

The story of Chi Si Chen (Autumn Silver Reed)

Chapter 15: Light calling Darkness (3rd ride of Tarsakh 1370)

Rules do not defeat Evil. It is that simple. Grandma said it. And then I saw the wisdom in her words. Rules, well implemented and thought out, might limit its options until none are left, but defeat? No. I was feeling like I'd awoken from a dream, still sleepy, still foggy in the head, but awake. Sometimes we need those rules to stop evil from happening and give those in doubt a crutch to lean on, sometimes we need to break the rules if it is clear they no longer are effective. The danger around us still frightened me, but it was a well known fear, like a sister with a score to settle. I had to smile. I might die, but I had some hope I made a small step up. Let's help the others to grow.

Grimwald nagged about the fact that he lacked material to do another *Augury*. He just doesn't seem capable of informing us, he must throw in a 'it isn't fair' tone. Some people just have no feeling for interaction. Luckily, we have a merchant in those goods handy. Goya, of course, immediately started complaining - it's his spiel - but he was sensitive to the fact that the right choice should help him as much as it would help us. With support of the rest of the group I negotiated and managed a very good price. Then Nethander showed that he might be the sharpest of this group by cheerfully putting down the same price for a second set - brightly assuming that a price for one is also a price for the second. A thin edge, but well played, and Goya looked terribly unhappy but accepted. To translate: he still made a profit but much less than he had planned.

Felina and Kendalan started to peruse the Book of the Brotherhood, Felina with anticipation, Kendalan with his usual distant reserve. I did not spent much time near - that book felt like bad Karma to me - yet I was glad two persons were there: one person is just to susceptible to the lures in these volumes. As an aside, I really need to watch the Manual of Malevolence, or watch Grimwald and Felina. Both either trust their mental defenses too much, or perchance they were lured by the dark thing: both have suggested that they might look at it, and I felt the dread of what would happen if they did. Sometimes it is a curse to feel what the future has in store.

Grimwald was reading the Tome of Bones. I should have been afraid, but emotion and that work precluded each other. An icy certainty perhaps. Yet I learned a lot from it, or perhaps it put a lot in my mind. It is now part of me and I should never fear myself. Embrace, accept, become one. There is a dark side in me and I should try to understand what it is - and why. Those dark feelings have a place. Anyway, to combine practicality with carefulness, Cuura was standing behind Grimwald to light his reading. He looked kind of gray, but the radiance helped. Cuura can't read, so she should be safe, but she could watch over Grimwald and stop him making the wrong choices.

Zhae. I tried to tell him things. I did not want to determine his Karma, but we were so close, yet so distant. Two people meeting on a crossroad. Would we ever be so close again? His decision, no buts or maybes. He looked tired, felt tired, but still practiced with Nethander. As far as I can tell he *almost* fell for those subtle moves of the little fellow. Almost, but not quite. Always at the last moment he turned his body, shifted his stance, deflected the attack with his blade. Training, pure and simple. It must be. It was wonderful to look at.

That evening Cuura made some remark about Rebecca, Zhae and me. A few days ago I might have felt uncomfortable, but not anymore. Would she grow too? Who here present would? Kendalan I was sure, but his pace was his own (and rightly so). Would Felina take that step forward? She could, but it would mean looking at herself. Grimwald had the understanding, but self reflection? Perhaps Nethander had the most possibilities. I must wait for the right moment.

Grimwald decided to get his smithing tools and continued with his creation of tools for his 'helpers'. It was kind of frustrating, but I could make remarks and objections when others were talking, but not when I was alone with him. He *was* a priest, *and* a male, and my inhibitions were still there. So I did not ask why he wasn't asking for divine direction. Instead I went to sleep as I had third watch.

It was not long after midnight when I was awakened and I heard that Cuura had ridden circles around the camp, still shining like a blazing fire. Was this smart? Even with the overcast sky... Wait it wasn't, I could see pieces of the night sky. Such a bright light on such dark plains. What were the chances those birds had spotted us?

Grimwald was still busy and his well shielded fire attracted my attention. I went to him and we had a kind of useful, deep, and meaningful talk about fire, color, smithing, timing - in short his art. To my shame I could not help him much, both because those magic servants of his already helped him, and because the fire 'talked' to me on a separate level. Something responded in my body and resonated with the fire spells I had studied. So close I could almost taste it.

