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The Vermilion Sisters

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The scent of Chang'an in the spring was a thick, intoxicating layer of peony blossoms, horse dung, and expensive sandalwood incense. The city stretched wide beneath the pale sky, its wards divided by walls and gates that pulsed with the rhythm of empire. Two million souls lived within those boundaries, each bound to the great machine of Tang civilization: scholars copying sutras in quiet courtyards, merchants shouting in foreign tongues, soldiers marching in bronze armor that caught the sun. The streets were alive with color and sound, but inside the Darning Palace, the "Palace of Great Brilliance," the air was thinner, sharper, and far more dangerous.

Lin Xiaojiang stood at the threshold of Hanyuan Hall, her shadow long across the polished floor. She wore the formal uniform of a Senior Decurion of the Vermilion Bird Guard: a high-collared ruqun of deep madder-red silk, reinforced over the chest and shoulders with blackened steel scales. Her hair, thick and dark as crow feathers, was bound in a high, intricate knot held by a single silver pin shaped like a soaring phoenix, which was a gift from the Empress herself. The pin was proof of survival. Every woman who rose in the Tang court carried her victories like scars, and Xiaojiang's were carved deep.

Her beauty was a subject of quiet fascination among the younger officials and poets who lingered near the palace gates. They spoke of her cheekbones, sharp as the northern frontier, and her eyes, dark and steady as obsidian. Yet none dared approach her. She had fought for every inch of her rank, clawed her way through a world that bowed to men and dismissed women as decoration. She had learned to speak through command, to move through rooms where her presence was tolerated only because it was useful. Every gesture she made carried the weight of defiance.

Beside her, kneeling on a silk cushion and arranging a set of jade hairpins, was Lin Meilin. The younger sister's hands moved with delicate precision, her fingers tracing the smooth edges of the jade as if reading a secret language. Meilin was eighteen, five

years younger than Xiaojiang, and her world was one of vibration and touch. A

fever in childhood had taken her hearing, leaving her in silence that others mistook for weakness. The court called her a "broken bird," a pity kept alive by her sister's rank. But Xiaojiang saw her differently. Meilin was the pulse beneath the surface of the world, the one person who could feel what others ignored: the tremor of footsteps, the hum of air before a storm, the faint shiver of silk when someone lied.

Xiaojiang had built her career for Meilin. Every battle, every sleepless night spent memorising military codes and palace etiquette, every scar earned in the Emperor's campaigns. All of it was for the girl kneeling beside her now. The Tang court was a place of beauty and cruelty, and Xiaojiang had learned that protection required power. She had become the blade that kept her sister safe. In the barracks, men had mocked her, called her soft, called her lucky. She had answered with skill, with silence, with victories that left no room for doubt. Her sword had spoken for her when words failed.

Meilin's fingers paused. She signed quickly, her movements small and precise, a language only the two of them understood. *The air is wet today. The Empress's chest will be tight.*

Xiaojiang's eyes flicked toward the window lattices. The sky was heavy with spring moisture, the kind that clung to the lungs. She touched Meilin's shoulder, a firm, grounding gesture. "I know," she murmured, though Meilin could not hear. The words were habit, a ritual between them. Xiaojiang's voice was low, steady, meant more for herself than for her sister.

The Tang Dynasty was at the height of its power. In the Western Market, Persian merchants traded cobalt-blue glass for bundles of raw silk. In the Eastern Market, Buddhist monks from India debated the Lotus Sutra with Confucian scholars beneath banners painted with dragons and clouds. The empire's borders stretched from the deserts of Central Asia to the shores of the South China Sea. Chang'an was the heart of it all, a city where every street carried the scent of foreign spices and every courtyard echoed with the sound of poetry. Yet the Inner Palace was a world apart, ruled by the iron will of Empress Wu Zetian.

The Empress was in her private solar, a chamber draped in heavy tapestries depicting the Queen Mother of the West. The fires had been extinguished for the three-day Hanshi, the Cold Food Festival. The ritual honoured Jie Zitui, the loyal retainer who had died in silence rather than betray his lord. No flame could be lit during the festival, and the palace had become a tomb of stone and shadow. The air was damp, the walls cold enough to draw breath from the skin.

