

Silken Fetters - Allegra, Year 11, NSW

– *Ming Dynasty, Wudang Mountains, China* –

Nestled between the mist-veiled valleys, a waterfall winds its way through the lush viridescent mountains into a rippling creek, as koi trace resplendent colours into dappled light.

I open an eye. A pair of passerine swallows take to the air from the golden canopy of maidenhair trees that overlook the precipice of the cascade. I inhale the scent of autumn morning dew and fresh chrysanthemums, and allow my qi¹ to sink into a state of calm once again.

At the peak of the mount, an ancient pagoda stands tall, its sweeping eaves poised like a crane ready to take flight. The scent of incense and the mellifluous melody of the bamboo flute pertains across neighbouring hills, stemming from the heart of a small nunnery, the tall and heavy red doors adorned with golden studwork and a brass ring – a reminder of where I was entrusted five years before.

As a child, my world was embroidered silks, opulent courtyards, and servantry. I was a xiaojie², a lady, treasured daughter of the Xia noble family, my future secured by my father's favour at court. My oldest brother was on his way to securing his position as the youngest minister, overseeing the Ministry of Justice, and my younger brother was to follow in uncle's footsteps and take over the family business.

I, on the other hand, was to marry into the prestigious Chao family as soon as I turned fifteen and intertwine our family with the wealthy upper echelons of the kingdom.

“You will make the Chao family proud, just as you have made us,” my father had told me, patting my shoulder as my mother squeezed my hand in hers.

The night before my tenth birthday, everything changed.

The emperor turned against us. My father's allies vanished. My older brother was demoted, his carefully written thesis left torn and scattered. My younger brother was forced out of his studies, and acquaintances who once sought my presence would turn stiffly as I passed. The gatekeeper, who once called me by the name “Little Miss” slid the lock shut as soon as I approached the threshold.

Our family was stripped of our titles, our luxuries, left ashamed and dishonoured. One by one, our household was dismantled. The royal decree ordered the Xia clan to be exiled to

¹ Qi is the vital force or energy in all living entities according to Traditional Chinese Medicine and martial arts practices. By understanding the rhythm and flow of qi, it can facilitate mental stability, health, and longevity.

² Xiaojie is the title for a young lady in Mandarin.

southern provinces. It would take three months to walk there. My mother had the foresight that my dishonoured family name would mean my prospects of marrying into another noble family were impossible, and I would not survive the treacherous journey.

It was raining the night my mother relinquished me to Zishan Nunnery. Moonlight barely peeked through the protective veil of fog that surrounded the secrecy of the temple. I was soaked, clutching the tattered silk robe, a remnant of a past life, that barely shielded me from the chilly, frigid mountain air. She spoke fervently to the abbess, who glanced at the lotus shoes upon my feet, and nodded once. As I was ushered inwards, I turned and caught sight of my mother's stricken face as the heavy doors swung shut, her expression etched into my memory. I never got to say goodbye.

Still, I would not cry.

“Though her feet are now unbound, the years of damage to her arch can no longer be undone. They will forever remain reshaped,” the abbess said to my shifu³.

A practice that survived half a millenium. The story behind this custom is as told: amidst the Tang dynasty, Emperor Li Yu became entranced by his concubine who bound her feet in the shape of crescents and performed her dance upon a golden lotus, weightless and delicate. Li Yu was a poet before an emperor, and he likened her to the new moon; slender, ethereal, lissom, and graceful. Although unnamed and unaware, beauty would be reborn in her image, and the following five centuries of women and girls' destinies would be tethered to their feet.

“However, this should not stop you from training, for your future lies in you alone,” said the abbess, her palms out holding a fresh set of simple white robes.

Given my disability, I was unsuitable for heavy combative kungfu like my peers. Instead, Shifu told me to focus on strengthening and building flexibility in my feet, ankles and lower legs. Prayer, breathwork, meditation, and fasting became second nature to me. My fellow apprentices would snicker at my unnatural movements or the misshapen form of my arch that coalesced into shame, but Shifu did not pity me.

Others glanced at me disdainfully as the daughter of a former noble family who had been stripped of her gold and jade.

“Shifu, the other girls glance at me with such contempt. My mother would never forgive me for bringing such shame upon our family.”

Shifu picked up my last pair of silken lotus slippers that I had saved before my home was sequestered by the authorities.

³ Shifu means and is used as a title to address a master/teacher in Mandarin.

“Though without bindings, they long for what these represent. Status, beauty, value in the eyes of our male counterparts. Though you no longer have ribbons and coveted ornaments of a lady of honor, they have never even seen such luxury. It is natural for others to resent the system that has given and taken unevenly. Yet in truth, the culture of footbinding benefits no woman or girl.”

Shifu fixed her sleeve and looked onwards to the dormitories where the other girls slept.

“For those who have broken their bones and disfigured their bodies, they are bound not only in flesh but in fate; tethered to their husbands physically, as they are unable to run away. They are manufactured as accessories of beauty and servitude at the cost of freedom, never to walk a single eve without suffering in agony. For the girls who have never been given the opportunity to bind, they are considered unwanted and outcasts, shunned by a society that measures worth by how well they can endure suffering in silence.”

The wind stirred the incense lazily as I turned over this information. All my life before I came to the temple, it had been normalised, a fundamental truth woven into every experience, that I had never considered how cruel and unfair it was, for to me, it had simply always been.

Shifu continued, “Do not let the doubts of others define your path. Their disbelief is a reflection of their limits, not yours. Let your actions prove your worth.”

So I endured the ridicule as I trained. They sneered as I stumbled, yet I did not cry, just like when I first had my feet bound. I refused to let tears cloud my vision for my future, staying grounded in my purpose even as I learnt to fly above the ground. My bones protested with every shift of weight, trembling with each mincing step, but as time passed, I learned not to defy gravity, but to master it.

It was pure luck, to have feet only partly broken, knowing elsewhere – another girl who also holds her hair in two braids, with the same small stature and dimples walks with feet completely bound, each step constrained and dictated. I could have had her kismet, and she could have had mine.

Under the guidance of my shifu, I mastered the art of *qinggong*, the lightness skill, allowing me to balance in the most extreme of heights, landing on the points of my feet, or equalise the forces working for and against my frame on the bamboo poles and drift where the river was still.

I learnt to adapt the concepts to suit my body. Where they spun low, I leapt high. I'd skim the ground like a whisper, wielding a sword with ease, or hold still upon the points atop the pagoda until daybreak. Each lesson learnt and each form created was transcribed onto parchment in careful strokes, the style of the “Golden Lotus”. As I experimented and the variety of my skills widened and lengthened, so did my legacy.

I send a silent prayer through the morning breeze.

I now understand the sacrifices you made to give me this freedom that you and so many others never received, it's more than you could have ever imagined.

Mother, are you witnessing this life I'm living now?

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– Present Day, Wudang Mountains, China –

In a bustling museum, a young girl around the age of ten, of small stature, with dimples and her hair held in braids stood on her tiptoes with unbroken feet. Her eyes swallowed the yellowish manuscript through the glass case curiously, two hands plastered on the cool surface. Under the title, the logogram of the Xia family name was stamped in red ink.

“Shifu, what is that?”

“The Pedagogy of the Celestial Golden Lotus Kungfu, created by a legendary martial artist. She learned to bear her pain so that you may walk unbroken today.”

The young girl gazed, starstruck, as the golden lettering twinkled at her.