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THE TANG DYNASTY

THE PROPHECY OF EMPRESS WU



by Dr. Virginia Loh-Hagan

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The Tang Dynasty
The Prophecy of Empress Wu

by

Dr. Virginia Loh-Hagan

Illustrations by *Kailien Singson*

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Characters

Empress Wu	the only female emperor in China's recorded history to rule in her own right; referred to as "Fair Flatterer," "Big Sister," and "Wu Zetian" (Note: She was not given a temple name. Her personal name was Wu Zhao. Her reign name translated to "Holy and Divine Emperor.")
Governor-General Wu Shihou	Wu's father, who rose in the ranks from a merchant to an imperial official
Lady Yang	Wu's mother, who is from a noble line
Yuan Tiangang	famed fortune teller who works for Emperor Taizong
Li Chunfeng	imperial astrologer and fortune-teller who works for Emperor Taizong
Emperor Taizong of Tan	the temple name of the second emperor of the Tang dynasty whose reign name is His Majesty the Zhenguan Emperor and whose personal name is Li Shimin
Crown Prince Gaozong	the son of the emperor, who will inherit the throne

Di Lingyi	a young girl who works in the imperial palace; also known as “Tea Girl”
Mama	Di Lingyi’s mother, who works as an imperial tea picker
Baba	Di Lingyi’s father, who owns a small teahouse in the countryside
Yanhe Kang	the imperial kitchen official, who works in Emperor Taizong’s palace
Chao Yuanfang	the imperial doctor, who personally works for Emperor Taizong
Wang Shen, Wang Xian, and Wang Guo	sisters who live at the imperial palace and who like to gossip

The Naming of Emperors

Tang dynasty emperors were known by a few names. During their rule, they used a reign title, which referred to the period of rule. After death, they were given a long title that described their achievements—this name was too long for common use. In addition, they were given temple names, which were used for ancestral worship. In historical records and after death, the emperors were mainly referred to by their temple names; as such, this is how they are most commonly known. Their personal names, given at birth, were taboo and no longer used after they ascended the throne. For simplicity, emperors in this book are referred to by their temple names, but note that they would not have been called by these names during their lifetimes. In fact, the emperors, while ruling, would have just been known as “the Emperor” or “His Majesty”—or in Wu’s case, “Her Majesty.”

Prologue: The Prophecy

Outside the imperial city of Chang'an, in a rural province west of the Taihang Mountains, a baby was sleeping. Born in the year 624 CE, the baby was the second child of Governor-General Wu Shihou and his second wife, the noble-born Lady Yang.

Wu Shihou, once a timber merchant, had recently been promoted, with new provinces to oversee. A loyal supporter of the Tang dynasty and a gifted leader, he had slowly risen in the ranks. Many people visited him to offer their congratulations. Some wanted to win his favor.

One of the visitors was Yuan Tiangang, a famed fortune teller. "I was on my way to the capital city and heard about your good fortune," he announced upon his arrival. "I wanted to wish you well."

"We are honored to host a local celebrity such as yourself." Wu Shihou gave a polite bow and offered Yuan Tiangang a chair.

Lady Yang, an expert in the art of false modesty as per the custom of the time, also welcomed Yuan Tiangang. "Our home is simple, not like the palaces you are used to. But we humbly share what is ours with you."

timber merchant: someone who sells wood for use as a building material

dynasty: a series of rulers from the same family or group

modesty: the quality of not being too proud or confident

Yuan Tiangang stared a little too long at Lady Yang's face. "So the rumors are true. You are as beautiful as they say." After a short pause, he asked, "Would you permit me to study your face?"

Lady Yang blushed. "I am not worthy of your attention. A famous face reader such as yourself surely has better faces to read. After all, you have read the faces of emperors and empresses. You are far too distinguished to read my simple face."

Yuan Tiangang ignored Lady Yang's flattery. He placed his cold fingers on her chin. He turned her cheek from side to side. He looked at the shape of her nose, the curves of her mouth, and the smoothness of her forehead and cheekbones. Then he announced, "I have read your face. From you, a high-ranking noble shall be born."

Wu Shihou immediately saw an opportunity. He jumped up. "While you are here, could you look at my sons' faces? They were born from my first wife." He brought his boys over to Yuan Tiangang.

Yuan Tiangang's eyes did a quick sweep of each of the boys' faces. He said, "Rest assured, these boys will honor the Wu family name in their own way. They will most likely be local governors, like their father." He looked at Lady Yang. "But it is one of Lady Yang's children who will rise to celestial status."

local governors: officials appointed by the central court to collect taxes and keep order in different regions

At that moment, a cry came from the other room.

Lady Yang excused herself and left the two men. She returned with a baby in her arms. "Forgive me. This little one is waking up from a nap. Could we bother you to read our baby's face?"

In a slightly dismissive tone, Yuan Tiangang said, "Babies are too fussy for me. Besides, it is hard to read the faces of babies, especially when they are asleep."

At that very moment, the baby's eyes opened wide. The baby stared with great intent at Yuan Tiangang.

Surprised, Yuan Tiangang laughed. "The baby seems to understand my words! What a curious little thing! I shall read this baby's face after all."

Yuan Tiangang looked at the oval eyes. He looked at the roundness of the head. He even lifted up the chin, examining the rolls underneath. Finally he said, "I sense powerful male energy. I see the eyes of a dragon. I see the neck of a phoenix."

Lady Yang smiled with pride. "Just like Fuxi, the first male ancestor who brought us civilization and created mankind. The Most Benevolent God. The Great Bright One."

"Yes, this child is certainly destined for greatness and

brightness,” confirmed Yuan Tiangang as he gathered his things. “I have overstayed my welcome. I must hurry along. Our Most Supreme Emperor is expecting me.”

The Wu family said farewell to Yuan Tiangang. Even the baby cooed.

When he left, Wu Shihou said, “Our little Wu here is destined for big things.”

Lady Yang turned to him and said, “Dear Husband, let us not get our hopes up. I did not want to embarrass Yuan Tiangang by correcting him. Our baby is just a girl.”

“Just a girl?” Wu Shihou scoffed. “Nonsense. Our girl is good fortune. Since she was born, a well of water that had been dry for years is no longer. Water flows abundantly from it. Even the locals sing a song about it.”

An auspicious omen, indeed.

Almost two decades later in the imperial palace, Li Chunfeng, the imperial astrologer, looked up at the night sky. He observed the position of the stars.

Beside Li Chunfeng stood Emperor Taizong, or His Majesty the Zhenguan Emperor. They were in the palace’s open-air observatory, one that the Emperor had built for the specific purpose of having his fortune read.

imperial astrologer: a high-ranking member of the court who studied the stars and advised the emperor based on their movements

The Emperor followed Li Chunfeng's eyes. With his face turned upward, the Emperor impatiently asked, "Well, what do you see? I demand to know!"

After a moment of reflection, Li Chunfeng announced, "Those stars form the *wu* character. Beware of Wu Wang, the Warrior King."

The smoke from the burning incense on one of the Tang dynasty's ancestral altars filled the Emperor's nose. Gray smoke clouds floated in front of his eyes. When the smoke cleared, he pointed at the sky and then looked at Li Chunfeng. "It is a crime to keep information from the emperor. There is more. What do those three stars in a row mean?"

Li Chunfeng hesitated, then said, "The Tang dynasty will only last three generations."

The Emperor shook his head. "Impossible. My dynasty is strong. I wrestled it from my father and brothers. I have many sons. I have grandsons on the way. My bloodline is secure."

He continued, "My empire is also strong. Trade is good. The government is stable. My people have nothing to complain about."

"Of course, Mighty Emperor." Li Chunfeng clasped his hands together and kneeled before him. "I am but

ancestral altars: raised structures on which items such as photos, food, or incense are placed to honor one's ancestors

empire: a large territory or group of territories ruled by a single person

a humble servant. Perhaps my interpretation skills are aging as I am.”

The Emperor motioned for Li Chunfeng to rise. He searched his face once more. “What else do you see?”

Li Chunfeng, with careful attention to his words, said, “The Tang dynasty will fall at her feet.”

“*Her feet?* This Wu Wang is a woman?” The Emperor laughed so hard he had a coughing fit.

Li Chunfeng hit his royal back to relieve whatever was caught in his throat.

The Emperor recovered and waved Li Chunfeng’s arm away. Then he shouted, “How can that be? Women cannot rule. That confirms your skills are weakening.”

Li Chunfeng forced a chuckle. “Honorable Emperor, you are right. That is the only explanation. Perhaps I misread the stars.”

The Emperor stared at the wrinkles lining Li Chunfeng’s eyes and lips. “Yes, perhaps your age is affecting your abilities,” he said, ignoring the fact that he had the same creases on his own face. “We have known each other for a long time, and you have served me faithfully. Perhaps it is time for me to appoint a younger imperial astrologer.”

Li Chunfeng nodded. “You are right. Perhaps it is time.”

Li Chunfeng welcomed the opportunity to retire. His emperor was getting more suspicious and less reasonable. Their long history was the only thing keeping him at court, but more and more, he felt his days were numbered.

The Emperor demanded, “Are you keeping anything else from me?”

Li Chunfeng swallowed the words caught in his own throat. Out of fear, he said, “No, that is all.”

“Good. Let us never speak of this again. As you know, the punishment for false prophecies is life imprisonment. And the punishment for treason is death.” The Emperor lowered his voice. “No one must hear of this. No one must question my dynasty. I have spoken.”

Li Chunfeng blurted, “Of course. I will erase the words from my mouth and from my mind. I am sure I have misspoken.”

The Emperor nodded. But he couldn’t deny that his imperial astrologer was the best in the empire and that all Li Chunfeng’s other predictions had come true. *But a woman ruler?* he thought. *That will never happen in China.*

The Emperor dismissed the thought from his mind, albeit not as quickly as he dismissed Li Chunfeng. “You may go. I suggest you lock yourself up in the imperial

court: a ruler’s residence and/or the members of their household, including family, friends, advisers, and other officials

library and study the charts. It sounds like you need to reeducate yourself.”

“As always, you are so understanding and wise, All-Knowing Emperor. Forgive me for my deficiencies. I shall remedy them right away.” Li Chunfeng bowed and walked away as fast as he could. He didn’t want to risk saying anything else. After all, he was keeping something back from the Emperor—he sensed that this Wu Wang was not only real but close. Very close.

The next morning, Li Chunfeng looked up into the sky. He shielded his eyes from the sun. It was still there—a great and bright star that dared to outshine the sun.

Venus had been shining bright for several nights and even during the day.

Li Chenfeng said out loud to no one, “Quite an omen, indeed.”

Unbeknownst to anyone, a woman named Wu was already in the imperial palace.

