

The story of Chi Si Chen (Autumn Silver Reed)

Chapter 2: Survival against the odds (1st ride of Alturiak 1370)

It was a strange group: for every time I almost thought I understood the rules and customs they changed and found problems where there were none. This time the first unexpected reaction was that the Korobokuro was upset that the Spirit Kendalan had killed that Orc instead of just wounding and capturing it and the second was that the group thereafter decided that Felina, who at least followed the female virtues I could recognize, should use the Orc's poorly made bow. These Orcs were creatures of Shadow: strong and crafty in war, but sorely lacking any refined taste or even more than the minimum in weapon maintenance, so it came as little surprise to me that Felina could neither handle the pull of the bow, nor was enjoying the fact that others would want her to carry such crude item. Kendalan mentioned having the skill to improve it to a level appropriate to a lady, but, as was to be expected, the tools were lacking. After the usual discussion which went nowhere (men are all the same, even Gajin), we finally left the remains of that miserable Orc; perhaps it's spirit had learned something and would start afresh in higher creature. A snail perhaps?

We traveled on, led by the Cuura on horseback – sometimes I think she could sleep there without falling of – and Kendalan, looking for trails or other signals where the lair of the Darkness could be. I would have thought that backtracking the trail left by the Orc would have been an option, but perhaps it had some woodcraft so it did not leave any clear marks for our tracker. As night closed in the Korobokuro again began yammering about going underground, but then we spotted a nice secluded cove with evergreen plants which gave ample protection, good cover, and an open field around it. It looked very hospitable until Felina advised us on the fact that some weeks ago somebody used a major magic to kill everybody in that copse: the trees and shrubs still carried the signs for those with open eyes and the knowledge to recognize the details. We checked the scrub for clues, but found nothing... except for the Korobokuro, who found a charm of some local deity – a woman with red hair – hidden between the roots of a tree. I have to give credit where credit is due; where most of us just wandered through the trees and bushes, the Korobokuro systematically checked each and every detail. Slow perhaps, but he found something we did not. This, however, suggested to us that this place looked good, but was a death trap in reality. With only half an hour of light left, we better hurry.

I was still learning, both from my compatriots as well as from the scrolls my great aunt gave me. I really should spent more time on both, but these travels were exhausting: I'd never walked these distances I now walked daily before, and often the ground was uneven, sprinkled with dead wood, rocks and ankle breaking holes. Zhae was looking out for me, which was a big help, but still I was tired at the end of the day and couldn't focus on the things I should do. Felina offered to discuss the Art – as they call the Six Elements here – with me, to help me step over this hurdle in my mind. But she was as tired as I was, maybe even more so, so little came from it during the resting periods. Cuura and Zhae talk little, although the wild woman did try to follow some of the exercises of Zhae. In a way there was beauty in Zhae's art, but it was clearly not for a woman to follow. Odd, but I cannot considered Cuura as 'female': she was of a tribal background with their own rules, which she no doubt faithfully followed. Gajin yes, but many not unlike her lived on the edges of Shou Lung.

Never leave home without a Spirit! I was learning so much from him by just observing. It looked like a totally inhospitable thorn bush, the type which shredded your clothes and pierced even armor, but he pointed out how we could safely enter it and showed that the branches in the center were brittle and had lost their stinging power. We cannot put up the tents, but there were enough places we could anchor them so we at least had some shelter against the freezing night. I'd been chosen to keep guard with the Korobokuro; I probably made a comment which upset some of my travel companions, so they gently reminded me of my place by giving me the midnight watch with that self pitying blabber mouth.

*Double oddness in two twins,
Mind versus muscle
Sun versus shadow*

It was lucky that the moon was near full by now, so I did not feel totally dependent on the night vision of my co-watchman, but I must admit that I'm still not used to this camping in the wilderness with hostile creatures in the neighborhood. I might start to like it though – not the Orcs I mean – because the sounds are soothing, the smells are an improvement on the Gajin cities – and even home –, and the land speaks to me – even if the story is sad and sometimes blood soaked. I felt at peace and even considered the Korobokuro in a different light. Then we picked up the noise of a group of creatures sneaking around. The Korobokuro informed me that I should wake some others, while he would go and investigate. My mind must have been asleep, because I did not object as he slowly crawled through the hidden opening in the thorn bushes. I had just woken Zhae, when I heard a sound of falling metal, quickly followed by a loud grunt. 'Silence' according to a Korobokuro no doubt, although those at home at least have some modicum of stealth and feeling for nature. The others woke up to, but those scouts of Shadow had already fled, planning to return with reinforcements no doubt. We quickly gathered our gear and left, for we are ill equipped for a stand up battle, even with the might of Cuura and Zhae. We would have to trust the woodcraft of Kendalan again, but I've been told – and it stands to reason – that hiding is a lot harder when the Shadow **knows** you are around.

