soul and you must come to visit him since I may not bring him here His eyes are b g like this— here she measured two circles with her thumbs and forefingers—"and he is so fat his flesh so fragrant—and he never cries I do assure you—and he is al ways greedy for his food and his teeth are whiter than these pearls and though he is still so small he wants to stand on his legs which are like two posts under his strong body

"Hush! her mother cried. Hush—hush—what if the gods hear you reckless one? Will they not seek to destroy such a child?"

Her mother looked up and down and everywhere around and she cried out, in a loud voice Nothing is as you say! I have heard that he is puny and weak and—and—

Tzu Hsi laughed and put her hand over her mother s mouth I am not afraid!

Do not say so" her mother insisted beneath the hand

But Tzu Hsi could only laugh and soon she was walking every here looking at the rooms she knew so v ell and teasing her sister who now had the whole bed to herself and alone with her mother in one room she asked concerning the marriage plans for her sister and proposed that she would find a good husband for her among the young noblemen.

Indeed" she said "I will find one young and handsome and bid him wed my sister"

Her mother was grateful If you can so do she sa d "it will be a filial deed and very pious

So the hours passed and all the family vas merry because Tzu Hsi was merry In midafternoon a good feast vas set, Lu Ma busy everywhere and bawling at the hi ed cooks and when this had been shared the day was nearing night and the Chief Eunuch returned to his duty He approached Tzu Hsi and requested her to prepare for leave t king

"The time has come Venerable he said "I have the command of the Most High It is my duty to obey

She kne there was no further escape and so she yielded with grace Once more she became the Empress Li Lien ying put b ck her headdress and she took her seat again in the main room and arrar ged hers lf Immed ately the became her subjects. One by one they came

made their obeisances and said their farewells and to each she spoke with suitable words leaving gifts for each and for Lu Ma money At last all farewells were said She lingered a few minutes more in silence her eyes moving here and there It had been a day of deep happiness and a
of the simple affections of her childhood And yet somehow she knew it was the last time that ever she could return to this house All seemed the same but in spite of her faithful heart she knew nothing was the same They loved her still, but their love was entangled with hopes and desires of what she could do for them Her uncle hinted at debts unpaid her brother yearned for amusements and her mother bade her not forget her promise for her sister In lesser ways the kinfolk, too had mentioned hardships and lacks She was pitying and merciful she made promises for all and she would fulfill them because she could but her loneliness returned and lay ten times more heavy on her heart for now she knew she was loved beyond herself She was loved for what she could do and for what she could give and her heart shriveled Though her body had come back and for these few hours her spirit had rejoined the others in this house, separation was forever Destiny compelled her onward
I her own she must leave behind There could be no return

When this knowledge settled into her being her gaiety was gone With firm steps she walked across the room and entered again into her sedan chair and the Chief Eunuch himself let down the curtains

So Tzu Hsi returned again to the Forbidden City and when she approached the great gate of the Meridian th Imperial Guard announced the end of the day The drummer stood behind his great drum beating upon it a rhythm so swift that the sticks fell with heavy blows as steady one upon anoth r as the beat of some mighty heart In the twilight the trumpeters stood in their robes and each held to his lips a long brass trumpet. These trumpets they raised in unison then lowered to the same level and at this moment they blew a long quivering blast of music beginning in softness and rising to strength and always following the beating of the mighty drums until falling away again the trumpet voices died Again and again this music was repeated

the last time when the trumpeters allowed the sounds to die so slowly that they were lost in distance So too did the drummer soften the beat of the drum until he made it end by three slow measured beats A pause of silence followed and then a bronze bell was struck three times and by Jung Lu

And the night fell as always it did fall The watchmen marched to their task, and Tzu Hsi in her sedan entered the vast gates and heard them close behind her

Winter ended late and the halting spring was delayed still further by the evil winds that blew down from the north Sandstorms tortured the city and though the people closed their doors and sealed their windows yet the wind drove the fine pale sand through every crack and corner Nor was the news good from the south The Viceroy Yeh had obeyed the commands from the Dragon Throne He had dallied and delayed he had not replied to the many messages from the Englishman Sir John Bowring and when it was reported to him that a French priest had been killed somewhere he made no reply to this announcement either nor to the demand of the French minister for retribution Yet the Viceroy now reported to the Dragon Throne instead of being subdued by such neglect the white men were more restless than before and he the Viceroy sought further direction from the Son of Heaven What if war broke out again? And meanwhile there was the small trouble of the families of the beheaded men who had been the ships crew of *The Arrow* They were angry and their sons and nephews had joined the Chinese rebels for revenge against the Viceroy who stood for the distant Emperor And worst of all it was rumored that the Englishman Elgin a noble lord very powerful was threatening to sail English ships northward along the seacoast and enter the harbor at Tientsin in order to attack the Taku forts which protected the capital itself

When the Emperor read this memorial he fell ill and took to his bed and would not eat In silence he handed the document to his brother Prince Kung whom he summoned and he commanded that Tzu Hsi read it also and that they present their advice Now for the first time Tzu Hsi fell

open disagreement with Prince Kung They argued in the Imperial Library their usual meeting place and in the presence of the Chief Eunuch and Li Lien ying who stood as attendants and heard all that was said

Venerable Prince Kung said reasonably "again I tell you that it is not wise to annoy these white men to the point of anger They have guns and warships and they are barbarian at heart."

"Let them return to their own lands We have tried patience and now patience fails Tzu Hsi exclaimed She was very beautiful when she was haughty and Prince Kung sighed to see such beauty and such pride Yet he admitted in his secret heart that this woman had an energy which even he had not and surely that his elder brother had not and indeed the times needed strength

"We have not the means to force their return he reminded her

"We have the means if we have the will" she retorted "We can kill them every one while they are still few and throw their bodies into the sea Do dead men return?"

He exclaimed at such recklessness "Will death put an end to them? When their peoples hear of it, they will send a thousand white men for each one that dies and they will come with their many ships of war bearing their magic weapons against us

I do not fear them" Tzu Hsi declared.

"Then I do Prince Kung assured her I fear them greatly It is not only their weapons I fear—it is the white men themselves When they are attacked they return ten blows for one No no Venerable—mediation is the safe way and bargaining and delays as you wisely did advise before These must still be our weapons We must still confound them with delays and promises unfulfilled and we must still put off the evil day of their attack We must weary them and discourage them always courteous when we speak, seeming to yield and never yielding This is our steadfast wisdom."

So in the end it was decided and that Tzu Hsi might be diverted for she continued rebellious Prince Kung advised his elder brother th Emperor that she be permitted to spend the hot season at the Summer Palace outside the ci of Peking There among the lakes and gardens she could

port herself with the Heir and her ladies and forget the troubles of the nation

"The Empress of the Western Palace loves plays and theatricals he suggested Let a stage be built at the Summer Palace and actors be hired to amuse her Meanwhile I will consider with the councilors what reply shall be sent south And it is to be remembered that when the green spring comes again we must celebrate the first birthday of the Heir and we should announce the occasion soon that the people may prepare their gifts Thus all will be diverted while we ponder the dangers ahead

In this way Prince Kung hoped to allay Tzu Hsi's anger and turn her thoughts to pleasure and away from proud revenge upon the white men In his secret heart he was very fearful, and he wished to take counsel with the princes and the ministers and any whose wisdom he could trust For he saw in the future and not too far the increasing threat of the men from the West They had discovered the treasures of ancient Asia and being men of nations young and poor could they be asked to leave what they had found? They must be placated but how he did not know until defense could be planned Troubled indeed he was sleepless at night and never hungry for food any more for what he pondered was deeper than he could fathom The old civilized ways of peace and wisdom were menaced by a new brute force Which would prevail and where lay the final strength in violence or in peace?

So grave were these times that the Emperor in the fifth month renewed an ancient rite which his ancestors had seldom observed after the end of the preceding dynasty of Ming At the Spring Feast of the Dead in this moon year the Emperor sorely troubled and afraid announced that he would worship at the Supreme Temple of Imperial Ancestors Now this was a very ancient temple and it stood in a vast park where great pines shielded its roofs from the sun These pines being older than the memory of man were gnarled and twisted by the wind and the sand and beneath them the moss was deeper than piled velvet Inside the Temple the sacred shrines of dead emperors their names carved tablets of precious wood and each tablet resting on a cushion of yellow satin Only priests in yellow robes

dered about the park and cared for the Temple and silence hung everywhere as heavy as the centuries that had passed. No birds sang in this still place but white cranes came in the spring and made their nests in the crooked pines and reared their young and in the autumn flew away again

To this place then at the Feast of the Dead the Emperor came with his princes and dukes his councilors and high ministers It was the hour before dawn and mists unusual in this dry northern climate rose from earth to sky so that brother looking at brother could not recognize his face Two days before the feast day the ancestral tablets of the dead Manchu rulers had been brought from their own private hall near the Imperial Library and by the light of horn lanterns so dark were the shadows under the pines the Chief Eunuch and his eunuchs had arranged them upon the eleven shrines inside the temple.

All was now in readiness for the arrival of the Son of Heaven He had spent the night in the Hall of Abstinence neither eating nor drinking nor sleeping For three days too the people of the whole nation had eaten no meat they had not tasted garlic or oils nor drunk wine nor heard music nor looked at plays nor invited guests Law courts were closed these three days and there was no litigation made by e

At this gray hour before dawn the Court Butcher made his report that he had slaughtered the beasts for the sacrifice and had poured their fresh blood into bowls and had buried their bones and fur The princes and the dukes reported that the sacred prayer was written which the Son of Heaven was to pray before the guardian Ancestors whose tablets stood upright and ready upon the imperial yellow cushions upon the altars

The Emperor received these reports and he rose to allow the Chief Eunuch to put on him the solemn robes of sacrifice dark purple trimmed in plain gold and leaning upon two near kinsmen, his first cousins he entered the Supreme Temple There his younger brother Prince Kung waited to receive him No strangers were near Even the eunuchs from the Temple withdrew before the Son of Heaven entered and his kinsmen alone stood at the door Now the imperial princes came forward to meet the Emperor and after obei

sances they led him from one to another of the eleven sacred altars At each one he made nine obeisances and he offered bowls of food and wine and before each altar he made the same prayer The prayer was for peace and for safety against the new enemies that had come from the West It was a long prayer and the Emperor read it eleven times slowly and in as loud a voice as he could muster

To the Spirits of the Great Dead he reported what the Western men had done how they had made war and how they had seized territories and how they came as barbarian tribesmen in ships that spat out fire to frighten the people and he reported how these men insisted upon unwanted trade

We have our own goods O Venerable Ancestors the Emperor declared in his prayer We have no need of Western toys What do we lack under the protection of Heaven and Our Guardian Ancestors? We beseech Our Ancestors to protect us now Let the strangers be driven into the sea! Provide pestilences to destroy them! Send down poisonous insects to sting them and vipers to strike them dead! O Guardians of our people restore to us our land and give us peace

