

Xangzhu's Legacy

Looking back upon it all now, I realize it was the ending of an age. The Empire of Four Thousand Stars had reigned uninterrupted since the dawn of recorded history. When the topaz throne was broken, it seemed that all which was noble in man was destroyed with it... But I get ahead of the story. One must begin, I suppose, with the beginning.

In my early years, I remember visiting the Imperial court, my hand clasped to that of my cousin, who in turn held the hand of his father, my uncle. The palace was a place of wonder. Everywhere there was the golden tones of amber and topaz, colors reserved for the use of the emperor's household. Among the gold was the varied greens of jade, the color of the imperial servants. It seemed that every drapery, every chair, each thing, each person, was artfully arranged to bring beauty and peace to mind.

The one time in childhood that I was allowed to enter the throne room itself, with my uncle's kin, I could only look on in wonder. It seemed the room itself glowed, as sunlight filtering through the massive columned hall was reflected endlessly from golden mirrors. I still recall the figure of the emperor, seated upon the topaz throne, which was itself held in the claws of a massive dragon, carved from a single, immense piece of jade, crowned with a golden sun disk. Even as a child, I was awed to silence, and the image is burned in my mind forever, I think.

My uncle was one of the generals of the Most Serene Emperor's army, Daimyo of a large territory outside the imperial city. Uncle was one of the most highly honored of imperial servants. My cousin and I were trained in courtly arts, and courtly etiquette. I grew up learning all those things that every graceful lady must learn, from dance and poetry to calligraphy and the ceremonies of serving tea. I was happy, in those days.

As will eventually happen, I reached an age where childish charm transmutes to beauty, and my uncle could no longer keep me close to him. By that time I had begun to see the wheels of politics behind the golden curtains. Though he by then had recognized my intelligence, and had ordered me trained in the arts of intrigue, it was my beauty that spelled the end of happiness.

I was cloistered, and quickly betrothed. I had long since accepted that my uncle would choose for me a husband from among the men of the court; it was the way of things, and I had always been a dutiful niece. Political marriage was only to be expected, and I only hoped that uncle had chosen well for me; an honorable man who would also recognize that my face was the least of my assets.

But happiness is a fleeting thing. The man chosen was no son of a noble lord, or imperial cousin, as I had hoped. When I heard the name of my intended, it chilled my blood. I had been matched to a daimyo of a far province, one of moderate prestige. A man as old as my uncle, and who had previously seen little favor in the courts. Confused, I sought my uncle, but he would not see me, a thing he had never done before.

Turned away without enlightenment, there was nothing I could do but wait, with trepidation. With luck, this far

province might not prove unpleasant, though I had wished for better. But I was yet young, and I knew that although the marriage would go forward, it would be years yet before anything would be expected of this marriage. I had seen it clear enough before. By that time I would know his household, and my place within it. I would be patient.

But though men may plan, the gods laugh. When at last the day of marriage came, and I was brought forth in a palanquin of blood-red and copper, with robes of red and trimmed in ruby, I found that the niceties of the imperial courts did not extend far past her gates.

I quickly discovered my husband Lao Tse Gou was a piggish, brutal man much taken with drink. His first wife had died years ago, in childbed, and the babe had died as well. He had done a service to the court, and now was rewarded with a new wife, of higher station than he would otherwise merit.

He was much taken with my cultured beauty, and despite the fact that I was still, by any consideration, too young to provide him with an heir, he forced his wishes upon me. By the time we reached his province, on the southern edge of the empire, I had long since lost my childhood, and happiness was something found only in dreams.

A year passed, then two, and three. Visits to the court were infrequent, and I found myself alone among the uncultured servants of his household. As time progressed, and I conceived to him no child, he more frequently grew angered with me. But nothing is as it seems. I did not have to bear his advances except rarely. I had not stood idle in the time, and learned his habits, and weaknesses. Like a true courtier, I found that subtle arts served me. And when he came to me, he often found a drugged cup, and heavy sleep. And I found peace, if not contentment.

The border of his province became unstable in that third year, and I found myself much relieved when at last he was forced to lead his forces, again and again, into battle. I thought it might take his mind from me. But things are rarely as they seem. Day by day, in that year, I saw my husband losing his grip on his territory before the advancing forces. They were a strange group, from beyond the borders of the empire. Though small in number, they fought fiercely, and seemingly without honor. They seemed to have supernatural awareness, to never be where expected, to strike like lightning, and then disappear like mist.