1

Kitchen Gossip

“**D**i Lingyi!” I heard Mama calling my name. As I had done many times in the past, I pretended not to hear. Today, it wasn’t hard to pretend. The imperial palace was buzzing with noise and news. The kitchen staff were running around cleaning up after the imperial supper. In addition to the usual clanging of pots and pans being washed and dried, there was a great deal of chatter about the Emperor’s terrible mood.

“I heard he fired an imperial nurse for saying he was sick,” exclaimed a dishwasher.

“I heard he threw an urn at the imperial astrologer’s head for suggesting he retire,” added a water boy.

“I heard he was ranting and raving about the end of his dynasty,” whispered a kitchen assistant, so low that only those paying attention (like me) could hear. “Can he really be losing his mind?”

Suddenly, familiar fingers pinched my ear. “Ow!”

Mama was one of the imperial tea pickers. She was

known for her ability to select the best leaves for tea. Her strong fingers dragged me back toward the imperial tearoom in the back of the kitchen. Behind the imperial tearoom was the cot we shared in a room with several other tea pickers.

“Di Lingyi, must you be a little imp all the time?” Mama scolded. “You must not be idle. Everyone has a job to do. And your job right now is to fetch me some fresh ginseng.”

“I really do not feel like digging around for ginseng root tonight,” I whined.

Mama was surprised. “You usually love being outside.”

That was true. I loved being in nature. I loved hunting for plants. I was getting quite good at recognizing different types of plants based on their leaf shape, size, and growth patterns. I also loved how Mama taught me about all the things that plants can do. But tonight, I would rather hunt for palace gossip.

I pleaded, “It is almost dark, and there is a chill in the air. I promise I will go early in the morning.”

“You need to go now,” Mama insisted.

“You told me ginseng helps calm nerves. Why do you need ginseng at this moment?”

ginseng: an herb whose roots are said to have various health benefits

Mama lowered her voice, which was unnecessary because the kitchen was still filled with people shouting and banging pots. She whispered, "It is not for me. It is for the Great Emperor."

"Is he sick? Is he dying?" I asked.

Mama pinched my lips with her fingers. "Never say that aloud again. It is treason. You cannot talk about the Emperor dying. Emperors live forever through their dynasty. As far as anyone knows, His Majesty is as strong as an ox and will live another hundred years." She looked around to see if anyone was listening, then asked, "Where did you hear this?"

I pushed away Mama's fingers. "I heard the kitchen staff talking about it right before you found me. I also heard servants of Chao Yuanfang, the imperial doctor, talking about it the other day."

"Everyone talks too much here. Gossiping is dangerous." Mama shook her head. Then she leaned into my ear and whispered, "Our beloved emperor is suffering. When his mind and body are troubled, that means trouble for all in the palace. Ginseng tea will boost his energy, relieve stress, and help him live longer. But you must keep it quiet. Just imagine you are part of a secret adventure."

I smiled. "Yes, I love secret adventures! I also want to help the Emperor."

Mama patted my head. “Good. This is an important opportunity for us. The Emperor knows of my skills making special tea brews. Let us not disappoint him. Perhaps one day, I can rise to help the tea master.”

“Maybe you could *be* the tea master one day!”

Mama chuckled. “Only men can have that honor. The highest I can aspire to be is one of his staff.”

“But that is not fair. Everyone knows you pick the best tea leaves and make the best tea.”

Mama rubbed my cheek. “Dear girl. Life is unfair. As women, it is not our fate to lead. Besides, I do not want to be the imperial tea master. I want to do my duty, make more money, and then leave the palace. My greatest wish is to return to your Baba and our teahouse.”

Before Mama and I came to the imperial palace two years ago, we lived in our own small house with Baba in a village by the Taihung Mountains. My family ran a small teahouse by the main road. We were known for making superior green tea. One of the Emperor’s officials had stopped by, enjoyed our tea, and then demanded Mama come work at the imperial palace. She didn’t have much choice in the matter. Her only request was to bring me along as her apprentice.

apprentice: someone who learns a trade by working for a person skilled in that trade



Except I didn't want to be an apprentice for the tea business.

Mama and Baba explained I would have more opportunities here. They had heard women enjoyed more freedoms in the Tang dynasty court. But so far, we hadn't experienced many freedoms in this hierarchal system. Mama didn't complain because Baba needed the money she earned from the palace. Baba stayed behind to run the family teahouse. Even though he missed us, he knew the prestige of having a royal connection was good for business.

hierarchal system: a social structure in which people are ranked based on how important they are, with higher ranks having power over lower ranks

prestige: importance in the eyes of other people

Mama's attention returned to the task at hand. She pointed a finger at the door. "No more stalling. Go to the imperial forest and get me some ginseng. Do not delay. The Emperor wants this tea before he goes to bed." She added, "And when you get back, we need to talk about your eavesdropping. Nothing good comes from gossiping."

"I do not gossip. I only listen," I defended myself. "What is the harm in listening? Besides, you are the only person I talk to."

The only other young people among the thousands residing here were either imperial servants or the imperial children. None of them would stoop low enough to pay me any attention. So I made friends with the shadows and dark corners of the palace. I stayed out of sight. I listened and learned.

As I headed out, Mama yelled after me, "Remember, harvest the roots of mature plants with red berries! And do not climb up the mountain. Stay at the bottom. You are not a mountain monkey!"

I admired the mountain monkeys, the tea pickers who did the most dangerous jobs. They climbed steep cliffs, high summits, and rocky ledges. Mama always made me

stalling: delaying on purpose

eavesdropping: secretly listening to something private

stay in the safer parts of mountain forests when picking tea. She never let me go with her when she went to the dangerous locations. Mountain monkeys were usually men, but there were a few women, like Mama, who were also called to do this work. I admired how Mama worked alongside the men and how, from a distance, you couldn't tell the men from the women.

I ran out as fast as I could so that I could return just as quickly. A lot could happen in the time I would be away, and I didn't want to miss anything!

2

The Emperor's Tea

In the imperial kitchen, I watched Mama prepare the ginseng tea. In my head, I took note of the ratio of ginseng to water, the amount of steeping time, and more. Mama said that preparation details mattered. Too much or too little could affect the quality.

Finally, Mama placed the pot of tea and a teacup on a tea cart. Yanhe Kang, the imperial kitchen official, inspected it. "Where is that steward boy?" he asked. "I need him to deliver this tea to the Emperor."

"He ran off on an errand," Mama said. "But my daughter can help. She is a fast learner and is very reliable. And we need to get this tea to the Emperor right away. It is perfectly brewed right now."

Yanhe Kang eyed me by Mama's side. Without any other options, he relented. "You, Tea Girl, take this up to the Emperor's private quarters. Give it to no one else except the Fair Flatterer, His Majesty's personal secretary."

ratio: the relationship in size or amount between two things

steeping time: how long a solid substance, such as herbs or tea leaves, should be soaked in water to extract the flavor from it

relented: gave in

The Fair Flatterer? I had heard her name whispered in the palace halls. She was the topic of much gossip. Was I going to get a chance to actually meet her?

Yanhe Kang pushed the tea cart and its contents in my direction. “Stop daydreaming. Hurry along. That tea should still be hot when you give it to her.”

I made my way through the palace. As I entered the wing of the Emperor’s private quarters, I passed two imperial ministers whispering to each other. It was hard to hide behind the tea cart and the squeak of its wheels, but the men were unconcerned by the presence of a lowly servant girl. They kept whispering even as I passed by—and I, of course, listened, whispers being my specialty.

“It is a shame how much power the Emperor gives to that woman. How dare she tell us what to do! We are her superiors in every way,” said the tall one.

“Surely His Majesty is bewitched,” said the short one. “It is not natural. I am reminded of the proverb ‘Men plow and women weave.’ That woman does not know her place.”

imperial ministers: high-ranking officials appointed by the emperor to oversee certain areas of government

bewitched: influenced or controlled by magic

proverb: a popular saying that expresses wisdom or common beliefs

I did not hear if the other responded, for they were now behind me, and I was in front of the Emperor's door.

Before I had time to decide how to enter, a beautiful young woman appeared in the doorway. She looked down the hall and pointed a slender finger at the two men. She barked at them, "Why are you two still here? You are like fleas on a dog. Scamper along. I do not want to see you again until you have news worthy of my ears."

I had never heard a woman speak to men like that before, or seen men obey a woman's command.

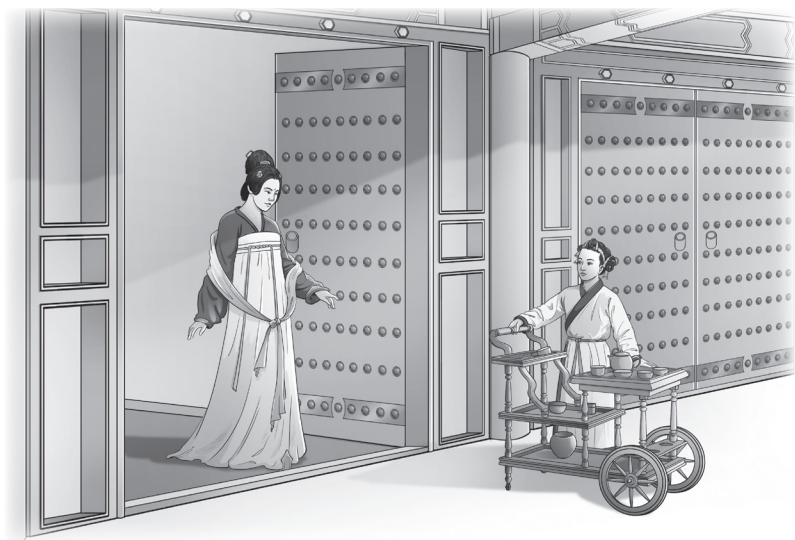
I moved forward an inch or two. The squeaking of the cart's wheels got the woman's attention. She looked at me. She scanned me up and down. "Is that the Emperor's ginseng tea? Give it to me."

"Are you the Fair Flatterer?" I asked.

She offered no response and reached out for the tray. I instinctively pulled back the tea cart. "I was told to only give it to the Fair Flatterer."

"Hmm. You are brave. You also do what you are told. I like that." She smiled, or perhaps sneered. It was hard to tell. She continued, "There is no time to waste. I am whom you seek."

sneered: smiled or laughed in a way that showed dislike or disrespect



She motioned for me to follow her. As I edged through the doorway, my eyes were drawn to the piles of bound scrolls on a table, on a large bed, and even on the floor. I had never seen so many scrolls in one room.

Eventually my eyes found a frail man in a large bed. Surely that old, weak man could not be the all-powerful and feared Emperor?