When the prayer was ended the hour was already near sunrise and in the dawning light flocks of white pigeons sleeping under the broad eaves of the Temple awoke and spread their wings and circled above the concentric roofs The candles faded in the lanterns and dust motes danced in the pale sunbeams stealing through the wide gates of the Temple. The sacrifice was ended and the Emperor let himself be led away again and entering into his imperial palanquin he returned to his own palaces Then everywhere over the nation the people took up their accustomed life comforted and encouraged because the Son of Heaven himself had bowed before the Guardian Ancestors had made his report and sent up his prayer on their behalf

These rites at the Spring Feast of the Dead so heartened the Emperor that when the sixth month of the moon year drew near and the heat of summer increased he had decided to go to the Summer Palace with his two Consorts and with him to take the Heir and the Court Ushers although he had longed to go the disturbances in

had made him uneasy What if the Chinese rebels were to rise while he was awav from the capital or what if the Western men were suddenly to become incensed and sail their ships northward up the coasts as they had long threat ened to do? Yet neither of these ill events had come and although the Viceroy Yeh was still gloomy the delays and the evasions which he made held back both rebels and Western men

And Tzu Hsi herself coaxed the Emperor upon a certain night when the summer moon was full and her smile en chanting

My lord she said come with me to the Summer Palace. The coolness of the hills will restore you to health

The Emperor was so dv in need of such restoration The slow paralysis which had weakened him in the last five years lay heavy upon his limbs Upon some days he could not walk and must lean upon tv o eunuchs for crutches and upon other days he could not raise his hands to his head His dead left s de was his constant affliction and he felt his whole bodv pervaded with its heaviness He yielded therefore to this beautiful woman who enlivened him and strengthened him as no other living creature was able to do and he de- ided upon a day then a month hence for the journey to the Summer Palace some nine miles outside the city walls

Now Tzu Hsi though she could look the Empress and in full majesty was still so young a creature that the thought of a holiday permeated her heart like warm wine She did not yet love the severe and noble palaces in which she was doomed to live although among them she had made small separate places for herself secret gardens in old forgotten courtyards and terraces where no one walked and where sometimes she might escape the burdens of state which she must carry In her own palace she had her pets a little dog, a female who bred pups to amuse her and she kept crickets in cages and birds of many colors The pets she loved best were not these however but the wild creatures v ho settled som times in the trees and upon the pools She could so imi- tate the sharp whisper of a cricket that she coaxed th e insect to sit upon her forefinger while she stroked its papery wings. With much patience sh learned the call of a nightingale at twilight so that the dim brown creature fluttered intoxicated

about her head. When this happened she felt a childlike happiness that she was loved for herself alone and not for any favor she could bestow Sometimes when she sat with her son upon her knees she forgot that he was the Heir and together they watched a flock of ducklings newly hatched or the pups pulling and mauling in play and then she laughed so loudly that her ladies marveled and smiled behind their fans But Tzu Hsi had no fear of smiles or reproaches She was herself and as she was so she continued to be a crea ture as free as those she played with. Yet though four square miles lay within the Forbidden City its walls confined her and she longed to be outside all walls and in that place of which she had often heard but where never yet h d she gone to live or even to visit

This Summer Palace had first been built fo pleasure sev eral centuries earlier by the emperors then ruling and they had chosen for its site a place near an eternal fountain which ran so clear and pure its waters sweet and eve fresh that it was named the Fountain of Jade The first Summer Palace was destroyed in a war and rebuilt again two centuries ear lier than this time and by the Imperial Ancesto K ang Hsi, then ruling but the Imperial Ancestor his son Ch en Lung then ruling brought all the separate buildings together unit ing them into a vast pa k threaded with lakes and rivers and crossed by marble bridges or bridges of ir n ood painted and carved by master workmen Dea ly d ed d d Ch ien Lung enjoy what he had done so that he h ard that the King of France then ruling had also su h pl asure grounds in that distant land Ch en Lung inquir d of F ench ministers and Jesuit priests wh t th French k ng h d that he had not, for Empe ors in thos d ys we e d ve ted by Western men and ev n welcomed them not d e ming that they could have a later evil intent When Ch en Lung heard of the beauties that the F ench king had mad he i hed for them too and he added Western beauty to the Summer Palace as well as that which belonged the e The Jesuit priests for their part thinking to find favor with the great Ch ien Lung brought with them f om France and It ly p tures of the palaces of Europe, wh ch Ch ien Lung closely and he took from them anything wh ch fancy After Ch ien Lung's time however the S

smoothed the highway with yellow sand also retired Upon the third warning of drums and gongs the nobles of the Manchu clans all in their best robes knelt on the sides of the highway before the Son of Heaven as he passed surrounded by his thousand guardsmen In the old days the emperors rode always upon great Arabian horses bridled with gold the saddles covered with jeweled velvet But Hsien Feng, now ruling was not able to sit upon a horse and so he must ride in his palanquin He was shy too because he knew himself so thin and sallow and he would not allow the eunuchs to lift the curtains Hidden and in silence he was carried along the yellow sanded highway and the kneeling noblemen neither saw him nor heard his voice

At the village of Hai Tien outside the city walls the road turned eastward and through this village the palanquins of the Emperor and his two Consorts passed with all the Court The little town was bustling with good business for here the Imperial Guardsmen were to live and in the countryside nearby the princes and the dukes and other noblemen had summer palaces on their own estates that they might more easily wait upon the Emperor at the Summer Palace Everywhere the villagers were in high mood for when the Court took residence at the Summer Palace of Yuan Ming Yuan they gained

At sunset the imperial procession approached the gate of the Summer Palace itself and peering through the cracks between her curtains Tzu Hsi saw the lofty gate of carved white marble guarded by two golden lions It opened and waiting and she was carried over the high threshold and into the quiet of the vast park Now she could not forbear opening her curtains with her hands to look out and she saw a dreamlike scene Pagodas hung as though suspended on the green hills and clear brooks ran smoothly rippling beside the winding roads paved with marble and bridges carved of white marble led the way to a hundred pavilions each different from the others and beautiful in gold and colored tile A lifetime would not be enough to know it all And with much that he could see there was more unseen the great palaces themselves designed so long ago and enriched every emperor in his time the famous water clock with twelve animals spouted water from the Fountain of

the manifold variety of palaces and gardens lingered in the doorway Alas the day was at its end the sun slipped down behind the spires of the pagodas and the afterglow faded from the lakes and streams Soon even the shadows of the marble bridges no longer lingered upon the waters and the day was ended

I shall retire early Tzu Hsi said and I shall rise at dawn However many tomorrows are allotted to this joyful place they will not be enough to see all that is to be seen here or to take our fill of pleasure

Her ladies agreed and the moon had scarcely risen before Tzu Hsi went to her own apartments A light meal of sweetmeats and tidbits was served to her she drank her favorite green tea and then bathed and in fresh silk garments she lay down to sleep At first she said she could not sleep so sweet was the night air and twice after her very women slept, she rose from her bed to look from the open windows The palace stood high above the low encircling hills and she could see beyond them to the distant mountains pale in the moonlight Peace stole over her spirit so deep a peace that it seemed the prelude to sleep itself and yet she was awake in every sense Before her lay the golden moonlit landscape she smelled the fragrance of night blooming lilies she heard the clear call of the harvest bird early in its season Her loneliness subsided the fear of wind and troubles died away her impetuous heart grew gentle and her thoughts kindly Beyond the terrace to the right stood the Palace of the Floating Cloud assigned to Sakota Tomorrow —no not tomorrow but some day when her happiness was full enough she would stay by her resolve and renew her steady friendship with Sakota How strange to think that they who had grown up beneath the same roof in Pewter Lane should now live side by side in their two palaces their one lord the Emperor!

And then because her mind was never long at rest she thought of Jung Lu her kinsman and how she had seen him for a moment today how their weary eyes had met had clung and then had parted again unwillingly and she had heard fiercely of a sudden to hear his voice and know him And why should she not summon him as her kins For some advice needed? What advice did she

mand a play was presented to the Court by the Imperial Players and for the first time Tzu Hsi could indulge to fullness of her desire her love of theater She had read books about the past, and she had studied well the old paintings and writings but in the plays she saw men and women of history come to life again before her eyes She lived with other consorts and empresses and saw her own self born earlier to rule and die And thoughtful thereafter she went to bed at night if the play were thoughtful and merry if the play were merry and whatever she did was all pleasure

Among the treasures which she mused upo more than the rest was the library which the Ancestor Chien Lung himself had caused to be collected and created from the great books of the past of four thousand years By His command these books had been copied by the scholars of his reign into one vast treasure Two sets of the manuscripts these scholars made the one to remain in the Forbidden City and the other here lest fire or invading enemies destroy either Tzu Hsi had not herself laid hands upon these libraries which the scholars had made for inside the city the one was stored in the Hall of Literary Glory and kept under lock and key except for a single season each year this at the Feast of Classics when it was the duty of the highest scholars to take out the ancient writings and expound their meaning to the Emperor then ruling For ever since the First Emperor eight hundred years ago had burned the books and buried scholars to put an end to ancient learning and make himself supreme it had been the first care of scholars to preserve books by teaching reverence for them first from the Emperor and then from all his subjects and that the words of the sage Confucius could not be destroyed by willful rulers the Four Books and the Five Classics were engarved on stone and these stone monuments stood in the Hall of Classics whose gates were barred But here at Yuan Ming Yuan Tzu Hsi though a woman could read the ancient writings and so help promised herself she would do if on a day it rained or if she were tired with the sights to be seen

Yet whatever she did for some twenty days not only was she enjoyed outdoor fêtes upon the imperial house boats the Court not only while she walked among the flower gardens or played with her imperial son who

Where before she had received her kinsman in secret now Tzu Hsi received him openly and among her ladies Seated on her throne in the great hall of her palace she waited for Jun Lu Magnificence became her as always The walls were hung with painted scrolls behind the throne was an alabaster screen and porcelain pots of blooming trees stood to right and left Her little dogs gamboled with four white kittens upon the floor and here was the woman in the Empress Tzu Hsi, in the midst of her splendor laughed at her pets so much that at last she came down from her throne possessed by mirth and playfulness And while she went here and there she praised one lady for her fresh looks and another for her headdress and she trailed her silken kerchief to make the kittens follow her and only when she heard the eunuch s footsteps followed by a certain steadfast tread did she make haste to sit upon her throne again and fold her jeweled hands and look proud and grand while her ladies smiled behind their fans

Her face was grave her lips demure but her great eyes sparkled when Jung Lu stepped across the high threshold of the entrance wearing his guardsman s tunic of scarlet silk and black velvet trousers He took nine steps forward and did not raise his face to hers until he knelt Then before he bowed his head he took one full look at her high lofty

Welcome cousin Tzu Hsi said in her pretty voice It has been a long time since we met

A long time Venerable he answered and waited kneeling She gazed down on him from her throne the corners of her mouth deepening in a smile I have something to plead advice upon and so I have summoned you

Command me Venerable he said

My younger sister is old enough to wed he went on "Do you remember that child? A naughty ailing little thing do you remember? Always clinging to me and wanting what I had?"

"Venerable I forget nothing he said his head still bowed

Tzu Hsi received the secret meaning in these words hid the treasure in her heart

Well now my sister needs a husband she went has outgrown her naughty ways and is a woman

She opened her eyes wide at him Why not pray? Was I not a concubine until my son was born?"

