

Black Stone, White

By David Wingrove

A Chung Kuo story set in the year 2208

Tang Tao set his bag down on the seat beside him and stretched out his legs. He had been travelling all night, but he was almost home. Two stops on the fast-track and he'd be there.

At this time in the morning the carriages were almost empty, but in two hours' time the speeding bolt would be packed, with scarcely enough room to breathe, let alone stretch out. Which was why he always travelled at this hour.

Yes, and maybe he'd sneak an hour in bed with Yi Wu before the children woke. Gods how he'd missed her!

In the bag were his latest samples; copies of the six new designs they'd been working on this past year. If he could sell in at least half of those to his retailers - in decent quantities - then maybe they could afford that holiday he'd been promising them for the last year or two. But it was getting ever harder to place orders, what with the political undercurrents throughout the levels, and working on commission, as he did, wasn't the most secure of occupations.

Still, he couldn't complain. He knew many in far worse financial state than they were.

Tang Tao stretched his neck muscles, moving them slowly from side to side, in *Tai Chi* fashion, then yawned. Gods, he *was* tired. If he was going to have Yi Wu, he'd best take her before she had time to wake. Not that she didn't like that. Most of their love-making was like that these days - snatched moments and furtive sessions behind temporarily locked doors - especially since the new child had arrived.

He smiled, picturing the children in his head and wondering if they'd missed him. Cho wouldn't have. Not much, anyway. He was fourteen now and the eldest. But Yao, his eight-year old, would most certainly have missed him. She was a daddy's girl and no mistaking it. As for baby Chang, who knew what was going through that tiny head. Only that, in the three weeks he'd been away, he would have changed. 'Pushed on', as Yi Wu called it.

Some days he imagined coming home and finding Chang fully grown, wearing one of his suits and smoking a stub, a bowl of fine rice wine at his elbow. They grew up so fast.

The carriage slowed as the bolt came into the station. *One more*, he thought, watching a young man and his girlfriend - *Hung Mao* both of them - climb aboard. Tang Tao gave them a smile and got one back. That, too, was different about travelling at this hour. People were nicer - less under pressure.

Not that his own job wasn't a regular pressure-cooker. It was. And these last few months had possibly been the worst. The 'War That Wasn't A War' had affected everyone, from First Level down to the Net. In the old days people had trusted one another. But now? Now barely any business was done with a handshake. A man's word was no longer good enough. Everything had to be tightly tied up, every last tiny detail agreed, the contract signed and chopped, before any goods were sent out, even to the oldest of their trading partners. No, no one trusted anyone anymore, and he didn't like that. He had grown up in a world of certainties, of *values*, but this world – the new world they had entered since Lwo Kang's assassination and Marshal Tolonen's brutal vengeance – was a much darker place.

That said, there *were* compensations. Yi Wu for one. She had used to work for one of their trading rivals, and he had met her at a trade fair, where he had got her drunk enough to follow him upstairs at the end of the evening. They had been together ever since, and when young Cho had come along, she had quit her job to become a full-time housewife. At which she was very good. But with the current economic climate, they had been talking of her applying for her old job again. Or something similar.

Tang Tao closed his eyes. As necessary as it might be, it would be a shame if Yi Wu went back to work. She was a wonderful mother and the children would miss her, even if their grandmother, Yi Pi-Lo was willing to fill in. Only that was the way of it these days, from the highest to the lowest. They had to make do. All of them. To bend before the wind, not to stand up and oppose it.

The bolt slowed, the doors hissed open. Grabbing his bag, Tang Tao jumped out, waving to the couple even as the doors hissed shut again; getting a grin and a wave from the pair as the train slowly pulled away.

Home was five minutes away, and he had not let Yi Wu know he was coming. But then he liked to surprise her. To catch her unawares.

Why, he had gone hard merely thinking about it. The thought of slipping into bed beside her compact, naked form; of feeling those tiny, bud-like nipples of hers hardening beneath his touch... It almost made him break into a run. Only there was no need to hurry. Yi Wu was going nowhere. She would be there even now, snoring away beneath the sheets.

Main was half lit, the caged birds sleeping, not a sign of anyone about. Likewise the feed corridor down which he lived. An overhead cam followed his movements briefly, then stopped dead, some computer program in the Security block recognising his face, his distinctive movements, and deciding not to track him any longer.

So it was. The world he lived in. A world of walls and corridors and watchful cams.

He thumbed the pad, then waited as the lock slid back, then pushed inside, closing it quietly behind him. And smiled, recognising the smell of home, the sound of Yi Wu and the little ones snoring, each so different, so familiar.

Tang Tao sighed. There was not a sweeter thing in the universe than coming home.

In the bathroom, he kicked off his slippers then studied his face in the mirror for a moment, smiling at his image, then shrugged off his jacket and top and slipped out of his er-silk trousers.

His cock stood up now, stiff and proud. He held it a moment, feeling how hard it was, how hot, then turned and left the room, the light switching off automatically behind him as he stepped into the darkness of the hallway.

Their room was at the far end. Eight paces brought him there. Pushing back the door, he stared into the darkness, her soft snores louder than before. Closing the door behind him, he slipped beneath the sheets, moving across until he held her, his left arm folding about her, reaching up to hold and cup her breast, even as he pushed closer, the hardness at his groin meeting the soft warmth of her. For a moment her snoring stopped, then continued, even as he began to push against her, his fingers gently caressing her nipple, arousing her, even as she slept.

He pushed and then gently pushed again, not penetrating her, but gently sliding the head of his cock against her moistening sex. And after a moment she was pushing back against him, shadowing his movements, in perfect tandem. For a moment it was enough, then he pushed higher, harder, entering her suddenly, hearing her cry out, then push back harder, urgently now, her buttocks pushing up to meet each thrust, her right hand reaching down to feel him entering her.

“Aiya... oh gods... aiya!”

It felt heavenly. Grasping her flank he turned her, forcing her onto her front, pushing her down into the pillow as he fucked her from behind. She was gasping now – gasping and whimpering – the noise she was making growing louder by the moment.

“Yi Wu!” he hissed. “Don’t wake the children!”

But she was beyond that. And besides, the sounds she was making only made the experience more pleasurable. Made him want her more. And as he came so she squealed like she’d been stuck with a spear.

He leaned close, speaking softly to her ear. “Gods, I’ve missed you, darling Yi Wu...”

She laughed throatily. “So it seems.” Then, turning on her back to face him, reaching up to gently touch his face, she echoed his words. “And I missed you, my sweet man.”

He kissed her; a kiss that threatened to send them into another bout of love-making, only they had already woken the baby, who started calling out from his room down the hall.

“I’ll see to him,” Tang Tao said, sitting up, but Yi Wu shook her head.

“Not with that,” she said, and reached down to gently touch his still erect cock. “You wait right here. I’ll get him to sleep then come back.” She smiled in the half dark. “I haven’t finished with you yet.”

* * *

Breakfast was busy, yes, and noisy, the kids overjoyed to see their father home again after his long absence. Tang Tao sat there, on his chair beside the big kitchen table, looking on with pure delight,

reaching out to brush his hand against Yi Wu's buttocks whenever she came close, smiling up at her, enjoying the glow she had to her this morning.

"How long are you home this time, dad?" Yao asked, her mouth half full.

"A month, maybe. We've some new samples. Fresh from the design studios. If I can sell enough in..." He grinned, seeing how they hung on his words. "Well, no promises but... maybe we could all take a holiday."

