

The story of Chi Si Chen (Autumn Silver Reed)

Background

I lived in the pinnacle of human civilization, the empire of Tu Lung. To be more precise in a well appointed family building near the centre of Shinmei city in Winto Forest district, Fengnao province. Many people said this, but none said it the way my grandmother could. My grandmother's tongue was the sharpest weapon in our home, the Guan Dao's of my brothers notwithstanding. I was the third of five children, three boys, of a wealthy merchant family. We could trace our ancestry to several noble clans, Yang foremost, so even if we were not noble, our standing was good ('the money helps, of course', granny said). My mother's mother was the daughter of a noble and judge, but even she accepted that to fight granny would be bloody – and one sided. My mother was proper in her very essence, pure like new silk – and as informative. She made my father a good wife, but his many travels made her life lonely. Still she could cloth herself as well as the judge's wife, and all her sons were without flaw, so she seemed happy.

Only a few precious memories of my father are mine; as a daughter I stood low on his limited time when he was home, but once he smiled when I played the Pipa, and I vividly remembered the time he thanked me because my serving different kind of teas helped clinched an important deal. 'Taste is subtle messenger'. My two elder brothers I seldom saw - Shu was working hard to become my father's heir, while Nio had become a servant of the local temple. That might seem a step down, but the family was generous with temple gifts and my father had plans: Nio might be allowed to join the Shugenja - even if his ancestry was perhaps not perfect. If not then the training in calligraphy positioned him for 'Master of Records' for our town. Even my mother's mother nodded in acceptance when she heard of this plan.

I have no recollection of saying it, but my sister was known in our family as Moon's Mirror, because I called her that after she was born. I was only two at that time, so it sounds unlikely, but I cannot believe mother would lie about that. She was beautiful, well mannered, and as sharp and twisted as a fox maiden who had training from Monkey. I recall one incident when I was twelve: I overheard a conversation between granny and Mirror, or more an admonishment. My grandmother told my younger sister that certain schemes would needed to be 'closed', that if sis ever endangered the family again, granny would show the 'broken grasshopper'. Whatever that was, after that Mirror was even more subtle, but she acted nicer towards the rest of the family. Oddly enough I can recall several times when I was on the point of loosing something valuable to her, but she always relented - perhaps relented isn't the right word. She looked at me as if I had said something, well, I'm not sure, but something that made her doubt her chances. We were each other's mirror, but we were family. Bond's of blood count, and family obligations are as inescapable as the seasons.

My youngest brother had little choice in his lot in life, but he accepted his karma with gusto. Even shaved he could fight with a wooden sword like a master, and, almost as important, he knew his skill, so he never blustered. Horses were his love, and a serious position in the army would reflect well on the family. Where Shu's shadow looked small, and Nio's felt slightly hazy, Yoshi's was large - if potentially dark, I am his elder sister. One day I will need to rescue him.

My father's brother lived with us, with his wife and four sons and two daughters, supporting the business. They had a second standing to us, but little strain, as my father was neither stingy nor stupid. They lived in the right side house and uncle had his own money chest and was allowed to designate his burial site on the family cemetery. Aunt Liu was as common as muck, but as daughter of a rich farmer she ran our shared household in a way my mother never would have done. My two nieces were married of when they were twelve to other merchant families, and Shu, Yoshi, Mirror, two of my cousins, and I were promised. Our fortune was well established.

The final member of our family was no member at all. Granny's sister lived far west of us, in the foothills near the mountains. She had revoked all family bonds and become a WuJen. Still she had a soft spot for granny and my father. I cannot remember one instance where her might was used for the family, but it was *known*; there were stories of her exploits and I doubt if even the Master of Spring Blossom of the large temple of the Weeping Willow north of us would have stood a chance against her. Once she visited us, and it was like the Emperor was coming for a short sojourn: even the pig sty was cleaned up. When she walked in there was this broken expectation remade. She walked in, alone, a travelers cloak and woven hat, and one could almost taste the shock and disappointment. Then her clothes shimmered and turned into the finest silk, and for a fleeting moment a cloud creature became visible carrying a mother of pearl palanquin. It floated away and disappeared as mist. She looked around, giving my sister and myself a glance which felt like she had seen our deepest thoughts, and accepted our hospitality. If she spoke during our visit, it must have been a single word, but still each of us knew her wishes. When she left she painted a sign on our gate and it felt like evil spirits did not dare invade our house since then.