"To the Emperor he reminded her and now you are the Empress The sister of an empress cannot be a concubine even to a prince

"Then I must choose the Seventh Prince she said It is only he who has no wife Alas he is the least handsome of all princes—that heavy mouth drawn down the eyes dull and small, a proud solemn face! I hope my sister does not love beauty in a face as well as do I!

She looked sidewise at him from beneath her long straight lashes and he looked away

Prince Chun's face is not evil he rejoined It is lucky if a prince be at least not evil

Oh she said most mockingly "You think that important? In a prince? Is it not enough that he be a prince?"

He ignored her mockery I think it not enough

She shrugged her shoulders "Well kinsman if Prince Chun be your advice I'll choose him and send a letter to my mother

She was angry of a sudden at his hardness toward her and she rose to signify the audience as ended then paused "And you— she said carelessly I suppose you are wed by now?"

He had risen with her and he stood before her tall and calm You know I am not wed

Ah but you must she insisted A sudden happiness made her face soft and young as he remembered it

I wish you would wed she said wistfully and locked her hands together

It is not possible He bowed and without farewell he left her presence and did not once look back

She stood there alone surprised at his being so swiftly gone and before she had missed him Then her quick eyes caught the movement of a curtain near a doorway A spy? She stepped forward and twitched the curtain and saw a shrinking figure It was Lady Mei her pretty favorite the young daughter of Su Shun

You? Now why?" This Tzu Hsi demanded

The lady hung her head and put her forefinger to her mouth

"Come come Tzu Hsi insisted "Why do you spy on me

Venerable not on you This came forth in the smallest whisper

"Then on whom?" Tzu Hsi demanded

The lady would not speak

"No answer?"

Tzu Hsi stared at the childish drooping figure and then without a further word she took the lady by her ears and shook her vehemently

On him then! she whispered fiercely "Ah he—you think him handsome? You love him I daresay—"

Between her jeweled fists the small face looked helplessly at her The lady could not speak

Again Tzu Hsi shook with all her strength "You dare to love him!

The lady broke into loud sobs and Tzu Hsi loosed her ears So harshly had she seized them that blood ran where the earrings had cut into the flesh

Do you think he loves you? Tzu Hsi asked scornfully

I know he does not Venerable the lady sobbed. He loves only you—we all know—only you—

At this Tzu Hsi was in two minds what next to do She ought to punish the lady for such a charge and yet she was so pleased to hear it said that whether she must smile or slap the girl's cheeks she did not know She did both She smiled and seeing the heads of her other ladies peeping here and there in doorways to know why there was such commotion she slapped the girl's cheeks with a sound but not with hurt

"There—and there she said heartily Go from me before I kill you out of shame! Do not let me see you for seven days"

She turned and sauntering with exquisite grace she sank down on her throne again half smiling and listening and heard the patter of the lady's little feet running down the corridors

From that day on the face and figure of Jung Lu were fixed anew in Tzu Hsi's mind and memory Though she could not summon him again she planned and plotted how they could meet not by contrivance and seldom but for and often He was present in her thoughts wherever

went in the day and when she woke in the night he was there While she sat at a play he was the hero at whom she looked and if she listened to music she heard his voice As the summer days passed and she grew accustomed to her pleasure palace she indulged herself much in thoughts of love Indeed she was a woman compelled to love and yet there was no man for her to love Meanwhile the Emperor received the overflow of this need and he thought himself beloved but he was no more than the image upon which she hung her dreams

Yet this woman was not one to be content with dreams She longed for flesh and blood to match her own Out of dreaming then she let herself proceed to purpose She would raise Jung Lu high enough so that she could keep him near her always maintaining their cousinship beyond doubt but using it for what she willed How could she refuse him without drawing all eyes toward her? Within the close walls of palaces scandals breed like foul fevers And she recalled her enemies Su Shun the Grand Councilor who hated her because she was above him and with him were still the Princes Cheng and Yi for they were Su Shun's friends She had an ally in An Teh hai, the Chief Eunuch and him she must keep loyal She frowned remembering the gossip that he was no true eunuch and that he pursued ladies of the court in secret

This led her on to thinking of Lady Mei again who it could not be forgotten was Su Shun's child Well she must not let that lady hate her too No no she would keep the daughter her friend and within her power so that the father could not use the daughter as a spy Well then was it not useful to know that the lady loved Jung Lu? Why had she shown such jealous anger? She must undo what she had done She would send for Lady Mei and bid her take heart, for she the Empress of the West in Palace would herself speak for her to the Commander of the Imperial Guard at some opportune time Such a marriage would serve a double purpose for it would give excuse to raise Jung Lu to high place Yes here she saw all at once was her means to raise up her beloved

She paused prudent after the instant of decision then the forbidden seven days had passed she sent La

ying to find the Lady Mei and bring her here Within an hour he brought his charge who fell at once upon her knees before her sovereign Tzu Hsi today was seated on her phoenix throne in the Pavilion of the Favorite a small secondary palace she claimed also for her own

When she had let the lady kneel awhile in silence Tzu Hsi rose and came down from her throne and lifted her up

You have grown thin these seven days she said kindly

Venerable Lady Mei said her eyes piteous when you are angry with me I cannot eat or sleep"

I am not angry now Tzu Hsi replied Sit down poor child Let me see how you are

She pointed to a chair and herself sat down on another next it and she took the ladys soft narrow hand and smoothed it between her own and went on talking

Child it is nothing to me whom you love Why should you not wed the Commander of the Imperial Guard? A handsome man and young—

The lady could not believe what she heard Her face flushed delicately tears came to her dark eyes and she clung to the kind hands

"Venerable I do adore you—

Hush—I am not a goddess—

Venerable the ladys voice trembled to me you are the Goddess of Mercy herself—"

Tzu Hsi smiled serenely and put down the little hand she held Now—now—no flattery child! But I have a plan

A plan?"

We must have a plan must we not?"

"Whatever you say Venerable"

"Well then—" and here Tzu Hsi put forth her plan "When the Heir completes his first full year since birth you know that there is to be a great feast At that time child I myself invite my kinsman so that all may see my intent to raise him When this is clear then step can follow step and who will dare to stop my kinsman? It is for your sake I raise him so that his rank may equal your own"

"But Venerable—

Tzu Hsi raised her hand "No doubts child! He will do what I say"

No doubts Venerable but—

Tzu Hsi examined the pretty face still pink "You think it is too long to wait so many months?"

The lady hid her face behind her sleeve

Tzu Hsi laughed Before one journeys to a new place the bridge must be built!

She pinched the lady's cheeks and made them still more red and then dismissed her

For two hundred years Prince Kung said the trade of these foreign merchants was confined to that one southern city of Canton Moreover such trade could only be through the licensed Chinese merchants

Summer was ended the autumn half gone and Tzu Hsi listening to her lesson gazed pensively beyond the wide doors open to the sun of midafternoon Porcelain pots of late chrysanthemums bloomed in red and gold and bronze She heard and did not hear the words falling on her ears and floating on her mind like fallen leaves upon the surface of a pool

Prince Kung spoke sharply to recall her from her dreaming

Do you hear Empress?"

I hear she said

He looked doubtful and went on Recall then Empress that the end of the two Opium Wars left our nation half ruined Thus defeat taught us one bitter lesson—that we could not consider the Western nations as tributaries They are greedy ruthless men though never our equal in force but in matters through the brutal force of the evil minds of barbarians have invented

These words spoken in his powerful voice startled her and she woke from her dreaming mood of summer now gone How hateful was it to return again to these high walls and locked gates!

Our masters?" she repeated

Our masters unless we keep our wits awake the Prince said firmly We have yielded almost to every demand—the right to indemnities the many new ports opened lately for the hateful foreign trade And what for foreign nations has the others all gain too Force—force that still figure wrapped

His handsome face stern his tall figure wrapped in gray satin robes drooped in the carved chair below the

weapons the sight of cruel force instead of skillful reason is changing even the Chinese people in subtle ways Force they say now is stronger than reason We have been wrong the Chinese say for only weapons can make us free This Empress of the Western Palace this is what we must understand in all depth and distance for I do assure you that in this one concept hides a change so mighty in our nation that unless we can change with it we who rule Manchu and ourselves not Chinese our dynasty will end before the Heir can sit upon the Dragon Throne

Give them weapons then Tzu Hsi said

Alas Prince Kung sighed if we give the Chinese weapons wherewith to repel the enemy from the West they will turn first on us whom they still call foreign although our ancestors came down from the north two hundred years ago Empress the throne is trembling on its foundations"

Could she comprehend the peril of the times? His eyes rested most anxiously upon the beautiful woman's face He could not read the answer that he sought, for he knew that woman's mind is not an instrument apart from her other being She does not separate herself as man does now flesh now mind now heart She is three in one a trinity complete and unified Thus while Prince Kung could only guess how Tzu Hsi's mind received what he taught, in fact her mind was working through her every sense It was not the dynasty alone the white men threatened it was her children's son the Imperial Heir imperial not only because he would be to sit upon the Dragon Throne but imperial because he had made him her energy conceived him and carried him and now her instinct rose to save him

That day when Prince Kung left her and she had returned to her own palace she sent for the child When she played with him holding him in her arms laughing with him singing to him the songs that she had heard her mother sing counting his small toes and fingers coaxing him to stand and catching him when he fell she allowed herself to forget enemies busy planning how she could destroy them Then at once—yes but first her son And when the play was over she gave him to his nurse and from that hour she presented to the Throne with free will to rule and silently from that place where

for love No while the Emperor lay in his bed half sleeping in an opium dream she pondered long and alone upon the written pages studying every word and weighing every meaning And when she had decided what her will was she lifted the vermilion brush and crossed out the words of those who advised action or war or retaliation against the intruders Delay she still commanded Do not yield but do not resist—not yet Promise and break the promises Is not our land vast and mighty? Shall we destroy the body because a mosquito stings a toe?"

None dared to disobey for to her handwriting she set the imperial seal and she alone except the Emperor could lift it from its coffer in the imperial bedchamber All that she commanded was printed in the Court Gazette as imperial decree essays and memorials had been printed daily for eight hundred years This gazette was sent by messenger to every province and its viceroy to every city and its magistrate so that everywhere the people could know the royal will And this will now was the will of one woman young and beautiful, who sat alone within the royal chamber while the Son of Heaven slept.

Prince Kung reading the vermilion words was sick with fear

Empress he said when next they met in the wintry shadows of the Imperial Library I must warn you again and yet again that the temper of these white men is short and savage They have not lived the centuries that our people have They are children When they see what they want they put out their hands to snatch it Delay and promises not kept will only anger them We must bargain with them persuade them even bribe them to leave our shores

Tzu Hsi flashed her splendid eye at him Pay what can they do? Can their ships sail a thousand miles up our long coast? Let them harass a southern city Does this mean that they can threaten the Son of Heaven himself?"

I think it possible he said gravely

Let them tell shorter torted

I hope it will not be too late he sighed

She pitied his careworn looks too grave for a young and handsome and she coaxed him with words You make your own load heavy

been patient with time and stern with her own heart Yet while she had resolutely studied and read her books she had remembered Jung Lu and her purpose to advance his rank One day before the birthday she chanced in passing or it seemed chance to see that Lady Mei looked pensive She put up her hand and stroked the lady s smooth cheek

Do not think I have forgotten child!