"Xiaojiang," the Empress called. Her voice was rough, catching on the moisture in the air.

Xiaojiang entered and bowed deeply, her forehead nearly touching the floor. "The Empress is troubled by the cold."

Wu Zetian sat on a raised dais, wrapped in brocade embroidered with golden dragons. She was nearly sixty, her face a map of the wars she had fought to claim the Dragon Throne. Her friendship with Xiaojiang went back to the border campaigns, when Xiaojiang, then a soldier, had pulled the future Empress from a collapsed carriage under a hail of Turkic arrows. That moment of two women who refused to die quietly had bound them.

"It is the silence I hate most," Wu Zetian said, gesturing toward the cold hearth. "Without the fire, I hear the palace breathing. I hear the walls whispering. Tell me, how is your sister?"

"She is well, Your Majesty. She tends to the imperial wardrobe."

"Bring her in," the Empress commanded. "The eunuchs chatter like flies over a carcass. Their noise irritates me. I want someone in the room who knows how to hold their tongue."

Xiaojiang signaled to a servant. Moments later, Meilin entered, her head bowed. She knelt beside the low table and began to prepare a bowl of cold tea, a Hanshi

necessity. Her movements were careful, deliberate, shaped by years of observation. The scent of chrysanthemum and snow-water filled the room.

Wu Zetian watched her. "She moves like someone who listens to the earth," she said softly. "Does she understand what she serves?"

"She understands everything that matters," Xiaojiang replied.

The Empress's eyes lingered on Meilin's hands. "Then she is wiser than most of my ministers."

High Eunuch Gao entered the solar minutes later. He was a man of immense influence, a spider who sat at the center of the palace's web of logistics and secrets. His robe was dark silk, dyed for the Hanshi festival, its folds heavy with the scent of camphor. His hands were hidden within his sleeves, a gesture of humility that masked control. He was the only man permitted in these private quarters, and he carried that privilege like a blade.

"Your Majesty," Gao said, his voice smooth and deliberate. "The physicians have prepared a special decoction for your cough. Since we cannot use the fires, they have steeped the herbs in snow-water collected from the peaks of Mount Tai."

He gestured to a young attendant who stepped forward with a silver tray. Upon it rested a jade cup, pale green and translucent, carved with the pattern of a coiling dragon. The cup gleamed faintly in the cold light filtering through the lattice windows.

Meilin, still kneeling near the table, reached out to take the tray as was her duty. Her fingers brushed the silver, and she froze.

She felt a vibration, faint but frantic, running through the tray.

Fizz. Hiss.

The sensation was like salt dancing on a pan, but the air was cold. Her breath caught. The vibration crawled through her skin, whispering of danger.

Meilin's eyes lifted to Gao. His expression was composed, but his fingers twitched inside his sleeves. The movement was small, yet it sent a ripple through the floorboards that reached her knees. She turned her head slightly, catching Xiaojiang's gaze.

Her hand moved beneath the table, hidden from Gao's view. *The water is angry, she signed. It bites the cup.*

Xiaojiang's eyes hardened. She had seen poison before, in the field, in the camps, in the quiet executions that followed failed rebellions. She stepped forward, her boots silent on the polished stone.

Gao extended his hand toward the Empress, ready to present the cup. Xiaojiang reached out and gripped his wrist.

The room fell silent.

To touch a High Eunuch was a violation of rank, a crime punishable by death. The guards at the door stiffened, their hands hovering near their weapons. The air thickened, heavy with incense and tension.

"Decurion Lin," Gao said, his voice sharp now. "Have you lost your mind? This is the Empress's medicine."

Xiaojiang's tone was calm, stripped of emotion. "The medicine is disturbed, Excellency. My sister feels it."

Gao laughed, the sound brittle. "Your sister? The girl who cannot hear thunder? You would delay the Empress's recovery because a mute girl trembles at a cup?"

He turned toward Wu Zetian, bowing low. "Your Majesty, I have served you since you were a consort. This guard mistakes superstition for loyalty. She treats your court like a battlefield and her sister like an oracle. It is an insult to your wisdom."

