

The story of Chi Si Chen (Autumn Silver Reed)

Chapter 7: Last woman standing (2nd ride of Ches 1370)

Slowly I started to understand this Gajin city, its chaotic build, wandering streets, and lack of gated suburbs. Merchants of a certain kind still concentrated in certain streets, temples were still built at crossroads, and the rich lived on the high ground with the cleanest air. Fewer parks than at home, fewer guards too, but I got used to this.

It was an odd feeling, knowing that I died. Not for long, seconds at most, but die I did. The priestess of Sune, she cared. Her goddess cared. A personal care, deeper than just a bureaucracy. Zhae, Felina, Kendalan, Cuura – even Grimwald – cared. At home we begged for gods to intervene, we try to get the rules working for us, but there was no connection. I knew I could find such personal link here. There were many shrines here and several showed aspects of divinity I could easily agree with. They missed the nature connection, though, but I was sure that there was the right match for me in some nature deity which was venerated near forest, mountains, and fields. The problem was that it feels *wrong*. I was from Tu-lung. My parent, grandparent, my family. I needed to find a part of the bureaucracy that could accept, wished for, agreed with such connection. At night I looked at the stars, looking for signs, trying to build something. It was not the custom, but is it evil? I needed to find out.

Zhae, Cuura, Kendalan, and me were visiting the big temple of Milil in the center of town when Weldin walked in through one of the many doors. It was an odd temple, but it was better to visit it than me trying to explain it. He was accompanied by a Spirit of some standing, perhaps related to the river. When he saw us he came over and asked to walk with him. As we went deep into that weird building, Cuura talked to the Spirit. Clearly she did so with style, because the Spirit, who had looked at us with some doubt in his eyes, became more friendly. Entering a small meeting room, Weldin quickly explained the problem: four elven youths had traveled to a 'coming of age' ritual in the forest north of Berdusk. They never arrived, however, and divinations stated that they would meet their doom 'at midnight under the three crosses'. The only location which made sense were a known triplet of trees on the south-west of that forest. Just visible from the river, they were often used as a reference point, but the trail past it was in little use. We agreed to help and readied to leave at once. We could not locate the others at such short notice, but Weldin gave Cuura a box with three potions to be used in emergency. Riding double we left.

It was close to twilight when we arrived on lathered horses. According to directions it was a mile or more to the Crosses, but the horses were spent and they would give us away to anybody who was watching. We followed the edge of the forest to the crosses when we saw some movement in the brambles further on. Kendalan doubted for a second then concentrated on the distant disturbance. Suddenly the brambles themselves *moved*, grabbing somebody who was hiding in them. Cuura hastened forward to be captured herself by the brambles, but Kendalan showed some excellent archery by shooting the creature in the arm, making him drop his weapon. Cuura then secured him. It was a hobgoblin and we all knew that surely this creature had something to do with the disappearance of the elven youths.

Cuura and Kendalan started to ask the creature questions but it reacted as if it did not understand any of the languages they tried until Kendalan tricked the creature in revealing it *did* speak the common tongue – although badly. Cuura wrenched some information out the Hobgoblin, the fact that they indeed had captured the elven youths and the location of their base, but it was Kendalan who got him to reveal the password in exchange for his release. They both swore an oath on some dark named deity and we let it go.

We found one of the entrances to the underground lair. It was good that we knew what to look for because it was well hidden. Cuura made herself to look like the hobgoblin, opened the trap door and grunted the 'password' in quite a believable style. A ladder was put up and she climbed down. About halfway the guard got suspicious and started to yell, but Cuura launched herself from the ladder and smashed into it, silencing it. The rest of us climbed down, but as I stood on the ladder the ground under it suddenly disappeared. Luckily Zhae pulled me aside or I would have fallen on some nasty spikes embedded below.

The corridors were dark and twisting and Kendalan bravely went ahead. We did not dare to make light as these Hobgoblins could see any glimmer far quicker than we would see them. Cuura, with great foresight, had bought a shuttered lantern some days before, so whenever we encountered a few Hobgoblins, we opened it at the same time as Zhae, Cuura, and Kendalan took them out. I was of little value as I had no luck in hitting anything with the special crossbow bolts crafted by Grimwald. We cleared the side corridors of a total of six of them with no damage to us, when we came upon the south west entrance of a large room filled with the rudy glow of a low burning fire. Kendalan sneaked a peek inside, but was discovered. The battle was on!

When I reached the chamber three hobgoblins could be seen in the gloom, with three others waking up and several small shapes running toward a large opening in the north and a door in the south. Kendalan told me to shoot a running shape, but the bolt missed. Zhae closed in with the three defenders, as did Cuura, while Kendalan targeted one of the small shapes. It was a chaotic battle and I did not help much. The hobgoblins fought in a line, and their solid defense allowed Cuura and Zhae little openings. My friends put down several opponents, but the woken up newcomers shored up the defenses and soon Zhae and Cuura were bleeding from multiple wounds. Then a new hobgoblin entered the fray from the south door, his equipment was of a much higher standard than the others and his first shot with a bow hit me. Cuura went berserk and attacked him furiously, leaving Zhae to handle the remaining 'goblins. Sounds from the north and north east warned us for reinforcements, and I rained stones on the hobgoblins from the north east.

Cuura drove back the hobgoblin leader when, from the north, entered a 'goblin adept with two large apes. It was clearly a spellcaster, and Kendalan told me to shoot at him. Zhae called for help, for healing, but I just did not have the time to help. Each time we hit him he used healing magic on himself, while the apes closed on Cuura and us. The 'goblins from the west had dug themselves out from under the stones and clearly readied to attack us. Then the hobgoblin leader went down, as did the adept (I finally switched back to normal bolts as the new ones were just too inaccurate), but so did Cuura and, shortly after, Zhae. Cuura lay exposed and I switched positions with her, while Kendalan tried to kill one of the apes. I had seen that the captain had drunk a potion from a pouch on his belt, so I grabbed them and tried to break through to Kendalan, who had also fallen to the multitude. I managed to give a potion to both Cuura and Kendalan before I was hit from the rear.

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I later heard from Cuura that they had cut down the three remaining hobgoblins and that, although Kendalan had fallen again, she had managed to scare off the apes. She even showed impressive self control by using a captured wand to heal Zhae. I finally woke up outside, with a number of warriors from Berdusk sent as second team. We had saved the elves, we all still lived, but this is the second battle we won by a very, very, narrow margin. I should feel afraid, but instead it helped me focus my mind. All those unimportant details fall away, I now know better what to do. It also showed our weakness. It would help to use what we'd got. Grimwald was right in that we should concentrate on better armor, Felina would have helped us to remain undiscovered longer, and both their magic would have helped us a lot. Time spent learning and improving our equipment.

Human female Paragon/2, Wu-Jen/1