She gazed into the pretty eyes that looked up at her startled and knew that this woman whom she called child understood her meaning It was Tzu Hsi s secret strength that while she put her mind to the large matters of state pondering long into the night and far beyond what Prince Kung thought she did yet she could at the same time remember her own hidden wishes Thus a few nights before the birthday as she lay in the Emperor s arms seeming half asleep she murmured words

Almost I forgot—

Forgot what, my heart and live ?' he inquired He was in good humor because this night he had found satisfaction enough to make him feel himself still a man

You know my lord that the Commander of the Imperial Guard is my kinsman? This she said still seeming half asleep

I know—that is I have so heard

Long ago I made my uncle Mo Yung a promise concerning him and I have never kept that promise—oh no!

So?"

If you invite him to our son s birthday feast my lord my conscience will not trouble me

The Emperor was slightly startled Why—a guards man? Will it not stir jealousy among the lesser princes and their families?"

"There is always jealousy among the small my lord But do as you will my lord So she murmured

Nevertheless in a little while he made slight movements of withdrawal from her Then he yawned and said that she was tired

My tooth aches she added not and lied for all her teeth were white and sound pure ivory

After that he slipped from the bed and put on his shoes and said Do not summon me tomorrow

The day of the feast dawned fine and fair the air blown clean by earlier sandstorms and Tzu Hsi woke to noise and music In every courtyard in the city families set off fire crackers when the sun rose and they beat gongs and drums and blew trumpets This was true in each city in the realm and in all villages and for three days no one was to work

She rose from her bed early imperious beyond anything she had ever been yet careful as her habit was to be courteous to each woman in her place as tenderly careful of her serving woman as of the highest of her court ladies She was bathed she allowed herself to be dressed she ate her morning sweetmeats The Heir was then presented to her in his royal robes of scarlet satin wearing on his head the imperial hat of his unique rank She took him in her arms her heart near breaking with love and pride She smelled his perfumed cheeks and the perfumed palms of his little hand plump and firm with healthy flesh and to him she whispered I am most fortunate of all women born upon the earth today

He smiled his baby smile at her and tears came to her eyes No she would not be afraid even of jealous gods She was strong in herself and none could assail her on earth or in heaven Her destiny was her shield and buckler

Now the hour having come she summoned her ladies and preceding the Heir in her palace sedan she went to the Supreme Throne Hall the very center of the Forbidden City and the place the Emperor had chosen for receiving the birthday gifts This central and most sacred hall was two hundred feet in width one hundred feet in height one hundred and ten feet and it was the largest of all the palaces flanked by two lesser halls it rose from a broad marble terrace known as the Dragon Pavement and below this terrace were five tiers of marble steps carved by twelve with dragons Upon the terrace stood gilded cisterns and incense burners and sun dials and granite masses symbolic of Heaven and Earth, and it was surrounded by marble balustrades whose pillars repeated the carved names of the gods Today the roof of the hall shone golden in the sun No weed or wild grass marred its smooth expanse which had been mixed with the ancient time a certain lime which had been mixed with the mortar and this poison killed all unblown seeds of weeds trees

Alas so sacred was this Supreme Throne Hall that woman had ever entered it and not even the pride and bea of Tzu Hsi could admit her on this day She gazed at golden roof the carved doorways and the painted eaves then withdrew into a lesser hall and one she chose the H of Central Harmony preferring it to the other the Hall Exalted Harmony

Yet the Emperor was mindful of her When he had sea himself upon the Dragon Throne and had there received from the nation the Heir beside him in the arms of P Kung he commanded that all gifts be taken by eunuchs the Hall of Central Harmony Thus Tzu Hsi was shown and she examined them and made appraisal and although would not express her pleasure at magnificence for no could be too splendid for her son yet all who watched her face saw pleasure in her bright eyes and vivid looks for in deed the tribute was very rich and valuable

The day was not long enough for the receiving of the gif and when the sun set those gifts still remaining to be seen all from the lower princes and lesser persons were put aside The moon rose and this was the hour for the feasting in Imperial Banquet Hall where only mighty f asts were held Here the Emperor and his two Empresses preceded all a they sat at a table set apart and at a table near them the Heir sat upon the knees of his uncle Prince Kung The Em peror could not keep his eyes from the child and indeed t little boy was in the gayest mood His large eyes so like mother s traveled from one huge candle to another as t s vayed in tasseled lanterns above the tables and he pou at them and clapped his hands and laughed He wore a rob of yellow satin which reached from his neck to his wh shoes and upon it were embroidered small dragons in scarlet silk Upon his head he wore a hat of scarlet satin pl with a little peacock feather and around his neck was locked as always the chain of gold which Tzu Hsi had pl there when he was born to keep him safe from evil spi who might wish him dead All admired the Heir but c spoke aloud their praise nor mentioned his health a d growth l st cruel demons hovered near

Only Sakota the Empress of the Eastern Palace looked him sadly and mild as she was she could not forbear

peevish word or two When the Emperor in court urged her to taste some dish she shook her head and said she could not eat she was not hungry and of all the dishes those she liked the least and when Tzu Hsi deferred to her she pretended not to hear She sat there at the feast table thin as a bird her little claw like hands heavy with jewels too large and under her high headdress her face was pale and pinched Who could blame the Emperor when he turned from this Consort to the other? Never had Tzu Hsi been so beautiful and so endowed with grace To Sakota's peevishness she replied with most perfect patience and all who saw her felt the barrenness of her spirit

Among the low tables set for the thousand guests those sat on scarlet cushions eunuchs garbed in bright robes moved in silent swiftness to serve them all At the far end of the hall were the Court ladies the wives of princes and imperial ministers and dukes and noblemen and at the other were the noblemen themselves Nearest to Tzu Hsi indeed at her right hand the Lady Mei had her seat and Tzu Hsi looked down upon her and smiled Both knew where Jung Lu sat though at a distant table Guests wondered doubtless by the Commander of the Guards had been so honored but when the question was put behind a hand to some eunuch passing by he answered

He is the kinsman of the Empress of the West in Palace and here by her command

To this no further remark could be made

Meanwhile the hours of feasting passed and the Court musicians played upon their instruments the rare delicate dishes and the theater went on for those below the Court and the stage was raised high enough for the Emperor and Court sports but not above them The Herald fell fast asleep at last the Chief Eunuch carried him away the candles flamed and guttered and the feast drew near its end

"Tea for the nobles" Princess commanded the Chief Eunuch when he had returned

Then eunuchs served tea to all the nobles but none was served to the Commander of the Guards for so was not noole Tzu Hsi seeming not to see all day long she beckoned the her jewelled hand and lifting gilded cup moved quickly to her side

"Take this cup of tea from me to my kinsman" The

commanded in her clearest voice She put the porcelain cover upon her bowl and held it outstretched and great with both hands into the two hands of the eunuch And Li Lien-ying proud to be the bearer carried it in both hands to Jung Lu who rose to receive it in his two hands He set it down and turning toward the Empress of the Western Palace he bowed nine times to signify his thanks

All talk ceased and eyes turned to eyes But Tzu Hsi seemed not to notice Instead she looked down at Lady Mei and smiled again This moment also passed The Chief Eunuch motioned to the musicians and fresh music soared into the air while the last dishes were presented

The moon was high the hour was late All waited for the Emperor to rise and make his way again to the terrace where his sedan waited But he did not rise He clapped his hands and the Chief Eunuch cried out for the music to be stilled

"What now?" Tzu Hsi inquired of Prince Kung

"Empress I do not know" he said

Silence fell once more upon those feasting and eyes turned to the doors through which the eunuchs came and went

The Son of Heaven leaned toward his beloved "My heart whispered look toward the great doors!"

Tzu Hsi looked and she saw six eunuchs bearing a tray of gold so heavy that they had lifted it upon their heads and crouched beneath it Upon this tray stood the image of a huge peach gold on one side red on the other A peach? It was the symbol of long life

"Announce my gift to the Fortunate Mother of the Heir!" the Emperor now commanded his brother

Prince Kung rose "The gift of the Son of Heaven to the Fortunate Mother of the Heir!"

All rose and bowed while the eunuchs brought the tray to Tzu Hsi and stood holding it before her

"Take the peach with your hands" the Son of Heaven now commanded

She put her hands upon the giant sweet It split and fell apart Inside she saw a pair of shoes made of pink satin and embroidered with fine stitches into flowers of gold and silver thread and in the threads were caught gems of every hue The heels high and set in the Manchu fashion beneath the

middle of the soles were studded with pink pearls from India so closely that the satin was encrusted

Tzu Hsi lifted brilliant eyes to the face of the Son of Heaven

"For me my lord?"

"For you alone" he said

It was a daring gift, the symbol of man's lustful love for woman

Evil news came up from the south and soon Evil enough it had been before but Yeh the Viceroy of the Kwang provinces held back the worst until the holiday was over Now he could no longer conceal fresh disaster He sent couriers by relay on horseback to the capital saying that the English man Lord Elgin again made threats to attack the city of Canton this time with six thousand warriors who waited upon his battleships in the harbor at the mouth of the Pearl River Even were there no Chines rebels hidden in the city the Imperial Armies could not have held the gates Alas the city was rotten with these rebels who called themselves Christians under the leadership of the madman Hung that ignorant and powerful man who declared continually that he was sent by a foreign god named Jesus to overthrow the Manchu throne

When this desperate news came to the imperial city Prince Kung received it first and he dared not present it to the Emperor Since the Hsien Feng's birthday feast the Emperor had not risen from his bed He had eaten too well and drunk too much and then to quiet his pains he had smoked opium until now he could not tell day from night Prince Kung sent word to Tzu Hsi asking audience at once That afternoon day and hour after noon Tzu Hsi went to the Imperial Library and took her seat behind a screen for Prince Kung did not come alone With him were the Grand Councilor Su Shun and his ally Prince Tsai and with them Prince Yi who was a younger brother of the Son of Heaven a prince yielding and without vitality and less wisdom but given to envy and peevishness These four surrounded at a distance by the eunuchs who followed to serve now heard the news which Prince Kung read from the scroll upon which the Viceroy had written with his own brush

"Very grave—very grave" Su Shun muttered

He was a tall broad man his face powerful and coarse Tzu Hsi wondered how he could be the father of so d a beauty as her favorite Lady Mei

Very grave Prince Yi agreed in a high little voice

Grave Prince Kung said that we must ponder the question of whether this Elgin having seized the city of Canton and there entrenched himself may demand that he be received here at the Imperial Court

Tzu Hsi struck one hand upon the other Never!