My upbringing was both conventional and odd. I learned how to play the Pipa, how to be well mannered, and how to listen - both in sound and meaning. My interest in the Gods was proper and supported by teachers, and my understanding of the stars an acceptable, if odd, hobby. Where my family broke common tradition was that we each received weapons training. All men (No exempted of course) learned to fight with the Guan Dao from horseback. As a rich non noble family training in the Jian was expected, but neither law nor custom forbade the Guan Dao - 'Who else but nobles can afford to have so many spare horses', granny mentioned - so, even if we were not noble, my family tried to reach that exalted state. This custom started five generations ago, but one day, during the life of my grandfather, assassins crept in and assaulted our household. Granny, a nobles daughter, had had training with the Guan Dao, and managed to keep those assaulting at bay long enough for the men to reach their horses and weapons. On the spot my grandfather stated that from then on all women would be trained in weapons. It is quite possible he regretted that statement - granny hinted at such - but retracting it would be improper. So in our house hold we were trained in the Guan Dao and the crossbow. Unusual to be sure, but even during the black years our compound was only assaulted once.

I was sure my father had planned things for me, as he had for my sister, because we both got high class teachers, but of course we were not aware of what these plans were. I say 'we', but it was very likely my sister had found out, perhaps even meddled in the final choice. Moon's Mirror really took to the lessons, so the 'prize' must have been worth it. The fact that neither of us had been married when she was sixteen would have been a stain in other families, but we were clearly destined to be married when our husbands-to-be became of age. Our dowry must be huge.

It was on an autumn day that I walked over the market and heard music. It spoke to me on a level I cannot catch in words. The evening before I had read the stars as was my wont and I had seen the Way. It took twists and turns, but it reached for me. Not that I thought of that when I listened, I just gravitated towards the source. An ugly man sat on a corner, round eyes, bad complexion, rough clothing, and a badly tuned Pipa like instrument. Sadness poured from him, loss and yearning from release, as he played these odd tones and twisted melody. I stood aside, feeling the story he was telling, and, after he had finished, I dropped what money I could miss on his cloak before leaving quickly. I went to the market more often then, making sure to be clothed in the simplest of robes with a peasant's hat to shade my face, to listen to his music and later his stories. I could taste his karma. He had made the wrong decisions, craving to repair his mistakes, but knowing that it wasn't to be. Slowly I started to understand his music, his language, uncouth as it was, and learned stories of fallen kingdoms, heroes and villains, and the disaster called the God's War. It took month's - a few hours each week - for me to reach understanding. I knew he was ready to tell me his doom.

*E*arly on a sultry summer's morning I was called to my mother's quarters. I trembled, as that only happened for the most severe causes. She sat like a statue, the performers broken instrument before her. My father to her right side, my grandmother looking old and wilted behind them. She didn't say a thing, didn't need to. I had shamed my family, and at that instance I knew the Gajin was dead. I wondered if a strangler had been summoned, and I felt the tension between my father and mother. My mother rose, and she and granny left. My father beckoned me, and I followed to the inner courtyard. No strangler but a palanquin. 'The Guardian', my father said, 'will take you. Perhaps a daughter will return.' So I was sent to my aunt. To be purified or die in the process.

I wondered if Mirror found out and told my mother. I don't think so. The blemish affected her too, and she had nothing to gain. Likeliest was a servant mentioning it to aunt Liu, who was one of the few people who talked with my mother - their standing different, but not too different.

*T*he travel was long, to the mountains north-east of Durkon, the two guards not speaking to me, but nobody accosted us. When I reached my aunt's house, my eye fell on a tiny sliver of stone. It did not belong there, so I bent and picked it up. Walking to the house I discovered one step was loose and the sliver perfectly fitted to make it stable again. My aunt welcomed me and took me for a walk in the garden, but when she walked down the steps she stood still. I apologized for putting the sliver there, but my aunt just beckoned and took the left path instead of the right towards a wild and untamed part of the garden.

*T*here, through summer, fall, and early winter I was taught about fire and water, air and earth, wood and spirits. I absorbed all, making progress in my understanding until after six months my father sent for me. The wedding date had been set. My great aunt looked at the stars, listened to the water and decided that she could neither send me to my wedding, nor keep me with her. She gave me scrolls to learn, a weapons to defend me, potions against hurt, and odd clothes to wear. 'One day the family will need you. Listen for that call. The Gajin are uncivilized, but still some can be trusted. I will send you to one who will help, but you will need to work for your keep. We will not meet again.' A spell was cast, and I disappeared from the garden.

Human female Paragon/1