Wu Zetian's gaze moved between them. Her face was unreadable, carved in the stillness of authority. She knew the law. Xiaojiang had interfered with an official act, a capital offense.

"Xiaojiang," the Empress said softly. "You know the price of being wrong."

"I do, Your Majesty."

"Then prove it."

Xiaojiang released Gao's wrist but did not step back. Her eyes fell to the tray. "If this is snow-water steeped with herbs, it should be still. But the silver is tarnishing."

She pointed. Tiny black pits had begun to form where condensation touched the metal.

"The Hanshi forbids fire," Xiaojiang said, "but not reaction. There is a toxin used by the mountain tribes. It reacts to silver when chilled. It does not kill quickly. It tightens the lungs, slows the breath, and mimics the cold."

Gao's face remained composed, but Meilin felt the tremor beneath the floor, the quickened rhythm of his pulse. His body betrayed him.

Meilin rose from her cushion. She took a silk cloth and dipped it into the cup. Then she pressed the damp fabric against the bronze incense burner beside the Empress. The burner had been cold for two days, its surface darkened by ash.

A faint vapour curled upward. The smell was sharp, bitter, like almonds left to rot.

Wu Zetian's eyes narrowed. "Enough."

Xiaojiang drew her dao in one smooth motion. The blade caught the dim light, its edge whispering against the scabbard. The sound was clean, final.

The guards moved, but the Empress raised her hand. "Stand down."

Her voice carried the weight of command.

"Gao," she said. "Drink."

The eunuch's composure cracked. He fell to his knees, his sleeves slipping back to reveal trembling hands. He did not reach for the cup. His lips parted, and words spilled out.

He spoke of the Li princes, of promises whispered in the dark, of men who longed for the old order where women bowed and power belonged to lineage. He spoke of plots woven through the palace kitchens and the physician's hall, of letters carried by servants who vanished before dawn.

Wu Zetian listened, her expression unchanged. "You speak of tradition," she said. "But you forget the oldest tradition of this court is survival."

She rose from her seat. The dragons on her robe shimmered in the dim light, their golden threads catching the air. "You would poison me with the tools of my own

empire. You would use snow-water from Mount Tai, the sacred mountain of the dynasty, to end the reign of its sovereign. You mistake reverence for weakness."

Her gaze turned to Xiaojiang. "Take him. I want every name that touches this plot. Every hand that carried the ice."

Xiaojiang bowed. "Yes, Your Majesty."

Wu Zetian's eyes softened, just slightly. "And ensure your sister is given a new robe. The silk on her sleeve is ruined."

Meilin lowered her head, her fingers brushing the torn fabric. The scent of almonds still lingered in the air, faint but persistent.

The guards seized Gao, dragging him toward the door. His voice broke into pleas, then silence. The sound of his footsteps faded down the corridor.

Xiaojiang sheathed her sword. The steel slid home with a quiet click. She turned to Meilin, who stood motionless beside the table.

"You felt it before anyone," Xiaojiang said.

Meilin's hands moved slowly. *The water spoke. It was restless.*

Xiaojiang nodded. "You saved her."

The sun began to set over Chang'an, spilling gold across the tiled roofs and the long avenues that divided the city into its walled wards. The air shimmered with dust and incense. From the drum towers came the deep, resonant toll of the curfew bells: one hundred and eight strikes, each echoing through the streets like a heartbeat. The gates would soon close, sealing the city for the night.

Xiaojiang and Meilin left the room, being dismissed, and stood on the ramparts of the Vermilion Bird Gate, the southern threshold of the capital. The wind tugged at Xiaojiang's crimson cloak, sending it streaming behind her like a banner of blood against the fading sky. Her armour caught the last light, the blackened steel scales glinting faintly. The day's adrenaline had drained away, leaving her face pale and her shoulders heavy. She had survived Gao's treachery, but she knew the palace was never truly safe. Gao had been one spider in a web that stretched across the empire.

