

## The story of Chi Si Chen (Autumn Silver Reed)

### Chapter 16: Power is relative (3<sup>rd</sup> ride of Tarsakh 1370)

We were bound, shackled, and helpless. That was clear to all of us, except of course Cuura. There is a kind of unyielding fervor, a never surrender mentality, which governs her spirit. Futile? Perhaps, but in a way it was to be admired – even if absorbing all those kicks had to hurt. These people will remember her.

Did I say 'helpless'? Well some of us were perhaps bound, but not unarmed. I was pretty sure Kendalan still had a knife on him, and Cuura's struggling meant that they just wrapped her up good – but a tied up person is difficult to frisk... Except when you're called Felina. Rebecca had no weapons – that is, until they searched her. Then she had both knives taken from Felina, with none of the guards the wiser. Again I had to respect their efforts, even if trying to loosen your bonds under such close scrutiny was risky. Oh dear. Grimwald wasn't good at this. One knife lost, two pissed of guards, and three kicks for those involved.

I suddenly felt a connection with the fire in which some guards were heating branding irons. The *combust* spell in my mind called out and I let the fire in my mind synchronize for a moment. My mind's flame held its heat, but the fire exploded in a small ball of fire, scorching the guards. Nothing lethal, but the power was still there. Putting this aside for a moment, I tried to help my friends by predicting some doom and pointing the now low flying watcher birds out to the guards, but they threatened to gag me and inflict pain so I returned to my inner studies. As the others tried to be a nuisance – escaping was out of the question if one looked at it practically – I tried to harness my newfound skill.

Grimwald lost a second knife, Nethander talked the guards – and the captain - into letting him join their side, and the females were first to be strip searched. Rebecca, Cuura, Felina, and then me. Felina moved and squirmed in a way that had Rebecca stare in jealousy and the sergeant came to her rescue, even as I discovered how to let go of little fireballs without quenching the spell I used as source. When they finally had time for me - Cuura first wrestled but then shifted to sack of potatoes - they seemed more than happy to have me cooperate. Thus I could keep on my stockings and be spared from feeling shame.

The Zhentarim leader was at least knowledgeable about the surroundings, and he clearly had some inkling about what was coming for us and them. Undead plagued these parts, powerful spirits which had hatred for life but still controlled the Arts. Camp was broken even as we were searched and Cuura's seemingly futile resistance bought time so that only the females had been searched before we were to leave this camp. No time for torture. I really have to thank Cuura.

We left at dusk, away from both Greenest and the oncoming darkness. It was lucky most of us were put into our own coach, so we did not have to ride or walk. Nethander had joined the Black Network (for real or just being pragmatic? how to know? does he know?), while Felina rode with 'her' sergeant. Speaking was difficult with guards paying attention to our every move and we couldn't look outside because the shutters were closed and our night vision ruined by the glowing Cuura. I picked up a few detail by listening: the captain has excellent control, but nobody is happy about what is happening. The pace was high, how long could we keep this up?

I rested a few hours – nothing close to real sleep – but when dawn was close I awoke with a start by a scream ripping at my soul and sanity. I did not close my mind for the anguish as I had been told is ones best defense, but accepted it inside, absorbing it with compassion and, and... and cold careful calculation. That Tome of Bones had left its legacy and part of me understood the power that came from hatred, but also the endless patience of the forsaken. It pulled at me, and part of me wondered what I could learn from that path.

Shortly after we stopped and were ordered outside, unshackled and allowed to get whatever gear we needed. It looked like the undead were gaining on us and the captain decided to leave us to fight them, so he had a weakened opponent – or perhaps none if we beat the undead or they left with their blood lust fulfilled. They opted to leave the coach, as they considered all of our equipment 'tainted'. Goya even got back many of the items acquired by the guards who had searched our equipment, so afraid were they that that might be the item the deadless hungered for.

Then Felina showed the power of the female wiles. The sergeant spoke for us, claiming that a unified defense gave a better chance of success. The captain's response was not as I expected but a help nonetheless: we were given about fifteen slaves and the sergeant to shore up our defenses. The sergeant did not even object, he really must have deep feelings for her. The slaves looked like a sorry bunch, but, as the Zhentarim and Nethander left us, we pulled out the Gnoll equipment we had scavenged and managed to equip them with armor, shields, and weapons. Both Cuura and the sergeant spoke to them, and Cuura's fury made them listen to their orders so not to evoke her anger.

We still had some time, time we used in several ways. Cuura and the sergeant tried to get the slaves to form a true shield wall, to stay in position whatever happened. Paul dug through his vials and containers and gave us two droughts and three terracotta flasks. The first drugged one into a rage, the others would explode into a fireball. Bruno and Cuura received the vials, and Felina got the flasks. Louis told Kendalan and Grimwald that the Tome and the Scripture had power over undead, and Felina took the Book – just to be on the safe side. I tried to shield us by preparing offerings for the spirits, and Zhae went through his pre-fight exercises with a vengeance. Kendalan noted that the Zhentarim were behind a hill some miles behind us. A problem for later – if there was one.

Dawn was now upon us as fifty or more skeletons marched over the hill in front of us. Poor slaves. They were ready to run from that sight, but the sergeant and Cuura proved their worth. Cuura had put the flask in a pouch, while Bruno had it ready in his hand. Sudden understanding of Cuura's growth enlightened me: she was in command – she would not drink it. I stepped forward, away from the hastily raised shields of the slaves. My newfound control of fire would not destroy them, but I could make them pay for every yard. Why did I think that? They are to be pitied. Still, the fire would allow the living to live, while granting the dead their rest.