Fair Flatterer followed my line of sight. She ordered, “I am commanding you to not say a word about anything you see or hear tonight. Our Most Honorable Emperor is simply tired. He has had a long day of ruling our great empire. After drinking this tea, he shall be well in the morning. You understand?”

scrolls: rolled-up pieces of paper used to write or draw on

“I understand.” I nodded and averted my eyes away from the Emperor.

Chao Yuanfang, the imperial doctor, was also in the room. He reached in his pocket and pulled out silver chopsticks. “We should test the tea for poison first,” he said, looking directly at me. It was a common belief that poison would corrode silver.

“Nonsense.” She shooed the silver chopsticks away. “The only real way to know if something is poisonous is if someone dies from it.”

Chao Yuanfang opened his mouth in shock. “Fair Flatterer, you cannot speak about death so callously!”

“I believe in science and facts. And as the imperial doctor, so should you.” Then she looked at me and commanded, “Pour the tea.”

As I poured, Fair Flatterer took out a vial from her pocket and dripped a thick yellow liquid into the teacup.

Chao Yuanfang gasped. “Fair Flatterer, I must protest!”

“You may protest all you wish. After all these years as his personal secretary, I know what is best for our beloved emperor.”

averted: turned away

corrode: eat away at

callously: feeling or showing no sympathy

vial: a small, sealed container, usually made of glass

She brought the cup to the Emperor's lips, and he drank. Almost immediately, he seemed to perk up a little.

"Give him another cup," ordered Chao Yuanfang. "The tea seems to be helping him."

I remembered what Mama had taught me. I put my hand over the teapot. "This tea has been carefully prepared for its medicinal purpose. Too much ginseng at one time can cause a stomachache. We should wait and observe and then give more later if he needs it."

Chao Yuanfang began to protest, but Fair Flatterer raised a hand. "The tea girl is right, Chao Yuanfang. Your job is to go and observe the Emperor."

He grumbled and scowled at me but went to the bedside of the ailing emperor.

Fair Flatterer turned and motioned for me to follow her toward the door. She spoke so only I could hear. "You are smart, and you have fortitude. What is your name, and what do you do here?"

"My name is Di Lingyi. I am just the daughter of an imperial tea picker."

perk up: become more lively
medicinal purpose: intended health benefit
fortitude: strength of mind

"It sounds like you are also a good student," said Fair Flatterer.

"Student?" I stammered. "I do not go to school. I help my mother in the kitchen and fields."

"The best teacher is life, and it appears you are paying attention. I was the daughter of a timber merchant. That is how I learned to run a business. So, we have something in common. I see a bit of me in you."

I blushed. "I am flattered."

Fair Flatterer became serious. She looked me straight in the eyes and said, "To be clear, you must not tell anyone about what happened tonight. Everything you saw and heard tonight is a secret. Knowing when to listen and when to speak is a very useful skill in the imperial palace."

I was used to hearing secrets, but I had never been part of a secret.

Fair Flatterer dismissed me with a wave of her hand. A moment later, I was in the hallway. I stood there stunned, clutching the tea cart, unsure of what had just happened.

3

Family Business

Mama was still awake when I returned with the tea cart.

“Mama, you should go to bed,” I said as I cleaned the teapot and cups. “You must be tired, and you have to get up early.”

Mama was plucking tea leaves from their stems. “There is no time to waste. We do not want these fresh leaves to rot before we dry them.”

“Why not?” I asked, remembering what Fair Flatterer had said about being a student of life. It made me curious to learn more.

“This is how we keep the leaves from losing their flavors and medicinal powers,” replied Mama. “The more care we take in preparing the leaves, the better the tea.”

I finished drying and putting away the tea cart supplies, then sat next to Mama and picked up a tea plant. I plucked leaves off the stem. As I placed the stem in a basket, I asked, “Why do you keep the stems? I saw the imperial cook throw away stems the other day.”

“That is because the imperial cook does not know any better.” Mama took the stem from the basket and held it up to the candlelight. “The imperial family drinks the nutrients from the young tea leaves, which are the most flavorful and aromatic. But the stem, although not as pretty as its leaves, also has nutrients. Tea stems make food from the soil and sun and carry it to the leaves. Leaves and flowers could not survive without stems. In some ways, the stems are more important. Older, thicker stems even taste better than the leaves.”

I picked up another stem and played with it, twirling it between my fingers. “And as you like to say, we should not waste anything we can use.”

“That is right. For poor farmers, using stems makes the harvest last longer.” Mama smiled, lost in her memories. “You may be too young to remember, but Baba and I often drank tea made from stems. In fact, we preferred its milder, nuttier taste.”

“I remember you and Baba drinking it before going to bed. You still do, though not during the day. Why is that?” Talking about Baba made me homesick. It’d been years since we last saw him.

nutrients: substances that help people grow and stay healthy
aromatic: having a noticeable, usually pleasant smell

“That is very observant of you. Tea leaves have an energizing property. The stem has less of this property, so I am still able to sleep well after I drink it.” Mama brushed a hair away from my eyes. “You do not usually ask me so many questions. Is there a reason for your interest?”

“I like knowing things,” I said. “I like learning. I do not want to just do things anymore. I want to understand why.”

Mama smiled. “It is good that you are interested in learning about our family business. You must know all these things if you are to rise above me. Maybe one day you can even be the chief imperial tea picker.”

“Mama?” I hesitated for a moment and then blurted out, “What if I do not want to be a tea picker? What if I do not want to work in the tea business?”

Mama sighed. “In this world, we are born into our positions. You were born a girl, and you were born into a family of tea pickers. Women do not have many choices, and they certainly do not have much power. We must do the best we can with the life we are given.”

“Tonight, I met Fair Flatterer. She seems to have a lot of power.”

energizing property: a special feature that makes people feel more awake and lively

Mama looked startled. "Did you actually speak to the Fair Flatterer?"

"Yes, but only briefly." I wanted to tell Mama about the sick emperor and mysterious vial. But I remembered what Fair Flatterer had said about not talking, so I pursed my lips.

Mama placed her hands over mine. "Di Lingyi, you need to be careful. The woman called Fair Flatterer is not like other women. There are many rumors about her."

I leaned in. I wanted to learn more. "What kind of rumors?"

Mama shook her head. "I know you like listening to gossip, but you must never spread it. Some gossip is dangerous. If you say the wrong thing to the wrong person, you could be in trouble. Keeping secrets is more powerful than telling them. Can you remember that?"

I nodded. "I know when to listen and when to speak," I assured Mama.

Mama rose from the table where she had been working and yawned. "You are right. I should go to bed. Please finish sorting the rest of the leaves for me. As you know, the best time to pick tea leaves is the few hours before sunrise. You can come with me in the morning if you would like."

“I would like that very much. Goodnight, Mama.” I pushed the rest of the stems into a pile on the table. During my many outdoor adventures, I had spent hours observing plants. I had noticed how stems bend toward the sun and how they support leaves and flowers. Stems are mighty yet overlooked. I felt like I had a lot in common with stems.

4

Imperial Library

A few days later, Yanhe Kang walked into the imperial tearoom just as Mama and I returned from an early morning of tea picking in the imperial forest.

“Tea Girl, since you did such a good job with your tea delivery the other night, I have a new job for you.” Yanhe Kang beckoned to me. “The Emperor and his personal secretary have increased the number of imperial civil service exams we are hosting at the palace this year for all those who wish to be government officials. The Emperor is encouraging more than just the children of nobility to apply. This means more and more people from around the country are coming in every day.”

I felt my heart flutter. “Does this mean I can apply too?”

Yanhe Kang laughed. “No, Tea Girl, you will be serving them tea. Can you even read?”

beckoned: called to come closer with a hand gesture or a nod

civil service exams: tests that people must pass to get government jobs

nobility: a privileged social class

My heart sank. “No, but I would love to learn. I am a fast learner.”

Yanhe Kang stared at me. He hesitated before he spoke again. Then he said, “The world may be slowly opening up, but some things will never change. Much of what happens to us—our fate, in fact—is decided at birth. You are just a child, so I do not fault you for thinking you have the power to change your fate. When I was a child like you, I too dreamed. I dreamed of being an imperial scholar. But my father was the imperial kitchen official, so that was always to be my fate. Your fate is to be a great tea picker, like your mother . . . unless you think you are somehow better than the rest of us?”

Before I could open my mouth, Mama answered for me. “Serving tea is an important and noble job. Di Lingyi is learning a lot. She is grateful for this opportunity. I know the men spend long hours over many days to complete their exams. They need tea to sustain them. We are honored to serve them.”

“Very well then.” Yanhe Kang handed me a map of rooms and hallways. “In each of these rooms, there is one man. You are to clean their rooms and serve them tea. Do not disturb them in any way. I assume you can be quick and quiet.”

imperial scholar: a very well-educated person who passed the highest level of civil service exams and earned a top government position

I nodded.

“Then off you go,” he said, and he left the room.

I helped Mama prepare the tea.

“You are quieter than usual,” Mama observed.

I sighed. “I love helping you with the tea, but I want a bigger life.” I took a deep breath. “But sometimes it feels like I am stuck. You and Yanhe Kang always talk about fate.”

Mama’s voice softened. “It is true. We are controlled by fate. But fortune can also play a role. You can always find ways to make the most of every situation. You are blessed with the skill of listening and learning. Think of your task today as another new adventure.”

I smiled. “You know me and adventures!” I decided to take Mama’s advice. I rolled off with the tea cart to explore yet another unfamiliar part of the imperial palace.

I discovered that each exam room was bare except for a desk and chair. Only test booklets, writing utensils, and tea were allowed in the rooms.

I quietly opened and closed each door, tiptoeing carefully so as not to make a sound. I delivered and refilled teacups all morning. The men spent the entire morning in their rooms taking the tests. These tests would last for weeks.

fortune: luck

As I served tea, I stole glances at the scrolls the men wrote on. I admired the beautiful characters on the paper. I didn't know what they meant, but I knew they carried knowledge. Each stroke was a secret I longed to decipher.

I felt jealous of these young men. How I wished I could take one of their places.

One afternoon, I was wheeling my tea cart along when I noticed one of the test takers rushing off in the opposite direction of the testing area. *Strange*, I thought. Test takers were not often permitted to leave the testing rooms.

He dashed up to a group of men who were huddled not far from where I stood. These men looked like imperial scholars. They had ink-stained fingers, brushes in their pockets, and scrolls tucked under their arms. When they noticed the out-of-breath test taker, one of the men said to him curtly, "You're late. We have a new assignment. Fair Flatterer wants us to research all the important women in China. She said that 'the Emperor' wants to compile a book of biographies about women. But everyone knows she is making all the decisions now, not the Emperor. She just uses his name. That woman is unbearable."

decipher: figure out the meaning of

compile: collect existing material in a new form



The men scurried off in another direction. The young, winded test taker followed on their heels.

