

Monologue ChumMei
of

CHAOXIONG YOU

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1. First Lady's Maid

Every girl of my background wants to be the First Lady's maid, but not everyone could. The First Lady's maid should have poise, know how to serve and talk, and be familiar with various etiquettes so as to properly receive wealthy family guests in the main chamber.

The rewards for such tactfulness are multifold, of course. Besides one teal of silver per month, she sees the master very often, or more importantly, gets to be seen. That is how Sun Xue'E managed to become a Mistress anyway, by seducing the master while serving his ex First Lady Chen. Bitch.

Ever since the age of ten when my father sold me to the Ximen family, I have learned the ways of the house's various power struggles without bringing trouble to myself. The concubines have taught me everything: I learned the smoothness of flattering from their bedroom whispers to the master, the sharpness of speech from their secret fights with each other, and all the subtle rules of who favors whom. When other young maids of my age were still obsessed with tasteless little crimes such as kitchen thefts, I was busy arming myself with the most powerful weapon for survival, the weapon that gets me intact and forward in this household: the complete arts of seduction. I wear make-up, bind my hair, dress neatly, and even practice binding my feet when nobody is looking.



But what is all this for if I never get a chance to approach the master? It has been three years since I was assigned to be the First Lady's maid, something I worked so hard for just so that the master would notice me when he came to visit his wife. Apparently I was wrong, for the master had lost interest in the First Lady long ago. Whenever he comes now, they discuss family business, such as guests that they need to invite or gifts to give, without any room for romance. Then he spends the night somewhere else with a mistress. The First Lady seems to have no complaints whatsoever because her status in the family is as secure as the rocks from Lake Tai. But what does that leave me? Being sixteen, beautiful as a fully blossomed flower and a ripe fruit to be savored, I cannot sit here and watch my youth drift into waste in a maid's chores.

Sun Xue'E was once the maid to a First Lady, too, and now a mistress. If someone as clumsy as she can do it, I can certainly do it, too. I've got to take some actions.

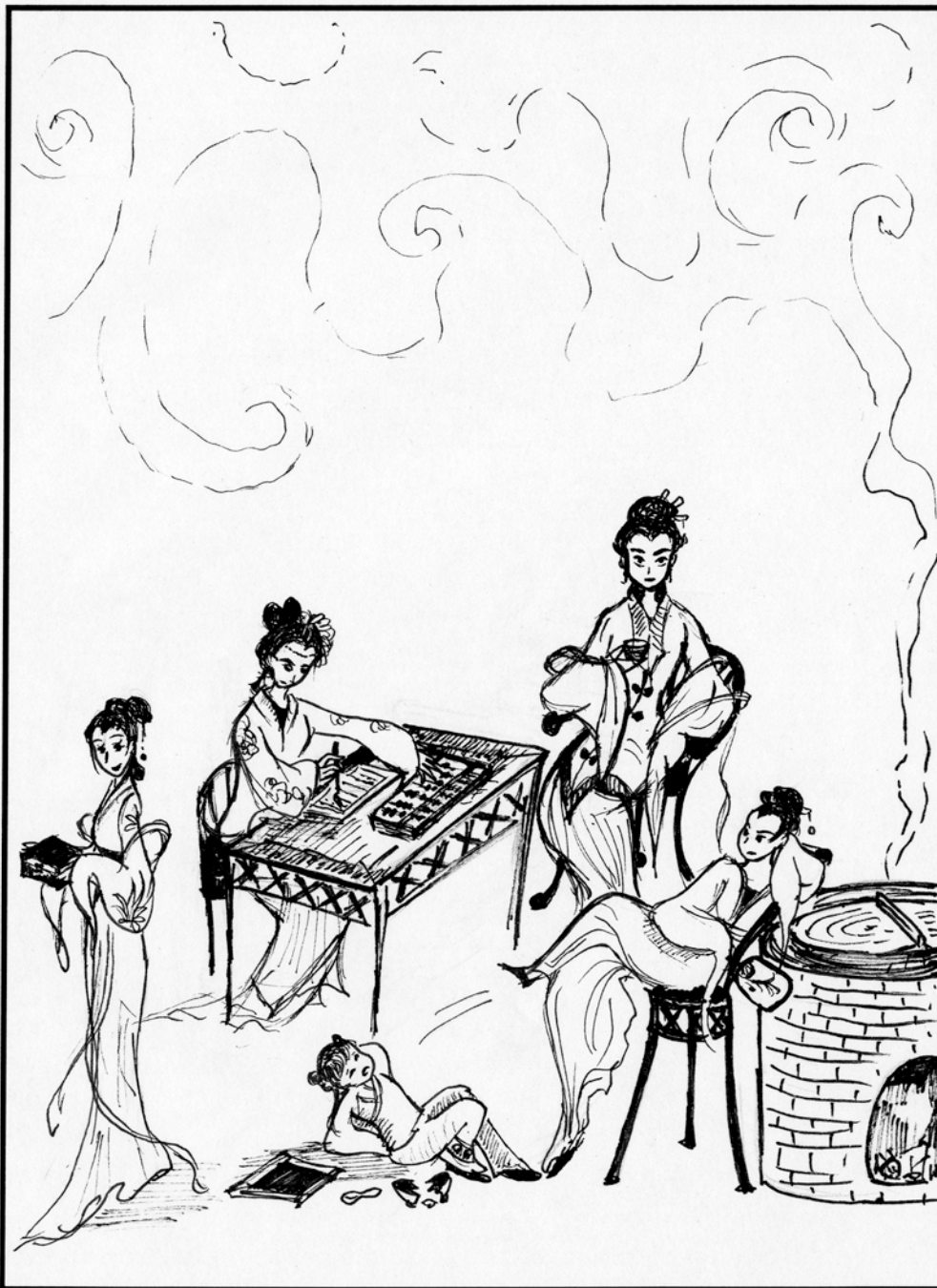
But how? I need some guidance, a role model, anything.



