**SMALL TALK:**

**Women of Influence: Navigating Beauty and Power in Society**

XS:

Good day, ladies.

(Murmurs of hellos)

It’s an honor to meet all of you. As all of you should know by now, I am Xishi. I’ve heard so much about you and your stories. Welcome to the first support group meeting. As you know, we are here to support one other in navigating beauty and power dynamics in society, especially in our unique circumstances that we share. We are bonded by our court relations, our political influence as well as our \*coughs\* legendary demises. We shall kick off our session with our pledge, outlining the guidelines of our support group. Hm… Diaochan Mei? Would you like to read our pledge?

DC:

Me? Alright. Repeat after me.

‘We, the Four Beauties of Ancient China.’

XS, ZJ, GF:

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DC:

‘Pledge to support and uplift each other in our personal and collective journeys.’

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XS:

Thank you, Diaochan Mei. Now, we may know of each other, but for formality’s sake, let’s go around and introduce ourselves. I am Xishi, known best for being the first of the Four Beauties. I may not look like it, but I am the oldest here. I was born in the Spring and Autumn period, 770-476 BC. Legend states that when fish gaze upon my beauty, they forget how to swim, and drown.

(1 person claps, then the rest follow)

ZJ:

It’s nice to meet you, Xishi Jie. Thank you for organizing this support group for us, it’s great to finally meet the other Three Beauties in person. I am Wang Zhaojun, but you can just call me Zhaojun. I was born in the Western Han dynasty, 50 BC. I am most famous for becoming a political bride to the Ancient Mongolian people. Stories say that when geese hear my pipa, they are so stunned that they fall from the sky!

(claps)

DC:

Hi, I’m Diaochan. I was born in the late Eastern Han dynasty, in 160 AD, where I became famous for my role in the historical novel “Romance of the Three Kingdoms”. It is said that I was so beautiful that the moon turned away its face for it knew it could not compare.

(claps)

GF:

Hey, everyone! I’m Yang Yuhuan, but like, everyone knows me as Guifei, Gui meaning prized and Fei meaning consort. I was born in the Tang dynasty, 22nd June 719 AD. As for me, flowers are so jealous of my beauty that they turn away in shame. You know, I have always wanted to meet the other beauties; I wouldn’t miss it for the world!

(claps)

XS:

(sighs)

Thank you, everyone, for introducing yourselves. Our support group’s aim of the day is to share our experiences and regrets firsthand, for us to share our first person testimony of our lives.

So, shall we begin? Who would like to start?

(Silence… maybe a tapping of the foot. A clearing of the throat. Anxious.)

…

Well, if nobody is ready, then I shall speak first.

History tells of Xishi, the most perfect girl of all. Not a centimeter too short or too tall, not an ounce too heavy or too thin. This girl was of course beloved by many who saw her face, including the Yue Emperor. Devoted to her country and loyal to her emperor, she obeyed his order to seduce the Wu Emperor and bring forth his demise. The Wu Emperor was kind and loved her with all his heart, but what the world doesn’t know is that I loved him too. But the Xishi of then was too obedient. Ever loyal to her own emperor, she let the Wu kingdom fall, and the man she truly loved fell with it. Alas, as we all know, beauty is but a curse. When I returned to my Yue Emperor’s side, I was plunged into the depths of the water, left to drown lest I use my face against him.

ZJ:

History has not been kind to you by portraying you as unfeeling, when you were but a loyal mercenary. You were not unfeeling as they say. I’m sorry that you had to go through that. Sometimes, your sacrifices are not seen by the people you love. No matter how much you do, your efforts may never be acknowledged. Sometimes, they’re even used against you.

GF:

I’m sorry, but are we listening to the same story? I mean, I guess you’re right that Xishi Jie’s story is a tragedy, but why are you pitying her? Is it not her own fault for abandoning her emperor? I know that if I had the love of my life right in front of me, I would never leave him. I mean, sure. She didn’t deserve the ending she got, but to only see her as the victim of her story is wrong.