Kendalan led us with his usual speed, and only the threat of being overrun by the Darkness kept me awake and aware as we tried to find a path which granted us cover and would leave little trace of our passing. Alas, we soon heard sounds of pursuit, the moon too bright to hide and many bushes lacking the vital leaves. The Korobokuro proposed a 'cunning' plan to make sounds like we were traveling on another path, and again my mind must have slept. He was planning to use slingshots to throw bullets in bushes a hundred yards away from our path, but so focused was he on getting that bullet exactly where he wanted (isn't one bush as good as another?) that he forgot that a sling twirled around for some time can make its own whistling noise. We heard the shouts of us being discovered and half a mile away I could barely perceive creatures running towards us. Cuura tried to make some kind of battle formation, but the Korobokuro stood berating himself, as the Spirit quickly got into position in a tree, and Zhae and Felina took opposed positions: she behind a tree, while he picked a spot where he could maneuver. I doubted for a moment, then placed myself behind Zhae: it would give me the best field of fire for my crossbow, and I could use my Guan-Dao in the prescribed way.

Even in the darkness it was evident that one shape amongst the servants of Darkness was much bigger, and the Spirit declared it to be the main target for our ranged attacks. To my amazement the Korobokuro agreed in this – no buts or maybes. We shot and shot, hitting more often as the giant closed in, but I could not discern any effect. Around it were more than a score of lesser creatures, some having the aspects of Orcs, others of smaller stature. We saw them getting closer as we finally managed to hurt the big – two headed! – thing. Yet it did not fall.

Like the rapid rising of a river during the spring, at one moment they were still in a distance, at the next we were swamped by a tide. I heard Felina saying some arcane words, and four in the center fell. Cuura was already charging for the big two headed creature, and she made good use of the sudden hole in the enemies ranks. I continued to fire, as did Kendalan, but the Korobokuro was surrounded by at least four opponents and was in dire problems. Zhae used some intricate maneuvers – he clearly studied under a Master – to stop the rush on us two, but javelins thrown at Kendalan and several more swarming Felina, made it clear that my Karma would need to go for another round in the Wheel. Perhaps my aunt foresaw the shame I would bring to my family and rightly made arrangements for me to disappear in the wilderness of Gajin lands.

Kendalan was hit again, and the only reason he did not fall toward the claws of those Orcs was that he had secured himself. Perhaps he was already dead, I had no time to look as the Korobokuro – the only healer of this group – was overrun having killed only one opponent. Felina had used her art to the utmost and still wasn't touched by those assaulting her, when Cuura was driven away by the large spiked club the giant was wielding, and I finally understood why it had been gesturing with its other hand. A greenish bolt blasted towards Felina and exploded in a hissing ball. The creature had gestured at us before, but it had been hit by Cuura's sword – clearly ruining the incantation. I mourned for the loss of another friend, but suddenly saw a more immediate danger as a few lucky hits weakened my defender, who already had made several attackers pay the ultimate price. Calling

him to fall back and drink one of the potions my great aunt had given me, I dropped my crossbow and wielded my guan-dao to buy him some time. I missed because I saw that not only had the blast killed the four enemies attacking Felina, she stepped unharmed from behind a tree; she clearly is not a lesser scholar in the Art! The few remaining opposite me doubted for precious seconds, as trying to step past a weapon like mine is risky business, so they waited for the four that had fallen by Felina's spell, which were now rising and again joining the melee.

Cuura was bleeding badly, as was her horse – my brother Yoshi had told me that a good rider would take care of his horse above himself, but in battle a killing blow was better taken by the mount than by the rider – but she fought on. I saw how some arrow we shot in it earlier popped out: the creature regenerated! I had no time to shout a warning before I was hit by a glancing blow and Zhae stepped forward again to shield me and dispatch those assaulting us. From the corner of my eye I saw how three Orcs were still bickering over the expensive equipment carried by the Korobokuro, and how Felina ran like a horse at full speed towards the giant, only to be hit by a massive swing of that spiked club! Reeling from the blow she staggered away, conscious only by a clear act of will. Many of those opposing us had fallen, but if anybody ordered those three Orcs to attack us in the rear, we would surely be killed and mutilated. Sensing that he needed to take the initiative or be surrounded, Zhae charged forward as Cuura made her horse sidestep an attack, causing the mace to be embedded deep in the ground. She used the fact that the giant was off balance and with swift strokes dispatched it. This broke the morale of those remaining, and, seeing Zhae charging in, they turned and fled. With two of us down, I wanted to see if they could be saved (even the Korobokuro: he had stood his ground, so deserved to be treated like a warrior), but Cuura ordered me to saw off the heads of those monsters, and, seeing her bloodshot eyes and crazed appearance I started to comply.

Luckily for the Korobokuro and Kendalan, Zhae offered to do the deed, and my potions restored life to those fallen, even if I was sure in my heart that it was too late for the Spirit. Retrieving my crossbow I saw that a single Orc carrying the heavy backpack of the Korobokuro was lagging behind and I spent a single bolt to show that there was no malice in my heart and I had tried to retrieve the stolen goods. I was amazed when it hit and it dropped the creature to the frozen ground. Karma was trying to tell me something, and I know I better listen.

He was called Grimwald.

Human female Paragon/1