"Venerable Prince Kung said sadly I venture to suggest that we cannot refuse so strong an enemy

We must use cunning she retorted We must still promise and delay

We cannot prevail Prince Kung declared

But the Grand Councilor Su Shun now came forward "We did prevail two years ago when the Englishman Seymour broke into the city of Canton You will remember Prince that he was driven out again At that time a bounty of thirty silver pieces was offered for every English head and when such heads were presented to the Viceroy he ordered that they be carried through the streets of the city He commanded also that the foreign warehouses be burned down Upon this the English withdrew

"They did indeed Prince Yi agreed

Still Prince Kung refused to agree He stood tall and handsome and strong too young to speak so boldly as he did before these men Nevertheless he spoke "The English withdrew only to send for more armies Now those armies have come Moreover this time the French desiring to seize our possessions in Indo-China have promised to aid the English against us and once more they have used the excuse of a French priest tortured and killed in Kwangsi Moreover again it is said that this Lord Elgin has received instructions from his ruler the Queen of England to demand residence here in our capital for a minister from her court whenever she shall so wish

Tzu Hsi was unchanged in her will but such was her respect for Prince Kung and her desire to keep his loyalty that she spoke courteously

I do not doubt that you are right and yet I wonder if you are Surely my sister queen of the west does not know we

his lord demands in her name Else why is it that all this did not happen to us before when we drove them ay?"

Prince Kung explained still patiently The delay Empress has been caused only by the Indian mutiny of which I told you some months ago You remember that the whole of India is now conquered by England and when rebellion rose there recently and many Englishmen and women were killed the English armies put it down with frightful force Now they come here for further conquest I fear—I fear—it is their intent one day to possess our country as they do India Who knows how far their greed will reach? An island people is always greedy for when they multiply they have no where to spread If we fall the whole of our world will fall with us This we must prevent at any cost

We must indeed Tzu Hsi agreed

She was still unbelieving Her voice was not good in her manner concerned as she went on Yet the disaster cannot happen soon or easily Moreover the Son of Heaven is to ill to be disturbed Soon we must leave the city for the summer Let action be postponed until the hot season is past and we have returned from the Summer Palace Send word to the Viceroy to promise the English to memorialize the Throne and present their demands When we receive the memorial we will send word that the Son of Heaven is ill and we must wait until the cold weather come before he is well enough to make decisions

Wisdom the Grand Counsellor cried

"Wisdom indeed Prince Tsai nodded and Prince Yi nodded his head up and down Prince Kung kept silent except for the heavy sighs he drew up from his bosom

But Tzu Hsi would not heed these sighs and she put an end to the audience From the Imperial Library she went to the palace where her son lived with his nurses and his eunuchs and she stayed with him for hours watching him while he slept and holding him upon her knees when he woke and when he should to walk still let him cling to her hand then when he wished to walk still let him cling to her hand In him was the source of her strength and resolution and when she felt afraid he came here and renewed her courage He was her tiny god her jewel in the lotus and she adored him with all her heart and being Her heart was soft

love and she caught the child to her and held him close her and longed that she could keep him as safe as once he had been in her own body

From these hours with the child Tzu Hsi returned to own palaces refreshed and she set herself to her continu task to study all letters and memorials which came before the Throne and to decide what the Emperor must command in reply

In these months before the summer she arranged for the marriage of her sister to the Seventh Prince whose name was Chun his personal name Hsuan She had private audience with this Prince that she might observe him herself on her sisters behalf and though he had an ugly face and a head too large for his body she found him to be honest and simple a man without ambition for himself and grateful to her for the alliance with her sister The marriage was made bef the departure of the Court for Yuan Ming Yuan but ther as no feasting in respect for the illness of the Emperor and Tzu Hsi herself only knew that on the appointed day her sister went with proper ceremony to Prince Chuns palace which was outside the walls of the Forbidden City

The summer passed sadly even at Yuan Ming Yuan for while the Emperor was ill no music could be made no theatre is allowed no merrymaking enjoyed The glorious days followed on upon another but Tzu Hsi mindful of her dignity did not so much as command a boating party on the Lotus Lake and she lived much alone Nor did she dare to recognize still further her kinsman Jung Lu for gossip had sprung up after the birthday feast like smoke in a dry forest and it was everywhere known that to him she had once been betrothed Until her power was beyond assail she could not do more for Jung Lu lest what she did be used against her to the Emperor or if he died against her son Young though she was and passionate she was mistress of herself and when she wished she could be strong in patience

The Court returned early in the autumn of that year to the Forbidden City the harvest feasts were observed quietly and as the peaceful months passed by Tzu Hsi believed that she had decided wisely not to allow a war to be made against the foreigners For the Viceroy Yeh sent up better news of

reported that the Englishmen though angry at delays were helpless and that their leader Lord Elgin passed the days at Hong Kong stamping his feet and sighing

Proof Tzu Hsi declared in triumph that the Queen of the West is my ally

Only the Emperor s ill health made Tzu Hsi sad She did not pretend even in her own heart to love the motionless pallid figure that lay all but speechless upon his vello satin cushions but she feared his death because of the turmoil of the succession The Heir was still so young that ere the Dragon Throne to fall to him now there would be mighty quarrels over w ho would be Regent She and sh al ne must be the Regent but was she able yet to seize the Th one and hold it for her son? Strong men in Manchu clans would come forw ard to assert their claims The Heir m ght even be set aside and a new ruler take his place Ah the e we e plots everywhere She knew it for Li Lien ying b ought h r ne s that Su Shun was plotting and persu di g Prince Y to plot with him and Prince Cheng made an ev l third Th e ere lesser plots and weaker plotters Who could kno them all? Her fortune was that her advisor Prince Ku g s honor able and made no plots and th t the Ch ef Eunuch An Teh ha vith all his command in the pal ces a d ove th other eunuchs was loyal to her because she was the beloved f his master the Emperor From habit fi st and then becau he had fa ed well under his mast the Ch f Eunu h l v d th s frail ruler and he stayed al vay n a the vast c rved bed upon which he lay unmoving nd s ldom spe king It was the Ch ef Eunuch who heard wh n th Emp o wh p red and he who le ned ov r him to h a wh t was anted Some times in the n ght wh n oth rs slept the Ch ef Eunuch nt alone to fetch Tzu Hs to t ll h r th t the Emper as afraid and th t he cr ved the tou h of her h nd nd th s ght of her face Th n wrapped in d rk obe sh follo d the Chief Eunuch along the sil nt pass ge v ys nd she entered the dim chamb where the c ndl s lways burned She took her seat be de th gre t bed nd she held th Emperor s h nds so chill and lif l ss betwe n hers and she let him gaze at her and m de her eyes tender tow ard him to comf rt h Thus she t until he slept and she could steal a way

Th Chief Eunuch, w tching from a distance

perfect patience and her steadfast courtesy and careful kind ness and he began from that day to fix upon her the same de otion and loyalty that he had given the Emperor since first he came into the gates a child of twelve castrated by h own father that he might serve inside the imperial city He was a thief sometimes this eunuch he took what he liked for himself from the vast stores belonging to his master and all knew that he had he ped great treasures for himself He could be cruel too and men died by rope and knife when he held h s thumb downward to make the sign of death But in that lon ly heart of hi hidden bene ath the layers of his increasing flesh and fat he loved his o ereign and him only and when he saw the Emperor daily nearer death he transferred that strange and steadfast de otion hour by hour to the woman young and beautiful and tro g whom the Emperor loved above all others and would so love until he ceased to breat

None were prepared therefore for the hideous ne vs which reached the palace gates one day at twilight in the early winter of that year It was a day like others a gray day chill and threatening snow The city had been quiet some busi ness done but without livelines Within the palace there had been little coming to and f o no audience for matters of im portance had come before Prince Kung on the Emperor s be alf and de isions were po tponed

Tzu Hsi had spent the day in painting Lady Miao her teacher stayed by her side no longer instructing or forbid ding but watching while her imperial pupil brushed a picture of the branches of a peach tree in bloom It was no easy task to please her teacher and Tzu Hsi took pains and worked in silence First she must ink her brush in such a way that at one stroke she could give the branch its outline and also its shading and this she d d with care and perfectly

Lady Miao commend d her Well done Venerable"

"I am not finished Tzu Hsi replied

With equal care she drew another branch int rtwi ing with the first To this Lady Miao remained silent Tzu Hsi gath er d her eyebro vs into a fro vn

You do not like what I have done?"

It is not what I like or do not like Venerable th said. "The question you must ask yourself is whether th

ter painters of peach blossoms would so have intertwined two branches in this fashion

Why would they not?" Tzu Hsi demanded

Instinct not reason rules where art is concerned the lady said Simply they would not

Tzu Hsi made her eyes big and pressed her red lips together and prepared contention but Lady Miao refused to contend

If you Venerable wish to intertwine the branches thus then do so she said mildly The time has come hen you paint as you wish

She paused and then said thoughtfully her delicate head lifted to gaze at her pupil You are an amateur Venerable and it is not needful that you should be professional as I must be for I am an artist and all my family have been artists Yet were you free to be an artist bearing no burdens of nation and state you Venerable would have been among the greatest of all artists I see power and precision in your brush and this is genius which needs only use to be complete Alas your life has not time enough for this greatness to be added to all the others you possess

She could not finish While Tzu Hsi listened her great eyes fixed upon her teacher s face the Chief Eunuch burst into the pavilion where the ladies sat Both turned to him amazed and startled and indeed he was a fearful sight He had run all the way from somewhere his eyes were rolling already to burst his breath coming out of him in gasps that tore his breast his bulk of flesh pale and wet with sweat Two streams were running down his jellied cheeks in spite of cold

"Venerable he bawled Venerable—prepare yourself—

Tzu Hsi rose instantly to hear the news of death—whose death?

"Venerable the Chief Eunuch roared a messenger from Canton—the city is lost—the foreigners have seized *it—the* Viceroy is taken! He was climbing down the city wall to escape—

She sat down again It was disaster but not death

Collect your wits she said sternly to the trembling eunuch I thought from your looks that the enemy was inside the palace gates

Nevertheless she put down her brushes and Lady Miao

withdrew silently The Chief Eunuch waited wiping his sweat away with his sleeves

Invite Prince Kung to join me here Tzu Hsi commanded Then do you return and take your place with the Emperor

Yes Venerable the Chief Eunuch said humbly and made haste away

In a few minutes Prince Kung came alone bringing no councilor or other prince He knew the worst for he himself had received from the exhausted courier the memorial written in an unknown hand but bearing the Viceroy s own seal and he brought it with him

Read it to me Tzu Hsi said when she had acknowledged his obeisance

He read it slowly and she listened sitting upon her little throne in her own library her eyes thoughtful upon the pot of yellow orchids on the table She heard all that the courier had told the Chief Eunuch and much more Six thousand Western warriors had landed and they had marched to the gates of Canton and there had attacked The imperial forces had made a show of noise and bravery and then had fled and the Chinese rebels hiding inside the city had opened the gates and let the foreign enemy come in The Viceroy hearing the evil news had run from his palace to a parapet on the city wall and then his officers had let him down by a rope But halfway down the Chinese had seen him dangling and they shouted to the enemy who swarmed up the wall and cut him down and took him prisoner All high officials were taken prisoners and the Viceroy was deported to Calcutta in distant India Then the Western men arrogant and honoring no one set up a new government all Chinese and thus defied Manchu dynasty Still worse the memorial continued the Englishmen declared that they had new demands from their own Queen Empress but they would not say what these were Instead they insisted that they would appear before the Emperor in Peking and tell him what they would have