There was a great roar from all three children at that. But he didn't want them getting any more excited than they were. Not if they were going off to school in an hour. Then again...

He looked to Yi Wu. "Look... I can afford to take a day off before I take the samples round. Is there any chance of calling their schools and... you know...?"

He tried not to say it straight out, but the kids were already one step ahead. They sniffed a day off school.

As for Yi Wu, she hesitated only as long as it took her to understand what her husband meant, then she was busy connecting with Cho's school.

"Daddy?" Yao asked, pushing her half-finished bowl away. "Can we come with you next time you go away?"

He laughed and reached out to ruffle her hair. "No, sweetheart. Besides, it's all very boring. I'm in meetings most of the time, and..."

But Yao was nodding her eight-year old head. "S'okay."

Tang Tao looked across. Yi Wu had finished her first call and was calling Yao's teacher. Turning, seeing him watching her, she smiled, then, as she was connected, turned away again, beginning to tell Yao's teacher that she wasn't at all well, and yes, she'd pass on her classmates' best wishes, and...

He stopped listening. Closed his eyes and breathed in all the old familiar smells. His family. His place. For now.

"Well..." Yi Wu said, looking about her. "We've a day off, all of us!"

And the children cheered and ran about again, excited by the prospect of the day ahead, and all being there together. Tang Tao grinned. What was life about, if not this?

Yi Wu came across, sitting down in his lap, one arm going about his neck. He could still smell the scent of sex about her. "Tao, my love," she said. "I don't want to be difficult, but..."

He knew what she was about to say and, looking up at her, squeezed her gently and smiled. "You want your mum and dad to come along, neh? Well why not? It can't hurt, can it?"

At which she kissed him a long, passionate kiss that, had the children not been there, would have ended with her on her back again.

“Go on,” he said, “you go have a shower and get ready. I’ll get the kids dressed.”

She grinned back at him. “You know what, Tang Tao?”

“What?”

“Just that I think I have the best husband in the whole of this great big world.”

And she kissed him again. Just in case he didn’t get the message.

* * *

Yi Yan-ch’o, Tang Tao’s mother-in-law, was a somewhat sour old woman who held the belief that the world had treated her ill and had never given her the chances that it ought. She classified herself as unlucky, and not merely in her own fortunes, but in her choice of both husband and son-in-law. The truth was, nothing Tang Tao ever did satisfied her. And her husband, Yi Wu’s father, Chang-li, was, if anything, worse. The old boy never stopped complaining about his ‘unambitious son’.

All of which Yi Wu knew. But, dutiful daughter as she was, she tried hard to make the best of things, and blessed the gods that she had a husband who understood how things were and worked with the situation rather than one who might harbour resentment and bitterness. In this, the most difficult aspect of her life, Tang Tao was, in her eyes, a demi-god.

Right now, Yi Yan-ch’o was busy griping over the suddenness of the decision.

“Yi Wu! You could have told us days ago and we’d have been ready!”

“But mother... we didn’t know ourselves until this morning. Tang Tao has been very busy...”

His mother-in-law looked across and scowled at him. “Tang Tao should learn to communicate more. A few days’ warning wouldn’t hurt...”

He let it wash over him. Let Yi Wu for once smooth things over. And besides, he knew they’d have moaned twice as much if they’d learned they’d taken a day’s holiday and not asked them to come along.

“So where are we going?” Yi Chang-li asked, coming into the cramped and crowded kitchen, his hand reaching out to gently brush his grandson, Cho’s hair. “Somewhere cheap, no doubt!”

“These are hard times, father,” Yi Wu answered, interceding before the exchange got more heated. “And besides, Tang Tao has new samples to sell in. If that goes well...”

“Ifs, maybes and perhaps...” The old man sniffed and stroked his wispy beard with his right hand. “My son-in-law, the rich man...”

“Who is taking us all for a day at the pleasure-dome,” Yi Wu said, trying to remain upbeat to keep the irritation from her voice. Could he not simply be pleasant for a change?

“I would have made some noodles up,” Yi Chang-li began. “You know how it is in those places. They charge a fortune for snacks, and the children will want to eat...”

"It's okay," Tang Tao said, smiling an understanding smile at his wife. "We'll stop on the way and get some. And some drinks, too. Chang-li is right. It's outrageous the prices that they charge in those places."

"Then all's fine," Yi Wu got in quickly, before one or other of her parents started up again. You just get dressed and then we'll catch the bolt. There's no rush. Most of the children are at school, and..."

"And that's another thing," Yi Chang-li butted in. "I don't agree with taking the children out of school. Their education... it's the most important thing. To encourage them to this..."

Then stay here and don't bother to come with us, Tang Tao thought, but Yi Wu was being more diplomatic.

"It's okay, dad. I checked with their teachers. None of them is missing anything important. And I've arranged to have copies of anything they have missed set aside, so they can keep up with their studies."

It was a lie, and the children looked away, almost giggling, as she uttered it, none of them wanting to jeopardise their day out by contradicting her.

But the old man wasn't happy, even so. He huffed. "I was going to meet up with some old pals today... have some *ch'a* and reminisce..."

Then why the fuck don't you? Tang Tao thought, only there was no sign of it in his face. Only a look of benign contentment as if taking his in-laws out was the greatest delight for him.

Why, he thought. *I've the patience of the Buddha.* That was, if the Buddha was ever on the promise of a good fuck. For as sure as eggs were eggs, Yi Wu owed him for this. Not that she didn't enjoy sex every bit as much as he did. No, but this deserved something special. Some delicate little treat.

Yes, and he knew exactly what that was.

* * *

Saintly. He had been totally fucking saintly. But now the day was over, the in-laws delivered home and the children fast asleep. Now was *their* time.

As he washed himself and prepared for bed, Tang Tao could hear Yi Wu gently humming to herself. She had put on the simple white bed shirt he liked so much, and combed out her long dark hair. Now she waited for him in their bed, and as she waited, so she gently hummed.

Tomorrow was going to be a hard day. He would have to be at his sharpest. His most pleasant and convincing. If he fucked this up...

Only he wasn't going to fuck things up. Too much rode on it for him to even contemplate it. And besides, wasn't he the best salesman they had? No. Tomorrow would be fine. And this now – this evening with his darling wife, would put him in precisely the right mood for it.

He wiped his face with the towel, then, slipping it back onto the rail, went through, pausing at the door to look in on her.

There was the faint light of a small lamp, on the shelf just behind her. In its light she looked... He was going to say 'lovely', only that wasn't what he really thought. There was no arguing with it. She looked quite beautiful.

"You want the light on or off?" she asked quietly.

"Leave it on... I want to see you."

"Yes?" And, as if reading his thoughts, she peeled the bed shirt up over her head and threw it aside, revealing her lovely breasts, her equally delightful shoulders and neck. So strong, she was. Just the sight of her aroused him.

He closed the door behind him, then walked across, standing beside her and looking down. She reached out and held him, and then, coming forward on her hands and knees, slowly took him into her mouth.

Tang Tao groaned.

He had not even had to ask. She had *known*.

Reaching out to grip her shoulders in his hands, he began to push, gently at first, then harder, until, with a gasp, he came, his seed spilling from her mouth.

"Arrrr... Yi Wu..."

Only she kept sucking, keeping him hard, making him groan again, and spasm a second time.

