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The Secrets of Jin-Shei



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One

It had been the hottest summer in living memory. The letters that came to the Summer Palace from those left behind to swelter in the Imperial Court in Linh-an were full of complaints about the heavy, sultry heat that wrapped and stifled them until they gasped for breath, the clouds that built up huge and purple every day against the bleached white sky but never brought anything except dry lightning and a distant threatening rumble of thunder. And it was barely the middle of the month of Chanain. Summer had only just begun.

But there were few left in Linh-an. At the Summer Palace in the mountains, although it was still hot enough for servants with enormous peacock feather fans to take up posts beside the royal women's beds until they fell asleep at night, one could raise one's eyes to the distant white-capped peaks and be comforted with the dream of coolness. There was always a breeze in the gardens, too, whispering in the leaves of the dwarf mountain magnolia trees planted around the inner courtyard. It was pleasant to linger there in the early morning, when the bird chorus was just starting up, or in the late afternoon with its long shadows and golden light. The voices of wild crickets mingled with captive ones in tiny wicker houses which hung concealed in the trees. There were cool ponds and fountains where water played over the smooth mottled grey stone brought here from a great distance by a long-dead Empress to grace her gardens. There were white flowers and red ones, some with a golden cast, and some with heavy purple petals making their heads nod in the breeze. And there were the butterflies.

It was the butterflies that brought Tai there. She was not of the Court, not even of the Court's retinue; by rights she should have had no real access to the Imperial gardens at all. Imperial life was complicated. Down in Linh-an, the great capital city, the lives of the women of the Imperial Court were governed by endless rounds of etiquette and protocol. There were people to see, petitioners to receive; the higher-ranked princesses and concubines held their own courts, and were expected to grace public ceremonies with their presence and attend to the day-to-day business of their own households. All of this required strict rules about attire and adornment. Summer was the only time when a woman of the Imperial Court of Syai was permitted to appear outside her bedroom without the mandatory hours of preparation and perfection. Here, in the Summer Palace, the Court was on holiday; the women were allowed to wear their hair down, to emerge from the seclusion of their rooms without the heavy ceremonial outer robes, to go barefoot in the gardens.

And summer was the only time that the ladies had the time to devote to the preparation of the necessary ceremonial garb for the Autumn Court at which they were all to appear to mark their return to Linh-an from their summer frolics. Everyone required a brand-new formal suit of robes for that occasion, and the Summer Palace was always a happy muddle of bolts of sumptuous silks, bright velvets, furs for lining hoods and tippets, and a thousand embroidery hoops with half-finished flowers and hummingbirds.

Tai's mother, Rimshi, was always part of the entourage which the Imperial ladies took to the Summer Palace. Rimshi was a sorceress with the needle. She could transform silk and velvet and brocade into lavish robes, and her services were much in demand. Ever since she had been widowed, three years ago now, Rimshi had taken Tai with her to the Summer Palace. Tai had been just six when she had first come here clinging to her mother's skirts, and had been fussed over and petted and spoiled with sweets and the royal cast-offs from princesses unlikely to be seen in public twice wearing the same suit of Court garb. Tai had a closet full of luxurious robes which her mother carefully re-cut and re-shaped into clothes suitable for her to wear. She was nine now, but she had become so much a part of the Summer Palace gardens by this time that nobody even thought about questioning her presence there.

She would find an unobtrusive perch in some out-of-the-way courtyard and dream her way through lazy summer mornings listening to the cricket chorus and watching the bright butterflies flutter from flowerhead to flowerhead, contrasting white and blue and violet and vivid orange against the blooms and foliage. One of the gifts that had percolated to her that particular summer, from a bored royal concubine who could not master the art of using them, was a set of coloured chalks and a sheaf of thick creamy rag paper. Tai had loved the idea of drawing the somnolent summer gardens. She was only just beginning to have an idea of how the chalks worked, and her first few efforts were crude and garish, in an attempt to overcompensate from what she was used to, brushes and inks and the cheap thin paper she could get back home in Linh-an. But she was learning, and these dazzling summer butterflies were her favourite subject.

She was smudging the finishing touches to a surprisingly delicate rendition on a hot, slow afternoon, sitting in the mottled shade of an ancient twisted chestnut with her feet tucked tidily away under her robe and oblivious to everything else around her, when she was startled to hear a voice from behind her.