DC:

That may be how you feel Guifei but love blinds. You may think the world of someone but find out their true intentions way too late. It is not her fault that her loyalty blinded her.

XS:

No, Guifei is right, Diaochan. I am but a fool. My own actions led to my own downfall. This is something I must struggle with, a regret that I will repent for as long as I live.

ZJ:

No Xishi Jie, you need to learn not to obsess over your regrets. Only then can you atone for your mistakes. I am sure that your Wu Emperor would never be able to rest easy if he knew that you still held on to this. You need to learn to forgive yourself. You have suffered enough already.

DC:

Speaking of forgiveness is easy, Zhaojun Jie, but putting it into practice is the real challenge. I’m sure you have things that you have done that you have yet to forgive yourself for.

GF:

Yes Zhaojun Jie, go on, tell us your story!

ZJ:

Alright…

Once upon a time, there was a headstrong girl. This little girl was determined to enter the palace and enter she did. All of the other palace girls brought gifts upon gifts to the palace portrait artist, but the little girl refused. She was confident enough in her beauty, but that proved to be her downfall. In a fit of rage, the painter painted her as the ugliest girl in court!

GF:

What an outrage! They basically doomed the girl to a terrible lonely life in the palace! They must have been a terrible artist to only be able to get by with bribery!

ZJ:

Exactly! And of course, the other palace girls who saw her face grew extremely jealous, and treated her terribly.

DC:

Did you ever regret it? Not bribing the artist?

ZJ:

(laughs)

Not one bit! Eventually, the emperor was looking for an envoy to marry off to an Ancient Mongolian prince. Not wanting to give away his favorite concubines, he asked for the girl with the plainest portrait to be given away.

GF:

(gasps)

And the girl he chose was you?!

XS:

Guifei! Stop interrupting! Let her tell her story.

ZJ:

No, it’s quite alright, Xishi Jie. Guifei is just excited. I suppose the art of storytelling has yet to leave me. But yes, the girl he chose was in fact, me! You should have seen the look on the emperor’s face when he realized the mistake he had made! But by then, it was too late. I had been presented as the Mongolian prince’s bride, and the prince was as happy as can be! We rode off North, where we lived happily ever after.

DC:

And what happened to the artist?

ZJ:

Oh yes, the artist! Of course, the emperor had them executed immediately. They really got what they deserved.

GF:

I really liked your story, Zhaojun Jie! You really seem to have no regrets! Is your story the only one with a happy ending?

ZJ:

Well, not exactly. My history’s fairy tale ending ends there, but what happened after? As a Chinese girl being married off to what our country considered as “barbarians”, one could say I was initially… discontent. But, as a political envoy, I couldn’t be rude to them, and vice versa. For the sake of both our countries. It took the journey North to convince me otherwise. While cautious, they made sure I was warm and well fed through the harsh winter. With them, rank meant little, everyone was treated like family. Slowly, we warmed up to each other, and despite not knowing Mongolian, we communicated through song.

GF:  
It must have been so hard being away from your family for so long. I am sure that they missed you lots.

ZJ:

Hard is an understatement. Occasionally, I would send letters back home, but I soon learnt what being a “barbarian sympathizer” meant. That was my only regret. I gained a family but lost the one I left behind. I miss them to this day. Even now, I instinctively fight to excuse the harsh ways the Chinese treated the Mongolians. But it’s their absolute refusal to repent that does it for me. I may be Chinese by blood, but I refuse to associate with xenophobes and racists any longer.

XS:

It’s not about the thoughts you think, Zhaojun, it’s about the actions you take. When you think impulsively, your first reaction is what you have been taught to think. It’s your follow up response and actions that show who you truly are. You’re doing a great job already by not condoning their racist actions.

DC:

You feel bad. That’s what matters, Zhaojun Jie. If you move to correct yourself, you’ve already broken free from the cycle.

ZJ:

T-thank you. That really means so much. It feels good to have all of you backing me up on that. Guifei, would you like to speak? Do you have any problems? Any regrets?