As I looked up the night sky finally was clear and I took my leave to study the stars for signs of dangers ahead. I forced myself to concentrate as Zhae was still walking around, or should I have said 'staggering'. My efforts to convince him to go to sleep fell on deaf man's ears, so I returned to what the stars deigned to tell me. Danger. That was clear, but there were at least two. One which had the burden of bad Karma, and another which held the promise of good Karma. As the dawn behind us paled out the eternal lights, I pondered the meaning of what I saw.

In the soft light of morning I saw Felina point to the wagon and put her finger on her lips. Zhae must have sat down for a moment, because he sat against the wagon wheel like sleeping child - relaxed in a muscle hurting way. As I looked he stirred and his eyes opened, but unfocused. Oh dear. Cuura had shaken herself free from the danger, but not Zhae. It must be because he was the best fighter, for his self control was usually better than any of us. Hmm, better yes, but also thin. Susceptible to a twin strike at the same spot, breaking the will by repeated attack...

The group has learned and reacted with practical ease. Ropes were thrown even as I used lesser magic to make Zhae fall back into training mode. Bruno came hurrying up with his steel shield held in two hands, but he waited as I prepared to have Zhae listen to my suggestions. Cuura on the other hand didn't and tackled Zhae. It looked clumsy, but it was Zhae who smashed a stone with his fist, missing the barbarian, so I assumed she had something planned. Grimwald touched him with a *Protection from Evil*, which Zhae managed to shake off, but my second casting now targeted his vulnerable mind. He dropped back into the exhausted slumber he should be in. We quickly wrapped him in sheets, a wet outer sheet to bind him to his bunk. He struggled in his nightmares, but I played and sang lullabies and his dreams became quiet and happy.

We traveled and Kendalan remarked that one bird had returned, a few hours later, two. Nobody scolded Cuura, nobody suggested we hid from them again. There was a kind of tiredness in the group: the dreams, the fights, they had taken their toll. I asked the others for their birth dates and got more than I expected, Cuura did not know a date per se, but she knew which constellations were visible, which was more precise than the dates from most others. Nethander had an arbitrary date, I'll have to see how useful that is. Year of the Long Watch - Kendalan, Year of the Creeping Fang - Grimwald, Year of the Blazing Brand - Felina, Year of the Crown - Cuura and Zhae, Year of the Dragon - myself, Year of the Arch - Nethander. Of course Felina's date was a conversion... Tricky.

That evening Grimwald still did not try to cast his spell. Had I missed something? Felina did not mention it, nor did Louis. Grimwald did manage to both doubt if Kendalan saw those birds and that they were a danger of any sorts. Mentally shortsighted. He just cannot see that experience outside his knowledge might be useful. We wrapped up Zhae for the night, but I did not manage to give him the rest he so deserves. I again took third watch to see if I could see which path would lead to the fight with the positive side. Initiative is important, in trade and in war.

At my watch I heard that Kendalan had seen fires on the horizon. Of course nobody else had, but we all - Grimwald excepted - got used to that fact. I studied the stars and two facts became clear: our opposition was stronger than we were, but there was a kind of interference which weakened their position; the other was that Cuura and Nethander - if his birth date was more or less accurate - were central in this fight. Two of our most volatile members: chance was going to play a major role.

As daybreak arrived I started making the morning tea. I could feel a fire burning inside me. My aunt suggested that each Wu-Jen had her preferred element, so that might be it. With what I had learned from Felina, I am deviating from that path. Bad? The way my aunt spoke it felt like she too followed her own route. Feel and accept, it would show itself in time.

Zhae looked awful, Cuura kept glancing around her, Grimwald stared at Zhae with pity - shudders - but not with care, and Felina quickly finished her meal so she could continue in *that book*. I informed them about what the stars had told me. Different reactions, but all accepted my conclusions. Of course the only one unperturbed by all of this was Kendalan, who informed us that he saw fires on the horizon. Cuura tried to claim she saw them too, but Nethander expertly called her bluff. He was a better study of character than most of us, and his eyesight was pretty good too.

With the possibility of another group out there Kendalan proposed to scout. As we needed Cuura to manage the coach, Felina shook herself free of the book and went with him. There was a silent agreement that nobody of us should be alone for any long span of time. We rode on, hoping to reach Greenest soon, when, some hours later, Kendalan and Felina joined us with some haste. At least four scouts of the other group had tried to encircle them!