I wanted to know more. I tucked my tea cart in a corner to be retrieved later. Sticking to the shadows, I followed the men. I watched as they entered the most magnificent building I had ever seen. I ran to a dark corner of the building and found a window to peek through. Thousands of scrolls lined the walls and shelves. Hundreds of men were hunched over desks with brushes in hand. I watched and mimicked in the air how they made strokes with upward- and downward-sweeping motions.

mimicked: imitated closely

“What are you doing here?”

I jumped at the sound of the voice. I turned and saw the test taker I had initially been following. “You are the girl who serves us tea,” he said to me.

“Yes, I am,” I replied quickly. I decided honesty would be the best policy. “I noticed you talking to the imperial scholars. I was curious, so I followed you here. I couldn’t help wondering what you were doing.”

“You *are* curious. Well, my father is an imperial scholar. I am taking the test so that I can work here, just like him. For now, I am his apprentice. Although most days, it feels like I am his servant.”

“What types of things do you have to do?” I asked.

“I clean his brushes. I get his paper. I serve him tea. Today, I am delivering copies of his latest work. You can look if you like.” The test taker let me glance at some of the scrolls he had tucked under his arm. “Listen, it is not safe for you here,” he said lowering his voice. “You are a girl. You must return to your part of the palace immediately before anyone important sees you.”

Ignoring him, I asked, “Where are we? What is this place?”

“This is the imperial library, the Department of Secret Writings. It houses all the Tang dynasty’s official documents, historical records, calendars, histories, and more.”

My eyes were taking in all the scrolls and all the men. “What are those men doing?”

“They’re imperial scribes. They are responsible for keeping all of our records and preserving history.” Beaming with pride, he added, “If I pass my exams, I’ll be able to work in there one day. I will start as a scribe and then become a scholar, like my father.”

“Maybe I can be an imperial scholar too.”

The test taker hesitated, then whispered, “Be careful what you say and who you say it to, Tea Girl. This is a dangerous time for women to be too bold. Many people, including my father, are unhappy with the state of things here. They think that the Emperor’s personal secretary has too much power. She is very unpopular. There are many rumors—” He stopped short as a group of imperial scribes passed nearby. “Never mind. I have said too much and am already late.”

He hurried off, dropping a couple of bound scrolls on the floor in his haste. I quickly picked them up and hugged them gently to my heart. They were the most precious things I had ever held.

He was right; I should return to the imperial tearoom. I knew I couldn’t bring the scrolls back with me, but I couldn’t bring myself to leave them behind. As I made my way back, I stopped at one of my hiding places.

scribes: people who copy documents by hand

Since arriving at the imperial palace, I had found at least three exemplary hiding places, away from prying eyes, and especially away from Mama, who always seemed to have a new chore for me whenever I was in her sight.

With my newfound treasures safely secured, I rushed back to retrieve the tea cart and return to the kitchen, where Mama was surely waiting for me.

5

Hiding Spot

My best hiding spot was in a small forgotten garden located far away from the center of court life. I had discovered it one day when I was foraging for mushrooms. It was a small clearing fenced in by tall trees and overgrown bushes. In the clearing was a small stone bench beneath a partially constructed pagoda. Over several weeks of foraging for mushrooms in the area, I had never seen a single person there. I had also observed that the tall trees covered the line of sight from the palace guard towers. I realized it must be somewhat of a palace secret. It then became my secret.

Although my forgotten garden was not far from the path to the imperial pond, the overgrown bushes discouraged anyone from accidentally or intentionally wandering in. It was a prime spot for eavesdropping since people often shared secrets on their strolls to the imperial pond. I heard the most exciting gossip while in my forgotten garden.

pagoda: a multistory tower with a curving roof on each level
foraging: searching in various places

This was where I had hidden the scrolls.

For the rest of the day, I felt like the mythical Pixiu being summoned to its gold. In this case, the gold was the scrolls. As soon as I finished my chores, I ran back to my forgotten garden.

Hidden away, I sat and carefully caressed the pages before me. I traced each stroke with my finger and imagined what each written character meant.

“Hello?” A familiar female voice startled me.

I looked up to see Fair Flatterer approaching me. I quickly rose, dropping my scrolls to the floor. I stuttered, “Fair Flatterer! Forgive me. I thought I was the only one who knew about this place.”

Fair Flatterer laughed. “It seems you and I share yet another secret. This, too, was my hiding spot. I used to come here often when I first arrived at the palace. I was very homesick and found myself needing to get away from the palace intrigues. I had not thought about it in years. But today, I just needed to get away. There has been so much useless talk at court these days.”

As if summoned, chatter drifted from a pathway on the other side of the overgrown bushes. Fair Flatterer placed her finger on her lips, signaling for us to be quiet.

intrigues: secret schemes

“Fair Flatterer is getting older,” said a woman’s voice. “She should be a mother by now. She should not be involving herself in politics.”

I recognized the voice. It belonged to Wang Shen, who was only a few years older than me. She was always with her two younger sisters, Wang Xian and Wang Guo. The Wang sisters were pretty and well liked among the court. But according to their servants, who were always gossiping in the laundry room, the Wang sisters were not kind. They would often come down to the kitchen or tearoom with demands and complaints.

“She is still beautiful though,” I heard Wan Xian reply.

“That is because she is Lady Yang’s daughter,” chimed in Wang Guo. “Lady Yang is from a noble family. She is related to the founder of the Sui dynasty, the man who reunified China. She has some royal blood.”

“No one knows much about her father though,” Wang Shen said. “I heard he is from a lowly background. In fact, I heard he was a merchant.”

“A merchant!” exclaimed Wang Xian. “No aristocrat would ever stoop so low as to work in the business of trade.”

reunified: brought together again

"I am shocked she was ever invited to the imperial palace with such a background," said Wang Guo.

The Wang sisters' voices started to fade as they walked away. My jaw dropped. I blushed. "Fair Flatterer, that was unkind. Those Wang sisters are nothing but trouble."

Fair Flatterer shook her head. "I have heard worse. As women, we are expected to act a certain way. And when we step out of line, people lash out. This is the price I pay for pushing boundaries. Most days, I am used to it, but sometimes it stings."

"You seem so strong and powerful. It is hard to imagine you caring what others say or think," I said. "People listen to you. I wish I had that power."

"Power is lonely. It is difficult being a woman in the Tang dynasty. My whole life has been a battle. I am far from home. I do not have many friends. I cannot trust anyone. I would love to have just one person here whom I can trust. You are fortunate to have your mother."

"I understand. I am glad to have Mama, but she is my *only* friend here. I am lonely too."

Fair Flatterer smiled. She reached for my hand and squeezed it in thanks. Then she bent to pick up the scrolls that had fallen on the floor. "I see you like poetry."

“Poetry?” I asked, puzzled.

“Yes, on these scrolls. I also love poetry.”

Unsure of what to say, since I had no idea what poetry was, I asked, “Why do you like poetry?”

“Poetry is truth. As a little girl, I annoyed my parents with my incessant questions. My parents said all answers could be found in great writings. My father gave me true stories about history and heroes and the Confucius classics. My mother introduced me to Buddhism and poetry. She told me, ‘For the answers you cannot find, look to poetry, as poetry gives us the most honest answers.’”

I still wasn’t sure how to respond.

She handed the scrolls back to me. “Would you read me one of these poems? I would love to hear one. As the Emperor’s personal secretary, all I seem to be reading these days are reports and records. I long to hear some beautiful poetry.”

My cheeks turned red. “I cannot.”

Fair Flatterer was taken aback. “Are you defying me?”

incessant: never-ending

Buddhism: a religion based on the teachings of a man from India named Siddhartha Gautama, who came to be known as the Buddha



I stammered, “Oh no! I would never! I am ashamed to admit that I do not know how to read. Mama says learning to read is not a necessary skill for someone in my position. But I love the way the characters look.”

Fair Flatterer nodded, understanding. “I was lucky. My father believed in girls’ education. He taught me to read early. From the moment I started reading, I have not been able to stop. All of the books I have here in the palace were gifts from my father. They are my most treasured items.

She continued as if she were losing herself in her memories, as if I were not there.

“My mother scolded me for spending too much time reading. She wanted me to practice my sewing or play the flute. But I preferred reading or riding with my father. I miss my family so much. It has been years since I saw any of them.”

Fair Flatterer stopped talking. She seemed deep in her thoughts. Under her breath, barely audible, she mumbled, “When I am truly in charge, I will bring them to the palace to live with me.”

After a moment, Fair Flatterer composed herself and looked at me. “You can never repeat anything you hear me say.”

“You do not need to worry. You can trust me. I would never break your confidence.”

“I believe you.” She smiled at me. “I have an idea. Everyone should know how to read. I will teach you. This will also give me a chance to read more than just government papers.”

My heart pounded inside my chest. “That is very kind of you. But Mama will never allow it. She would be mortified that I am even speaking to someone of your rank.”

“We will just have to come up with a plan.” She paused, then said, “I will tell your mother I want you to serve me afternoon tea. In fact, I shall employ you as my companion.”

I pushed back. “You are so important. I would feel like such a burden in taking so much of your time.”

“Nonsense,” Fair Flatterer said. “In some ways, you will be doing me a favor. I remember how much I enjoyed teaching my younger sister how to read. It will be nice to be able to teach again. Besides, I think we both could use a friend in this palace. Is that not so?”

mortified: extremely embarrassed or ashamed

I nodded. "But how will I ever repay you?"

"I am sure you will find a way. But for now, this can be our little secret."

Another secret.

6

Reading Lesson

The next day, I wheeled my tea cart to Fair Flatterer's chambers, which were in the same wing as the Emperor's. I had asked Mama to brew her best green tea. I served Fair Flatterer a cup.

She wafted the steam toward her so that the tea's aromas filled her nostrils. "This smells delicious. But you know what will make it taste even better?" She brought out the vial and poured in a few drops of the same thick, yellow goo she had put in the Emperor's tea.

I gasped, remembering Chao Yuanfang's reaction. "What is that?"

"Do you think it is poison? I have heard the silly palace rumors about me poisoning everyone." She laughed and took a sip from her cup. "Trust me. Try some."

She poured a few drops in my teacup. "This is called honey. Bees make it. It is pleasantly sweet. It also has many other benefits. I have been reading about it."

“I love bees! They land on tea plants to eat the nectar and pollen, which sticks to their bodies. Then they move between the tea plants, which helps the tea plants grow.”

“So tea is not the only thing you know.” Fair Flatterer looked impressed. “How did you learn about bees?”

“I have spent hours watching them,” I said with pride. “I’ve been learning a lot from my mother and from observing nature.”

“I learned about bees from books. I read some farmers’ reports about beekeeping,” Fair Flatterer said. “I would like to add beekeeping to our grounds. The imperial palace could harvest the honey and sell it. It is one of many ideas I have for making China more powerful.

