

The story of Chi Si Chen (Autumn Silver Reed)

Chapter 5: Those that came before (3rd ride of Alturiak 1370)

Zhae was the first to join us, inquiring after our safety, and Felina came out not much later. I made tea and we put up camp on the previous spot, high on the hill. It was at least hours later before Cuura and Grimwald finally returned. They 'had been making sure none of the Greenskins would ever become an undead', a kind of grisly job if you asked me, and not really something I was happy with: killing those who prey on caravans was only right and proper, but hacking those bodies to bloody pulp and then torching the place didn't feel like 'good'. Also Cuura had this nasty cough.

Grimwald cured most of us then we made ready for the night. I would do the watch with Kendalan. I made some tea for the nights were icy cold, then I had the oddest feeling: I was just pouring some tea, but it seemed to take hours. Then I turned to pass the cup to the Spirit and he just sat there looking to the left. Not only that, but there was this, well, aura in the camp. It felt absolutely right. No need to worry about anything, but it did not block us from staying alert. Next morning Grimwald immediately wanted to know what the aura was and cast a lesser spell; probably detect magic. I was not sure what he saw or felt, but took a whole day before he was himself again. Only then we found out that Cuura had taken a turn for the worst, but luckily Grimwald knew the cause and Kendalan the cure. I knew hacking bodies to bits wasn't right!

There was some doubt if what we should do, but Cuura just bonjour'ed us off: she had the right herbal tea and just needed rest according to Grimwald. So Felina and Grimwald proposed we should check out the complex for hidden rooms and other secrets. We took the 'back entrance', and started looking. The smell inside was bad: death, smoke, and sewers, but we had prepared ourselves with wet cloth and certain wood ashes. At least the dwarf knew how to prepare for these places. It wasn't long before we hit our first snag, as Kendalan got more and more oppressed by the darkness and endless hallways. Grimwald tried to 'help', but luckily Felina made him shut up. I was not afraid of narrow places, but even I started to feel boxed in after the dwarf 'explained' things. He really had no concept of how to talk to people and help them. Really, none at all.

After a day worth of searching through this disaster – true, the complex itself showed it was made by masters, and if some of the original wall covering had been left, it might even be interesting, but the smell and carnage made this more of an 'keep breakfast inside' kind of expedition – Felina found two spots which were 'off'. Of course she and the dwarf wanted to investigate immediately, but the rest of us were tired and convinced them that everything would still be there the next day.

This time the watch was uneventful and Cuura was clearly improved the next day, but one more day of rest for her seemed best (and one more day of smelly darkness – if warmer – for us).

One of the 'odd' places was a 'collapsed' hall, through which a tunnel was dug. Felina explained why this 'tunnel' was a fake. I had to believe her, but I couldn't follow her story. We looked it over, but it felt likely that any experimentation on our part would bring down the whole tunnel - perhaps more, so we went to the second spot.

It was a dead end, but its length seemed variable. We tried to feel it, with various amount of success, but the dwarf figured it out; logical, as it needed a dwarven burial procession march. In step with the dwarf we walked and the corridor did not stop, but went on with openings to our left and right. Grimwald was sure these were burial places, and that the last spot would be the last resting place of the most important person. I expect he would be more polite to these remains than he was to those orcs and goblins.

*An enemy that is not
A trap that is not
A fate that is not*

There was a kind of rhythm, an expected crescendo, in Grimwald's chant and indeed we stopped at a slightly bigger entrance to our left. It had thin gold wire embedded in the stone to enhance the door. But our attention was drawn to another door, strait ahead, with twin rubies on the lintel. It looked rich and opulent, but it had a door, where the other doors, including the current one on our left, just had an opening to an antechamber.

One thing I was only slowly getting to grips with was that faith in these parts was often focused on one Deity. Back home each temple of course focused on one or more Deities or Immortals, but all of the Shugenja prayed to the Celestial Bureaucracy, not anybody specific. Totally logical, of course, because I was quite sure the Immortals did not have the power to grant spells, and asking a specific person in the bureaucracy to help you was not how things were done. But no, the Gajin had a different method: 'clerics' followed a specific God or Goddess, while most people prayed to several, as they did back home. I wondered if the Gods here took more interest in their followers? I knew that at home that hardly felt the case – the exemption of course being Guan-Yin, some voice whispered in my head.

Anyway, Grimwald was a cleric of the dwarven God of the Dead, and, if I understood correctly, also the Lore Keeper. So it was only right and proper that he entered the antechamber to our left first. It was a bare room, lower than expected (but logical if you kept a dwarf's length in mind), with a single circular, rune inscribed, stone table in the middle. Grimwald started reading it in the wavering flame of our lamps, and, after some prodding on Zhae's part, was convinced to translate some parts. A prince of Dwarves had fought against those that would cut off his father's realm from the dwarven kingdoms to the south. He had died, but he also won, so he had received a place of the highest honor. That part I could understand. Perhaps Dwarves were not so much different from us.

Next Grimwald wanted to visit the burial chamber through the only other exit. It had a door which was slightly stuck through age, but not locked. After some deliberation he decided that he would enter alone, as none of us could state a valid claim why they would be allowed to enter. Again I could but agree. Grimwald cleaned up the crypt a bit, restored an axe to its rightful place, and left. Well, after some time and some more time.

Kendalan hadn't been terribly happy, and he often looked at the way back, which looked exactly like the other side: a dead end. We all agreed that the last room was improperly placed according to the burial chant, and that there hadn't been mentioned any other person more importantly than the prince. Kendalan feared it was a trap and our way back depended on the magic extending the hallway. I tended to agree, but Felina and Grimwald were lured in by the unknown and they just went and had a look. The Spirit and I shared a look of resignation.

Of course it was a trap. The magic of the hallway disappeared, and undead centipedes swarmed Grimwald, Felina, and Zhae as the door closed. Zhae jumped and managed to keep the door open, as Felina scrambled through. Kendalan first tried to throw a rope to the dwarf, then helped Zhae with the door as I invoked the powers of stone to remove many of the centipedes from the him. The door was closing bit by bit, the opening now too tight for the bulky Grimwald to pass through. Doubt, then certainty gripped my mind and I invoked the powers of ever changing water, to exchange the places of the dwarf and me. I had mentally prepared myself for the mass of ever hungry undead, but fear gripped me while Zhae and Kendalan fought the door. I was in luck that Felina was such a quick thinker, because she used her magic to climb above the warriors to throw me the end of a rope, which Grimwald used to yank me out of the room.

Safe. But no way out. The dwarf knew the secret though, and chanted, making the magic reappear. I would be glad to be outside and reread the scrolls my aunt gave me. I was a Wu-Jen now!

Human female Paragon/1, Wu-Jen/1