Meilin leaned against the stone merlon, her eyes closed. She felt the vibration of the bells through the soles of her boots. The rhythm was the city's pulse, the sound of life continuing after danger had passed. She sighed slowly, her movements weary. *Are we safe?*

Xiaojiang looked out over Chang'an. Beyond the palace walls, the city was beginning to glow. Lanterns flickered to life in the markets and courtyards, their light soft and amber. The Hanshi festival had ended; the people could light fires again. Smoke rose from the kitchens, carrying the scent of roasted chestnuts and sweet wine. Warmth returned to the empire.

For tonight, Xiaojiang signed back. She reached out and tucked a stray strand of hair behind Meilin's ear, before cupping Meilin's cheek. Lin Meilin raised her own hand, putting it over her sister's.

Xiaojiang smiled at her sister. The court would never truly accept Meilin. They would see her as a curiosity, a fragile creature tolerated only because of Xiaojiang's rank. And they would never forgive Lin Xiaojiang for being a woman who had risen through merit and blood, who commanded soldiers and defied the hierarchy of men. To them, she was an anomaly, a disruption in the order of things.

Xiaojiang adjusted the weight of her sword on her hip. Tomorrow would bring interrogations. The Empress would demand names, and the Li princes would weave

new conspiracies. The court would resume its endless dance of silk and poison. But tonight, the air was warm, the bells were ringing, and her sister was alive.

Meilin opened her eyes. The lantern light reflected in them, soft and golden. She signed, *The palace breathes again.*

Xiaojiang smiled faintly. "It does," she said aloud, though Meilin could not hear. "And we breathe with it."

From the direction of the inner courtyard came the sound of footsteps. A messenger approached, bowing low. "Dequn Lin," he said, "Her Majesty requests your presence. The Empress wishes to dine."

Xiaojiang exchanged a glance with Meilin. The summons was unexpected. Wu Zetian rarely invited anyone to her private table, and never after an execution. She signed to her sister, who smiled.

"Tell Her Majesty we will attend," Xiaojiang said.

The messenger bowed again and departed. Meilin's fingers moved quickly. *She wants to celebrate.*

Xiaojiang nodded as they descended the ramparts together, their footsteps echoing against the stone. The palace below was alive with movement. Lanterns hung from carved eaves, their silk shades painted with phoenixes and dragons. Musicians tuned their instruments in the outer hall, the notes trembling like water. The scent of plum wine drifted through the corridors.

When they entered the Empress's solar, the air was warm and golden. Wu Zetian sat at a low table, her robe shimmering with embroidered dragons. The hearth burned again, its flames reflected in the jade cups and bronze mirrors. She looked up as they entered, her expression unreadable.

"Sit," she said.

Xiaojiang and Meilin knelt. Servants poured wine into their cups: rice wine infused with chrysanthemum petals. The Empress raised her own cup. "To loyalty," she said. "To vigilance. To the women who keep this empire alive."

Xiaojiang bowed her head. "Your Majesty honours us."

Wu Zetian's gaze softened. "You have done more than survive, Xiaojiang. You have reminded them that strength wears many faces."

Meilin watched the flames flicker. She felt their rhythm through the floor, steady and alive. For the first time in days, the palace did not feel cold.

The Empress gestured to the musicians. A guqin began to play slow, deliberate notes that filled the room like falling petals. Servants brought dishes of steamed fish, lotus root, and sweet rice cakes. The air shimmered with warmth and spice.

Xiaojiang looked at her sister. Meilin smiled, faint and genuine. She lifted her cup, the jade cool against her fingers. Xiaojiang mirrored her, and together they drank.

Outside, the city glowed beneath the stars. The bells had fallen silent, the ward gates closed. Within the palace, laughter rose softly, mingling with the music. The empire breathed, alive again after three days of ritual silence.

Xiaojiang felt the tension ease from her shoulders. For this moment, there were no plots, no whispers, no shadows. There was only the warmth of fire, the taste of wine, and the quiet certainty that she and her sister had earned their place in history.

The Empress raised her cup once more. "Tonight," she said, "we celebrate your quick thinking, that saved my life."

And under the lantern light, Xiaojiang and Meilin drank with her.