“I am still researching it,” she continued. “And of course I have to convince the Emperor of its merits and find a way to have him think it was his idea.”

I didn’t understand. “Why does he need to think it is his idea?”

“People have a hard time taking ideas from a woman.” Fair Flatterer chuckled. “Of course, unbeknownst to him, for the past month, I have been adding honey to

nectar: a sweet liquid produced by plants that bees use to make honey

pollen: a fine powder that plants produce to help them create seeds

unbeknownst: without someone’s knowledge

his drinks to sweeten the taste. He is so picky these days. Hardly anything tastes good to him, but he does seem to like the honey.”

She pointed to my teacup. “Try it.”

I took a sip. It was delightful: sweet, with floral notes. I savored this moment—my first taste of honey and my first reading lesson.

“You are a fast learner,” Fair Flatterer remarked as we finished the lesson. “In no time, you will have read through many of the great works in my chambers. We will have to pay a visit to the imperial library soon.”

“You are able to get into the imperial library?” I asked in awe. “But women are not allowed outside of the inner court. They are forbidden in the library and government offices.”

“Yes, most women are. But I am the Emperor’s personal secretary. I must have access to all areas if I am to do my job well,” she explained.

She paused before continuing, “But the question is not how I am able to get into the library but how you were able to get in. I know the poetry scrolls belong to the imperial library. How did you get them?”

I blushed. “Should I return them? I feel bad for keeping them. But I did not steal them. I found them.”

Fair Flatterer shook her head. “Those are copies. We have hundreds of imperial scribes copying texts all day long. They will not miss a few scrolls. Let this be another secret among friends.”

We have so many secrets already.

“You still have not told me how you got into the library in the first place,” she said, winking at me.

“Oh, I did not go in,” I assured her, telling her about the window and the apprentice who had found me. I even told her how he had said it was impossible for women to be scribes.

“People are ignorant about the things they do not know. Ban Zhao was a renowned scribe. She was our first female historian and esteemed scholar,” explained Fair Flatterer. “But women’s histories are ignored. Just because we do not hear of women scholars does not mean they did not or do not exist. It simply means their stories were not written down. This is because most leaders and scholars are men, so they omit stories about women.”

She straightened and continued, “I hope to change that. One of my goals is to compile a history of powerful women.”

"I heard about that!" I blurted out before I could stop myself.

"You did? How? It is one of my secret projects. I have not announced it yet. I only told my most trusted imperial scholars," Fair Flatterer said with much frustration.

"I heard the imperial scholars talking about it." I told her everything they had said, word for word.

Looking at me intently, she asked, "Did they see you?"

I shook my head. "No one ever pays attention to me because I am small and of no rank. It is amazing what one can learn hidden in plain sight."

"You are so clever. What others may deem to be weaknesses, you have turned into strengths. This will be a useful skill."

"My eavesdropping is a useful skill?" I was confused. "Mama is always trying to get me to stop. She thinks it is dangerous."

"Information used in the right way can be a powerful tool," Fair Flatterer said. "As a matter of fact, I think I have found a way for you to repay me for your lessons. Keep listening to palace gossip. Tell me and no one else everything you see and hear, especially if it is about me.

And in addition to continuing your lessons, I will also see what I can do about your taking the imperial examinations to become a scribe.”

“Me? An imperial scribe?” I beamed. “Imagine having the power to record history.”

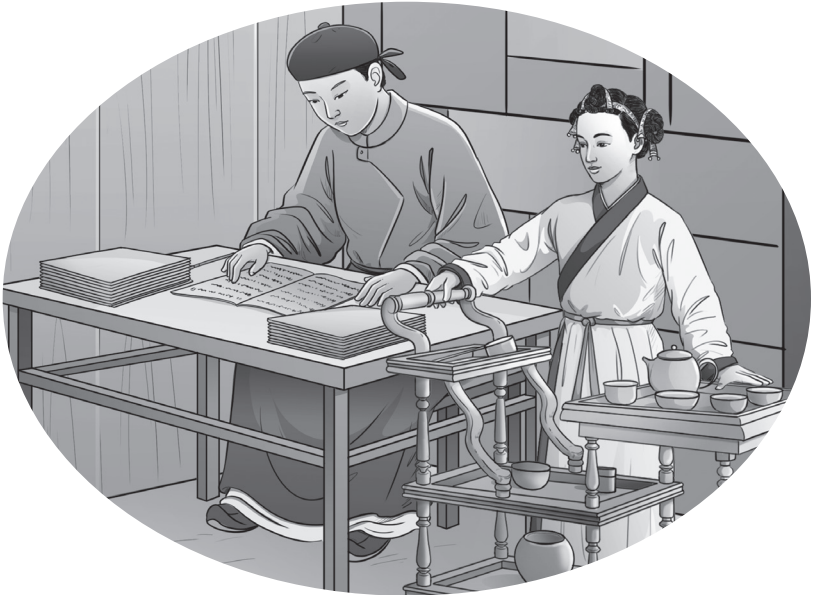
Fair Flatterer laughed. “If you are true and loyal to me, we will do more than just record history. We will make history.”

7

Beauty and Brains

Over the next several weeks, my life followed a routine.

In the mornings, I still served tea for the men taking their exams. Many looked exhausted and anxious after days of test taking. As I delivered their tea, I would often glance at the open test booklets. Each day, I was able to decipher more and more characters. I studied the types of questions asked.



Wherever I went, I listened to what people said. I even examined their faces and the expressions that accompanied the words they spoke.

In the afternoons, I met with Fair Flatterer. I told her everything I saw and heard around the palace, and she continued to teach me. She always had new scrolls for me to read. She even presented me with my own permit to check out any scrolls I wanted at the imperial library. Of course, I had to pretend I was getting everything for Fair Flatterer. I loved being inside the imperial library. I loved its grandeur. I loved the smell of the scrolls and the multitude of characters that sat on the paper like soldiers in an army whose cause was knowledge.

At night, I helped Mama sort the tea leaves and stems. I asked her more and more questions about different plants. I wanted to know everything she knew.

One night, I looked at Mama, who had never had a single day of schooling yet was the smartest woman I knew, and asked, "How do you know all these things?"

She put down the pot she had been drying. "I learned from my mother, and she learned from her mother. You come from generations of women who were raised in the mountains and forests. That knowledge has been passed on through stories and memories. You will one day hold all my knowledge."

grandeur: the quality of being grand; magnificence

I knew that I would hold that knowledge and so much more. The more I read and the more I learned, the stronger and braver I got.

During this time, Fair Flatterer and I also grew closer. I told her about my family, our tea shop, and our journey to the imperial palace. And I became curious about her past as well.

One day, as we sat together in our beautiful, green, peaceful hiding spot studying some new scrolls of poetry, I asked, "How did you come to live in the palace?"

"Like you, I came to make a better life for my family. When my father passed away, my mother, my sisters, and I were treated horribly by my father's first wife and her sons. Then, at my father's funeral, one of the imperial ministers noticed me. Years later, he remembered me and called me to work at the palace. Such an opportunity could not be ignored. This enabled me to take care of my mother and sisters." She paused. "I came here when I was fourteen years old, a couple of years older than you."

"That sounds like a great honor."

"I was chosen for my beauty, nothing more." She sucked at her teeth and inhaled deeply. "It is too bad we were born girls. We cannot take over our fathers' titles.

We cannot be promoted into important positions. We have no real power. My beauty was my family's only way out."

Even though I didn't have her looks or her ranking, I understood all too well the limitations of being a girl. "It sounds like you turned your beauty into a strength."

She nodded. "Thinking back, I sometimes reflect on what a silly girl I was. I remember my mother crying about how she could not be parted from me. But I calmed her by saying this was my duty. I said to her, 'How do you know it is not my fortune to meet the Son of Heaven, our Most Precious Emperor? I will raise up our family name once again.' I remember feeling so proud of being able to work at the palace."

"I am thankful you are here. Look what you have done for me. I was just a tea picker's daughter. I was a nobody."

"That is not true. Everyone has a role to play especially at court. Court life is cutthroat. Fortunes rise and fall. I have seen many people rise up from nothing only to suddenly disappear. It does not take much to bring someone down. Everyone here lives in fear." Fair Flatterer continued, "You know, when I first arrived at the palace, I was known as the talented lady of the fifth rank, which meant I was in charge of cleaning the imperial bedsheets."

I could not help but giggle. “And now, you are the Emperor’s personal secretary,” I said. “In many ways, it seems you are ruling the empire for him.”

“Never say that when others can hear,” she warned. “You and I know that the Emperor values my opinions and often acts on them. But he must always appear to be in charge. Always. To suggest a woman is in charge is dangerous, especially for me.”

“But you do not seem afraid.”

“I am afraid every day,” she said. “I have many enemies. Many people resent the influence I have over the Emperor. They say awful things about me. The only thing that protects me is my favored position with the Emperor. It is essential that people believe that his decisions are his alone. That is the world in which we live.”

And with those words ringing in my ears, we departed from our hiding spot, leaving behind the shelter of the tall trees and overgrown bushes that I had grown to love.

8

Big Sister

One day, as I was returning from serving Fair Flatterer, Yanhe Kang approached me. “Tea Girl, tomorrow morning, you must ride to the springs to get the purest water for the Emperor’s tea. He has made a special request.”

“The springs are miles away. That would take all day and into the night,” I whined. I would be unable to visit Fair Flatterer if I went. “What about serving tea for the test takers? And I told Mama I would help her with tea picking.”

“I will find a substitute,” Yanhe Kang replied impatiently. “You are the only person we can spare. Several people are sick, and everyone else must be here to do their job. It has to be you.”

I rushed to Fair Flatterer to tell her of this change to our plans.

“We are all at the whim of the Emperor. What he wants, he gets,” she said. Then, to my surprise, she added,

whim: a sudden idea or decision with no serious reason or purpose

“I shall ride with you. It has been too long. I welcome the opportunity to be outdoors again.”

Early the next morning, I made my way to the horse stables. Fair Flatterer was already there. The imperial stable hands brought out Wind, a brown mare, for me and Dappled Lion, a beautiful gray stallion, for Fair Flatterer.

I had heard through palace gossip that Fair Flatterer was a good rider. In fact, she was said to be better than some of the male courtiers.

She gently rubbed Dappled Lion’s neck and combed her fingers through his silver mane. “It is because of this horse that I am called Fair Flatterer,” she said.

“Is that not your real name?” I asked as we set off, the horses trotting along side by side, with the early morning light rising in the east.

She shook her head. “No. It is neither my given name nor one I would choose. The Emperor called me Fair Flatterer years ago, and that has been my name ever since.”

