

The story of Chi Si Chen (Autumn Silver Reed)

Chapter 1: Unlikely companions (Midwinter 1370)

*M*y great aunt decided in her unerring wisdom that my Karma did neither lie in marriage, nor in prolonged study with her, so she sent me to the barbaric western realms; lands which the one-I-promised-my-father-not-to-think-about described in loving detail. During her travels to deepen her insight of the elements of our existence she had met some Gajin whose continued acquaintance she was not loath to break off. These Gajin must have shown great promise and excellent Karma to their future lives, because they were of the lowest standard: they were called harpers!

*S*he prepared me for the travel, giving me odd clothes – far too warm for even this mountain home – several healing draughts, weapons I've been trained to handle – even if I never thought I would hold them except under tutelage – and told me that she would inform one of some standing and that this person would make sure I would be protected and cared for. I shook in uncertainty and excitement: how would I survive in lands full of danger without the order and laws of Tu Lung, even if I had to admit that strife, power play, and the never ending feuding had a greater impact on my beloved home than it should. The arcane symbols inscribed in the circle around me glowed and changed hue as smoke from the braziers whirled around me, slowly weaving an enchanted mist between me and my dear aunt, whose last words I heard were 'Farewell'.

*S*uddenly I could see again, but what I saw was unexpected and threatening: a low room of massive stone and wood – a large and heavy table in the middle – with alcoves around, but which was not empty as I had been told to expect. Round eyed creatures of diverse races and uncertain stature stood or sat around the table and reacted with fear and shock to my, clearly unexpected, entrance by jumping back and reaching for weapons: an elder Gajin male, a black leather dressed warrior woman, a spirit male hunter, an oddly familiar clothed male – but still a Gajin, a quiet woman with some spirit ancestor, and an unassuming Korobokuro of the lowest caste, yet still present. For a moment nothing happened, although I could see by the slightly unfocused look in his eyes that the elder Gajin received a mental message from my beloved great aunt, so I stayed still and made no hostile moves to not further provoke any here present. I had little doubt that my great aunt's word would weight heavy on the man, as it did, but his solution to the problem of giving me protection and a place to stay was one which astounded me, yet one which I had to follow as I had promised to follow his directives as he was well informed about the local affairs. I had to join the motley group as they would travel to discover some disappearances of several caravans!

When darkness falls, I need to be able to run (Reed)

*T*he customs of these Gajin were alien to me: three women, without a chaperon, husband, or brother, who would travel in the wilderness with a Spirit, a Korobokuro, and a male with at least some breeding – well two ladies and a wild woman, because I wouldn't want to be a male that tried anything improper with that black clad horse fightress. None of them had any civilized training and I overstepped my boundaries by helping them to get the best value for money, which again (will I ever understand them?) let neither to recriminations nor gratitude, but just plain acceptance. The city we were in, called Bear-Dusk, was in the grasp of icy winter although non outside seemed to care much. There was even snow on some roofs! A donkey was selected by the Spirit, and I could find no error in his selection of the beast, while the spirit blood woman bought us some tents and other equipment for traveling the wilderness in the cold of winter. I found that all my objections to this dangerous venture I left unvoiced, like my mind was in a sort haze; might it have something to do with that circlet they made me wear? Possibly, but I found myself not predisposed to them in anyway which would be a sure marker of a Charm, nor is my dislike anything less. It is just that I didn't seem to see the point in actually voicing these sentiments. It was of no consequence anyway, as my promise to my great aunt had far greater weight than any personal preferences I might have had in these strange lands: it seemed that people in trade have greater standing than I expected.

When we left the city – without walls or gates (!) – the real cold hit me. According to the spirit it is even colder where he came from, and the Korobokuro's clan lived even further north. Underground! No doubt because the cold. I only read about these things in countries like Shabot, or in the north of Shou Lung.

We traveled for some days, and I saw a pattern appear in the dynamics of this mixed group. The Korobokuro talked endlessly about, it seemed, historical facts of his clan, which Zhae (the human male with some tuition) had learned wrong, while the barbarian woman (Cuura) led us instead of the spirit blooded woman (Felina) who seemed even less at ease traveling through this hilly and open land than I was. The Spirit male (Kendalan) walked in our rear, silent and ever watchful, either to make sure we did not leave an obvious track which creatures of shadow could find, or because he found the never ending monologue of that Korobokuro exasperating. There were occasional patches of snow, but it is dry and my aunt gave me the proper clothing for this rather cold climate – the padded armor is a real help too! To my amazement the 'dwarf' is a priest of some kind, because he knows spells of protecting the quality of our way fare, which is a bigger asset than somebody raised in a sheltered community would recognize but for the fact that I had to travel a long way to reach my great aunt's house. But why is the food so bland? Some peppers would do wonders!

You will reach perfection when the last drop of blood falls (Grimwald)

As we got closer to the area the others think contained the Shadow creatures responsible for the disappearance of so many people, horses, and carts, the group stayed closer and a discussion about possible battle tactics started. I held my council as was both appropriate and my very limited trained does not allow for any helpful comments, but the rest had various opinions which ranged from the Korobokuro proposing we all fight in heavy armor, or all should fight from horseback (where he proposes we find such items or animals is not totally clear, but his ponderous solutions often lack a certain practicality), to Cuura's statement we should all just fight, to Zhae's and Kendalan's silent shrugs while they checked their weapons. Gajin had very little need for structure it seemed, unless they raise 'structure' to a height were it was no longer attainable.

It disagrees with itself, but it agrees on hatred

Camping in the remains of tower (only 3 to 4 feet was left standing but it shielded us from the icy wind), I had the midnight watch together with Kendalan as I picked out a noise of creatures sneaking up on us and was told by him to wake up the others. The Spirit then decided to scare of those little runts with a well aimed shot near their malformed heads, while Jae, Cuura and Felina (oh and the Korobokuro) woke up by my hand. There was some discussion over this action, but they talked to quick for me to understand.

Roots in shadows, but touched by a metal sun

We now got in the more hilly country, with bushes, shrubs, and some spread copses of trees dotted on the landscape. Many have dark green leaves that do not fall, but others stand bare and empty, reflection the feeling of the land. This land has lain under a Shadow, perhaps it still did, as I could sense the darkness, despair, and disillusion creeping through the minds and spirits of all who wander here. Was I the only one to sense it, or does the honor (or in case of the Korobokuro, mental slowness) of the others forbid them to talk about it? Again we picked up somebody trailing us, but this time the Spirit killed it with a single shot, while Cuura hunted shadows. It was a creature of ill aspect, called an Orc, armed with a poorly maintained bow and some lesser weaponry. He also carried a brace of rabbits, so he might have been a forager, not a pure scout.

Human female Paragon/1