"Yi Wu... oh, my darling girl..."

Only she was grinning now, a strange wantonness in her eyes. She drew back a little, then as his cock slipped from her mouth, gave a deep, throaty laugh. "That better?"

"Oh, Yi Wu..." He reached out to gently touch her chin, her beautiful, dirty mouth. "You are the very best of wives..."

"And you the best of husbands."

Her face changed slightly, becoming more serious. "Today..."

Only he put a finger to her lips to stop her. "Today was fine, my love. Today was the best of days. The children loved it. And this..." He shivered. "Lay down, Yi Wu, and let me hold you. Yes, and put out the light. We'll make love again in a while, but first I want to hold you against me."

● * * *

The truth was, today had been foul. At least, from the viewpoint of having to put up with her parents. You would have thought that they'd improve with the years, only with them familiarity really had bred contempt. They did not like their son-in-law, and they made no effort to disguise the

fact. One might have thought that the children's presence might have made them think before they spoke, but it did nothing of the kind. No, they used the children almost as bartering chips in the great game of pettiness they played, like white and black stones on a *wei ch'i* board. And had it not been for Yi Wu...

He would have walked. In fact, he would have walked long years ago. After they'd had Cho. Back in the days when the sniping had been bitterest.

Only his life with Yi Wu did have its compensations, and if that should cease...

Only why should it? All she wished for was for him to be a good husband, a good father to their children. And to make love to her as if she were fifteen again, which was something he was only too happy to comply with.

Tang Tao sighed, then listened a while to her soft and gentle snores. In that too he had been lucky. Other men, he knew, could not stand sleeping with their wives for just that reason. Because they snored. As if, as human beings, they could possibly remain quiet. But Yi Wu's snores were comforting and, like the touch of her fingers and the scent of her, he would not have changed them in the least part. It was who she was, after all, and he liked that.

Only today...

Today, for the briefest moment, he had almost lost his cool. Had almost snapped and struck the old cunt.

It had been when they were queuing for the Wild Dragon ride, baby Chang clinging to him, half dozing beneath the big lights. It was then that Yi Chang-li had leaned close, speaking quietly to his ear.

"Hey, big man," he'd said. "You don't fool me. I know what you are. A big fraud, that's what you are. A fucking big lie. Taking us all out for the day. Well, you may fool my daughter, but you don't fool me."

No? he had wanted to say, but he found he couldn't answer.

And that would have been alright. Only he could still feel the old man's spittle on his ear lobe. Still hear that dry, whining voice, reverberating in his skull.

Droning on and on and on.

* * *

He was up at six and washed and dressed, in his best *chi pao*, looking every bit the businessman. And as he sorted out his bag and the sample cases, so Yi Wu came to him and, putting her arms about him, lifted her face to his for a kiss.

"And how is my hero this morning?"

“Glowing,” he said, and actually half meant it. Were it not for his dreams, it would have been a perfect night. But he was not going to start about that. She would only worry, and then he’d worry too. No, best leave that all unsaid.

“Are these them?” she asked, making no attempt to handle them; knowing from past conversations that he didn’t like her to touch his merchandise.

Tang Tao nodded proudly. The design boys had really produced some fine work this time out, and if these didn’t sell...

He closed the thought off abruptly. No. No negatives today. Today was the day he was going to turn their fortunes round. Today was the first day of his new life. And when it was over he could face that old bastard, Yi Chang-li and give the old fucker the finger. See if he didn’t.

* * *

“I’m sorry, Shih Tang, but do you actually have an appointment?”

“No, but...”

“Then I’m afraid you’ll need to call us and make one. Our sales representatives are busy men. They have very tight schedules and...”

Tang Tao raised a hand, trying to stop the woman’s flow, only she was not even looking at him now. As far as she was concerned he didn’t have an appointment and therefore he shouldn’t be there. Only they had never operated this way before. Before now...

“...so if you don’t mind, I’d be grateful if you would leave now, Shih Tang, and when you’ve made an appointment...”

He snapped his case shut. She hadn’t even looked. He knew she hadn’t. Because if she had she would have seen. And then...

He swallowed his disappointment, forcing himself to smile at the woman. “Forgive me, but how long do you think it will take to get an appointment? You see, I have these new designs and...”

He fell quiet, seeing how she was staring at him coldly now. Not like the old days,. Oh no, not like the old days at all. Everyone so suspicious of everyone else these days. Everyone...

“I think you’d better leave, Shih Tang... before I call for security.

He almost laughed at that. Security? Why, he’d never in all his career... Only even as he thought these thoughts he could see the look in her eyes and, taking his case, turned face about and left.

After all, he could probably find a public com-room in the lobby downstairs and make the call from there. Set something up and then come back up here again. It might cost him an hour or two, but he could afford that. And once they’d seen the samples.

Tang Tao smiled again. It was just a setback, that was all. A minor setback. And he’d had them before and overcome them, hadn’t he? So why not now?

Stirred into action, he strode into the lift and pressed 'Down'. It looked set to be a long day, but that was fine. While he was making this call, he'd make the others, too – set up a whole raft of appointments. Yes, and then they'd see. Yi Chang-li and that spiteful shit of a wife of his.

* * *

Ten hours later, Tang Tao sat in the waiting room of the Red Emperor Corporation, hunched forward in the chair, his head down, his bag on the chair beside him. It had been a long and tiring day, most of which he'd spent chasing shadows. But here, at last, he'd got himself a meeting. Not with one of the major leaguers, sure, but if he could make a small sale here it would at least be something to carry into the week ahead, and not, as now, a total wash out.

When he'd called round this morning, he'd thought it would be a simple matter of squeezing him into their schedules. He knew how it was. He'd been a buyer himself, in better days. But things had clearly changed. Now you had to book in well in advance, and as for seeing the main buyer himself, forget that.

Six weeks, he'd been away. A mere six weeks. What in the gods names could have changed in so short a time.

Only he knew what had changed. The world.

When those terrorist arseholes had blown up the imperial solarium – and afterwards, when they had assassinated the T'ang of Europe's eldest son on his wedding day - the world had been turned on its head. Yes, everything had changed. Though not at once. For a time it had all run on in the old fashion, but now the tidal wave had struck. And if today was anything to go by, he would be lucky to rack up half the sales he'd thought of getting.

Yes, but even that would be good right now. First he had to get a foot in the door.

"Shih Tang?"

He looked up, then jumped to his feet, putting a smile on his face, praying to the gods that the buyer hadn't read his body language when he'd entered. Because body language was everything these days. Or so they taught you in College.

He bowed low, then offered his hand, "Buyer Chao... thank you very much for seeing me so late in the day. Only it's been chaotic and..."

He fell silent, realising he was close to gibbering.

"Anyway... thanks."

The other man – older than Tang Tao and taller by a good *ch'i*, gave him the most polite of smiles. "Come through, Shih Tang. I'm afraid we're rather rushed, but I can give you half an hour. Is that okay?"

It wasn't. He needed a full hour if he was going to demonstrate all six items, but it would do right now. He'd focus on the best of the six – the two he had his best hopes for – and see where it led. Maybe he could set up another meeting, for tomorrow, and do a proper job of it.

Inside, beyond the reception area, was a suite of offices and, behind it, glimpsed vaguely through the 'ice' of the back wall, some kind of factory.