“Can you tell me the story?” I had grown to love Fair

courtiers: members of a ruler’s court

Flatterer's stories. And a story would help pass the time on the long ride to the springs.

"When I first arrived at the palace, my low rank prevented me from meeting the Emperor. But I was determined to find a way. I discovered how much the Emperor loves hunting and riding. One day, I learned that he would be in the stable yard along with his ministers and his youngest heir, Gaozong, who is now the Crown Prince. I arrived at the stables to find them watching the stable hands attempt to train Dappled Lion. One by one, Dappled Lion threw men off like they were sacks of rice. The Emperor boasted that no one could tame this horse. I stepped forward and said I could."

I laughed. "That was so bold of you. I am sure the men were shocked that a woman dared to speak up."

"They were. I spoke with confidence and used flattering words—lots of them. Words like *humbled*, *honored*, *respected*, and *esteemed* were uttered and directed at our great emperor. I explained how I had tamed many wild horses with great force in my home village. The Emperor listened to my words and stared at me for some time. Then he laughed so hard he cried."

Fair Flatterer let out her own hearty laugh. "He complimented my bold sense of humor. Then he said,

‘Not only is she fair, but she is also a flatterer. I shall call you Fair Flatterer. From now on, that shall be your name. I have spoken.’ Although I did not like having my name changed, I was smart enough to bite my tongue. Emperors are fickle. He could take away his approval as quickly as he had given it.”

“Perhaps one day you can reclaim your true name,” I consoled her. Then another thought occurred to me. “I should like to call you by a name you choose for yourself. What would you like me to call you?”

She looked at me with appreciation. “That is very kind of you, but you must continue to call me Fair Flatterer, as we cannot go against the Emperor’s proclamation.”

She thought for a moment, then said, “However, I suppose, when we are in private . . . You could use the name I used when I first came to the palace: Yang, my mother’s family name. She told me to use it at court since her family is of royal blood.”

But Fair Flatterer did not seem satisfied. She continued, “Or . . . I could honor my father by using his family name, the name I was given at birth . . .” She paused, still thinking. “Or I could honor my sisters, whom I miss dearly and whom you remind me of. Yes, that is it.”

fickle: likely to change often without a good reason

proclamation: an official announcement

She looked at me then. “I would be honored if you called me ‘Big Sister.’”

I smiled.

“Well, Big Sister. Let us ride faster to the springs. The Emperor needs that fresh water for his tea!”

Fair Flatterer glanced at my smiling face and whispered something to Dappled Lion. Before I knew it, they were galloping ahead across the vast palace grounds.



9

Nursing Duties

We did not return to the palace until the early hours of the morning. I promptly fell asleep only to be woken by Yanhe Kang. "Tea Girl!" he yelled. "Your mother has had an accident. She is calling for you."

I quickly followed him to the Imperial Medical Academy. There, I saw Mama lying on a cot. Her right leg was wrapped in bandages and secured by a wood splint. She was clutching her leg in pain. I ran to her, my tears coming quickly.

"Di Lingyi." Mama reached for me. "You are here."

I held her hand. "What happened?"

"I went out with the mountain monkeys at first light. We were picking tea by a rocky cliff. One of the new climbers lost his step. I tried to catch him, but I fell too. He broke both his legs. I guess I am lucky. I have several wounds but I only broke one leg."

"Lucky?" A laugh escaped through my tears. "That is one way of looking at it."

“We need to take all the good fortune we can,” she replied.

“I should have been with you. I told Yanhe Kang that I did not want to go to the springs,” I sobbed. “If I had stayed and helped you like I said I would, maybe this would not have happened.”

“That is not how life works. Fate is in charge.” Mama wiped the tears from my eyes.

“No! I cannot accept that what happened is fate!”

“Hush now,” she comforted me. “We have a lot to do. I need you to care for me. I also need you to do the tea picking for me. I will still be able to sort the leaves and stems. I will start on the ones I collected today.”

Mama tried to get up to reach for the basket of tea by her bedside, but a medical student rushed over and said, “Your mother must try not to move. She needs to be here in bed for some time.”

“Where is Chao Yuanfang?” I asked.

“The imperial doctor only serves the Emperor and the high-ranking nobles,” the medical student explained. “Medical students serve everyone else at the palace.”

“I am not staying here,” Mama announced. “My daughter is taking me back to our cot.” Mama grabbed my arm and whispered to me, “These medical students

do not know what they are doing. I need to heal as quickly as possible. You need to get me some herbs so that I can make poultices and teas to manage the pain and inflammation. I know what needs to be done.”

I ignored the medical student’s protests as I helped Mama back to the room we shared with the other tea pickers. I moved our cot into the tearoom so that we would have more privacy at night while I nursed her. I would sleep on the floor beside her.

Once she was comfortable, I served her some tea that would help her sleep.

“Before this sleeping tea takes effect, I need to tell you the herbs to collect for my medicines,” she said softly.

She started to list the many names of various herbs. I recognized most, though some were unfamiliar.

“Mama, wait,” I said. “Don’t go to sleep just yet.” I ran to collect some discarded paper, a sharp stick, and a cup of concentrated black tea. These would have to do for writing utensils. I quickly wrote the names of the plants I hadn’t recognized in different corners of the paper. Then I returned to her bedside and handed her the paper and brush. “Please, can you draw these plants for me so I know what to look for?”

poultices: soft mixtures of various substances, such as herbs or clay, that are spread on a cloth and applied to the body to treat pain or injury

Mama looked at the paper, stunned. “You can write? How is that possible?”

I had forgotten that my lessons were a secret. “Yes. I have been learning to read and write these past few weeks.” I looked at my feet as I spoke, unsure of how she would react. “Are you upset with me?”

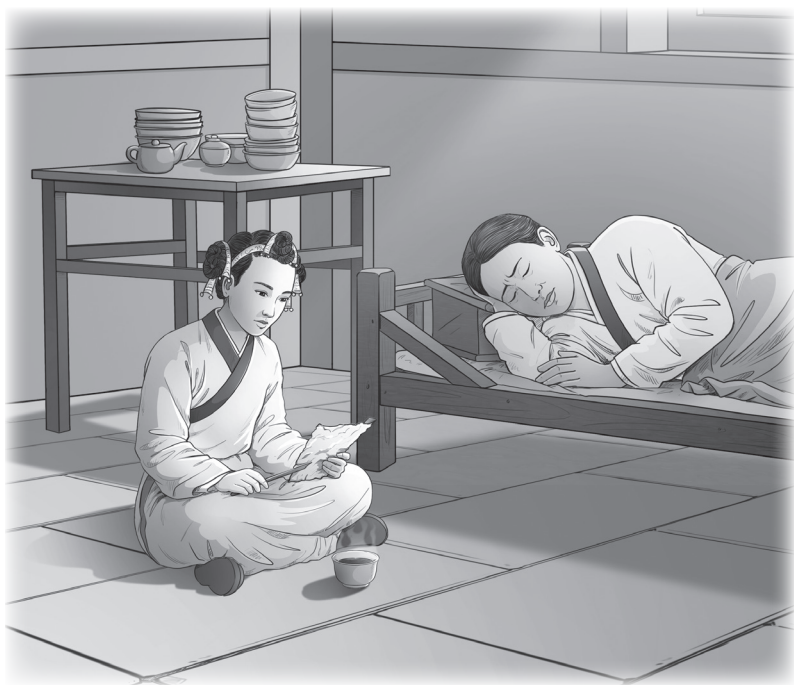
“Upset? Not at all. I am so proud. A daughter of mine can read and write. But who has been teaching you? One of the test takers you have been serving?”

“Fair Flatterer has been teaching me. I am learning a lot from her.” I didn’t mention my part of the bargain, as I knew how Mama felt about gossiping and eavesdropping. Besides, I had sworn to Big Sister that I would keep our deal a secret.

Mama paused before she replied. I could tell she was choosing her words carefully.

“You must be careful spending time around such a powerful person. I am glad you are enjoying your studies, but being overly ambitious and rising too quickly in this court can draw unwanted attention,” she said. “Now, hand me that stick.”

Mama drew pictures of the herbs and instructed me on their physical features and medicinal benefits as I took notes. When she was finished, she turned her head and fell into a deep sleep.



Every morning for the next few weeks, I woke up early to pick tea. Then I spent the day taking care of Mama. I cleaned her wounds, changed her bandages, set her splint, and made her herbal remedies.

When she slept, I read scrolls that Big Sister had sent to me. I copied the strokes in the air using the same motions I had seen the scribes use. I wrote down any questions I had using a stick and discarded paper to ask Big Sister whenever I was able to see her.

At night, I helped Mama sort the tea leaves and stems. I also helped prepare the tea that would be served in the palace the next day. Finally, exhausted, I fell asleep each night beside Mama's cot.

I thought I was going to be unhappy. I missed my lessons with Big Sister and even serving tea to the test takers. But I found myself strangely fascinated by nursing Mama. I kept notes of everything she taught me about herbs and concoctions. I read, as best I could, scrolls about medical care. I took notes on her progress. Soon, I knew what to do without Mama's instruction.

10

Words of Treason

One afternoon, Mama was suffering from a stomachache. I brewed some ginger tea and instructed her to drink it. When that didn't work, I headed to the forest to find some fresh star anise, which I had recently read about in a medical report.

As I made my way, I spotted the Wang sisters on the path ahead of me. Remembering my promise to Big Sister, I slowed my steps but stayed close behind, following them in the shadows.

Wang Shen cackled. "Did you hear? Fair Flatterer's days are coming to an end. I heard some of the imperial ministers are making moves against her. They want to see her exiled far away. I cannot wait for that day."

Wang Xian and Wang Guo joined Wang Shen, forming a chorus of tittering laughs.

Before I could stop myself, I stepped into the light. I glared at the Wang sisters and pointed my finger at them. "How dare you speak ill of Fair Flatterer!"

star anise: a star-shaped spice that comes from an evergreen tree

exiled: forced to leave one's home

The Wang sisters stopped in their tracks, silenced by my outrage. Finally, Wang Shen spoke up. “How dare you speak to us with such impertinence, servant. You are a nobody. Step aside!”

The Wang sisters hurried off, their laughter taunting me.

I collected the star anise for Mama, but instead of returning directly to the imperial tearoom, I ran to Big Sister’s room to tell her what I’d heard.

At first, Big Sister was quiet.

“They know my influence is tied to the Emperor,” she said finally. “Although we have tried to keep his ailing health from the public, court gossip cannot be stopped. Every attempt has been made to ensure it looks like business as usual. Nothing destroys a peaceful empire like a weak emperor. But as the Emperor grows weaker, so do I. They know this. The Crown Prince and I are doing our best. We have been managing palace affairs and communicating his edicts. I do not know what more we can do.”