'That is actually very good,' the voice observed, a young woman's voice, sounding at once lofty and warmly approving.

Tai, who had paused in her work and had been sitting with her eyes tightly closed and her head lifted in a pose of furious concentration, dropped her paper and scrambled gracelessly to her feet. The voice was patrician, aristocratic, and in any event anybody in this garden had to be part of the Imperial Court and it was not etiquette for Tai to be seated in the presence of a woman from the Court.

The owner of the voice was perhaps only a few years older than Tai, but even in the permissive *déshabillé* of the Summer Palace there was no mistaking her rank. She wore a light summer robe that left her arms indelicately bare, and they had taken on a golden glow from the sun, but her hair was gleaming and plaited with pearls where it coiled in thick black braids under a wide-brimmed hat which shaded her fair complexion. She was leaning on the trunk of the chestnut tree with one hand, and it was placed with the long-fingered elegance of one trained to grace in every movement. Her eyes were dark, slanted up at the corners, touched up with kohl –

languid, friendly, but with a definite glint of imperiousness lurking in the corners together with a hint of irrepressible laughter.

Tai dropped to one knee, lowering her eyes.

'Oh, don't,' the Princess said, waving her up. 'It's summer. It's too hot for protocol. You draw well. What is your name?'

'Tai, Highness.'

'Rimshi's girl? I think you were presented to me once. A year ago, maybe two. You've grown.'

Tai searched her memory frantically. She had been presented to several Imperial ladies, but one so young? This young Princess could not have been more than maybe fourteen or fifteen herself; that would have made her . . . what . . . perhaps thirteen when Rimshi had presented her little daughter to her. There couldn't have been many.

There weren't many. There was only one. Antian, First Princess, Little Empress, the heiress to Syai's throne.

Tai, who had started to rise at the Princess's behest, dropped down into the courtesy again.

'Your Imperial Highness,' she squawked.

'I said, rise,' said Antian. 'I recognize your tools. Hsui never could apply the chalk properly. I'm glad she had the sense to give them to someone who would make better use of them. Do you usually draw with your eyes closed?'

The question was unexpected. Tai blinked. 'Princess?'

'That's what made me come here to you,' Antian explained patiently. 'I saw you from across the court, and you were alternately concentrating on your art and sitting there with your eyes tightly shut . . . and sometimes your hands were moving on the paper even when your eyes were shut. This intrigues me.'

Tai smiled. 'I close my eyes so that I can see,' she said.

It was Antian's turn to look surprised. 'You close your eyes to *see*?'

'I cannot draw from life,' Tai said. 'I can see the butterflies on the flowers, but before I can draw them with my hand I have to close my eyes and draw them in my mind.'

'Ah,' said Antian softly. 'I would like to take a closer look at this drawing.'

Tai's first instinct was to hide the paper behind her back, a childish gesture as natural as it was futile. 'Princess . . . it is not very good . . . yet . . .'

Antian held out her hand. Obedience and deference, things Tai had been painstakingly taught and bred to, won out over diffidence; she brought the paper out and gave it up reluctantly. Antian studied the sketch, tapping her lower lip with the fingertips of her free hand.

'Yet?' she queried at last. 'This is fairly accomplished, if indeed you are a beginner.'

'I have drawn in ink, Princess, just patterns, and then in silk.'

'Silk?'

'Embroidery. My mother has made sure that I practise needle art.'

'You embroider?' Antian said, raising an eyebrow. 'How good are you?'

'You are wearing some of my work, Princess,' Tai said, unable to quite hide a smile.

Antian glanced down at the hem of her robe, where a swirling pattern of stylized birds was embroidered in scarlet thread. 'Yours?' she asked, lifting the hem of her skirt to observe it better, sounding impressed.

'Pattern and needlework,' Tai said.

Antian dropped the robe, straightened, handed back the drawing with a small imperious motion of her hand. 'You interest me,' she said, and gave Tai a small smile. 'We will talk again.'

Tai dropped into obeisance again. 'Princess.'

