

The story of Chi Si Chen (Autumn Silver Reed)

Chapter 26: Faith and Filth (2nd ride of Mirtul 1370)

The corridor was dark and had a strange combination of welcomeness and stench. Nethander went in to have a look, and Cuura send Grimwald back to get Zhae. She used a ploy, however, and I couldn't really make sense of that: if she wanted somebody to realistically twist the truth, why send Grimwald? If she needed Zhae fast, why not just ask 'We need you'? I could tell Grimwald was really upset, and I can relate – casual lying is an affront.

As Grimwald promptly returned with Zhae, Nethander popped up from the dark. There was a lake of some kind there, with a fallen statue, and filled with holy water. Why did he had to use *protection from good* to find that out? This isn't the way. A broken statue of some goddess and three further passages with different sounds were also of note. Goblins right, *Moo* center, and scraping left. Neither Cuura nor Felina really paid attention – nor did Kendalan, but he hated being underground – so we just moved there, as Nethander used his *darkness* to shield us from detection.

I noticed that Grimwald looked darkly at Nethander, Cuura, and Felina. He was upset, but what had Felina got to do with it? When we arrived at the cave with the lake his expression turned still and pensive as he looked the shapes. He clearly saw something I did not, and not once did I hear him make a disparagingly remark about what he saw. The statue must be of a Elven Goddess, Hanali Celanil I thought, but I could not be sure as age and destruction wrought by the goblins have damaged it.

Others filled flasks with the water while I tried to remove the blood of battle. The fire that burned inside me in battle was effective, but was it right? This place felt like one of meeting, of friendship, and our martial thoughts seemed inappropriate. We took the right entrance and Nethander found a corridor guarded with a heavy crossbow. Cuura and the others charged in, while Kendalan and I stayed at the crossing. A cry echoed through that hallway and Grimwald came hurrying from the cave. Cuura was impaled by a bolt the size of a javelin. Luckily Grimwald had the skill to remove it. Three rooms filled with statues of a Centaur and other forest denizens. Damaged and the gold and stones decorating them removed, but still they talk of quality, of sharing, of inclusion.

Grimwald wanted to turn on the goblin women and cubs present. I could understand his anger, but to kill the defenseless in a place like this is *wrong*. He clearly had great difficulty in understanding what I meant, but finally he relented. We bound them to the destroyed balista, to be taken outside later. True they would likely die without their men, but they would have a chance. Just like everybody else. I tried to explain the good karma bound to this deed, and Grimwald seemed to understand – at least he stopped complaining.

We went into the left hallway and found animals poorly quartered in halls similar to the other side. Something was weird about these creatures: how did they arrive here? Their kind I would expect to find in mountains. A couple of goblin cubs hidden were placed with the others, and Nethander tried to search for secrets in a hall dedicated to a swanmay. Poor man, his mind was overwhelmed by the fey powers still present and I had to pull him out: swanmays are non violent, but that didn't mean they were not dangerous. Nature kills. It is its way.

Next we entered the central hallway. These rooms were clearly build following the pattern of a tree. The ancient halls of elven nobility lay dark and rank, filled with filth and debris. But still the history of this place was awesome. Mountain cows and skeletons of humans and orcs filled rooms, and an altar or table had been used as butcher place. I cleared it with fire, and the stench may be worse, but the feeling was good. Grimwald didn't see the oddness of these creatures as Kendalan and I did, but he finally admitted that we might know more about it than he did. Kendalan lacked the deep knowledge needed to find knowledge here. We must return here later.

The passage seemed to end in a huge pile of refuse. Felina tried ascertain if there was anything on the other side by *spider climbing* past, but two tentacles tried to grab her. In vain, of course, for she's a master of defensive magic. Kendalan proposes to pull the thing – an Otyuch – from his cover and we manage to do so. But instead of killing it with ranged weapons, suddenly Zhae, Nethander, and Felina started to close in. Zhae seemed to slip, but Nethadner and Felina made good use of the distraction, and Grimwald gave it the killing blow.

We should have listed when Grimwald told us they often come in 'pods', as a second one grabbed Nethander and pulled him into the stinking mass. Zhae raced to close in and got grabbed by a third of the aberrations. Grimwald showed his true honor and fought as hard for Nethander's survival as he would fight for any of us – although I saw a look of satisfaction as Nethander finally crawled out all dirty – and then went in again to retrieve his lost rapier. Zhae had a really weird method to block blows, but it worked long enough for Grimwald to kill the third. True we all helped, but our dwarf slew three of them, something I will remind him of when he feels down again.

The last part of the complex consisted of a room closed with a new door, and a cave full of mirrors and openings to the night sky. It took some effort, but with the help of the map I took from the Ogre leader I found out it was a *gate* that opened on certain star dates, the next two months from now. After making sure that I knew what I was doing and how I could undo it, I changed the mirrors to a configuration that could not happen – or at least until the sky was remade.

The door had two locks, for one I had a key. Felina tried but could not open the second so we opted to break it. Twin howls erupted from the shadows, souls being tortured in hell. I managed to resist, as did Felina, Grimwald, and – amazingly – Cuura, but the others fled. I called forth my last fire and returned one to the pits of despair by destroying it physical form, but Cuura, Grimwald, and Felina had some difficulty with the second *hound of hell*. Cuura was severely wounded and forced to take desperate measures to survive, but finally we dispatched that one too. It was good planning some of us had silver weapons.

Inside was a kind of general purpose wizard room: a luxurious bed, a simple closet with finely made red robes, paper, ink, and assorted stuff, and a huge chest. Locked. Even Grimwald admitted that opening it right here, right now was a receipt for disaster. He, however, looked inside using *clairvoyance*: there was a second chest! We decided to let this mystery wait until we arrived in Nashkel.