We prepared for battle by parking the coach on the highest hill we could find in that limited time, but decided that some form of negotiating would be smart: a table, some food and wine, a few odds and ends selected by Goya at the foot of the hill. As we are still posing as guards it was Goya who had to be at that table. He looked terrible unhappy about that prospect, but again he saw the reasonableness of our request. I accompanied him as an entertainer and Cuura would be some ten yards away: close enough to offer some protection but distant enough to show it was a defensive measure. The fact that it was close enough to do a teleportation was just practical. Grimwald of course muttered something, but what else should we do. Dissemination was our only option.

Half a dozen scouts on horseback took position on the hills around us. Our crossbows had a slight range advantage, but they were no doubt adept at firing while riding. Then six figures came riding towards us, three in mail, three encased in steel. It is lucky that it was yet early in the year, for I do think that one would die of heat exhaustion if one would wear that in full summer. They shew a black banner - unknown to any of us - then advanced. With no indication of a charge Goya waited nervously while I started playing a simple tune I had heard in Berdusk. The leader did not even raise his visor as he commanded to know who we were and what our business was. Cuura of course did not like that and interrupted Goya as he was trying to placate the warrior. The second of the warrior cast a spell, with no undue results on any of us. Detect lie? Detect poison? For a moment it seemed like Goya would manage to make the man dismount and sample our wares, but another aggressive statement of Cuura blocked that. Instead we were ordered to accompany them to their camp. Close to threescore of soldiers surrounded us, making it clear that it had been smart not to fight. So guarded we rode the few hours towards their hold.

I listened carefully, and I was sure Kendalan did too. These are Zhentarim, the Black Network, the original owners of the Manual. When I could I informed the others, while Cuura started a talk with one of the scouts who seemed to be from a tribe known to her. Much she couldn't exchange, for the sergeants in charge kept a tight rule, but it seemed like the grunts suspected some problems in the higher echelons - or at their base (Darkhold Keep I suspect). Their camp was a simple affair with a thorn filled ditch as its only defense: good enough to keep animals out, but it won't stop any serious offense.

Inside the camp the horses were detached and the Zhent captain talked to a mage. From the fact that he raised his visor and his general pose I surmised that the caster was at least the captain's equal - or perhaps somebody on another chain of command. In any case I made sure I was inside and unseen. The moment the mage started casting a spell I invoked an Protection from Evil over the chest containing the books. Perhaps it was for naught, but the caster seemed unsure about our load and ordered the content of coach to be checked instead. This was one of those times when our cooperation was flawless: Goya made sure the searchers got away with acquiring some minor

goodies, Felina and I showed all the boxes and other odds and ends – but managed to shift those important around so that in the end none looked at them, but were convinced they had. Rebecca tried to be helpful but bumped into soldiers in the most physical alluring way possible. Even Grimwald could not get his eyes off her. Like or no, it was an impressive feat!

The captain went inside his tent with a scout who had just returned and we were packing the coach again. The hope that we might get away with it was growing when I saw the captain return. He seemed angry (was that a change?) and talked briefly to the priest when a bell like sound erupted from the tent. All attention immediately focused there and I – sorry, all of us – noticed that Nethander was no longer with us. The hunt converged on a stack of equipment close to the thorn filled ditch, but they discovered nothing. The next step of the captain was painfully clear, so I gathered Felina and Kendalan with a look and hid behind a stack of our boxes. They together had capability to heal any thorn wounds and repair any ripped clothing, so I let the essence of water determine Nethander's and my position for a brief moment.

There I was, craftily hidden between the thorns. I heard shouts when the captain saw Nethander, and I managed to climb out and squatting down like I needed to pee. Seconds later a group of rough handed thugs grabbed me and inquired about my reason for being there. I could but stammer, so the pulled me to their leader who asked who my master was. Again Goya was forced to affirm and I was commanded to tell why I had tried to break in the tent. Fearfully – no play, the man stank of iron and death – I told that I had been at the coach the whole time. Felina referred the captain to the mage who had been looking at us the whole time, but Cuura blustered and was gagged instead. For a moment it looked like there would be a massacre, but somebody told the captain that 'another' missing caravan would surely attract undue attention. Instead we were disarmed and bound to be questioned. The odd thing was that the priest claimed his previous orders were more important, so that any spells would need to wait. That meant that a) they were not sure we were the group they were looking for, and b) that there was something out there that had the captain seriously worried.

Together like lambs before the slaughter we sat, while some half-orcs gathered around a fire with whips and branding irons. The connection to that fire grew and something inside me responded. I could call upon it if I wished. The certainty was amazing. Why did Cuura and Nethander had to take the offensive road? If not for them we might had ridden away. Cuura and Nethander... What was out there? Bound and gagged, we might be at the right spot after all.