Taking his seat behind the massive desk, Buyer Chao gestured towards a smaller, shabbier seat facing him. Tang Tao took it and, clutching his bag in his lap, waited for the man's signal to begin. Only Buyer Chao raised a hand.

"I just have to make one call."

Tang Tao bit back his impatience. This wasn't how business was done. Or, at least, it hadn't been. Not the last time he was out in the levels, anyway.

He waited as the man droned on and on. And waited. And, finally, his call ended, Buyer Chao looked up at him again.

"I'm sorry about that. Now... my assistant says you have some samples to show me. Is there any chance of you leaving them with us overnight? So that we could look at them, maybe? Assess them and see whether they're something we might be interested in?"

It was completely out of the question, of course. Not unless they'd signed a pre-purchase contract with a secrecy clause, and he told Buyer Chao so.

"Is it possible, perhaps, for me to show you just one of them? To demonstrate it, so to speak?"

Buyer Chao looked at the timer at his wrist, and drew a deep breath. "I don't know. I..."

"Ten minutes," Tang Tao said. "That's all I'll need."

Buyer Chao stared at him a moment, as if he was the greatest nuisance he had seen in his office all year, and then he shrugged.

"I guess so. But be brief Shih Tang. My time is precious."

And mine worth nothing, he thought, but it was crucial now not to give the man an excuse to say no without at least glimpsing the potential of these new products

Unlocking his bag, he quickly searched among them for the best of them and, setting his bag down on the carpet next to him, placed the thing on the desk between he and the man.

"Now this," Tang Tao began, his voice exuding confidence, "is our top-of-the-range model. It comes in vermillion, sapphire blue and gold, and as you'll see..."

* * *

Tang Tao stood in the doorway, listening but hearing nothing from within. The hallway was dark, which seemed to indicate that the children were already in their beds. As indeed they ought to be, at this hour. But of Yi Wu he could hear no sound.

He had stopped on the way home to have a beer to sooth his nerves. But one beer had become two and two three, until, after a fifth he'd forced himself to stand and walk away, his bag under his

arm, his every step weary, filled with the dread of going back home to Yi Wu, his tail between his legs.

“Aiya,” he said in what was close to a whisper. What a day it had been! In fact, he’d never had a day quite like it for turn-downs and refusals. And when he’d finally managed to get his foot in the door, he’d been rejected outright by a man who clearly didn’t know his arse from his elbow.

Aiya...

He went inside, setting the bag down in the hallway by the door, then popped his head around the living room door.

Yi Wu was sat there, cross-legged on the rug in front of the wall screen. There was some old film on the screen – a historical romance, no doubt. It was all she ever watched.

Hearing something, she half turned, then, realising it was him, she quickly stood and came across, embracing him, holding him a moment in precisely the way he needed holding, as if she understood. As if she’d been there through all the humiliation he had suffered.

“I...”

No. He couldn’t say. Not yet. And it wasn’t as if everything was lost. Not yet. He still had those appointments later in the week. Surely *something* would come of them?

Only right now he felt defeated. And with that, impotent. Normally, when she held him close, he’d find himself aroused, whatever the occasion. But this evening... This evening he felt wasted. Not that the beer had helped any.

He held her back a little, looking down into her face, lit partly as it was by the glow from the wall screen.

“Not a good day,” he said. “In fact a pretty fucking awful day, all in all.”

“Not anything?” she asked, her eyes searching his face, her own dark eyes anxious now.

He shook his head. “Not a thing. But I’ve got appointments... for later in the week. I thought I might...”

He hesitated, as if this were difficult to say, then pressed on.

“I thought I might go back for a day or two. You know... to the sales offices. See if I can’t get a few more samples. The buyer tonight... he said he would have gladly looked at them much closer, only I couldn’t leave them for him. It’s not allowed. And their time’s so precious...”

Her face had changed. “You mean... go away for a couple of days?”

“It’d only be two nights, three maybe at most. And then I’d be back. And I’ve nothing to do until then... and if I can persuade them to a slight change of policy... so that I could leave material with the buyers...”

He could see she didn't like it. Not the business side of it, but the staying away. She'd only just got him back, and now...

"Isn't there some other way. I mean... can't you just call them and ask them, to send the stuff here?"

He shook his head. "They don't like doing that. That's why they have us sign a possession order before we leave the factory with the samples. And besides, it'd be no cheaper for them to send it here. They'd need a courier and..."

She raised a hand. "Okay. I understand. If you have to go you have to go."

But he could see how little pleased she was.

"It won't be long," he said, drawing her closer and kissing the top of her head. "I'll be as quick as I can. I promise I will."

* * *

He took a different route every time, sometimes double-tracking to make sure he was not being followed, obsessively checking the faces of his fellow passengers to make certain he'd not seen them before; only then moving on to the next part of his journey.

It was over five hundred *li* as the bolt ran, and he could have done the journey in an hour, but that was just asking for trouble. And so he broke his journey up, each time taking a different path through the great maze that was the world of levels.

Thus it was almost the best part of a day before he got home. Home as opposed to home. Though after all these years it was hard to say which was his *true* home.

"Hello?" he called out, putting his bag down on the hall table. "Anyone home?"

The rooms were silent, and, as he walked about the plushly-decorated apartment, so he wondered where she was right then and what she was doing.

All of this was hers, inherited when her father had passed on. Tang Tao had never met him, but from Katrin's account he was a nice man. A jovial, generous man. Unlike her mother, who still lived, though at a far enough distance for them not to have to suffer her company too often.

There was a message for him in the kitchen, handwritten on the slate, the time-dating in the top right corner indicating that she had written it an hour after he had sent his own message.

"Hi darling – gone shopping on Eighth with Ginny and May. Back supper time. Kxxx"

He smiled. Maybe he'd take her out to dinner tonight. Then again it might be nice to have a quiet evening in. He'd let her choose.

He had a shower then changed his clothes, selecting a fresh *chi pao* from the bedroom wardrobe, a salmon-coloured robe with an emerald border that he knew she liked. Then, knowing he had time to kill, he sat at the comset and selected a game.

Tang Tao was still playing when the door behind him opened. He turned, smiling, then got up and went across to her.

She snuggled into him; all blonde hair and perfume. "You weren't gone long."

He sniffed in the delightful smell of her, then reached up to gently touch her lips. "I know. But I was missing you. I've no appointments 'til next week, so I thought I'd come back for a few days. Help you with the party."

"Oh, Tao... you're so sweet. You'll really help?"

"Sure. I know how important it is to you."

"It is. And Ginny was only saying this afternoon that she wasn't going to be able to help out, what with her sister's illness. I was racking my brains trying to think who I ought to ask."

"Then look no further."

She grinned, her deep blue eyes searching his a moment. Then, grabbing his hand, she led him back through, into the bedroom.

"We can do the invites tonight," she said, turning to him and kicking off her shoes. "But first I want to shag you senseless, my darling man."

Tang Tao grinned back at her, then kicked off his slippers. "Whatever my mistress says."

* * *

"So these are...?"

"Decorations. Special ones with the company logo on them. If they didn't have that logo we couldn't claim for them. As it is..."

Tang Tao laughed. Katrin never missed a trick. She was like her father in that, supposedly. Never one to waste a fen. Generally, that was. Except when it came to him.

She was looking at him from behind the desk in her study. "Did it go well?"

He shook his head. "Disastrous."

"Oh, you poor thing. Do you need...?"

Again he shook his head. "You're too generous, my love. I've got my allowance. That'll see me through."

