

The story of Chi Si Chen (Autumn Silver Reed)

Chapter 20: Identity (1st ride of Mirtul 1370)

The night passed uneventful – nothing tried to sneak upon us from the lake - and we all felt better for the rest. It was odd, but the danger from the lake notwithstanding we all felt quite at ease. There was time for some tea, Kendalan made breakfast, and when Nethander and Zhae started to spar with each other it felt like the most natural thing in the world. I tried to capture their movement in sound, and I noticed that Zhae was clearly experiencing some revelation of sorts: after the training he went back and repeated his moves in slow motion – but still identical. To be quite honest I wouldn't have been able to tell, but for the fact that my improvisation was the same.

Rebecca gave Felina (and also Cuura) some pointers in how to move. She's looking a lot like she's waiting for us to demand things of her, to spring the trap of us having bought her. I sort of feel for her, but she's got to learn what freedom means by herself. It is kind of the only way. Kendalan was staring at the hills around, his mind clearly miles away. I could almost hear him call, but it was impolite to listen – still I could tell he was concentrating on binding himself closer to those who roam. In an odd way I was perhaps closer to the elf than to all others of this group, even Zhae. Zhae was my defender, my guardian, my... or perhaps not. Yet the elf walks the path closest to me. A road more bound to wilderness, more linked to the animals than the elements of the whole, but still... It is good to know both travel with me.

When Zhae was finished Cuura walked over and told him he should spent some time with the horses. I'm not sure mounted combat is his thing, but being able to ride would reflect well on his standing – should he ever go to T'u Lung. Grimwald, of course, had been working his trade almost the whole morning. It kept amazing me how we could so easily overlook him: smithing wasn't the silent's of skills, his healing capacity was vital for the survival of the group, and his opinions were clearly voiced... yet still he couldn't take the lead like Cuura can do.

We left, stealing ourselves for the ordeal of the ward. I sat in the coach not looking outside when we crossed the border and feelings assaulted my mind: ordered stumbles, evil eye, refracting patterns, power and precision, twirling desire, shape and intention, edge of sanity, everlasting control, unbending resolve, voice of war, heat and blood, and strike two. To much, just to much... all the options, styles, reasons, love, hatred, passion... to be worthy, to be the best, to be the only, to be... Then I heard Nethander telling us we must go back or horrible thing would happen. His tone was sincere and threatening, promising disaster if his demands were not met. I should not be able to fight such voice, such determination, but strong as he was, his might was insignificant to the combined/dividing power of those who trained here. There was a trap there – in the center – I could feel the subtleness of the one who placed it. When he came here, he would be caught, undone.

NO!

The fear, the feeling of being watched diminished to be replaced by a dull headache. We were miles away from the training ground and I felt no longer... I tried to keep hold of the feelings... it told me something but I knew I wasn't strong enough to understand. What were the odds two pupils of these masters came together? The book was our responsibility, but these masters... our fate is intertwined. Nethander and Zhae, Zhae and I, perhaps the others too.

To get our minds of it, we studied the items from the chest: the scroll was easy, but the potions only gave an inkling of what they would do and the wands were hardly more clear. We figured out the coin though – it was a medallion giving the wearer improved health and the ring protected the wearer from falls. Felina wanted to give the latter to Kendalan as he most often climbed trees and the former was acquired by Nethander. We had spoken about karma, about choices... Perhaps I should talk to him again, as his selfish side seemed to win. I knew, it was his decision, but I was allowed to warn.

I've got last watch as usual, so I went to sleep early. It felt like I'd hardly slept at all when I was awoken by somebody yelling. Cuura's light was no more, but she sat on the chest with her hammer at the ready, while Felina looked outside. We were clearly under attack, so I tried to shield the chest so whomever was endangering us could no longer feel its presence. I heard a thud, from an opening in the coach's floor I hadn't earlier perceived, and I discovered Nethander had been having 'dreams' too – only his perception was that of a castle/palace from which he needed to remove (steal?) a treasure. The group – Grimwald is still sleeping – reacted calmly and just proposed methods to make sure the book will not be able to misuse Nethander's capabilities.

Next morning the headache returned with a vengeance, and I spotted a dragon shape in the air! Normally that would be a good omen, but the shape – still many miles away – filled me with dread. It is *to* thin, the early sun shone through it in a way utterly wrong. An abomination against nature and life. I never learned this, but I *know*. Kendalan saw it, as did Cuura, but we had some difficulty convincing Felina. Kendalan was sure it was a 'Dracolich', an undead dragon. We were not sure how it hadn't spotted us, until we remembered the circlet Grimwald was wearing. But were it had shielded us unfelt for so long, it now felt, well, strained and thin. Perhaps we have grown too tall to be able to trust it to shield us from creatures of such power... Yet I know we are not even close to being ready to confront such creature. Perhaps it would be best to leave this open plain.