As we stand in rows, a mix of new and old students, Rini Di tells us that we’ll start with a

warm-up and then go through the five basic stances. Horse stance, forward stance, cat stance,

twist stance, and crane stance.

“When will we practice the high kicks?” asks a boy in the front.

“First you must perfect the stances. Having the right stance centers your gravity and

drives your hand and leg motions, giving you power. They’re fundamental to the practice of

Shaolin kung fu. When an experienced practitioner views a performance, they look at the stances

first.”

I take a mental note.

The instructions begin. *Left. Right. Press your thighs. Back straight. Shoulders down.*

*Breathe deeply.*

As I relax down into what I think is the horse stance, Rini Di comes and straightens my

back. “Don’t push your chest inward,” Rini Di shows me. “All power in kung fu comes from the

ground.”

I try to feel the pull of the earth. I embrace gravity, letting it connect with my body.

Somehow, it’s more natural than I could have ever imagined. Something happens.

My body loosens up and lets go. I open up my shoulders, instead of slouching over my breasts in shame. I inhale deeply into my expanded lungs.

I think of when I’ve felt like fighting in the past. How the tension in my body seemed to

swallow me. I wasn’t in control then. But now I feel as light as air. The gravity centers me. The

earth carries me. The day’s anxieties don’t exist. The earth has absorbed them. I feel as though I

can move my body in any direction.

We move to the forward stance. Rini Di shows us how to shift our weight onto the front

leg. We bend the front knee, our back leg straight toward the side like a drawn bow.

By the time we finish the cat stance, the twist, and the crane stance, I am exhausted.

I can feel every muscle ache, every pore breathe. The shame, the guilt, and the fear that

have been embedded in every cell of my body seem to have seeped out of me.

I have always hated my body—my breasts and hips, the parts of me that gave me away. They marked me out for the fair in Ravi Lala’s eyes.

I push my shoulders back and open up my chest without fear. I am calm, though my heartbeat is loud. For the first time, it seems, I notice different parts of my body.

Finally, Rini Di says, “Relax. Remember, kung fu is not just about physical strength. It is

about channeling your energy, or chi, to use your strength effectively. The more you practice, the

more you train your mind and body to work together, the more you will reach the highest stage

of kung fu—a state of complete mindfulness.”

“What does that mean?” asks Sadaf.

“It means your mind and body will connect. They will guide you together. You will choose to listen to both unitedly. If a power is stronger than you, you will become flexible and let

the stronger power spend its energy out on itself rather than on you.”

We nod. I mull over these words.

She leaves us with a final thought. “You cannot be powerful all the time, or you will

break. You cannot be flexible all the time, or you will lose direction. Be like water. Flow. Don’t

crash.”

I bow to Sifu Rini, then in all the four directions of the kwoon.

I will flow, not crash.

“Namaste.”

And then I hear my name. It’s my turn.

I look for Rini Di, sitting near the judges. She gestures with her chin toward the arena,

her thumb up in a gesture of good luck. But I don’t need luck. I’m prepared. Nisha gives me a

nudge and I get up.

The hall is buzzing. There must be two hundred people here, young, and old. It’s a two-

minute walk to the arena, but it feels like two years. I feel that all two hundred pairs of eyes are

on me. I tell myself I’m my mother’s daughter. She hasn’t given in to the superstitious chattering

101of the women in our lane, or the evil Ravi Lala, not even to Baba’s fists, so how can I give in tothis momentary panic? I come from a line of *pehelwans*.

Somebody claps, and then more students join in. They don’t know where I come from.

They don’t know who I am, or perhaps they do. I am a girl in a kung fu uniform about to exhibit

some classy moves. The buzz that I hear is a symphony of hoots and cheers. Of anticipation and

encouragement.

And then I’m standing on the blue mat, soft and slippery underneath my feet, unlike the

hard ground of the school kwoon. I push all thoughts to focus on my body as I begin.