She was quiet a moment, then. "I do admire you, you know. After all that's happened. To bite the bullet the way you've done and taken on a lesser job. A lot of men... well, they'd not consider it."

"No. Maybe not. And don't think I don't appreciate it, but sometimes..."

"It feels like you're a kept man, neh?"

He shrugged. "It's just... I'd love to be your equal in that way. You're such a strong and capable woman..."

"Except in bed, neh? Where I'm a mouse."

"A mouse that squeaks..." He smiled. "No. It's just that, when I lost the company... when I was forced to take that buyer's job... I didn't think it could get any worse. But this..."

"Was it really that bad?"

"Yes, really."

"Then let me speak to Michael. He'll have a job for you. I know he will."

"I'm sorry, but I don't want you to speak to Michael. If I accepted a job with him I'd never hear the end of it. You know how he is. I'd be a laughing stock."

She studied him a moment. "Okay. But there's got to be another way."

"Sure. Only let me try this. Let me see if I can't stand on my own two feet. I only need a couple of sales. The rest will follow. I know it will."

"Oh, I'm sure it will, my love. You're such a clever man. But come... we've lots to do before Saturday. Here... here's the list of who's coming and who's sent their apologies. I've drafted a standard letter for the latter, so if you can organise those. Maybe add something personal to give it a less formal touch, neh?"

"Whatever my lady commands."

But he was thinking about the waiting room in the Red Dragon Corporation building, and the dismissive glance the buyer there had given him as he left.

A kept man, that was what he was. And he was growing not to like it.

* * *

He woke in the dead of night and wondered where he was. Home. Only which home.

The silence answered him. The bed beside him was empty and cold, the silken sheets thrown back. He sat up, straining to listen, then heard her, her voice carrying through walls and doors, as she talked on the comset.

It was just like her, getting up in the night and making calls. Like most of her Above friends, she suffered from insomnia, if not from the whole neurasthenic package. Why, they probably did more business in the early hours than at any other time of day.

He got up and, pulling on his night robe, went through to join her. As he came into the room, she gave a little wave, but continued talking. He sat, reaching out to pour himself a coffee from the tray.

It had taken him a long time to get used to coffee, but now he was addicted. Why, he was almost *Hung Mao* in his ways, these days. He had only to dye his hair blonde and you might take him for a westerner.

Or not, he thought, amused by the thought of him – a Han – mixing with these kind of people. He and they were like black and white, to be honest. And though he had many friends among them, he was never quite comfortable at this level, in this society. He always thought he was going to make some kind of slip and give his origins away. And though Katrin said he was being silly about it, and that her friends really didn't care – they did. If he'd not been her lover, then they'd not have passed the time of day with him.

Which was why making this sales job work was so important.

He walked across and, turning the volume down to nil, turned on the wall screen and flicked through until he got the news channel for the Above. He studied it for a second or two then turned to her.

"Look. They're making some kind of announcement. Him there... that's the T'ang's Chancellor, isn't it... what's his name?"

"Nan Ho..." She turned up the sound to twenty, then sat back slightly. "You see this, Michael? It's like you said. They're trying to placate the Lower. These new health care plans of theirs... It's too little, too late."

Tang Tao glanced across at her. She was still keyed through. On the other end was her millionaire friend, Michael Strachan, probably the one member of her group he had never got on with. His voice sounded now, connected through.

"I'm watching it now. That guy he's with... Shou Chen-hai. I've had dealings with him before."

"And?"

"And I'll tell you about it when I see you."

"Ah..."

"Yes, Ah... oh, and Tang Tao..."

Tan Tao turned, as if Michael was in the room. How had he known he was there?

"Yes, Michael?"

"If there's anything I can do to help..."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome... Okay. I'm signing off. Bye K."

That too annoyed him. The familiarity he had with Katrin. The way he called her simply "K". Not that he was a jealous man, only there was one bastard he didn't trust far enough to spit on him.

“You’re so funny, Tao,” Katrin said. “You could be good friends with Michael, if you tried. He’s a nice man. And he really genuinely wants to help you.”

Yes, well he didn’t help one bit when my company went down the shitter, did he?

Only he didn’t want a row. In fact, that was what he liked about being with Katrin. How calm everything was about her. How orderly. But Michael got under his skin. He really did. He was such an arrogant bag of wind.

Another item announced itself on screen.

Tang Tao laughed.

“What?” Katrin asked, looking across at him and frowning.

“Just the news here. It’s just so anodyne. So... soothing. Like they’re administering some kind of sleeping draught. To keep the Above safe and sound... and calm.”

“I thought you liked calm.”

“I do. But not all the time. They make even disasters seem cosy. Down level...”

Katrin shivered. “Change the subject, sweetheart. I don’t want to know what happens down there.”

“But I thought you just said... about the health centres... that...”

“Oh, leave it, Tao. Go back to bed and get your beauty sleep.”

“You won’t join me?”

She smiled. “Maybe later. But I’ve three more calls to make.” She made a gesture with her hand and the sound went dead on the wall screen again. “Oh, and darling...”

“Yes, my love?”

“Don’t wake me too early, neh? I need my beauty sleep too.”

* * *

Saturday came round all too quickly. There was lots to do, and in the end, despairing of getting everything done in time, Katrin had hired in help.

“It’s not that you’ve not been helpful,” she said. “You have. Only there’s just too much to do, and at least we can claim it back if we hire people in. You can still help me meet and greet, sweetheart, but some of the other stuff...”

The truth was, he was quite happy to give up most of “the other stuff” – especially when it came to dealing with some of Katrin’s richer friends. Most of them considered him some kind of hired help anyway, a kept man, tolerated only because he kept Katrin sweet in bed. Oh, he didn’t really mind it all that much most of the time – they could think what they fucking well wanted, as far as he was

concerned – but just occasionally it rankled. Especially when it came from those who were the sons and daughters of fathers who had climbed the levels. They, particularly, were borderline obnoxious.

But come the evening...

She had bought him a new suit for the occasion and was insistent that he wore it. Which was not, in itself, a problem for him. He liked the suit. Liked dressing well. Only then she had made the mistake of telling him that Michael had picked his outfit out.

Being dressed by her was one thing. Being dressed by Michael quite another.

Angered he had stormed back into his bedroom and torn the clothes off, then chosen something from his own wardrobe. Something which, even he had to admit it, revealed him from what he really was – a citizen of the Lower Mids. Not Above material at all.

Katrin confronted him coming out of the apartment, tipped off by one of her maids.

“Tang Tao! Have you lost your mind! You can’t go to the party wearing that! What will people say? You have to go back and change. You’re my escort, and if they see you by my side, dressed like that...”

“They’ll *what?*” he said, fuming now, knowing she was right, but defiant anyway.

She took a long breath, then, shaking her head, turned and walked away, back to her waiting carriage.

He stood there a long, long time after that, letting the anger flow from him. And then he turned and, returning to his bedroom, put the clothes that Michael had chosen for him on again, studying himself in the full length mirror before going out again.

Like one of those GenSyn monkeys, he thought, remembering their one and only trip to GenSyn’s Zoo.

Katrin was standing there, talking to Michael, when he got there. Michael saw him first and nodded to her, as if to warn her. She turned and, seeing him in the clothes, gave him an apologetic smile before coming across to him, Michael at his side.