In time it became apparent to me that I saw what my husband did not; what he would not or could not. His tactics would lose him the province. I tried to speak to him of it, subtly at first, for a dutiful wife must support her lord in any way possible. He would not listen, and struck me for my presumption to speak to him of military matters when I brought the subject. In time I again resorted to subterfuge, and sent a missive to his commander, in his name. That engagement was won, but it cost me dearly, as I knew it would.

When he came to me that night, I offered him a glass, drugged, for I anticipated his anger. He knocked it aside, and set upon me with fury. I think he would have killed me, if he could. But that night, something happened which was unforeseen. He struck me, but that night, anger rose in me as well. For the first time, I struck back. And the blow from my arm sent him careening. I was amazed at the strength in my

own hands then. And when he drew his sword on me, and called me a demon, I stood my ground. When he swung, I grabbed his arm, and broke it. And when he cursed me, I took the sword from his grip, and I killed him. It was so easy, in that moment.

Within my own heart, everything had changed. I saw his blood pooling upon the floor, and knew I would never let another man touch me again. With cold certainty, I felt my heart set itself. This place was now mine. I called for the servants to clear his body away, and sent messages to his commanders. I could see what he did not, and I would not let the province fall to invading barbarians.

But again the gods laughed. When the commanders came, and I told them Gou was dead, they seemed to accept it. When I spoke to them of new tactics, however, they laughed. They then began to speak among themselves as to who would take me and become the new daimyo. Enraged, I slew the first man who approached me. They called me demon, then, and the lot of them drove me away. I was strong, but they were many.

In the end, wounded and angry, I was forced to depart. I took a horse, and Gou's sword, and left what had been, so briefly, my home. With no clear plan in mind, I left the province behind. I turned towards my uncle's territory, for in the wake of battle, he might accept my return, and perhaps be the only one to listen when I spoke of the new menace on the empire's border.

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My uncle was always an honorable man. When I returned, he accepted me with kind words, though I had none of the grace of the court left by the time I arrived. Word had preceded me of the battles on the border. The province, as I had feared, had been lost.

He listened to my words when I spoke of the manner of these barbarians from beyond our lands. And when I spoke to him of my wish to stand and fight, he seemed to accept it. I learned he had not wanted that marriage into which he had cast me, but politics had forced his hand. He had never turned away from me, but only done as duty and honor had demanded. Now, my husband was dead, and I had been proven barren in the eyes of the court, so with little prospect for remarriage he granted my wish to be trained as samurai. I had no more uses in politics, so I could do as I pleased.

In the next years, his sword masters found me an apt pupil. All the graces taught in dance found quick translation to the graces of katas. The sword was a thing alive in my grasp. I found in the art of the sword the closest thing to happiness that I have yet touched. It quickly became apparent, even to me, that I would surpass them, the sword masters of my uncle, though no one spoke of it. And during all that time, the forces from outside the border kept advancing.

It came to be known that these forces were led by a man known only by his mon. The Gold Chrysanthemum, they called him. Mile by mile, province by province, he slowly pushed back the best generals of the greatest empire in all the world. The greatest surprise was that they carried with them great dragons of iron, bombardars, as they came to be called. These constructions of steel spat fire, and destroyed great swaths of men with every breath. Nothing of the like had ever

been seen before. It was this, more than any other factor, which concerned my uncle, and myself. To waste men charging these bombardars was unwise, so he felt they must be led to where they would be of little use.

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By the second year of my return to the household of my uncle, it was nearly over. The generals of the imperial army had been defeated, one by one, and eventually agreed to submit to the plans of my uncle. By the spring, most had retreated with what remained of their forces to the walls of the imperial city. Only my uncle stood between the Gold Chrysanthemum and them, with the force of a thousand samurai. My uncle's stronghold was the last. It stood only a week's march from the walls of the imperial city.

Now the imperial city is itself no fortress. It sprawls upon a vast plain, like a turtle in the sun. But to reach it, one must cross mountains, which ring the plain from every direction. My uncle held the pass to the imperial plain, and his household was fortified. Our walls closed the way, and the gates that had stood open for three hundred years were closed and barred. Built into the mountain itself, the fortress had withstood numerous sieges in the ancient days, before the Empire of Four Thousand Stars reached from horizon to horizon. No one had forgotten that, or neglected to keep the battlements in good repair.