2. Role Model

How did Wu Zetian climb to the point tip of the power pyramid? That is a story I have known since a young age, thanks to my father who sells books for a living. I've heard people at leisure chat about her cruelty in setting up traps for many concubines and having them killed. Yet people always fail to appreciate the extreme intelligence in her schemes, steps of which I would love to learn and imitate: The Fair Flatterer stayed respectful and harmless to the queen, at first, so that the empress trusted her with her weaknesses. While forming allies with some concubines to exclude the others, she also passed false, agitating messages between them to aggravate their relationships. When the time came, she exposed the queen and various other concubines' sins to the emperor, or made some crimes up if there were none to be discovered, and became the ultimate ruler in the court. Most brilliantly, however much she manipulated everything, she managed to look like an amiable, innocent Lady of Talents in front of the emperor, knowing nothing of jealousy or greed, making peace with everyone and wanting the best for the court. If she is not the smartest woman of all Chinese history, then who is?

Now what can I get out of Wu Zetian's story? I am just a maid, and the master is certainly not an emperor. But the household, with its many mistresses and intricate relationships among them, is not unlike the Tang Dynasty imperial court. In this "court", who should I respect? Who should I flatter? Who should I form ally with or alienate? Who should I set up and "sentence to death?"



My six years of observation has not gone into waste. Yueniang might be old and unattractive, but I should always respect her. Being the First Lady, she is like the big Song Dynasty antique vase in the main living room: expensive, well preserved and untouchable even if no one holds flowers in it. Her manners and poise is a symbol of high status by itself.

It may not be a good idea to offend Li Jiao'Er, either, because she is in charge of all the money matters. Given such an important talent and responsibility, I don't think the master would ever want to replace her. But the arrogant singing girl is never friendly to me. I should be careful that she doesn't get more power than she deserves.

For the Third Lady Meng Yulou, I am not quite sure what to do yet. The wealthy widow is new to the house, generous to everybody including servants like me. She carefully minds her own business, and seems to have some genuine innocence different from the others. I like her to some extent, but she is too new to judge. Who knows what heart of scorpions and snakes is hidden under the smiling mask? If everyone likes her, there is a problem.