“I’m sorry,” Michael said. “I am, really. I just didn’t think. I’m really sorry, Tang Tao. I’d have reacted just the same if you’d have dressed me. I mean... it looks good on you, but that’s not the point, is it? It’s a man thing. Pride and all that.”

Tang Tao almost laughed at that. Why, Michael almost seemed genuine for once. Only he didn’t trust him. What if it were all a show to impress Katrin? Whatever, he was there now, and taking Katrin’s arm, he took her aside.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “I just...”

She put a finger to his lips. “Let’s just forget it, neh? Let’s just enjoy tonight. Oh, and I think you look wonderful in those clothes, Tang Tao. A prince among men.”

“Yes?”

She smiled, then leaned close to kiss his neck. “Oh yes, my love, most definitely.”

* * *

Tang Tao sat in the reception area, waiting. His meeting had been scheduled for three o’ clock and it was now gone six. In all that time no one had come in and no one had gone out, and he was beginning to think that this was all some kind of ruse – to humiliate him again. To rub his nose in the fact that he was just a lowly salesman, and no one of any significance at all.

I should have worn that suit, he thought. Except that they would have only thought he’d stolen it.

HemCom were one of the biggest Companies he had had dealings with, and in the past they had been one of their most reliable customers. But rumours were that HelCom had fallen out of favour with the T’ang. That one of the owner’s sons had had Dispersionist sympathies and had been arrested.

How true that was, Tang Tao didn’t know, nor did he think it politic to ask, but if it were true then it did not bode well for making a deal. He’d seen what happened to companies who fell out with the T’ang and his servants. Not to speak of the thousands who had simply disappeared.

These were ‘difficult times’, or so the media commentators said. And that was proving true, and no denying it. The morning had seen more of the same. Buyers who no longer had the power to buy. Others who really liked the product but just couldn’t take the risk. The markets were so ‘volatile’. As if no one possessed both judgement and courage any more.

Only he had had such hopes for this one. HemCom had always taken risks. Sound as the Company was, there had always been an element of intelligent gambling about their buying strategies.

Tang Tao took a long breath. His instinct was to go. Not to wait a second longer. Then write a tart little note to them and send it.

But these weren’t the old days. Tang Tao knew his ‘note’ would have no effect. Would only close that particular door against any further chance of sales.

He grabbed his case and stood, and even as he did, the door on the far side of the room swung open.

“Shih Tang... so sorry to keep you. Things have been chaotic here...”

Tang Tao frowned. The old, grey-bearded Han who was crossing the room to greet him seemed a good ninety years old if he was a day.

“Forgive me, I thought...”

The old Han stopped, then smiled and nodded a bow, which Tang Tao returned, but he was even more confused now. The man he had spoken to, to set up the meeting, had been mid- twenties at most.

“You’re not Chin Ho...”

The smile broadened. “I most certainly am not.”

“Then I am speaking to...?”

“I am Chin Fa’tse, and I own HemCom.”

Tang Tao frowned. “But I don’t understand. I was meant to meet your assistant buyer.”

“Which, temporarily is me. Until I find a replacement. The old buyer was taken away just yesterday. A bad business, it was. A very bad business. No proof, no evidence at all. But that’s the way of it now, neh? We live in difficult times.”

Tang Tao didn’t know what to say. But Chin Fa’tse was staring at him now. “So?” he asked. “What have you got to show me?”

“I...” He shook his head, then started again. “You say you have a vacancy? As assistant buyer?”

The old man shook his head. “Not just as assistant. The chief buyer too has gone. Taken. Like he never existed.”

Tang Tao swallowed. “Then... you’re looking for someone with experience of buying, yes?”

“I am.”

“Then I’m your man. I’ve had three years’ experience as chief buyer for a large mid-level Company.”

“And before that?”

Tang Tao looked down. “I had my own business. It failed.”

“I see...” The old man scratched his beard, considering. “And the products you brought today. Do you believe in them?”

“They’re great. Some of the best I’ve handled.”

“As salesman, neh?”

Tang Tao nodded.

“And as a buyer?”

“I’d buy the lot. Get a monopoly on them.”

The old man smiled, amused no doubt by his hyperbole. “Show me.”

An hour later, the old man sat back, scratching at his beard once more, clearly thinking things through.

“Okay,” he said finally. “I’ll sign an exclusive deal for the product. As for the other matter, when can you start?”

Tang Tao grinned. "Tomorrow?"

Chin Fa'tse held out a hand. "Then the job's yours, salary to be negotiated. I'll see you in the morning, Shih Tang. Eight o' clock on the dot."

* * *

He sat there in the station for the best part of an hour, trying to decide. In the end he tossed a coin, and, as the T'ang's head appeared, face up, he'd picked up his bag and left, heading for Yi Wu's.

For more than fifteen years he had shared his time, travelling from one to the other, all the while putting down roots, like a tree. Only what tree divided its time between two places five hundred *li* apart?

It was not often that he asked. For why ask questions when there were no answers to be found? Why rock the boat when keeping the waters calm was all that was needed? And why deny himself the love of two women when it was possible to keep both happy?

Only now he questioned it. Now he asked himself just what he wanted. This, for the rest of time? Or a simpler life, with a single wife and no need to make excuses. All he had to do was choose.

Because today he had met a good man. An honest, pleasant man who trusted him, and with whom it would be a pleasure to work. And he knew – as only instinct could tell him – that somehow everything had changed, even if he didn't quite know how.

As he walked toward the lift, he wondered just how he had managed to get to this point. Oh, he knew how it had started. Only... to let it drift for so long. To organise his life thus. How had that happened? How...

Tang Tao stopped dead, astonished by the sight that met his eyes.

There, standing directly in his path, blocking his way to the lift, was Katrin, with what was clearly a hired bodyguard, standing just beyond.

"Tang Tao," she said, a strange coldness to those familiar words. "What a surprise to meet you here."

He knew, at once, and without the slightest doubt, that she knew. Knew everything? No. There wouldn't have been time. But enough to give her the broad strokes.

"Who followed me? One of Michael's men?"

She was calm. Far too calm. "It doesn't matter," she said. Then, looking about her. "Is this where you've been coming all these years?"

His instinct was to deny it. To tell her she was mistaken. But why do that?

"Yes."

He saw the disappointment in her eyes, the hurt, and wished he could have done this differently. He was not an unkind man, but that did not matter here. He had betrayed her. Betrayed them all. And now he would be punished for it.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“I want to meet her. This woman I’ve been sharing you with. I want...” Her voice almost cracked. He saw the struggle in her to keep control of her emotions. “I want to understand why you’d do this to me. Was it the sex?”

It was. Or part of it. Yi Wu *was* better between the sheets. But that wasn’t it. It was something else. The fact, perhaps, that he felt comfortable at this level. That he didn’t have to pretend to be something he was not.

“You want me to take you there, is that it?”

She nodded.

He hesitated. Yi Wu didn’t deserve this. Neither of them deserved this. But this was how it was going to be, he could see that. Katrin was going nowhere until her curiosity was satisfied.

And then?

Then it was over. Both with her and with Yi Wu.

He walked past her, feeling her eyes on him, looking at him as if looking at a total stranger. Well, so he was now. He was a man who had lied to her, and there was no going back on that. He had crossed a line.