In this quiet place where an hour ago Tzu Hsi had painted peach blossoms the dreadful news now fell upon her She heard it and said not one word She sat musing and Prince Kung looking sidewise at her pitied the beautiful and lonely woman and waited for her to speak

"We cannot receive these hateful strangers at our court,

she said at last And still I do believe they use Victoria s name without her knowledge Yet I cannot reach her distant throne nor reveal to our people the mortal illness of the Em peror The Heir is still too young the succession is not clear We must deny the foreigners entrance At any cost we must still delay and promise and delay again making winter our excuse

He was greatly sorry for her in the midst of his o n deep alarm and he spoke gently

Empress I say what I have already said You do not un derstand the nature of these men It is too late Their patience is at an end

Let us see she said and that was all she ould say To his pleadings and to his advice she shook her he d her face pale and the black shadows creeping beneath her tragic eyes Let us see she said let us see

Heaven helps me Tzu Hsi told herself and ndeed that winter was cold beyond any that man had kno n Day after day when she rose and looked from her window th sno v lay deeper than the day before Imperial cour ers t the south took three times as long as usual to reach the c p t l and it was months before her reply could rea h Ca ton gain The aged Viceroy Yeh was now vasting away in a pri on in Cal cutta, whither the Engl h had t ansported him but he heart was hard against him He had failed the Th on and o x cuse was strong enou gh to fo give him such def at Let him diel Pity and mercy she would keep for those who could serve her

W nter crept slowly by a d sp ing came ag n a bitte and uneasy spring She long d fo the fi st le ve to b d on the date trees and for th b mboo sp outs to crack the earth In side the pal c s the s cr d lilies bloom d, warm d by the burn ng charcoal s n thered n sh s in hich the bov ls were placed D arf plum t e s coaxed by hot stoves stood blossom ng in po celain jars Sh m de a mock sp ng f om such flow rs in h r halls and n the branch es of the potted trees she comm nd d b rds in c ges to be hung so that she could hear th song Wl en she thought of the p ril in wh ch the nat n stood t comforted he to open the c ges and the birds fly out a d ttle on her shoulders and

natural beauty of sky and water and earth When she slept at night she did not dream of lovers but of gr d s not e closed and of the peacefulness of moonlight on the ba e and distant hills She spent hours poring over l ndsc pe scrolls and painted scenes mag ning she v lked bes de rivers or the sea and that at night she slept in pine forests o a temple hidden in a bamboo grove When she oke she ept for these dreams were as real as memories clear and never to be forgotten but v hich she could never see

But one day suddenly as a storm comes do n the rumors of the evil for which she felt herself l a ait ng came rushing north vard and instantly she put aside all hope of Yuan Ming Yuan The Western men ere mov ng t p the co st in ships of war Imperial couriers in relay r n d and n ght to tell the ne vs l efore the ships could rea h tl T ku forts at T entsin which city v as a scant eighty mile fro n the capital itself No v consternation fell on everyone on commoners as well as on courtiers The Emperor bestirr d h ms lf a d he commanded h s Grand Councilors and min ste s a d pr nces to gathe in the Audience H ll and he sent a ummo s to the two Consorts to seat themsel es behind the Dr g Screen There Tzu H i ent leaning on he eunuch s rm and she sat herself i pon the higher of the t o small thr ne there In a wh le Tzu An the Emp ess of the East rn P l ce came too and Tzu Hsi always cou teous rose a d w i t d h le she sat on the other throne That Emp ess s g g be o d her years for she vas not yet th rtv t o He f ce h d grown long and th n and melancholy a d she made f u t s d smile when Tzu Hsi pre sed her hand

Yet v ho could think of one when all were threatened? In silence the noble assembly list ned to Pri ce Kung as he stood to announce the evil ne s Th Emperor in l s gold n robes and seated on the Dr gon Th o e bowed l is l ad lo his face half hidden by a dken fan he held a his r ght hand

When proper greet gs had be n made Pri ce K ng p o-ceeded to the hard truth l e must tell In sp te of all the Throne H as done to prevent them the l ens ha e not e mained in the so th Th y are e en now on the r w y up our coast th r sh ps rmed and carrying a ri rs We must they will halt at the forts of T ku and not ent r u to

proper at Tientsin from whence it would be but a short march to this sacred place

A groan burst from the kneeling assembly and they bowed their heads to the floor

Prince Kung faltered and went on It is too soon for me to speak Yet I fear I fear that these barbarians will obey neither our laws nor our etiquette! The least delay and they will come even to the gates of the imperial palaces unless they are bribed and persuaded to return south again Let us face the worst let us cease dreaming The last hour is come Ahead is only sorrow

When the full text of the memorial which Prince Kung had written was read and presented the Emperor ended the audience commanding the assembly to withdraw and consider its judgment and advice So saying he rose and supported by two princes his brothers he was about to come down from the Throne when suddenly Tzu Hsi's clear voice rose from behind the Dragon Screen

"I who should not speak must nevertheless break my proper silence!

The Emperor stood irresolute turning his head left and right Before him the assembly knelt with heads bowed to the floor and they remained motionless None spoke

In the silence Tzu Hsi's voice rose again It is I who have counseled patience with these Western barbarians It is I who have cried delay and wait and now it is I who say I have been wrong I change I declare against patience and waiting and delay I cry war against the Western enemy—war and death to them all men women and children!

Had her voice been that of a man they would have shouted yea or nay But it was the voice of a woman though she was an empress None spoke none moved The Emperor waited his head drooping and then still supported by his brothers he came down from the Throne while all heads were bowed to the floor and he entered his yellow palanquin and surrounded by Bannermen and guards he returned to his palace

After him in proper time the two Consorts also withdrew saying not a word to each other except what was necessary for courtesy but Tzu Hsi could see that Tzu An shunned her and looked away And Tzu Hsi returned to her own apartments while the day passed to wait for the imperial summons

but none came In silence she pored over her books her mind distracted. When evening came near and she was not called, she inquired of Li Lien ying her eunuch and he told her that the Emperor had dallied all day with one and another of his lesser concubines and had not mentioned her name This he had heard from the Chief Eunuch who had been compelled to stay by his master's side and bear with his hums

"Venerable" Li Lien ying said "be sure the Son of Heaven has not forgotten you, but he is afraid no of hat may happen. He waits for the judgment of his ministers

"Then I am defeated!" Tzu Hsi exclaimed

This was speech too plain against the Emperor and Li Lien ying pretended he had not heard He felt the teapot and muttered that it was cold and he bustled way with the pot in his hands his ugly face blank and unsmiling

The next day Tzu Hsi heard the news she had foreseen. There was to be no resistance even now against the invaders from the West. Instead by advice of his councilors and ministers the Emperor appointed three honorable men to go to Tientsin to negotiate with the Englishman Lord Elgin Among these three the chief was Kuei Liang the father of Prince Kung's wife a man known for his good sense and his caution.

Aie alas! Tzu Hsi cried when she heard his name "This excellent man will never oppose the enemy He is too old, too careful and too yielding

She was right indeed On the fourth day of that seventh month Kwei Liang signed a treaty with the Western warriors which was to be sealed in a year from that day by the Emperor himself The three noblemen then returned with their French treaty At point of sword the Englishmen and the Americans and the Russians, supported by their friends had gained their demands The governments were to be allowed ministers *resident* in Peking their priests and traders could travel throughout the realm without submitting to its laws opium was to be called the stuff of legal trade and the great river port of Hankow in the heart of the Empire a thousand miles *from* the sea was named treaty port where white men could live and bring their families.

When Tzu Hsi had such terms she retired to her chamber and *for* three days she did not wash herself in

subtle nowadays he sent ministers to the white men ruling the city of Canton through the Chinese governors they had appointed, and these ministers were to coax and bribe the white men not to come north again because the treaty was not sealed

Let them be content with their southern trade the Emperor commanded "Tell them we are friendly if they remain where they are Did they not come here for trade?"

What if they refuse? Prince Kung asked

Remembering what Tzu Hsi had said in the long night when they were alone together the Empero replied "Tell them if you must, that we will meet them later at Shanghai to seal the treaty This is to go halfway toward them Can they complain that we are not generous?"

For Tzu Hsi had said feigning indifference to matters of state Why sign the treaty? Let them hope and if they are impatient say it will be signed at Shanghai halfway up the coast If they come there then t will be time to decide what to do

This she said, while secretly she held war s the final weapon If the invaders came to Shanghai would it not be proof that only death could end their advance?

The noblemen departed early in the year with these commands and that same spring as soon as the earth was free of frost the Emperor commanded that the Taku forts near Tientsin were to be strengthened and to be manned with guns and cannon bought from Americans This was to be done secretly so that the English knew nothing of it Such plans were seeded into his mind in dle hours while Tzu Hsi amused him and made dutiful love to him and roused him by reading tales and verses from the forbidden books she had found in the eunuchs libraries

What dismay then when in early summer courtiers brought news from the Emperors ministers that the Western men would make no compromise that once again their ships were sailing northward up the coast far past Shanghai this time under the Englishman Admiral Hope! But the Court and the commoners of the city declared themselves not afraid The T'ang fortresses stood ready for battle In calm and prom sed good re rd for bravery In calm and wa t d for th att ck.

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She heard a fearful

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ceilings and the golden images from the altars The gems inset in the imperial thrones were torn out and jeweled screens were carted away Fine porcelains were broken and ground into the earth except where some more clever robber perceived their value Jade pieces were stolen or smashed Yet with all this robbery less than one tenth of our treasures were saved even to be enjoyed by our enemies The rest of our precious and delicate possessions the bequeathed inheritance of our Imperial Ancestors was crushed into pieces by the butts of the barbarian guns or tossed into the air by howling white men in wild games Last of all the whole palace was set afire For two days and nights the sky was lit by flames the clouds dark with smoke Yet not satisfied the barbarians pushed into the uttermost folds of the hills and destroyed every pagoda and every shrine and pavilion and be sure that close behind the barbarians came the local thieves and robbers"

Tears crept from under Tzu Hsi's closed eyelids as she now remembered what the courier had said and her woman watching wiped them away with a kerchief

Do not weep Venerable she said tenderly

I weep for that which is no more Tzu Hsi said

"Venerable this palace too is beautiful Li Lien ying said to comfort her

She did not answer To her Jehol was not beautiful Centuries ago the Ancestor Emperor Ch'en Lung had built this fortress palace a hundred miles north of Peking and he loved well the wild and and hued landscape in which it stood the miles of sand and rock and in the distance the mountains of bare sand and rock stretched against a sky as endless blue In contrast to this barren land Ch'ien Lung had made the palace the more gorgeous The walls were hung with brocaded silks and embroideries of many colors the ceilings paneled with scarlet and gold and across them gold dragons spread their jeweled length The table and chairs and vast beds brought from the south were carved and inlaid with gems

Ah but she longed for gardens and lakes for fountains and brooks! Here water was more precious than jade It was carried upon the backs of bearers from little wells dug into the desert, and when these filled from a distant oasis Wit

her heart a fever of anger burned night and day beca
Yuan Ming Yuan now lay in ashes because in the capi
Prince Kung stood a suppliant before the barbarians becau
here in this remote and dreadful palace prevented by l
enemies she could not approach the Emperor She was
tic with anger and anxiety and the discipline she enforced
upon herself to hide what she felt drained the strength fr
her very bones

And how could she prevail against her enemies when
here she had no friends? The Three had declared themse
against her on that fearful day when the Court had fl
the Summer Palace For she had not ceased to resist fl
even while the Court had fled But they her enemies
persuaded the weak and foolish man who was Emperor tha
he was in danger of his life She remembered how easily
had yielded and so swiftly that he had left his pipe his h
his papers on the table of his bedchamber It smote her
to think that when the barbarians had pushed into that
penal place they must have seen these things and laughed
loudly to know how frightened was the Son of Heaven Why
should this be an arrow into her heart when all else was
gone?