“The Crown Prince? I did not know you worked so closely with him.”

impertinence: rudeness or disrespect

edicts: orders given by a ruler that have the force of law

Fair Flatterer's eyes sparkled. "While you have been nursing your mother, the Crown Prince and I have been nursing the Emperor. We have spent many hours together. I must admit we have become quite close. He is very different from his father. He does not seem to mind sharing credit for ideas. We trust each other." Fair Flatterer smiled.

"This means you still have influence," I insisted

Big Sister gathered her thoughts. "You are right. Today is today, and tomorrow is tomorrow. Let us have a talk with the Wang sisters. Enemies must be put in their place, or they grow stronger. Hate spreads faster than any disease."

We found the Wang sisters holding court in the garden, a group of women courtiers mingling about them.

Wang Shen saw Big Sister approaching first. "Here comes the Emperor's favorite." The other women giggled, if a bit nervously.

"I can assure you I am merely the Emperor's secretary," Big Sister replied.

"No one believes that," Wang Shen said sharply. "People think you have bewitched the Emperor. They say all your scrolls are spells and that you are doing men's work."

Big Sister replied, "And what do *you* think about me?"

"I am not so foolish as to believe in witches." Wang Shen rolled her eyes. "But I think you do not know your place. There are rules, which you do not follow."

Big Sister laughed. "Do you not think these rules are unfair, especially for women?"

"Oh my! You have no shame," Wang Shen said. "We are the imperial women of the Tang dynasty. What more could we ask for?"

"We could ask for so much more," Big Sister replied.

Wang Shen shook her head. "Disgraceful!"

Big Sister stood her ground. "What is more natural than being equal human beings?"

Wang Shen scoffed. "I will not dishonor my family and my emperor by stepping out of line."

"So instead, you will dishonor yourself."

Wang Shen said, "How dare you! You are a treacherous fox."

"Do not speak to her that way," I cut in forcefully. "She is your superior."

Wang Shen then turned her attention to me. She narrowed her eyes. "Ah, yes. The little spy. Or should I say spider who likes to creep around in dark corners."

Wang Shen looked at Big Sister and continued, “You are not the only person here with spies. There are things I could tell the Emperor about you!”

“Go ahead,” Big Sister said. “Who do you think the Emperor will believe, me or you? He doesn’t even know who you are.”

“Rumor has it the Emperor’s days are coming to an end.” Wang Shen clapped a hand over her mouth, immediately regretting her words.

“Your words are treasonous,” I blurted out. “I believe the Emperor just passed an edict: Spreading rumors about his health is punishable by death.”

Wang Shen’s face turned a bright shade of red. She didn’t even challenge my words, let alone my lowly rank. She was silent and stood as if frozen to the ground.

Big Sister and I turned and walked away. We did not look back.

treasonous: involving a betrayal of one’s country or government



11

The Woman Warrior

A few weeks later, I was tending to Mama when Yanhe Kang approached. “Di Lingyi,” he said, for he had recently stopped calling me *Tea Girl*. “Your presence is requested in the Emperor’s private room. People have become aware of how well you have been nursing your mother and how quickly she has been healing, even without the care of our imperial medical students. Fair Flatterer has asked that you bring up more ginseng tea and some other medicinal teas and cures.”

I gathered the necessary supplies and made my way to the imperial bedroom. When I arrived, the Emperor was moaning in pain. The rumors appeared to be true. His health had greatly worsened since I saw him last. These days, he only allowed Big Sister, the Crown Prince, Chao Yuanfang, and a few trusted ministers in his bedroom.

“Chao Yuanfang,” Big Sister said to the imperial doctor as I entered the room. “You may leave. Di Lingyi will tend to the Emperor now.”

Chao Yuanfang's jaw dropped, clearly insulted. "I must protest! I am the imperial doctor. She is but a child."

Before Big Sister could respond, the Crown Prince stepped in. "Chao Yuanfang, you have served my father well. You have been here all day. You must rest."

Chao Yuanfang bowed. "As you wish, Your Highness." He left the room, but not before throwing looks as sharp as daggers at Big Sister.

I examined the Emperor. He was clearly in a great deal of pain. His body was failing him.

I gave him teas and tended to his bedsores. But there was nothing more I could do. He was suffering from old age, yes, but I also knew he was suffering from a broken heart, and for that, there was no cure.

Big Sister had told me that in the past few years, several of the Emperor's sons had tried to take his throne. The Emperor defeated his sons and named Gaozong, his ninth son who was never meant to rule, as his successor. But His Majesty never truly recovered from his other sons' treachery.

I wetted the Emperor's lips with a tea-soaked rag. While I hovered over him, he asked for Big Sister to come closer. Big Sister knelt beside him. He spoke softly. "It seems you and my son, the prince, are becoming close."

successor: one who comes after, especially in taking a throne, title, or office

To my surprise, Big Sister blushed. "Yes, the Crown Prince is the loveliest of men. He is kind and gentle."

"That he is," said the Emperor. "He is also young and inexperienced. Do you think he will be a good ruler?"

Big Sister nodded. "Of course, for he has been learning from you all these years. He will also have his advisers, and he has the leadership book you wrote for him."

The Emperor said, "He will also have you."

Big Sister exclaimed, "Oh, Emperor! I am truly honored you see me in that way."

"Yes, it is my hope that you will be his most trusted adviser."

Big Sister looked taken aback. "Adviser?"

"But of course. What else would you be? You did not believe you could marry into my royal line, did you?" I could see that speaking caused him great discomfort, but he continued anyway. "Advising is your fate. You may be able to tame wild horses, but you cannot change one's fate." He smiled at his own joke, then clutched his stomach in pain.

"I—My apologies, Emperor. Of course that's what you meant."

I could see Big Sister's heart drop. From my quiet observation, it was clear to me, though perhaps no one else, that she felt deeply for the Crown Prince.

Could it be love? Before I could observe further, a practiced unreadable expression fell over Big Sister's face. She slowly stepped back from the Emperor until her back was against the wall.

The Emperor coughed and gasped. He clutched his stomach again.

The Crown Prince, who had heard none of their words, rushed to his side. "Father, are you all right?"

The Emperor said, "Tell the imperial astrologer to come in. I am ready to see him."

Moments later, Li Chunfeng entered the room.

The Emperor looked anxiously at his astrologer. "So tell me, Li Chunfeng, what do the celestial skies say?" he asked.

Li Chunfeng walked to an open window and looked up at the stars. He looked at his charts. He looked at the Emperor. Softly, he said, "You will be with your ancestors very soon."

At this, Big Sister rushed back to the Emperor's side to help the Crown Prince make him comfortable.

I noticed Li Chunfeng staring intently at Fair Flatterer. I could see that something was bothering him. Perhaps it was the same thing that bothered everyone else: a woman so closely tied to the Emperor and his son. At last, he said, "Fair Flatterer . . . that is quite an unusual name."



Big Sister looked at him. "It is the name the Emperor honored me with the day we met."

Li Chunfeng's eyebrows raised ever so slightly. "You mean to tell me it isn't your given name?"

"Well, no. But it is a name I am honored to have, of course." Big Sister clearly did not know how to respond to these questions after all these years of obeying the Emperor's proclamation.

But Li Chunfeng would not drop the subject. Clearly something was still bothering him. "You must tell me. What is your real name?"

Big Sister shifted uncomfortably, but she said, "My father's name is Wu."

Li Chunfeng gasped.

In that same moment, the Emperor's eyes opened wide—with pain, fear, or realization I did not know. Then he closed his eyes once more, never to reopen them again.

12

Bold Dreams

The entire imperial palace was in mourning. Taizong, the Zhenguan Emperor, had passed, and Gaozong, the former Crown Prince, had become the new emperor. His reign would be named Yonghui. Uncertainty flooded the air. And the most uncertain of all was Wu, the woman formerly known as Fair Flatterer to the Zhenguan court and as Big Sister to me.

Although her influence was weakened by the Zhenguan Emperor's death, Wu was in favor with the new Yonghui Emperor. And even on her own, she was still a formidable force.

As per custom, all the former emperor's official noble female servants were sent away. Those with children were confined to their chambers in the palace or sent to live in smaller palaces elsewhere. Those without were sent to a nunnery.

Although it had been the Zhenguan Emperor's desire for Wu to serve his son as an adviser, the new emperor's advisers thought it would be best to send Wu away while

mourning: the act of showing sadness over somebody who died

nunnery: a place where women belonging to a religious order live

he set up his court. So Wu was to be sent to a nunnery.

I was in her room, helping her pack, when the Wang sisters appeared in her doorway. Wang Shen chortled in a songlike manner, "How the mighty have fallen."

Wu ignored her and stayed silent. She kept busy wrapping her belongings.

Wang Xian said, "I heard Buddhist nuns have shaved heads. You are going to have to cut your beautiful shiny black hair."

I couldn't help myself. "Why are you gloating? You are also being sent away from the palace."

The three sisters offered up half-hearted smirks, then turned on their heels and stomped away.

I glanced at Wu and said, "They are just jealous. They have never met anyone as daring as you, and it scares them."

"I do not care about them," she said. "They will not be remembered. To have no history is a sad fate indeed."

When she finished packing, Wu turned to face me. "I will be back. The new Emperor and I have a plan. I will go to the nunnery and mourn the late emperor for three years, fulfilling tradition, after which the Emperor will bring me back to the imperial palace."

gloating: showing satisfaction about one's own success or someone else's failure

I nodded, surprised to find myself holding back tears.

Wu smiled at me. “You mark my words. My story is not done.”

“I have always admired how strong you are,” I said.

Wu took my hands in hers. “What about you? What do you dare to dream for?”

I replied, “I will find a way to continue my studies. You have inspired me to be bold and to dream.”

“We will keep working hard, you and I. We are still building the future we want for ourselves,” Wu said, smiling. “In the meantime, since you are staying in the palace, you can still be my eyes and ears.”

“You mean your spy?”

Wu laughed. “Spying is illegal. I simply want you to come visit me. I am still your teacher. We can continue our lessons, and you can tell me stories. Just like old times.”

I chuckled. “I look forward to my weekly lessons, then.”

“Before I forget, I have gifts for you.” Wu placed four items before me. “These are the four treasures needed for study: brush, ink, paper, and inkstone. I have made sure you have access to all the paper and ink you need. No more scrounging for supplies. It is important to record and preserve knowledge.”

inkstone: a stone on which dry ink and water are mixed

These were the finest writing tools I had ever seen. I pushed the expensive gifts back toward her. "I cannot accept this. This is too much."



"Your friendship and loyalty are priceless," she said. "Besides, how will you be a famous medical scholar without all the proper tools? I signed you up to take the imperial exams next year. How will you take the tests without proper writing utensils?"