He stood there, watching her enter the lift, her bodyguard close behind, then punched for Yi Wu’s level. For a moment he had hesitated, wondering if there was not some way he could avoid this; make a break with Katrin and leave things as they were with Yi Wu. Only that wasn’t going to happen. Katrin was determined to meet her. Determined to understand just why he had felt the need to take another lover.

As the lift doors closed, he glanced at her, but there was nothing there now. Her eyes were dead to him. *As in a dream*, he thought, staring at his hand where it rested on the panel, surprised to find he was trembling.

Why today? he asked himself. Why, when he’d had the first real break he’d had in years, had it happened now?

It’s that cunt, Michael, he thought. Meddling. He’s had designs on Katrin for as long as I’ve known the creep, and now he has her. All he has to do now is reel her in. Because I’m no longer in his way. Yes, and he’s sure to get the sympathy vote. No, it wouldn’t surprise me if he finds himself in her bed this very night. Sharing a revenge shag with her. Getting a sympathy fuck. Making sure he’s the one who benefits from all of this.

Tang Tao swallowed, surprised by how bitter he felt.

“What does she do, this woman?”

He looked up. For a moment he had almost forgotten she was there.

“She’s my wife.”

She laughed. “Your...” Her face changed; became hard and ugly. “You really are a cunt, aren’t you? You’re married, then?”

He nodded, frightened by the hatred he now saw in her eyes. He didn’t want it to end like this between them. He truly didn’t.

“So I’m the ‘other woman’?”

The lift was slowing. He looked to her, his eyes pleading with her. “You don’t have to do this. Call me a cunt, call me whatever, but I never meant to hurt you. It just... happened.”

She stared back at him, a look of sheer incredulity on her face. “*Happened?* What, did you trip up and fall between her open legs?”

“No, I...”

Only there was no way to explain this. All of this, it was *his* fault. No one else was to blame. He had chosen to weave these sticky webs and now he was to be called to account for what he’d done.

The lift stopped, the doors hissing open. They were less than a minute away now. He closed his eyes, agonising over what was about to happen. Could he prevent that, even now? No. Looking at her, he saw there was to be no reprieve. This was it. The nightmare was fated to continue, through to its bitter end.

As they stepped from the lift, he saw how she looked about her.

“Here?” she said, a marked Above disdain in her voice. “You came from here?”

As if he’d been slumming. He felt the urge to argue. To justify. But what was the point? She’d never understand. And why should she? None of this was her fault. She had taken him at face value; helped him, loved him, given him her warm body. And he?

He had cheated on her. Lied to her. Slept with another woman behind her back.

Tang Tao hesitated. His mouth was dry, his legs felt strangely weak. He felt like a prisoner about to be led to his execution. Only that he could probably face. This? Well, this was something other than that. Something far more dreadful. To watch love die in someone’s face. There was nothing worse, surely, in the whole universe?

“Katrin...”

“*Don’t!* Don’t you ever fucking say my name again!”

Her face was like a fury’s. He dropped his eyes, cowering from her. He’d never seen her like this. Never imagined...

“Well?” she went on. “Aren’t you going to take me to her? This *wife* of yours?”

Tang Tao walked on, as in a dream, leading her there, each step one step closer, imagining in his mind the children playing, Yi Wu happy and laughing, not knowing that this life was about to come to an end.

Aiya, he thought. *How in the gods’ names has it come to this?*

At the door he stopped and turned to her. “This is it,” he said. “You want to knock, or shall I?”

There was a strange blankness to her face now it had come to it. A lack of expression that he couldn’t quite understand. Had she realised too what this meant? At this final moment, had she taken pity on him?

She reached past him and banged her fist against the door; once, twice and then a third time, loud enough, he thought, to wake the dead.

There were noises from within.

Tang Tao closed his eyes, a teardrop rolling down his cheek.

I’m sorry Cho. I’m so very sorry my darling Yao and baby Chang. And you, Yi Wu... how could I ever have hurt you?

The door swung back. Yi Wu was standing there, in her apron, baby Chang holding on to her leg, peering round her at the tall and elegant Above lady with her long blonde hair and her startlingly blue eyes.

“Yes?” Yi Wu started, surprised to find the woman there, not noticing Tang Tao at first, her eyes drawn to the bodyguard, and to the stunning finery of what was clearly a very rich lady. Only after she had taken this all in did she recognise her husband, standing there in this strange company.

“Tang Tao...”

“Can we come inside?” he asked, his voice gentle, loving, part of him still clinging to a past that he knew was already over.

“I don’t understand... has something happened?”

“No, Yi Wu...”

Only it had, and how was he to explain? Yi Wu was staring at him now, trying to piece it all together and make sense of it.

“Who is this, Tao? And why are you crying? Has someone died?”

“Can we come in? ... Please Yi Wu...”

But he was conscious now that Katrin, beside him, was staring wide-eyed at baby Chang.

“There are *children*? You had children with this... this *woman*?”

He saw how Yi Wu bridled at that; how anger flared in her eyes, even if she didn't know why. And now young Yao appeared beside her mother.

"Daddy? What's happening?"

That almost broke his heart. Daddy... Would he ever hear her say that to him again after this?

"Tell her," Katrin said harshly. "Just tell her and put us all out of our misery!"

"Tell me what?" Yi Wu said, turning to him again.

"This woman..." He swallowed, almost unable to continue. "This woman... Katrin... is my common law wife. I..."

He saw the shock in Yi Wu's eyes, the sudden panic. "Your wife...?" She said it with total disbelief, while Chang and Yao just looked to her, as if for explanation.

"Fifteen years he's lived with me," Katrin said, sparing them nothing. "And all the while I thought him a loving, faithful husband. But he's just a selfish bastard after all. Because all the while he's been fucking you. Producing little brats... how many are there, Tang Tao? A dozen? More?"

"Three," he said, in what was almost a whisper.

"Three! Well, well... there's three more surprises I didn't know about! And you, woman... Yi Wu, is that right? Did you know your husband has been sneaking away to sleep with me?"

Still shocked, all Yi Wu could do was feebly shake her head. She looked devastated. Broken almost.

Eight-year-old Yao burst into tears.

Tang Tao took a step toward her, then, seeing Yi Wu's glare, stayed where he was.

Yi Wu struggled to find her voice. "Is this true, Tang Tao?"

He lowered his head, shamed. "It's true."

Beside him, Katrin gave a long, shivering sigh. "Gods but you're a bastard, Tang Tao. I almost feel sorry for this woman. She didn't know, did she? She really didn't know!"

He shook his head.

"And now what?" Katrin demanded. "The allowance... well, that's gone. I'm not paying you to crawl away and fuck another woman! And as for all your stuff... You can come and collect it all... tomorrow, when I'm not there. Michael will arrange it all..."

He almost said something at that, but he bit it back. Michael may have engineered it, but it wasn't his fault. No. No one was to blame but him. He looked to Yi Wu, but she looked away. Shock had turned to hurt. Tears were rolling down her cheeks now.

Yi Wu...

Katrin stared at him a moment, like she was studying some vile specimen, then angrily shook her head. "Okay, we're done here. There's no more to be said. Have a good life, Yi Wu. As for you..."

And, leaning forward, she spat full in his face. Seeing it, Yao howled.

Tang Tao grimaced, then lowered his head. *Let me die right now*, he thought. *Let me go asleep and never wake up. For I'm in hell.* I surely am in hell.

* * *

Tang Tao had no recollection of what happened next; of how he'd left there or of what had been said. All he knew was that he had woken in a rented room, that next morning, and, after freshening up, had gone to HemCom's offices.