But she was gone, a small gesture bringing her entourage of four attendants to fall in line beside her. Tai, raising her head, saw the straw hat bend as the Princess said something to one of the four ladies who had waited for her on the path while she had stopped to talk to Tai; the sound of soft laughter drifted back to where she stood with her chalk drawing still in her hand.

The light had changed, and the sun was almost dipping behind the mountains to the west. The Palace was built clinging to a mountainside; its gardens were tiered, its courtyards enclosed in the safety of high walls and the pavilions of the cloistered women, but there was a series of open terraces on the various levels of the gardens which hung almost suspended from the face of the mountain, separated from the sheer drop only by a carved stone balustrade, and from which the steep valley opened up towards the west in a breathtaking view. At sunset the narrow ribbon of the river, a long, long way below in the valley, turned into a thin skein of gold thread – only for a few minutes, when the angle of the sun

was just right, a river of gold flowing off into the mysterious west. Tai could not believe that she was the first to discover this moment of beauty, but either everyone else was already weary of it or perhaps the open balconies made visitors nervous, because she inevitably had the place to herself when she came on her sunset pilgrimages.

On this day, distracted by the encounter with Antian, she was late – almost too late. The glow was already starting to fade when she got to her perch. Usually she left with the sun, coming to this place only to salute its setting, but this time she stayed, watching the sky darken into amethyst, then violet, then deep blue-black. She watched the stars come out above the sharp black silhouettes of the mountain peaks, and had the oddest feeling of transience, as though all of this was just a glimpse, as though the world would turn away in the next moment and she would never see the twilight in the mountains again.

She stayed on the terrace, curled up deep in thought and dream, until the sun-warmed stone against which she leaned had turned cool to her back, and then made her way back through lantern-lighted courts to the outer apartments where she and her mother were housed.

'You are late,' Rimshi said as she entered the room they shared.

'I met the Little Empress,' Tai said, perhaps by way of explanation.

'Oh?' Rimshi said. 'Your dinner is on the table. Eat, and tell me about it.'

'She wore a dress which I embroidered,' Tai said.

'And . . . ?' Rimshi prompted when Tai appeared not to wish to go beyond this simple statement.

But that was all that Tai had to tell about the encounter at this time. The rest, she was still thinking on. *We will talk again*, the Princess had said. Whatever had she meant? Her life and Tai's touched rarely – would not have touched at all had Tai not sneaked into the Imperial gardens to draw butterflies.

Rimshi did not push it; she and her daughter had a good close relationship, and it would come when Tai was ready to talk about it. 'It's late,' she said when Tai had done with her food, clearing the dishes away and setting a pile of scarlet silk and a tangle of bright embroidery thread on the matting next to the oil lamp where she would be finishing off the day's work. 'The yearwood, and then bed.'

The yearwood box was at the foot of Tai's bed, as always. The small carved chest which had been given to her at birth contained the record of her years – the small neat bags containing the bead strings for the years past, marked by bold numbers brushed in ink, and the delicate split wand of the yearwood itself with its beaded strings of the current year. Siantain and Taian hung completed from their pegs, forty beads on each string, a record of another spring of her life having passed, another spring of the reign of the Ivory Emperor. The current string, Chanain, the first month of summer, had only ten beads on it – the first week, with a knot below it. It was the end of another week this night, and Tai obediently extracted ten ivory beads from the box and strung them carefully onto the Chanain string with the help of the bone needle attached to the end of the string. Another week; Chanain half-gone now, a knot tied with small neat hands at the end of the ten beads. Tai worked with focused attention; this was almost an act of weekly devotion for her, this counting of her days. Her task completed, she glanced to her mother for approval and received a nod and a smile.

The duty done, Tai turned to a less demanding task but one that she had always enjoyed a great deal. She fetched her inkwell and brush and the cheap journal book she had been given on New Year's Day, its thin paper already curling as she opened the cowhide binding. There was a lot to write this day, and nothing at all; for a while she sat nibbling on the already well-chewed end of her wooden brush, and then wrote with quick, neat strokes, forming the *jin-ashu* letters of the secret language which her mother had been teaching her since she was six years old:

> *Met Princess. She liked my drawing. She wore my embroidery. I was proud of both, even though I don't think I am very good with the chalk yet. Saw sunset from balconies, and the golden river flowing west, as always. Saw stars come out. Today something has changed.*