



The Secrets of Jin-shei

By Alma Alexander
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Introduction

Enter an ancient world of courtly elegance and intrigue, where sages are also sorcerers, and the daughter of a lowly seamstress can become a companion to an empress. In this magical land there is a secret language -- a language that women have passed down from mother to daughter for countless generations -- a language that signals a bond like no other ... the bond of jin-shei.

Set in a mythical Chinese kingdom, *The Secrets of Jin-shei* is a timeless story of what sustains friendship -- and what tears it apart. Accepting all the joys and responsibilities of jin-shei, eight girls pledge lifelong loyalty to each other: the poet, Tai, whose promise to a dying girl changes the history of an empire; the warrior, Xaform, an orphan who will protect her chosen family no matter what the cost; Khailin, the scholar, whose thirst for knowledge leads her into a world of dark secrets and alchemy; sage Nhia, the only person with the power to save Khailin; Tammary, the gypsy girl, whose

secret lineage could ruin a royal house; Qiaan, daughter of a captain in the Imperial Guard, with family secrets of her own; the healer, Yuet, confidante to the empress; and the empress herself, Liudan, whose search for family and ultimate quest for immortality holds the power to destroy them all.

Discussion Questions

1. Which Jin-shei sister do you identify with most? Why?
2. Tai makes a promise to the Little Empress as she is dying, a promise which has far-reaching impact on the rest of Tai's life. Have you ever made such a promise that you have kept?
3. When Liudan asks Khailin to do "the unthinkable" in the name of jin-shei, Khailin agrees. Do you agree with Khailin's decision? Yuet makes a different choice, who do you feel made the correct choice? Why? Would you have followed Khailin's path or Yuet's?
3. What is the greatest sacrifice you have ever made to help a friend? Did you compromise your own values?
4. Jin-ashu is the secret language of the jin-shei sisters. What are some other sorts of "secret languages" of women?
5. Jin-ashu is based on a real secret language -- nushu -- which was used in some ways to subvert the patriarchal power structure in China. What other ways do reclaim power in patriarchal societies?
6. Liudan can be viewed as emotionally unstable, yet the sisters continue to support her and allow her to influence them all -- even above and beyond the bonds of jin-shei. Why?
7. The jin-shei sisters go to great lengths -- even the risk of death -- to protect one another. What sorts of things have your friends done for you? In what ways have you supported your friends? Is this a uniquely feminine trait? Are women "predisposed" to form these intense bonds and friendships or is that just a stereotype?
8. Alma Alexander's characters defy stereotypes -- for example, Xaform is the most powerful warrior, a "killing machine" by her own definition, while Liudan creates her own rules and in fact, rewrites the rulebook for the empire. How are the rest of the sister unique? In what ways have your own friends defied stereotypes?
9. Do you agree that the bonds of friendship can be stronger than blood ties? What are some examples from your own life?

About the author

Alma Alexander is the author of three acclaimed novels that have been published exclusively in Australia and New Zealand. She was born in Yugoslavia, grew up in Africa, and now lives in the state of Washington. *The Secrets of Jin-shei* will also be published in Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Italy, and Germany.