There’s no music, but I have a beat in my head. I pull my feet together, my hands on my

hips. I bow to Rini Di and the judges in all four directions.

I start as taut as a bow, my left foot

pointed straight, my left leg parallel to the earth, my right leg stretched all the way back. My

right-hand punches out while my left forms a fist against my side. My back is straight while my

breasts and hips share my weight with my thighs and knees.

As I hold the pose in front of the judges in perfect balance, I get a sudden flash of

realization—that every part of my body is equally valuable and linked to the other. I don’t feel

ashamed of it anymore because I value every cell and know I will keep it safe.

I finally understand another one of Bruce Lee’s wisdoms:

*You must accept the fact that there is no help but self-help. I cannot tell you how to gain*

*freedom since freedom exists within you.*

The judges lean forward as I hold the pose longer than most advanced competitors.

Then I move to the horse stance, demonstrating the fist thrusts as I hold my body in a low

squat. In the crouch stance, I lean in with one leg bent at the knee, the other stretched out, almost

flat to the ground. I hold both my feet and go even lower.

Every pore of my skin breathes in unison. My body sings and I’m in tune with it. I can’t

see or hear anyone anymore—the judges, the hall, the students, the teachers. My mind is still.

I stand straight and adopt the empty stance, one foot pointed, arms swinging through the

air. I cycle through the various kinds of kicks, ending with the one that’s gotten me into the most

trouble—the side kick.

And then it’s over.

I get off the mat and head to the changing area, feeling as though I may float away. The

applause fades. I return to Planet Earth when I hear a voice and see Rini Di coming toward me.

“You did it!” shouts Rini Di. “You were flawless!”

I’m smiling so hard my cheeks hurt. We hold each other in a tight hug. I repeat to myself

what Rini Di just said. I did it.

….

My voice is shaking less now, and I manage to look at the people in front of me.

“How do people survive when they aren’t allowed to do the work they know and love?

For my family of nomads, it meant asking people for a place to live, and then doing just about

any job they told us we could do. One of these jobs was having sex with people for money.

“These children and women had no choice but to sell their bodies in exchange for a place

to live, for food to eat, and for their husbands to be given work. And though people say that

times have changed, they must not have changed everywhere, because I have been told since I

was a little girl that selling my body was what I had to do to support myself and my family. And

I believed it. Many in my family believed it too.

“Finally, earlier this year, it was my turn to be put up for sale. My family was in a tight

spot, in debt to the wrong man. I grew up in a red-light area, so I knew what it meant, what it

involved. There are no secrets kept from kids where I come from. So, I said no, and we tried to

get around it.

“My mother paid back our loan, but the traffickers came for me anyhow. The first time, I

got away. The second time, they got me, but I was rescued by my brother and teacher.

“When I was stuck in a tiny room, with my traffickers outside the door, I asked myself,

why had they kept coming for me even when they had no claim? No right? And it wasn’t until

that happened that I fully realized that they believed that my body belonged to them, and I knew

for certain that it did not.

“It was kung fu that helped me understand this. Because it is through kung fu that I learned that my body would do what I told it to. That my body listened to me—and only me.” I take a breath.

“There is power in my body. My body connects me to my cousin, my aunt, my grandmother, who were all sold for prostitution. But kung fu also connects my body to my ancestors, who were champion wrestlers. If both these things lived within me, could I choose which course I wanted to take?”

I look up now, realizing that I’ve memorized the final words on the page.

“For most of my life, I thought the answer to that was no. But suddenly, I felt that maybe there was another possibility. I didn’t do it on my own: I needed my family to stand with me, and most importantly, a cheerleader who made me believe that safety could be mine. Rini Di

taught me kung fu and opened the doors of the world to me. And that is how I have come to

stand before you now.”

I pause and there is a moment’s silence. And then the audience bursts into applause. As I

walk away from the podium, all I can think about is how I forgot to thank them at the end of my

speech. I feel like my legs will give way, but I’m held up by the cloud I feel inside me until I

reach my seat.