Before I deal with anyone else, I would love to see the downfall of Sun Xue'E. Coming from the same background as mine, she has got everything I yearn for by sheer luck: being favored by the master, elevated to be a Mistress, and assigned an important job in the household - food manager. I cannot tolerate the sight of her scolding maids in the kitchen so harshly as if they were born to be a lower breed than hers. It disgusts me to see her sit on a high stool in her delicate silk dress, secretly sticking her tiny golden lotus out. Unlike the previous three ladies, she has no wealth of her own nor high-class family members to back her up. What has got into her mind that she dared to forget her former status of a servant so quickly? Pure stupidity, maybe. In such a close-knit household, one can never openly offend anyone, especially not the servants, because all troubles come from words. If I ever rise to power, I swear to Buddha that teaching her a lesson would be my first business in mind. She would be an easy target, for sure.

All I need now is a glance from the master, or a better mistress who attracts the master more than Yueniang. I am cautiously waiting for my time to come.



3. Opportunity

Opportunities always favor those who are prepared. On the eighth of the month, I finally got my share of fortune. There had been rumors for several months that the master was going to bring Wu the Elder's wife home to be the Fifth Mistress. With a red sedan chair, four lanterns and a matchmaker's escort, the new bride came without even the simplest wedding ceremony. I knew my opportunity has come. The moment I saw the sedan chair being carried in behind the door curtain, I hastily found an excuse to stay with the First Lady, hoping that when the Fifth Mistress and the master came to pay their greetings, they would notice me.

The new mistress Pan is no doubt as clever as she is beautiful. Being the newest member of the household, she appealed to everyone almost immediately. She talked sweetly and respectfully with Yueniang as if the First Lady was the only authority in the house. While talking, she did not fail to greet every other concubine in the room with much warmth in her eyes, and also throw the master a seductive look from time to time. When nobody was paying attention, she secretly examined all other women in the room with stealthy glimpses while sitting quietly aside with a smile and all the poise.



When her eyes met mine, I saw a flash of alarm, which was replaced by warmth in no time. I gave her a bright, humble smile immediately, and knelt my knee a little to indicate my respect and admiration for her. She looked at me and smiled contentedly; the warmth in her eyes soon became genuine. Nobody would hate a smart maid who knew her place, I thought. Within seconds, we both knew that we are essentially the same, a born flatterer without a single faux pas. It was not surprising, then, to see the new mistress whispering something into the master's ears, and pointed at me under her wide floral sleeves. Apparently she spotted her own kind in this new, intimidating household, and would want my company and loyalty. The master looked at me, and quickly declared to everyone that I would move to serve the Fifth Mistress in the garden chamber from that day on.

It's hard to describe how excited I was at that moment, yet I tried my best to show no more joy than was expected of me. I knew that my adventure in this big household would finally begin. The new mistress needed ally; with the master's frequent visit in her chamber, I would rise as she rises to power. Sooner or later, I would become a second Sun Xue'E, and better.

I knew I guessed right, because a lustful pair of eyes was already measuring me from head to toe with great curiosity, and the pleasure of finding a long-hidden treasure.



4. The One in Favor

Unexpectedly, my bonding with the new mistress had a rough start, but I had the master to back me up. Ever since he caught the first glimpse of me, he could never turn away from me even though he couldn't do anything in front of Pan. I knew that she hated me to guts for that: I saw her crying herself to sleep once or twice. Yet she was too smart to hold her jealousy for too long. Ever since one time, when the master talked in favor of me as she scolded me for nothing, she learned how to make peace.

"Sister!" she called me into her bedroom in a rare, sweet tone, "I have always liked you more than anyone else here. I see that father likes you, too. If you ever want to let him have you, I will have no objections. We are one family anyway." I laughed and turned her down, "no, my lady. How would I dare to compete with you for the master's favor?" "Oh don't be foolish, my sister." my mistress smiled, "let me tell you: we will both be better off if he has you. We all know that our romantic father would never dote upon any of us forever. We two together, however, can hold his favor in this chamber for as long as possible. Once he starts to frequent other women in and out of the house, he will start to find fault with us, and we can help each other out at that time. In this house, it's every man for himself." She sounded reasonable, and I couldn't agree more. But there was one more point that slipped her mind: we are on the same boat now, but not forever. Once we are done crushing other boats, we will start to tear each other apart. Sisters, oh well.

