

The story of Chi Si Chen (Autumn Silver Reed)

Chapter 17: Past finds present (Greengrass 1370)

New Greenest was different from the villages I knew, much less organized and with houses and halfling burrows scattered over the landscape. Around the center was a spring fair, which allowed us a good chance to resupply. 'Haste by halfling green'. That was what I said. But we needed to stay till dawn for the curative spells, and Grimwald needed supplies for his smithing, so we decided to stay one day, then leave early in the morning. Surely one day would be considered 'haste'...

As I played the Pipa I tried to pick up new songs and news: both the south and the north seem to be in turmoil. I thought about the need to acquire a new instrument, as the tonal setting of the Pipa wasn't suitable for most western songs, but I had no funds and another large item could be a serious hindrance if things went haywire (again). Zhae had quite a following of halfling who gave him all kinds of advice to pace himself. I wondered, but this might be one of the best thing happening to him – there was no jealousy, no anger, or even oneupmanship, just serious suggestions covered by some jokes of hasty big folk. Felina had some following too, but that were mostly kids clamoring for parts of the cake she had won. The sarge was her faithful shadow. Sweet, really. Cuura and Kendalan stayed with the coach, and I had no idea where Nethander went.

The market was a busy place so I helped Grimwald and Paul with their shopping list. I saw Goya do his best, but he also seemed to talk a lot to the two caravan masters present. What were the odds he was going to leave us? To be honest I wouldn't miss him, but Bruno had been an asset and I felt sorry for Rebecca. I didn't like her, but my personal feelings had no standing on her general situation. Then Kendalan came walking up and asked me if I was interested in joining him in a late night meeting with some people he met. It sounded safe, but we made sure we arranged a signal with Grimwald and Felina.

Unwritten customs ruled a druids meeting. A meeting after dusk meant sub-rosa, something not to be openly discussed with outsiders. We walked away from the populated parts and arrived at a stone circle. Two humans, followers of Chauntea and Malar, were there but most of my attention was captured by a winged creature, an elf-spirit-kind: an 'Avariel' as I later understood. That rarest of creatures was there to discuss the movement of (hob-)goblin tribes to the south; away from their current home on the moors. The druid of Malar wasn't worried, but the druid of Chauntea was. They talked about the effects of such movement, but I heard myself say: "like children on the beach discussing the sudden waves destroying their sandcastles, ignoring the leviathan rising". I wasn't sure if they took what I said serious, but the druid of Chauntea was relieved to hear we were probably going to visit those places; truth was it probably had to do with the Elven Dragon manual. This was our quest.

Returning, Kendalan spotted an ambush near a big thorn bush. We dove down and a quick running man shot at us. My magic intoned our alarm call, even as a big brute of a man, whirling a huge axe, came running for us. I had to decide: fight against one of these two, or try to hinder them both. The decision to do the last had a slight risk, because to do so meant I would also be targeted. Still I did invoke the power of *glitterdust* over the area, and closed my eyes just in time to stop being blinded. The barbarian was pummeling Kendalan, blood everywhere, but he might have stepped that half pace to stop his eyes being effected. The archer was though... and I suddenly saw a Tu Lung clothed shape near me. His eyes were unflinching and I did not need his explanation that I was dead – that part I could read perfectly well.

Arriving at the nick of time, Zhae attacked the ninja, who showed himself as much a master as Zhae – I was afraid even more so. The ninja was a master of Darkness, and my protector just managed stand up to the first blast of black, even as I heard Grimwald helping Kendalan who was mauled by that raging brute. I managed to hit him with *stone*, disrupt his fire with *fire* of my own, and also pull his attention with a grazing hit

hit long enough to allow Zhae a solid hit. Yet the killer was clearly a trainee of a cloistered order, for he evaded most attacks and grievously hurt my Wei Shi.

Lurking in his shadows, we still all recognized a change in his style: Respect. Zhae was no longer a mere stand-in-the-way, he was now a worthy opponent. That did not decrease the ninja's focus thought, and Zhae fell soon after. I was lost. Then Grimwald stepped in. Wounded because of his encounter with the now silent barbarian, but unbent. Arrows flew past telling me that Kendalan was still alive, but the master of death just seemed to step to the left, then right. As Grimwald tried to follow he stepped in path of one of Kendalan's arrows and dropped like a rock. His eyes gleaming with satisfaction, the killer his me in a nerve point and I could do nothing but stand to await my doom.

I stood and heard him say I would join my aunt. He produced a vial to pour in my mouth. Yet I also heard the voice of my aunt telling me to focus on the path, to forget the body with indomitable will. I moved a fraction of a second before he could make me drink it, and managed to block his attack. Grimwald, lying on the ground, made an attack through pure determination, even as Kendalan hurried in with his sword. A master, however, is not so easily stopped. He let go of me to take out Kendalan, then turned to me. The last thing I heard was Felina and her sergeant hurrying up.

Soon after I awoke, finding all my friends still alive. Zhae, Grimwald, and Kendalan must have hurt him enough so he couldn't fulfill his duty: he must have been paid to poison me, so poison me he will. Through the powers of Grimwald's curative spells, we soon all stood again, but it was a guarded rest. The master was still around, waiting for his moment. At the coach, guarded by Cuura - we learned our lesson - I heard that there had been a fourth opponent: a priest of Tempus. Felina had taken care of him. The scout got away. Resting here was out of the question as the master no doubt would use that opportunity, but we needed to because we all were still hurt and out of spells. After quick deliberation we decided to ride north: a moving target was so much more difficult to attack, especially because of the open aspects of the Green Fields. Paul still decided to be with us, but Goya left us. It was an odd thing, but we decided to buy Rebecca free from him. A huge investment, and I negotiated dispassionately. Why were we doing this? Probably because it was the 'right' thing. Her Karma was intertwined with ours.

The moment we started to ride I went to sleep in my hammock immediately. If Kendalan and Cuura couldn't keep us safe, there was little I could do to help them. Trust. So simple. I awoke at dawn, trust repaid. And as I looked at the land I felt a connection I hadn't had before. The darkness in my soul was still there, but there was also life. Dangerous, ever changing, ever continuing life. They cared for me, now I have to care for them. Complete the circle, one step up at the time.

Human female Paragon/3, Wu-Jen/1, Naturalist/1