There was little room to fight before the keep. Even so small a force as a thousand men could hold the pass a long time. We knew the secret ways, where sure-footed mountain ponies could be used for quick assaults, only to disappear into the crags. We could harry them, and hold them back while we were reinforced from the imperial valley beyond. So long as we could keep the dragons away from our gates, we would stand. And maybe even if we couldn't keep them away. None had ever breached our walls. They were built of massive stone, and grounded in the roots of the mountains. No wooden fortress, we.

Uncle's plan was simple, he knew that to defeat the Gold Chrysanthemum, he must rid him of his bombardars. So he retreated to the keep, leaving only one clear path to the fortress. He defended the pass fiercely, but not too fiercely. He allowed the invaders to advance, step by step, striking and retreating.

Meanwhile, having earned the respect of my uncle, I was placed to lead the second force. I had 200 of my uncle's thousand men. We picked our way slowly, quietly, through the mountains around this massive army. We sought the bombardars. We had learned through observation that these machines of destruction were slow to move, and required a skilled force to operate. We would slip behind them, and when they had been arrayed for battle, and the assault upon the keep had begun, we would strike.

It all seemed to come together as planned, at first. My men had reached a concealed position on the crags above. Our mounts would have no trouble in a swift charge downward. We would fall upon them like wolves. The bombardiers seemed to have no idea we were even there. From below, the crags appear too steep to traverse, as I knew.

Finally, at dawn, it began. The bombards were positioned, and began to prepare for the assault. When the footmen advanced, and left the bombards in the rear, we knew it was time. As we heard the clash of swords, I raised my hand, and let it fall. Our charge began.

The bombardiers were caught unaware, it was true, but apparently not without training. All that proceeded next is a blur in my mind, and I only can remember flashes – glimpses of memory.

I saw the largest of the bombards fire, its great ball hurtling towards the keep, shattering the battlement where my uncle stood overlooking the field. It seemed that stone and flesh were thrown from the mountainside in slow motion. I remember spurring forward faster, in the knowledge that we must take them before they could reload that great beast.

I remember plowing through the back ranks of the bombards like reapers cutting wheat. And then I remember seeing the bombardiers scatter before us, as the front-most machine was thrown over on her great wheels, with a practiced move of her crew, upside down, but already loaded, and fuse lit. I was charging into the mouth of the dragon...

I hauled on the reins, to try and turn my horse, and shouted for my men to scatter, but it was too late. The momentum of our charge, previously an asset, spelled our doom. They could not turn away. My own horse managed to twist and rear as the thunder surrounded me.

It felt as if I had charged into a wall, the force of the blow was so great. I heard screams of men and horses, and thunder, and the hissing of iron bits, like a rain of arrows, flying past me. Bizarrely amid the thunder, I also heard the shattering of my sword, which was like glass breaking.

The force of the blow threw my horse nearly over backward, and off the edge of the path. I remember falling down the hillside, my horse, dead the instant of the blow, tumbling with me. When I finally hit the ground, all was black.

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Much to my surprise, when I managed to open my eyes again, I found that I was not dead, and among the celestial courts. I was instead at the bottom of a ravine, the corpse of my horse lying atop me. I found the hilt of my shattered sword still in my hand. It was dawn again, but all was silent. Whatever had occurred, the battle was over.

Slowly, painfully, I managed to extricate myself from under the broken remnants of my mount, and found that I was not as badly injured as I had feared. The horse had taken the full force of the blow, and that alone had spared my life. I was cut in a few places, and massively bruised, with at least one rib broken, most likely from the fall, but I was alive.

When I climbed out of the ravine, I found the impossible. The carrion birds feasted on a field of carnage. I must have been unconscious for at least two days, I judged, for the army had moved on. The fortress of my uncle lay broken, the massive gates sundered. Nothing remained.

As I walked amid the wreckage, I noticed many things. I found the shattered body of my uncle, lying at the foot of the battlement that was broken. His sword had remained intact.