The old man knew something was wrong. It was hard to hide. But he did not pry and, at the end of the day, came down from his office to see if Tang Tao was alright.

Which was when he told him. Told him everything, the tears flowing freely as he spelled it all out. All of the lying and deceit, and how he had ruined his life. And the old man listened without comment, and at the end of it lay his hand briefly on Tang Tao's shoulder.

"It'll get better. Not soon, but..."

* * *

The best part of a year had passed when he went to see her again. He had set up a payment order, right from the first, to send her money for the kids, and for herself. But he had kept away, fearing having to face her anger, her bitterness. A coward, sure he was, but who could blame him?

Only finally he had to face her. To explain himself, and to get what he deserved.

He had arranged it several days before, to give her time to find a minder for the children, and, he guessed, to let her rehearse in mind what she would say. But then suddenly the hour was upon him and, seated in that tea house, waiting for her to come, was the longest hour in his life.

Would she come? If he were she, then possibly not. After all, why should she? He had shat on her, proving her father's judgement had been right. And how bitter a pill was that to swallow?

Only there was all the rest of it to consider. The happy years they'd had together. And yes, he had cheated on her, but what harm had been done?

He shook his head. No. That was just sophistry. Excuses for his lack of moral fibre. The kind of things only a total cunt would use to justify his appalling behaviour.

Even so...

Tang Tao pushed the cold *ch'a* bowl away from him and sighed. Katrin's actions had clarified one thing in his mind. That when it came to a straight choice, it was Yi Wu he truly loved. Yi Wu he had always loved.

Not that he hadn't loved Katrin. No. That was the complicated part of it. That too had worked. For a time. And the only way he could explain it was that a man had many possible destinies, and to say that he could only live his life in one, singular fashion, was not true. It was all chance. Meeting with one woman and not another. Living his life this way and not another.

What he had done wrong – and he was certain he was not alone in doing this – was to not constrain himself to a single woman, but to have, quite literally, the best of both worlds. To play both black stone and white on the great board of life. In short, to have it both ways.

He was about to leave, to give it up as a bad job, when he saw her arrive, handing her jacket to the waiter, then coming across to him.

He felt his mouth go dry, as it had once before, his legs turn to jelly. He wanted to run. Anything but face her. Only, as she came closer, he could see his own uncertainty mirrored in her face. Saw, unexpectedly, how much of an effort she had made.

He stood. "Yi Wu..."

She let him take her hand briefly. Waited while he pulled out her chair for her and pushed it in again as she sat. As he always had.

"So?" she asked, her dark eyes staring into his. "What do you want?"

"I..." He stopped, then shook his head. He had had it clear in mind, but now that she was sat in front of him, all he could think of was how much he had missed her. Her and the kids.

He reached out, taking her left hand gently in his own, expecting her to pull away. Only she didn't.

"Yi Wu... I'm sorry. I..."

It was so hard. So hard to say the simplest things.

"Did you love her?"

The question was so frank, so unexpected, that he blinked. "What?"

"That woman... Katrin... did you love her?"

He hesitated, then gave the slightest nod. "Yes. I..."

But she was shaking her head now. He fell silent.

"Why did you come here today? What did you want?"

Tang Tao sighed. He'd had it so clear in his head before he'd come here but now he was facing her he couldn't say a word.

"I need you. I..."

"You *need* me?"

He nodded. She had not removed her hand. Had not – yet – walked away from him.

“The children miss you.”

He swallowed, taken aback by the words. Again, he hadn't expected them. “I miss them, too.”

“And you've been a good father, even in your absence. You always were. The money you've sent us...” She gave a long sigh. “This is hard, Tang Tao. You hurt me. Do you know that? Hurt me more than anyone has ever hurt me.”

“I know, and I'm so sorry...”

“Tang Tao... it can't be as it was. What you did...”

He drew his hand away, the pain he was feeling at her words awful. “I know. I just hoped...”

But what was the good of hoping? He had fucked up royally, and she was not to blame if she didn't trust him any longer. And besides, he had hurt her. So why should she risk being hurt again?

She reached out and took his hand again. “Why did you come here, Tang Tao? Why did you *really* come here?”

Only he couldn't say. To ask and be refused would cast him into hell again, and he wasn't sure he could face that. Best keep his dreams than lose them.

She waited, her eyes never leaving his. “Well?”

Only he couldn't. Nothing in the universe would drag the words from him.

Yi Wu looked down. “Okay. Then let me say it for you. You want to come back, neh? You want to come home.”

His mouth was completely dry now. Yes. That was exactly what he wanted. Only he could sense the killing blow behind her words. Knew that after what he'd done to her there was no earthly possibility of them getting together again. Why should she after all? What possible reason could she have for wanting him again?

“Tang Tao, I love you. I've never stopped loving you. Even when the hurt was at its worst, some part of me held on, remembering you as you were. A good man. A loving man. Oh, I knew you loved me. I could feel it every time you made love to me.”

A tear rolled down her cheek. He reached across and, with his fingertip, gently removed it.

“I love you, Yi Wu. I've always loved you.”

“I know. But sometimes loving isn't enough, is it?”

“No...” Only he wasn't exactly sure what he was saying no too. Was she about to let him down easy? It was absurd to think otherwise.

“Well?” she asked, after he'd been silent for a long time. “Will you come home, Tang Tao? I can't pretend it'll be how it was. I can't promise... well, I'll call it bluntly, neh? I can't promise things will be as they were between us. Every time I think of you, I think of her fucking you. And that's hard to live

with, Tang Tao. Harder than anything you could imagine. Why, it breaks my heart. But you're a good man, and you deserve a chance. Just one, mind you. You stray again and..."

It was left unsaid.

"Then..." He shook his head and gave the smallest laugh. "Am I dreaming, Yi Wu? Did you actually just say I could come home?"

She nodded.

"But when?"

"Right now, if you want to come."

"And your father?"

She almost smiled. "You'll have to face him, Tang Tao. You'll need to explain yourself. As far as he's concerned you've proved right everything he ever said about you. He told me I was mad, coming here today, but I'm not, am I? But you'll have to prove that to him. Yes, and to me."

"Yi Wu..." He wiped away the first of his tears, then reached out to embrace her, only this time she did back away.

"No. Not yet. I'm not ready yet. I'm still hurting, Tang Tao. So don't rush me. Give it time, husband. Give it time."

* * *

As it was, it was two full weeks before she came to his bed again, her small, naked body slipping in beside his own. Surprised, he made to call her name, only she placed her fingers to his lips, then, rolling him up on top of her, drew him down, inside her.

It was over in seconds, Tang Tao gasping out in pained pleasure, Yi Wu, holding him within her, grasping his buttocks tightly as he came. Only afterwards she turned her back on him, and when he made to cuddle her, she shook her head.

"Not yet," she whispered. "Not yet."

And so he lay there, conscious of her there beside him once again, unable to sleep, even as her snores filled the room. As once before they had. The luckiest man in the universe, that was what he was. And as he stared up into the darkness, he could smell her scent and hear her breathing and knew that finally he was home. Not provisionally, but for all time. Or, at least, until the Oven Man took them both.

The two of them, like white stones and black. Paired for eternity, as in the blessed *Tao*. And finally he slept, his hand in hers, his soul matched to her soul at last. As it was always meant to be.

THE END

12,900 words