GF:

Hmm… if I were to talk about my regrets… I don’t think I really have any. Oh, other than the fact that everyone in this day and age keeps telling me I’m fat! I’m not fat. I’m pleasantly plump, and I will let you know that for my era, I was the pinnacle of beauty!

My regret is not living long enough so I could set those wretched historians straight! Beauty standards have changed so much, just because scholars called me “full bodied”, everyone jumps on the bandwagon that Guifei is obese? Guifei? More like You4 Gui4 You4 Fei2! So, what if I lived a comfortable life? It was a great life! Well, until it ended of course. But that’s not important. At least the artists made sure that I was beautiful. Don’t I look good?

DC:

Um… I think we skipped over something there. Do you… want to talk about your death? Seems like you’ve got some… unpackaged baggage over there…

GF:

Oh. Right. My death. Let me think. Well so I was like, the emperor’s favorite, most prized consort for 11 years. That says something right? So, I just gave some of my family members high-ranking jobs. No biggie, right? Then, everyone decides to turn it on ME! Calling it… what’s the word…

ZJ:

… Nepotism?

GF:

Yes! That! Ooh, I hate that word… it has such a bad connotation behind it. Not everything I do is ‘nepotism’ you know. Like, is it wrong to protect my own interests? If you had the power to make your family’s lives better, are you telling me you wouldn’t do the same? Ugh, people can be so dumb sometimes.

XS:

\*coughs\* Dear Guifei, have you perhaps ever considered that others may not be as well off as you? People who had to fight to even reach the position you were handed on a silver platter-

GF:

Hey! I fought hard to get to my position, why wouldn’t I do everything I can to keep it-

DC:

Alright, alright Guifei. Back to the topic. Your death?

GF:

Right. Anyway, people were like, totally upset that I what, had too much power? Believe me, sweetie. There’s no such thing as too much power. So, like, they got mad and made up a bunch of rumors that I was gonna overthrow the emperor, which is totally Not True by the way, cause I’m like totally in love with my Shnookums! I would never do anything to hurt him! But it doesn’t matter. In the end, the soldiers killed me anyway.

ZJ:

Hold on, back up a little, you’re telling me that the soldiers hated you so much, that they just killed you against the emperor’s wishes?

DC:

\*claps\*

Good job, soldiers. You did well.

XS:

Diaochan Mei!

DC:

Sorry.

GF:

Well yeah, pretty much. They probably couldn’t stand that I constantly made them import lychees for me-

DC:

(tired)

Guifei.

GF:

But what could I do? Where else would I be able to get my fresh, soft, lychees-

XS:

(scolding)

Guifei.

GF:

Ooh, how I love my lychees, the soft red skin contrasting its pearly white flesh-

ZJ:

(curt)

Guifei.

GF:

The sweet embrace on my tongue as I-

XS, ZJ, DC:  
GUIFEI. YOUR DEATH.

GF:

Oh right! Sorry. Yeah so, the emperor was so sad that he dug up my body just so he could see me again. Then, he reburied it and kept the fragrance bag so he would always be able to remember me. It’s said that while my body decomposed, the bag stayed fresh! That’s like a metaphor for our love! Isn’t that like, so romantic?

DC:

Gosh, Guifei, you really have been brainwashed by history’s romanticization of your tale. Zhaojun Jie, do we need to get her head checked? It doesn’t seem screwed on correctly.

XS:

You know what Guifei? Good on you. Find the good in your life. Fully enjoy it. No regrets.

ZJ:

(sighs)

Looks like she’s gonna need more than one session.

GF:

Alright, but legit, no regrets. I’m happy being my own boss now. I don’t need a man to control me! I’m my own woman! Made for myself, by myself. And I’m beautiful, just the way I am. Though having a little boy toy doesn’t hurt. Speaking of boy toys and regrets, go Diaochan go!

DC:

Excuse me. Boytoys and regrets is not the best segway into my life. Though I do suppose you’re not wrong…

(sigh)

Sometimes I feel like I am lesser than the rest of you.