She rose abruptly from her chair pushing aside with her
hand the fan that Li Lien ying again wielded with slow
patience and she began most restlessly to pace the floor up
and down up and down, while outside the closed windows
the h t inds howled

W ll she knew what the plot was Su Shun and his allies
and their subordinates had taken flight with the Emperor
but they had seen to it that the ministers and councilors who
might have helped her against them were left behind She
had perceived the conspiracy too late and she was helpless

No she h d one ally only one for even Su Shun could
not prevent the Imperial Guard from its duty to protect the
Emperor

She turned imperiously to Li Lien ying

Summon my kinsman the Commander of the Imperial
Guard! I would ask his counsel

Now Li Lien ying had never before failed to obey immediately whatever command she put upon him What was her surprise to see him hesitate the fan hanging in his hand

Come come" she insisted

He fell upon his knees before her "Venerable" he begged do not compel me to obey this one command"

"Why not?" she asked severely Surely it could not be that Jung Lu himself was against her

"Venerable, I dare not say" Li Lien ying stammered "You will have my tongue cut out if I speak

I will not, she promised

He continued afraid nevertheless and she could not pull the words out of him until at last she flew into a great rage and threatened to have him beheaded if he did not speak without delay Thus beset he whispered that the Emperor would not summon her because her enemies had told him that—that—she and Jung Lu—

Do they say we are lovers?" she demanded

He nodded his head and hid his face in his hands

Liars she muttered "Liars—liars—

She had to vent her anger somehow and she struck the kneeling eunuch with her foot and he fell over and lay there motionless while she went raging up and down the great hall, coming and going as though she climbed mountains

Suddenly she stopped before the silent eunuch

Get up she commanded I dare say you have not told me all What else do you know that I am not told?"

He crawled to his feet and wiped his swarthy face with his sleeve "Venerable—I have not slept a night since I heard what those three plotted

She made her eyes wide and terrible "What do they plot?"

Venerable he faltered I cannot speak the traitorous words They plot—they plot—to seize the Regency them selves—and then—and then—"

Kill my son! she hissed

Venerable I promise you—I did not hear so far as that. I beg you calm yourself—

"When did you hear it?"

She sat down in her great chair again and smoothed her hot cheeks with her palms

I had a first rumor many months ago Venerable—a small rumor which passed And you were silent

She cried out And you pleading if I told you every

I hear you would cast me in prison to silence me Those sit in high places must always be surrounded by the swarmh insults of gossip And you Venerable were higher than the rest Who could have thought that the Son of H would have heeded these lower ones?"

You should have used that stupid brain of yours" sh cried "You should have remembered that in the years befor I came it was Su Shun who was the well beloved of the Em peror They were young men together and because th Emperor was weak and gentle he loved that wild youth who hunted and drank and gambled and lived like savage Recall how this same Su Shun rose from a small pos tion in the Board of Revenue to be Assistant Grand S , and ho v he brought about the death of Po Ch un that h and honorable man, so that he himself could have th power!

It had been so indeed In the days before her child w born when she had won the Emperor s love one day th had come to her an aged prince the Grand Secretary I Ch un She had been too young then too new to palace ways to comprehend the tangles of intrigue Therefore she listened without thought while the good old man besought her to speak for him to the Emperor

I do not have his ear now lady" he said mournfully while he stroked his scanty beard already white

"Of what are you accused by Su Shun?" she inquired

Lady I am accused of enriching myself at the Throne s expense This fellow this Su Shun has whispered to the Emperor th t I hold back monies from the Imperial Treas- ury

"Why should he say so?" she asked

"It is he who is the robber and he knows I know it" the old Prince said

She could not doubt his plain and honest looks and too innocent she promised to speak for him to the Emperor and had done so But in those days the Emperor still favored Su Shun and he believed him and so the old man had been beheaded and Su Shun then took his place Her anger mounted afresh as she remembered how Su Shun began to hate her Only the Emperor s quickly growing love for h

had saved her against Su Shun's anger Ah she had been too sure of her power—look at her now!

Suddenly unable now to bear the heat within her heart, she stood up and lifted her right hand and slapped Li Lien ying first on one cheek and then on the other until his eyes watered and he could not get his breath. But he said nothing for to bear such anger was his duty

"There she cried and there and there—not to tell me at once! Oh, evil silence!

With this she sat down again and put her palms to her cheeks and sighed for full five minutes or so while Li Lien ying knelt like a stone before her for never had he seen her in such a rage as this

Another five minutes and her mind cleared She rose from her seat and walked with impetuous grace to her writing table There she sat down prepared her ink slab and wet her brush and when this was done she took a small piece of silk parchment and on it wrote a letter to Prince Kung telling him of her plight and asking his immediate help She folded it and pressed her own seal upon it and beckoned Li Lien ying to her side

You are to go to the capital this very hour she commanded "You are to deliver this parchment into the hands of Prince Kung and from him bring reply and all this is to take no longer than four days

Venerable he protested "how can I—"

She cut him off "You can because you must

He looked sorrowful and struck his breast and groaned, but she did not melt and so he could only make haste to obey

When he was gone she went pacing up and down the hall once more until her woman was weary of watching her and her Court ladies came and peered through the curtains at her and went away not daring to speak or even to let their presence be known

At the end of four days Prince Kung himself arrived and he came dusty and travel worn to the east wing of the mighty palace where Tzu Hsi lived. She had not left these rooms and slept less while all her she had eaten little and from this prince What was her pinned on word from

Empress of the Western Palace and the Empress of the E
ern Palace on this day of My death——"

Here Tzu Hsi left a space and after it she added words

And I set My name and the imperial dynastic seal to My will and My decree

Here again she left a space

She rolled the parchment and put it in her sleeve Yes, would take Sakota as Regent with her compel her to be ally and thus prevent her as an enemy Tzu Hsi could stil let a smile flicker on her lips at her own cleverness

Meanwhile her woman and Li Lien ying stood watching her and waiting for her commands Weary though he was the eunuch did not dare to ask for rest.

Suddenly the woman turned her head toward the closed door She had the sharpest ears this woman, made keen by years of listening to hear her sovereign s call.

I hear footsteps she muttered

"Whose footsteps?" the eunuch muttered.

He caught his robes in his right hand and strode to the door He drew the bar and slipped through the crack and the woman hastened after him and stood with her back to the door closed again, and she heard the flat of a hand pounding softly She opened the door a crack and looked through. She turned to her mistress

"Venerable she said under her breath "it is your kinsman

Tzu Hsi still at the writing table turned her head sharply "Let him come in

She rose as she spoke The woman opened the door further and Jung Lu came in The woman closed the door and drew the bar while outside the door the eunuch stood on guard.

"Kinsman greeting Tzu Hsi s voice was smooth and sweet

Jung Lu did not speak He walked forward and made swift obeisance

Kinsman " she said do not kneel Sit down on yonder chair and let us be as we have always been.

But Jung Lu would not sit He rose and stopping nearer to her he fixed his eyes on the floor between them and

to speak "Venerable we have no time for courtesy The Emperor is dying and the Chief Eunuch sent me to tell you Su Shun was there less than an hour ago and with him the Princes Yi and Cheng They had their plot—a decree for the Emperor to sign appointing them as Regents for the Heir! He would not sign it and he fell unconscious when they tried to force him but they will come again.

She did not pause a moment She flew past him He followed her swiftly and Li Lien ying came after She tossed commands across her shoulder to the eunuch as she went.

"Announce me—tell the Son of Heaven that I bring the Heir with me!

As though the winds bore her she went to the Hunting Lodge She burst into the door and none dared to stop her She heard a child crying she paused to listen and recognized her son's voice Oh fortunate weeping that led her to him! She pushed aside the frightened women she ran through the rooms until she found the room where he was crying She burst through those doors and saw a woman nursing her son but he would not be comforted She swept him in her arms and carried him away he clinging to her neck with both his arms silenced by astonishment but not afraid She hastened through passages and corridors up steps of stone through halls and chambers until she reached the innermost of all and there without pause she went straight through the door that the Chief Eunuch held open for her

"Does the Son of Heaven still live?" she cried

He breathes the Chief Eunuch said His voice was hoarse with weeping The great bed was raised like a bier and around it the eunuchs knelt weeping in their hands She passed through them as though they were trees bordering a forest Straight she went to the Emperor's side and there she stood her child in her arms

My lord! She called the two words in a loud clear voice She waited and he did not answer

My lord she called again Ah would the child might wake?

The Emperor heard his heavy eyelids lifted His turned his head the dying eyes looked up he saw her face

My lord she said here is your heir

The child's eyes stared down his eyes [illegible]

"My lord she said you must declare he is your heir If you hear me raise your right hand

All watched the dying hand It lay motionless a yellow piece of skin and bone Then while they watched it moved with such effort that those watching groaned

My lord she said imperiously I must be the child's Regent. None but I can guard his life against those who would destroy him Move your right hand once more to signify your wish

Again they saw the slight slow movement

She stepped forward to the bed and lifted up the yellow hand

My lord she called my lord come back for one more moment!

With great effort did his soul return when her voice called He moved his dim eyes to rest upon her face She took the parchment from her breast and quick as her own wish Jung Lu brought the vermilion brush from the writing table nearby and put it in her hand Then he took the child from her arms

"You must sign your will my lord she said distinctly to the dying Emperor I take your hand—so Your fingers about the brush so—"

He yielded her his hand she held it and the fingers moved seemed to move to make his name

"Thank you my lord she said and put the parchment in her bosom Rest now dear lord

She motioned with her hand for all to withdraw Jung Lu carried the child from the room and the eunuchs stood at the far end and waited their sleeves at their eyes She sat down then upon the bed and lifted the Emperor's head to rest upon her arm Did he still live? She listened and heard a flutter in his breast. He opened his eyes wide and drew in his breath

"Your perfume—sweet!

He held his breath an instant it quivered in his throat and then he blew it out in a great sigh and with it died.

She put his head down gently upon the pillow and leaned over him and moaned twice Ah—" and "Ah—" and she wept a little, her tears pure pity that a man should die so young

and never loved Oh that she could have loved him and for a moment she grieved because she could not

Th n she rose and walked from the imperial chamber but slowly as a widowed Empress walks

Swifter than the winds the news of death swept through the palace The Emperor lay in state in the Audience Hall whose gates were barred and padlocked against all the l v ing At each gate of the great building stood one hundred men from the Imperial Guard appointed by Jung Lu Only the birds were free to come and go and nest among the gold dragons that reared themselves upon th e t o-tiered roofs Silence lay deep beneath the heavy eaves along the pillared outer corridors but there v as no peace in such a silen e Throughout the palace these walls hid the str ggle of power but who knew where the final battle would t ke pl ce?