They held their position for what seemed eternity, until those birds flew in again and some shambling remains of the Zhent patrol joined them. Then they went forward in open position. That diminished my effectiveness, but it also meant that they would be incapable of bringing their numerical superiority to bear. Closer and closer until I released fire upon fire while falling back to our ranks. I felt the prayers of Grimwald taking effect, enhancing our resolve and focusing our minds. The wall opened to let me through on a barked command of the sergeant, and I wondered when the master of this legion would show itself.

They halted again and we all heard it. Cold, commanding, hating, ever patient, alien but so close. It demanded the Manual and we perceived the pale translucent shape of an elder spirit whose needs surpassed the boundaries of death. It was only by the combined power of the prayers of Grimwald and the commanding presence of our two veterans that the shield wall held. I heard Felina invoke the *Grace of a Cat*, then Grimwald's *Silence* took hold protecting us from the creature's voice. Bruno had quaffed the vial and assaulted the Banshee, even as the skeleton horde assaulted us. The wall wavered but held and wrapped back in a U shape on the perimeter of the Silence. Kendalan used the Scripture of the Sun to blast the skeletons, while Grimwald took the awful choice of making skeleton fight skeleton. My fire did some damage to the banshee, as did the brave slaves and their leaders to the skeletons. Bruno's attack was futile – his blade carried no enchantment, but Zhae went for him at full power. His cut was true, disrupting a complex spell casting, but the return attack left him – how should I put it – diminished... still there, still strong, but not the imposing figure he was. Again the wall held, again we destroyed a handful of animated bone, and again Zhae was less. Then a huge fire – silently – exploded behind me and I turned to see the true problem: wights had sneaked in the coach and Louis fell under their onslaught as I looked.

Four wights were in and on the coach, trying to reach the Manual. Felina had thrown one flask and readied to do so again, even as Rebecca, Paul, and Goya scrambled towards us. To make a mistake once is pardonable, but to make it twice shows a lack of understanding. This was the second time we forgot to protect our rear, to guard our charge. We should have placed Zhae there: mere wights would have fallen quickly to his blade I'm sure. This is why they paused: to hold our attention. Foolish us! Another flask, followed by a lesser Orb took out one and gave Louis the rest of the dead instead of the curse of undeath, but one attacked the sergeant, another came for me, while the last grabbed the iron bound chest containing the Manual. Felina used her last flask, and the sergeant made short work of the fire damaged undead, but my opponent hit me before Zhae finished him off. Cold wrapped my mind and memory. I knew I had forgotten things, even as my understanding of the Restless improved. The power. It's incredible. But the price!

Odd. The chest glowed hot. Grimwald had been evoking some fire in the metal. In any case the heat was enough to destroy the last Wight, and the Banshee started another invocation. Grimwald tried to stop it, as did I with my *combust* spell, but we couldn't connect to this creature in its ethereal state. A huge skeletal figure ripped from the earth, grabbed the still glowing chest, and ran away, quickly followed by the Banshee. I reached for it, but in vain.

I glanced around to see where Zhae was, and saw him hurrying up. I must have overlooked him. How could I? Cuura and the sergeant still held the line, with Goya, Rebecca, and Paul trying to save as many fallen slaves as possible. Bruno was still rampaging. Then Kendalan saw the skeleton fleeing and he called on the powers of nature to sent a wolf to hunt it. Cuura too left the line, but her fearless action seemed to strengthen the remained slaves resolve, not lessen it. What I also saw was that the whole Zhentarim force *teleported* in on our flank. I had estimated that such magic was above the power of the Zhent mage, but then I saw two more persons: a well groomed mage with a commanding presence, and a elven female.

The Zhentarim force split in two, even as we hasted after the chest and the banshee: one flank charged the few remaining skeletons and zombies, helped by a true *fireball*, while the others went for the huge skeleton, led by our companion Nethander... The mage hit the Banshee with a strong *force* effect, and the skeleton stopped to desperately try to force the chest open. With my *combust*, the Zhents, Cuura, and Grimwald the reanimated bones were quickly undone, and the Banshee fled the battle it could no longer win. There we stood. No fire was left to me. Oddly enough we were hardly hurt, but in no shape to win another battle - also not counting that mage and his companion.

The man walked closer, showing no fear to come within Zhae's reach. The way the soldiers reacted, I was sure to attack him would be folly. He looked at us, taking his time. Clearly a man who has reached the important stage where one knows that acting without insight is foolish. Finally he spoke, a simple question: "Weldin?" I could not but affirm. Lying to such a man would require the skill of Nethander, and what would the gain be? He then asked "Candlekeep?" He seemed to know most of our secrets, but I decided honesty was perhaps the best way and answered "Perhaps". Still he studied us, changing his designs to fit us in no doubt. Then he calmly offered us succor in exchange for a binding favor. I balked at the risk I might be forced to commit murder, and he accepted my stipulation. We were to get a less wrecked transportation, supplies, and support from the priests in Greenest. The Zhentarim captain was outside of himself in anger and slew three of his own men, even as Cuura received those slaves who fought so bravely, and the sergeant managed to stay with Felina as the Zhentarim force left. So this was the good karma the stars spoke about.

In Greenest we stayed to give the priest the chance to receive a restoration spell for Zhae and several enhancements to help me fight off the soul binding curse of the wight. But that night I dreamed that somebody like my aunt, but even greater in purpose and care spoke to me and told me that I could follow two roads: one would lead to the deepest understanding in the Art - both the fire and the darkest powers - while the other would add to that the insight of life, society, and the mastery of arms. The price was patients, compassion, and to take the lesser position. I suppressed my hunger for power, retracted my reach for the utter cold. Play the Pipa and let others enjoy it.