ZJ:  
What? Why? Why would you possibly feel that way?

DC:

People have always said that my story was just that: a story. The rest of the men in my story definitely existed, but I was never documented in history. It’s not the nicest feeling, not knowing if you really existed.

XS:

Does that matter? In the end, you’re just as beloved as the rest of us.

DC:

But am I? Everyone seems to hate me.

GF:

How can they hate you if they never knew you?

DC:

… You’re right, Guifei. Why would I care about people who don’t care to understand who I am?

ZJ:

Go on then, Diaochan Mei. Help us understand you.

DC:

Well, you see… When I was very young, too young to be making decisions, I met a man. He offered the hungry orphan a family and a home, all in exchange for a favor that he would claim in the future. When I became of age, he decided to claim back his favor. In short, I was supposed to seduce both the General and his son, pit them against each other, and watch them fall. And fall they did.

I blame that stupid book. ‘Romance of the Three Kingdoms’, more like, … I can’t think of a good retort, but know that if I could, I would put it here. Of course, they had to tell the story, where I was the vixen who willingly manipulated and seduced them into falling for me just for the sake of chaos. Now. You tell me. Does that really make sense? Also, what person would take in a child, and make a favor they fulfil part of the conditions of being given a home? Seems suspicious to me.

(rambling)

Of course, suspicious people are bound to do suspicious things. When my favor was repaid, I was promised a life of nunnery where I may devote myself to the moon goddess. He said my clause was unfinished. That I had yet to complete my duty. He wanted to send me to fight an evil I would never be able to defeat. If I were to serve the new titan, I would never make it out alive.

That stupid book paints pictures of my cowardice. Lies about how I took the easy way out. But you tell me, when is taking your life ever an easy decision? To leave behind all you have ever known, all you have ever lost, to feel like death is your only escape? Suicide is how I reclaimed my power.

ZJ:

…

You asked me this before, and in return I shall ask you, Diaochan Mei. Do you regret it?

DC:

I may not be an advocate for suicide, but I would do it all over again if I had to. I would gladly give up my life if it meant I would never have to suffer by the hands of a man again. In death, I returned to the moon goddess, she is where I found my peace. I am content.

GF:

You know what, Diaochan Jie? I like, really respect you. Being able to make that decision for yourself? It must have been, like, tough. I’m proud of you for exercising your power over such a terrible situation. I’m glad that you were able to be happy in the end. You really have been through so much.

DC:

Thank you Guifei. It means a lot, really. It hurts that there will always be people who mock my decision, but I’m glad that you can stand by my side.

XS:

Thank you, Diaochan.

Today was a lot, so I would like everyone to get a good rest when they get home. Thank you for trusting us with your stories, and your truths. I know how difficult it is to open up to strangers so quickly. To wrap our session up, shall we go through some of our key takeaways?

Today we learnt that although we have beauty that rivals nature, we are more than that. We have stories and lives beyond our legends and history. Personalities beyond the book.

ZJ:

Thank you Xishi, Guifei, Diaochan, it’s hard to find such understanding people. I really appreciate this opportunity to share what I went through, and I enjoyed hearing your firsthand perspectives on your stories. Who gave those artists and storytellers the right to speak for us?

DC:

Yeah! Twisting things to suit their own narratives? How irresponsible. Somebody should be there to regulate their facts and history. Do they know how much influence they have? But really, thank you all of you., but especially Guifei for being so understanding. That kindness is something I didn’t expect from you, and I’m sorry for judging you and being mean to you.

GF:

I… I’m sorry. I feel like I may not have shared enough. All of you took this session so seriously, but I was so casual about it. I would like to use the next session to open up a bit more. But I really do appreciate the honesty. Thank you

XS:

We appreciate you too Guifei. Opening up is hard, and we appreciate the effort. With that, let’s wrap up today’s meeting. Shall we meet at the same time next week?

DC:

You got it. Anyone down to get some bubble tea?

GF:

I want extra boba!

ZJ:

You know what? Tea does sound great.

XS:

All of us are going, then?