Tzu Hsi was no v the Empress Mother the mother of the Heir She was still young a vom n not vet thirty years of age Princes of the blood surro inded h r d heads of strong and jealous Manchu clans Could sh pre l even as Em press Mother? All knew th t Su Shun vas h r enemy and with him the two princes both broth rs of the dead Emperor Was Prince Kung st ll he al v? The Court a ted irresolute not knowing where to give its l yalty and ea h courtier kept to himself and each vas areful to be cool and make no sign of e ther fr endsh p or hostil ty to any other

Meanwhile this same Su Shun Gr d Councilor that he was had summoned the Ch f Eunuch as soon as his spies had reported the d ath of the Empe or and he bade the eunuch take a message to the Empress Mother

"Tell he Su Shun said arrog ntly that I and Prince Yi were appointed Reg nts by the Son of Heaven himself before his spirit left us Say that we come to announce ourselves to he

The Ch ef Eunuch made obe sance saying nothing but hastened to do wh he was told Yet on the wa he to whisper his business to Jung Lu who stood on guard

Jung Lu took com m nd at once Proceed as you can to bring the Three to the Empress Mot myself outs de the door and the momen enter"

from her bosom the parchment which the dying Emperor s hand had signed In a smooth calm voice every word dis tinct as the stroke of a silver bell she read the decree from the beginning to the end while Su Shun and the two Princes listened.

Su Shun pulled at his beard "Let me see the signature" he snarled

She held the parchment where he could see the name

"There is no seal" he cried A decree without the im peri l seal is worthless"

He d d not wait to hear her answer or even to see the look of consternation on her face He turned and fled the princes his following shadows She knew at once h t made their haste The imperial seal was locked within its coffer in the death chamb r Whoever seized it first was victor She gnashed her teeth against herself that she h d not waited for the seal She tore the headdress f om her head and th e v it on the floor she pulled her ears with both her fists and was bes de herself with rage

Stupid! she shrieked against herself Oh stup d st p d woman I and more stupid Prince who did not warn m early and stupid kinsman and t eacherous eunuchs ho did not help me sooner! Where is the se l?"

She ran to the door and jerked it open but no on stood outside no Ch ef Eunuch not even Li L en ying There was none here to give chase She th ew h rself upon the floor and wept The years were lost she was betrayed

At this moment Lady Mei peeping th ough b ocaded c t ains saw her mistress lying th re as d ad and she ran in and knelt beside her

Oh Worshipful" she moaned "are you wounded? D d some one strike you?"

She tr ed to lift her weeping *mist es* but she could not and so she ran to the *door* still open and m t there Jung Lu and behind him the eunuch *Li L en ying* just now arri ed.

Oh she cried and sh nk ba k her blood flooding up- ward from he heart *into her* ch eks But Jung Lu did not see her He arried something in his hands a lump wrapped in yellow silk

He set it down when he saw the graceful figure ly

opened the tip of his tongue touched his upper lip in a rare smile

"Now I see" he said now I know why Su Shun says that such a woman as you must be killed or she will rule the world

They looked at one another Empress Prince and eunuch and they broke into triumphant mirth

The imperial seal was hidden underneath Tzu Hsi's bed and the rose red satin curtain overhung it so that in the whole palace only she and her woman and her eunuch knew it was there

Do not tell me where it is hidden" Prince Kung had commanded I must be able to say I do not know

With the imperial seal secure she could do as she wished Her fever left her and peace took the place of restlessness She could and did ignore the ferment in the palace when it was known that the seal was gone and none knew where All guessed that she had taken it and courtesy and obedience took the place of open impudence and growing arrogance Her three enemies kept far from her and while she knew that they were bending themselves since they could not carry out their plot And this confusion and covert mission she went sweetly and at ease and the first deed was to send her eunuch to thank the Lady Yi for caring for her son and to assure her that she would not put this trouble upon her for she could care for him herself since now by her grief her time was now needed for the Empress herself was restored to her the Heaven

Her next deed was to go weeping to her own room and sit beside her and tell her how the Emperor had said that they two should be the Regents while the little Prince was a child 'You and I dear Concubine shall be as sisters Our Lord will bid us to be united for I will swear my love and love to you so long

She took Sakota's little hand and smiled at her wistful face and how could Sakota dare to be afraid She smiled back again and if gratefully and with her old child's honesty she said

"To tell the truth Concubine I am glad to be free

"Sisters Tzu Hsi said

Meanwhile Prince Kung returned to the capital there to prepare a special truce with the enemy which would allow the return of the dead Emperor for his imperial funeral.

I have but one warning" Prince Kung told her in parting Do not, Majesty allow any meeting between yourself and your kinsman, the Commander of the Guard Who can value his loyalty and his courage more than I do? Yet enemies will have their eyes upon you now to see if there be truth in old gossip Instead put your trust in the Chief Eunuch An Teh hai who gives his service whole to you and to the Heir

Tzu Hsi cast reproachful looks upon the Prince Do you think me stupid?"

"Forgive me" he said and these were his parting words

Although she did not need it yet his advice was good for her against temptation For she was a woman and her heart was hot, and now that the Emperor was dead she did often in the night let her wild and secret thoughts go creeping through dark corridors and lonely halls and past empty rooms to that gate lodge where the Imperial Guard was stationed There she found him whom she loved and her thoughts circled about him like mourning doves remembering him as he had been when they were children he always tall and straight inclined to stubbornness It was true never yielding unless it was his will to yield stronger than she however strong she was handsome then as now but male and never delicate or womanish as the poor Emperor had been Against such thoughts and memories it was well that she had Prince Kung's warning a shield to keep her from her own desire She made her outer calm invincible while within the fire burned

And indeed she could not indulge her heart. Her task was still not finished *She must* not give comfort to her enemies nor freedom to herself until the Throne was hers to hold for her son *She must* exert her every charm her dignity and courtesy toward everyone and so well she did this that all except *her enemies* were drawn to her and especially the soldiers of *the* Imperial Guard to whom she granted gifts and kindness without once seeming to show a difference between these men and their commander To them too she sent her daily thanks for their protection of the in

corpse.

"Venerable your enemies despair" the Chief Eunuch told her the night before departure "Therefore we must watch them at every step"

"I depend on your ears" she said

"This is their plot," the Chief Eunuch went on Instead of our loyal Manchu guards Su Shun has ordered his own soldiers to accompany you Venerable on the plea that the Imperial Guards are needed for the dead Emperor And even I have been commanded to attend the bier and with me your own eunuch Li Lien ying

She cried out "Alas—

The Chief Eunuch put up his huge hand

I have worse to tell Jung Lu is ordered to remain behind to guard this Jehol palace"

She wrung her hands together Forever?'

The Chief Eunuch nodded his immense head "He tells me so"

"What shall I do?" she asked in sharp distress This means I am to die In some lonely mountain pass who will hear me when I cry out to be saved?"

"Venerable be sure your kinsman has his own plan He says you are to trust him He will be near you

With this faith only to uphold her she set forth the next morning at dawn her sons court in front then hers and Sakota's and surrounded by the alien guard Yet all day her calm and unafraid she spoke courteously to everyone directing here and there and asking last as though she all but forgot, that her large toilet case be put beneath her lest she wish kerchief or perfume There in her toilet case was hidden for the imperial seal but none knew save her faithful woman

When all was ready she seated herself inside her curtains and so began the sad journey She had longed to leave that somber palace and yet it seemed a shelter now that she did not know what lay ahead nor even where that night she must sleep The summer drought had broken and rain fell steadily as the day went on a clean hard rain that soaked into the sandy soil and swelled the mountain streams and choked the narrow roads between the mountains By nightfall thus delayed they were far from any resting place and the rivers were so high that they were forced to stop in a cart

night rather than another to kill her? Would it not be easy to bribe a palace cook to put poison in her food or an assassin eunuch to hide behind some door where she must pass? She toyed with each thought coaxing herself free from fear saying that it would indeed be annoyance to have the body of a dead empress to hide and would not her subjects inquire what had befallen her and could even her enemies take the risk of their anger?

The next hour passed more quickly and now she only dreaded the dying of the candle If she moved the child would wake and he was sleeping sweetly his hand folded into hers Then she must call but softly to rouse her woman to put a fresh candle in the lantern She lifted her head so to call and her gaze which had been fixed upon the child's sleeping face at this moment caught the movement of the leather curtain of the tent. It was the wind doubtless or the rain pressing down but still she could not move her eyes away nor did she call And while she watched a short sharp dagger slit the leather silently and now she saw a man's hand upon the thumb it wore a red jade ring

Without a sound she snatched up the child and ran to the tent but in that same instant another hand slit the tent and seized the hand that held the dagger and forced it out and the slit fell shut again All she knew was the man's hand! She stood and listened and heard men struggling She saw the side of the tent tremble when they fell against it heard a moan then silence

"Let that be an end to you" these words she heard Lu mutter

Such comfort now came flowing into her heart that she was shaken to the heart She put down the child and stole across the carpet to the door of the tent and peered into the stormy night Jung Lu was there He turned toward her and they gazed at each other for a moment

I knew that you would come she said

"I will not leave you, he said

Is the man dead?"

"Dead I have thrown the body down the cliff"

"Will they not know?"

"Who can dare to speak his name when they see the place?"

She sat silent in her cushioned seat the curtains parted wide enough to see the landscape and if any glanced toward her not once did he see her face turned toward the Commander of the Guard What her thoughts were who could know ?

She was scarcely thinking her restless mind for once was in repose These few days of travel were her own for she was safe The climax of her struggle the final battle for the Dragon Throne must come when she received the imperial cortege Falque Traveling now at such steady speed she would enter the Forbidden City five days before the cortege As soon as she reached her palace she must summon her clansmen and the dead Emperor s loyal brothers and they must plan together how to seize the traitors not by force for then the people would protest but with order and decorum proving their wickedness and her own right as Regent on the Heir s behalf Beyond the edge of her mind these deeds of state loomed dark and threatening but she had the trick of taking pleasure when she could and therefore was refreshed and strong when the hard moment came

And surely this was pleasure to ride through the autumn countryside the dangerous mountains hourly more distant while Jung Lu rode beside her silent it was true and proud, so that they could not speak or look toward each other But he was there and her life was in his keeping Thus passed the days She slept sweetly in the nights and woke hungry in the morning for the fresh northern air made her blood lively

On the twenty ninth day of that ninth month of the moon year she saw the walls of the capital rise up from the surrounding plains and the gates were open Inside the city the streets were cleared of folk but Tzu Hsi put down her curtains lest she see a foreign enemy There were none. The city lay silent in suspense for news traveled faster than human feet and the poorest citizen knew that tigers were at war and victory was not clear At such times the people wait.

Tzu Hsi had planned her course She entered the palace in deep mourning *her robes of* white sackcloth and she wore no jewels Looking not to right or left, she descended from her cart while eunuchs knelt on either side Then in perfect courtesy he went to Sakota s cart and helped her to descend and holding her left hand within her own right,