My mistress kept her word. Under her deliberate absence, the master sneaked into our chamber during the day and had me for the first time. Soon, my clever mistress stopped bothering me with household chores. Under her tacit permission, I became the only maid in the house who binds her feet and wears a mistress' jewelries. It was hard to believe, even for me, how a woman who hoards such jealousy and greed in her nature could tolerate a competitor like me. That is a warning sign, I reminded myself, of how tactful she is. Didn't the rumor have it that she murdered her own husband?

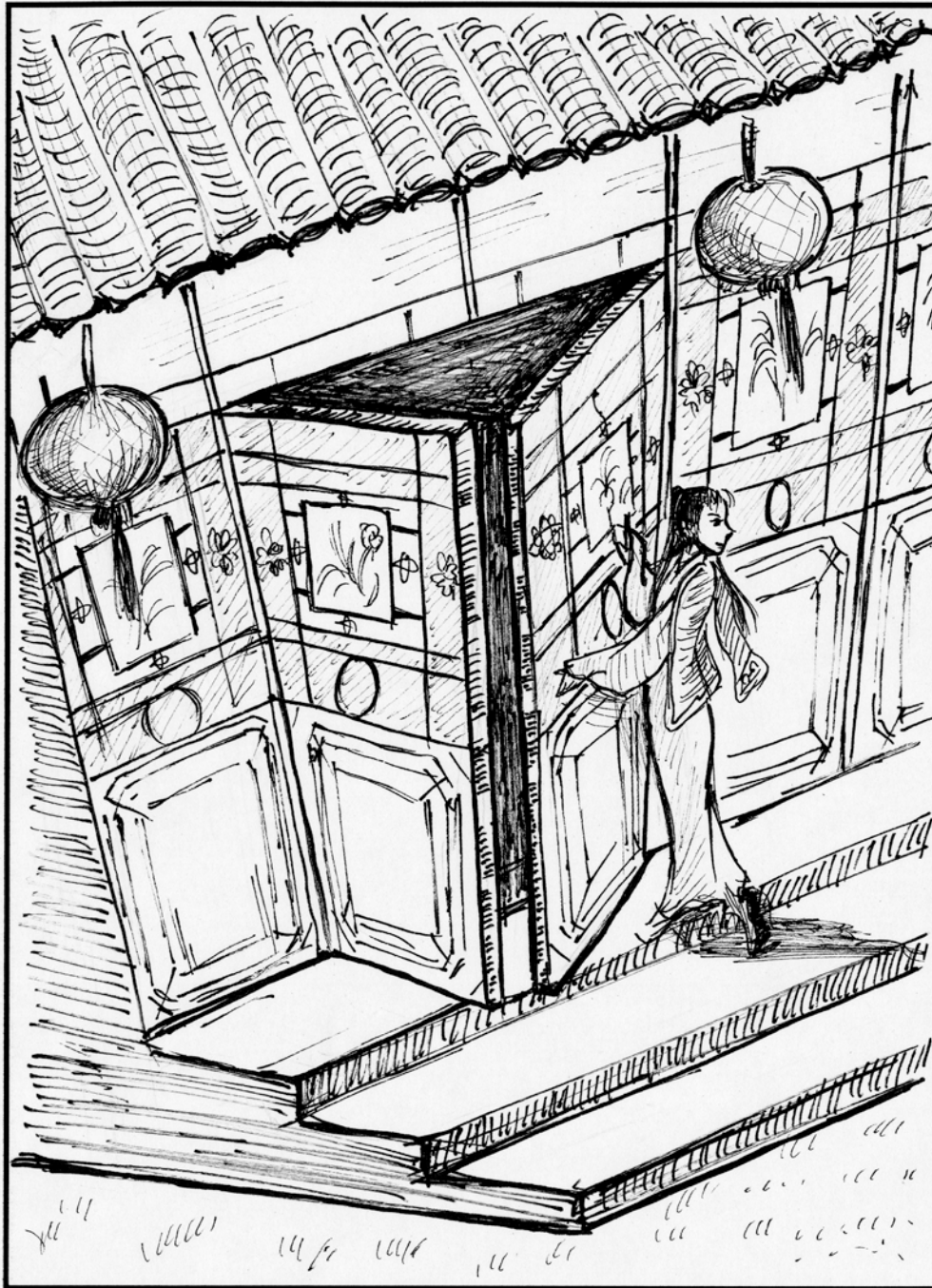


5. The Hidden Dagger

Now that I had a voice in the house, it's time for Sun Xue'E to learn some respect. One night, when the master was spending the evening in our chamber, I sneaked out of the garden and visited Sun's kitchen. "What are you busy with, Fourth Lady?" I asked, pretending to grab an evening snack for the master. "Stop goofing around, Chun Mei." There she was on the high stool, talking to me with her usual superior tone again. "I'm just cooking some congee for everyone's breakfast tomorrow." I smiled. How did she dare to talk to me like that! Didn't she know that I was the new favor of the master? She sure did. That proved once again how stupid she was. But it didn't matter. I already had a little plan.

The next morning came as I eagerly waited for the master and my mistress to rise. "Good morning, master and mistress." I smiled as I helped them dress, "would you like some warm lotus-blossom cakes and vermicelli soup for breakfast?" "No, not today." The master hastily buttoned up his silk robe, "that takes too long to cook. I'm in a hurry to go to the temple for some pearls." My mistress kissed him contentedly on hearing this, knowing that the pearls were for her to make into a headband. "Oh there's no need to cook at all!" I smiled, "I saw the Fourth Lady preparing them last night for your breakfast. They must be all ready now." The master was pleased, and sent Qiu-ju to fetch them immediately as he put on his boots.

You know the rest of the story. There was no cake or soup prepared, of course. I harshly scolded Qiu-ju in the kitchen for having the master and mistress wait for so long, which led the Fourth Lady to a bad temper. When I came back, I vividly fabricated how the Fourth Lady refused to give the food to me because she didn't want to serve "the whore and her slutty slave", which effectively led the master to severely beat and kick her. As you could tell, ever since that day, I have not only suppressed the superiority of Sun Xue'E, but also planted a seed of hatred between her and my own mistress. My job, then, was to merely sit back and watch their fights.