My heart pounded. "How did you make this happen? Only men can take the tests."

Wu said, "Like you said before, I still have influence."

I shook my head. "I cannot take the test next year. I am not ready. People study years for these tests."

"You have been preparing for this test for a long time. You are more ready than you know." Wu pushed the four treasures back toward me. She said, "Just think about all your experiences."

Wu was right. I had learned a great deal from serving tea to all the test takers. I had also learned a great deal from Mama. Since my days nursing Mama, I had been recording all my observations about nature and the human body. I was fascinated by medicine. I hadn't realized Wu had even noticed my little scribbles.

But I was still reluctant. "Me? A scholar? But I am a nobody."

"Do you want to know the biggest secret of all?" Wu asked. "You have never been a nobody. From the moment I met you, I knew you were destined for big things."

"I would not dare to dream so boldly."

Wu grabbed my shoulders. "But you must—we women face so many barriers already. Do not create your own barriers. Change your fate. The future is ours."

Afterword

The Tang dynasty lasted from 618 to 907 CE (with the exception of the Wu Zhou dynasty, 690–705 CE). During this time, China expanded its territory and established a network of trade. This set the stage for China to be a world power during the Middle Ages (500–1500 CE). The Tang dynasty was a golden age in Chinese history, a time of peace, economic prosperity, and political and cultural reform. It was a time of innovations in the sciences and arts, both big and small. For example, during the Tang dynasty, things like tea and honey became popular. It was also a time of great poetry—in fact, the establishment of an academy for poets helped preserve more than 48,900 poems written by more than two thousand poets.

Much of the Tang dynasty's greatness can be attributed to Wu Zetian (624–705 CE), the only woman to have directly ruled the Chinese empire. There were a number of prophecies foretelling the ascension of a female ruler—some believed to have been fabricated by Wu herself. Whether prophecy, fate, or something else, the rule of Wu Zetian came to be.

innovations: new ideas, methods, or devices

Wu Zetian first ruled indirectly through men, as a wife and then a mother. Then she ruled in her own right and even established her own dynasty, the Wu Zhou dynasty, which lasted until her death (when her son reformed the Tang dynasty).

She had many titles and was known by many names. Some names were given to her, and some she claimed. Consistently, she was mostly known as Wu. Wu was her family name, meaning warrior, weapon, or military force. During her lifetime, she referred to herself as Wu Zhao. After her death, she became known as Wu Zetian. *Zetian* means “ruler of the heavens,” which was how she ultimately wanted to be seen—as a holy and divine ruler.

Wu was extraordinary for her time. Born a girl, she was not supposed to rule. Well-educated and ambitious, she was respected, feared, and hated. She was the topic of much gossip and the subject of many scandals. Even today, she is known more for her “crimes” than her accomplishments. Historians and scholars disagree on whether or not she actually did the terrible things she was accused of. But most agree she lived in prejudiced times. Although women had more privileges than in previous dynasties, the Tang era was still patriarchal.

prejudiced: showing unfair treatment of a person or group for no good reason

patriarchal: describes a system in which men hold most of the power and authority

Strong women like Wu were seen as freaks of nature, like “a hen crowing at the dawn,” as a traditional Chinese idiom goes. Historians of her day characterized her as evil and ruthless. But is this portrayal fair? Is it accurate?

Wu did many great things for China. Her contributions are still influential today:

- ♦ **Education:** Wu promoted education. She set up local schools. She expanded and reformed the system of imperial exams, requiring them for palace and military jobs as well as civil service—rather than just appointing noblemen to those positions—and ensuring test takers’ names were masked during assessment to avoid favoritism.
- ♦ **Arts:** Wu cultivated the arts. She supported many poets and publications. She supported the concept of mass printing. She created a group called the Scholars of the Northern Gate, whose members promoted literary pursuits in addition to serving as her advisers. She even wrote some poems and essays herself. In addition, she promoted music and dance, including collecting and organizing music documents.
- ♦ **Chinese Writing System:** Wu created new characters for the Chinese writing system. Today, these characters are known as Zetian characters.

- ♦ **Foreign Policy:** Wu had strong foreign policies. She oversaw a few victorious wars. She expanded Tang territory. She helped unify China.
- ♦ **Domestic Policy:** Wu had strong domestic policies. She reduced taxes and military spending. She built irrigation systems. She turned over vast royal lands to farming.
- ♦ **Information:** Wu understood the power of information. She set out copper boxes in the capital so people could communicate with her anonymously. She encouraged people to report their thoughts and complaints. She also created a system of spying and informing.
- ♦ **Buddhism:** Wu was an early adopter of Buddhism, which was more liberal toward women than Confucianism and Taoism. Knowing how to use propaganda, she used Buddhist beliefs in a female savior to justify her reign as a reborn Buddha, leading to yet another name: the Sage Mother.

irrigation systems: ways of bringing water from natural sources to plants that need watering

anonymously: without revealing one's identity

propaganda: information designed to convince people to support a certain idea or cause

- ✦ **Feminism:** Wu was an early feminist. She changed the mourning period for mothers so it would be as long as that of fathers'. She funded the study of exemplary women for publication. She modified ancient rituals to include women. She increased the role of women at court. She created an examination system for women. She hired female officials. In fact, her personal secretary was Shangguan Wan'er (664–710 CE), who has been described as Wu's "female prime minister."

Wu Zetian was an effective ruler. She was a shrewd leader. She was an innovative disrupter and an influencer. She had an early understanding of globalization and wanted to make China the center of the world. And she wanted to be the center of China. But she was a victim of patriarchy. Toward the end of her reign, she lost her power and influence. In February 705 CE, she was forced to abdicate her throne to her son.

In the same year, Wu died at the age of eighty-one. Nothing was written on her tombstone. It's the only known blank tombstone in more than two thousand years of Chinese history. Some say she upset too many men.

shrewd: showing cleverness and good judgment

globalization: the process of increasing connections between countries and cultures around the world

Some say her achievements could not be stated in words.

Whatever people thought of her, Wu cannot be erased from history. She has been described as many things. She has been accused of many things. Some may be true. Some may not be. But one thing is for sure—Wu was a powerful woman. Her story continues to fascinate.

Timeline of Wu Zetian's Life

624	Wu is born.
635	Wu's father dies.
638	Wu is summoned to Emperor Taizong's court.
649	Wu nurses Emperor Taizong, who dies. She and Gaozong form a bond. Wu is sent to a nunnery.
651	Wu is summoned to Emperor Gaozong's court.
652	Wu gives birth to her first son, Li Hong.
c. 653– 656	Wu gives birth to either her second or third son, Li Xian, the future Emperor Zhongzhong.
654	Wu gives birth to a daughter, who dies.
655	Wu becomes Emperor Gaozong's empress.
660	Wu begins ruling for Emperor Gaozong.
662	Wu gives birth to another son, Li Dan, the future Emperor Ruizong.
c. 664	Wu gives birth to her youngest child, a daughter possibly named Li Lingyue, later called Taiping.
670	Wu's mother dies.
683	Emperor Gaozong dies.
684	Wu begins ruling on behalf of her sons, first Zhongzhong and then Ruizong, after the death of Gaozong.
690	Wu deposes Ruizong, proclaiming herself to be the emperor. She starts her own dynasty, the Wu Zhou dynasty.
705	Wu is deposed by Zhongzhong, who restores the Tang dynasty. She retires to a palace outside the imperial city and dies ten months later.

Author's Note

Writing historical fiction is like a puzzle. First, I research the history of people and events. Then, I create a narrative with compelling characters and actions. Lastly, I piece together fact and fiction. The goal is to create a story that *could* have happened. Historical fiction is an author's interpretation based on the facts available. Unlike nonfiction, historical fiction lets authors make up some things.

This story describes what it would be like to live in Wu Zetian's time. I used mostly real people and real events. Everyone really existed except for Di Lingyi and her parents, the Wang sisters, and Yanhe Kang. For these characters, I researched possible names and positions that existed in this time period. Di Lingyi is inspired by the women Wu hired into her inner circle.

Wu's family members, Emperor Taizong, and Emperor Gaozong are real. I featured other real characters, like Li Chunfeng and Li Yan (father-and-son fortune tellers), Yuan Tiangang (famed face reader), and Chao Yuanfang (imperial doctor). They were alive during the story's time frame, but there's no evidence they would have interacted with Wu. In several cases,

I simply referred to people by their positions (e.g., scribe, cook, etc.). This demonstrates the hierarchal nature of court life. It also shows how rank overshadowed people in this society.

Of course, all the conversations are imagined. I tried to mimic the formalized speaking style of court life by not using contractions. During the Tang dynasty, false modesty, false humility, endless honorifics, and exaggerated flattering would have been expected. I tried to convey this in how the characters speak.

I added some authentic quotes that were inconsistent across historical sources. I adjusted these quotes to fit the story. Some of the stories are based on real anecdotes. But most of this story is fictionalized.

Lastly, I chose to not focus on Wu's scandals (and there were many!). Instead, I focused on her as a person. I tried to humanize her. I wanted readers to understand the woman behind and before the scandals. I hope my retelling does not diminish Wu's real story. It is just one of many versions of a remarkable person's life.

humility: the quality or state of being humble

honorifics: titles or words implying or expressing high status, politeness, or respect

Meet the Author



Dr. Virginia Loh-Hagan is an award-winning author, educator, and activist. She has written more than 450 publications, including children's books, academic articles, and more. Most of her work addresses Asian American topics. She is currently serving as the inaugural executive director for Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI) Affairs and director of the Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA) Center, both at San Diego State University. She is also the co-executive director of the Asian American Education Project. Previously, she was a teacher educator, college professor,

K–8 classroom teacher, curriculum designer, and more. She is committed to ensuring that all students learn about APIDA histories and narratives. She was born and raised in Fairfax, Virginia, and graduated from the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. A daughter of Chinese-Cambodian refugees, she was the first person in her family to be born in the United States. As such, she was named after the state in which she was born. She currently lives in sunny San Diego with one well-trained husband and two naughty dogs. Virginia has written about Wu Zetian in two other books: *Born Reading: 20 Stories of Women Reading Their Way into History* (Paula Wiseman Books/Simon & Schuster, 2023) and *Empress Wu Zetian* (Cherry Lake Publishing, 2024).

Meet the Illustrator



Kailien Singson. A born artist, Kailien hails from the northeastern region of India known for its rich natural beauty that serves as a constant inspiration in his work. His passion for art began at a young age with artistic scribbles in notebooks at school and gradually developed into a serious career that led him to pursue a degree in arts. Having explored several techniques in art through his education and professional years in publishing, Kailien specializes in using striking colors and depicting realistic forms in his work. He is equally adept at traditional art styles, taking inspiration from everyday life.

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Cover Illustration by

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