I also found bodies notably missing. Not all among the household were dead, though most certainly were. My cousin, though he was to have held the gates with a force of men, was not among the corpses. He had survived, and possibly been taken prisoner, though it seemed unlikely. His honor should not have allowed such a thing.

I wandered amid the dead for many days, unable to comprehend what I was seeing. With pain dogging my steps I could do little but survive. I buried my uncle in our family tomb, above the fortress, in the mountainside. It, at least, was still unsullied. I buried him in his armor, but with Gou's broken sword in his hand. I myself, with no one else to note it, took his blade, the ancestral blade of our family, along with a vow of vengeance to my uncle's spirit. I would see the end of the man that did this.

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Finally I set out to see what had happened beyond our gates. When I crested the pass some days later, I knew that it was over. The imperial city, which normally sparkled on the plain, was a smoking ruin. Gates sundered, much of the city had burned. The parts that remained no longer showed the symbol of the dragon that had graced them for centuries. Instead there was the wolf of Shingtsao, the barbarian warlord that had followed the Gold Chrysanthemum. Of his mon, curiously, I saw no sign.

When I reached the imperial gates, nearly four days later, I found a strange welcome. Shingtsao was holding court, and accepting the vows of fealty from his new allies. Being myself unknown to the courts, having been so long absent, and so few of those I once knew in evidence, I was allowed the same entry as any ronin warrior, to stand among the mercenaries and see who asked for our allegiance. Curious, I entered.

The imperial palace had burned, so Shingtsao held court in a garden on the other side of the city, among the cherry blossoms, brought to early bloom by the heat of the blaze.

I saw my cousin then. He stood with Shingtsao, as his general, and I saw Shingtsao reward him with the grant to lands within the imperial valley, as well as the acknowledgement of him as the daimyo of what remained of our family. My heart broke in that instant. I knew what had gone before. He had betrayed my uncle, and forsaken his honor.

I could not step forward and challenge him. I had less blood than he of my family, and he held the greater right. And those that lived among my family, I saw, were those who would stand by him, not me. Those who had been my friends in the old days were dead. I was now alone, only a woman with a sword. He thought me dead as well, surely, so I would not disabuse him of the notion.

I slipped away, as the mercenaries slowly came forward to declare their allegiances. No one saw me go. I moved away from the courtiers, and into the ruined city. Eventually I found myself amid the wreck of the throne room, what was once the heart of the imperial palace, and the center of the courts. Ash covered everything. The heat of the blaze had caused the great topaz throne, as well as the jade dragon holding it, to shatter. The gold decorations and fittings had melted. Some pieces, I saw, were already missing.

As I turned to leave, one bit of green caught my eye. A claw, from the great dragon, lay on the floor before me. Its tip was caked with the rusty remains of blood. So you too want your vengeance, eh old dragon? You too would have it, I vowed. I took the claw then, and I wear it still, on a chain of gold.

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The next years were hard. To the bafflement and amazement of all, when the imperial city fell, the Gold Chrysanthemum disappeared, along with most of his bombards. No one knew where he had gone. Shingtsao was left the ruler of a shattered empire. As time passed, the Gold Chrysanthemum became a legend. Some said he never existed at all. But they were fools, who never had to face his forces.

Myself, I drifted. Years turned to decades. I sold my sword to whomever would take it, except to the family of my cousin. Never would I return again to his halls, though in truth I do not think he would have recognized me even if I did, for I was no longer the little girl he knew long ago.

As the years went by, my services became more valued, as the various warlords that had previously served one master fell upon each other, in the attempt to unseat Shingtsao's dynasty. What had once been, in my childhood, a peaceful empire, fell into endless war. I perfected the art of the sword over those years, until I was unmatched among men.

In time I myself became something of a myth, as I soon became known as the sword-goddess, or dragon-fang, or wolf-bane, and in time as the daughter of the sword-goddess. Notoriety did not serve me, so I forsook using my own name for a long time, in a wish to go unrecognized. But still, I found no trace of the Gold Chrysanthemum. I wondered what could have become of him.

At last, after I had passed my eightieth year, I still looked in the mirror and saw the flower of youth. I wondered what the strength of my oath truly was. Would I remain young forever, until I found this Gold Chrysanthemum, or his family, and avenged the death of my empire? I did not know. I could only go on, and see what fate would bring me.

And then I met the scions of Amber. And that is another tale, for another time.