The fight began sooner than I expected. It had been several months since my mistress came to the house now. Her constant favor from the master made her much less humble and more openly jealous than before. She was so bold as to even start an affair with a servant. Sun Xue'E and Li Jiao'Er immediately got to know about it and told on her to Yueniang. I could have covered for my mistress, of course, but I didn't want to. Considering her bad temper and increasingly intolerable jealousy about me, I wanted her to be punished somehow, so that she knew who she was dealing with.

Unfortunately, the First Lady was not interested in getting involved in the two mistresses' accuse. Having no evidence of the adultery, the two failed to convince Yueniang of what happened, which led my Fifth Lady to ecstasy and an even more arrogant temperament. "You crazy little whore!" she laughed and cursed at me once when she was drunk, "I know you all want to see the end of me. But you know what? I will not let you have it. I will see my dear servant right tonight, and still nobody would believe a word you said."

On hearing that, I had had enough. When the night came and her servant lover climbed onto her bed, I sneaked out and unlatched their backdoor. I was almost certain that their noise would wake up Qiu-ju, who slept right outside of the mistress' bedroom. Knowing that Qiu-ju could never keep any secret, I happily feigned sleep throughout the night, and waited for the scandal to unfold through Qiu-ju's gossip. "Let's wait and see, dear Mistress." I smiled to myself, "you may have your pleasure to curse at me now, but tomorrow, you will beg me for mercy to cover your crime."



6. The End

I often wonder what Empress Wu would do if she faced many of my life situations. Would she want to be a concubine or even a first lady one day? Would she seduce the master, expose Pan Jinlian's adultery, and have Sun Xue'E beaten, too? I know she would. She would even feel guilty after all this the way I do now.

Guilty or not, we would do it anyway. There is no right or wrong in this world, and we have no other choice. We are both intelligent, beautiful young women born into a man's world with a status lower than what our capacity allows us. Ruining others is the only way we get to have a say and stay safe. Readers behold: Later historians will ponder the morality of my actions and fairly give a judgment. If there has to be someone to blame, it should be our times and the merciless societies, not us.

Now if you excuse me, I have new plans to make, a master to serve, and plenty of mistresses to get rid of.