

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

### *Chapter 37: Dangers of the Wild (3<sup>rd</sup> ride of Flamerule 1370)*

We woke, finding Nethander and Felina – who had the last watch – gone. A small note written in Felina's cursive handwriting told us they would be back soon. 'Soon.' The word has an almost Shou artful evasiveness in it. Kendalan saw the direction they had taken (of course) but that was not towards the mountain shoulder which was our destination. During breakfast we heard a mournful sound from far away, but no wayward couple. Deciding they would be able to find us, we took off.

I had been feeling, well, a bit worried. I finally found the right merge of the two streams of magic and to be honest it felt a bit empty. Like a house without occupants. Or perhaps more like a drifting boat. As I had woken I had the distinct feeling I was building a castle on muck. It was not the fire, that was just a shadow, it was as if I missed a crucial aspect.

As we left it suddenly came to me. 'What is nothing without the Why.' I was making the same mistake as I feared Zhae was making: the skill was there, but the spirit was lacking. It wasn't that I had lost the Way, that Guan Yin no longer found me worthy to search for the destination, but the true essence wasn't there. Most crucial was my actions against the ogre group near the wood-elves. We had attacked them, not because they did something wrong, but because of our own failures.

I talked with Grimwald about it. Kendalan is closer in faith, but what I needed was a harsh penalty for my transgression, and Grimwald understand the true worth of strictures and the horror of doing even a bit less than one is capable off. He did of course tell me that with ogres (and goblins) it was a matter of time before they had done something to condemn them, but he admitted that our reason for attacking them would not pass the values I tried to uphold, even though our discovery of the Red Wizard's gate showed the good side of our actions. Penance, he would think about.

We walked over hills and through valleys and our Dwarf remarked this was prime Giant territory, that they often waited until a group was close to the bottom of a valley before launching huge rocks at them. Prophetic words, because no sooner had he finished or a rock weighting more than I did landed next to him. As we were just on the downward slope, we ran back to the ridge, half a dozen rocks raining on us, hurting Grimwald, Cuura, and the pack horse. As we took cover no more rocks fell and people discussed which action we should take.

As the slope got more gradual towards the north we first traveled a mile or so to try the passing there. Clearly we were not the first to have tried that, because the giant – or better the aberration giant, three arms! – was waiting for us hidden by some rocky outcrop. Luckily several of us spotted it so they peppered it with arrows, before it came for me.

Zhae, of course, shielded me and was pummeled by the huge brute. Then the others surged in, but its thick skin made actually damaging it hard. Even my crossbow bolt just stuck somewhere. My guardian got hit again, and again, reeling under the blows, although he returned some hefty hits himself. I stepped closer to return the protection he was giving me, but another four blows threatened to end his life. An instant prayer to Guan Yin, mirrored by the same action of Grimwald, and the protection granted by my example, and Zhae survived the onslaught to the clear astounding of the giant. That doubt was it's downfall, because hammer, sword, axe, and guan-dao cut it down.

Sometime I wonder: did Grimwald have no sense of smell at all, or did he ignore it as unimportant? That creature hadn't washed in months, perhaps years, but he meticulous searched it to come up with a serious amount of gold and several gems. Well that solves his problems with funds for the final enchantments. After healing we continued – it's still an hour before noon, after all.

Kendalan warned us we were being trailed by a group a cat like creatures, not an hour later. As the giant had had tentacle like wounds, our guide concluded that these cats were likely displacer beasts, which can be hard to fight because they do not are in the exact spot they appear to be.

As they were clearly trying to figure out if they would attack us, Grimwald proposed to take the fight to them, as it would give us the initiative. There was a small chance that they would not attack us, but these creatures hunted for fun as well as food, so I did not object. Not that I am happy with it, but I have to trust the lore of Kendalan, and hunting for fun means they are outside the normal natural balance.

Cuura proposed to ride ahead to attract their attention as she could fall back to us, but we counted more than half a dozen and each was more dangerous than Kendalan's exceptional wolf, so I noted that I still had several beads of my necklace of fireballs, and that area magic was not influenced by this 'displacement'. Grimwald concurred and protect most (except Kendalan's wolf and the packhorse) against fire. Cuura then tried to lure them out, but she needed to dismount and act like her horse was lame or such before suddenly eight shapes sprinted for her.

Zhae ran forward, as I waited until most were close and I threw the biggest bead. Fire engulfed them, but still six attack Cuura and her horse while two late comers tried to cripple Zhae. Kendalan shot, and Grimwald moved forward as I threw the next bead. Again the fire shielding absorbed almost all of the blast, but now the beasts near Zhae saw me as their main target. Attacks of Zhae and Grimwald as they ran at me were foiled by the magic of the cats and tentacles slashed at me, while Cuura valiantly fought six opponents, repaying every hit with one of her own.

Grimwald and Zhae came to help me, leaving Cuura alone, so I trusted their protection and threw the next but last bead at the six around our combat leader. I got hit again, but Grimwald and Zhae managed to keep most attacks away from me. Then I had a moment of weakness and considered that the last bead would surely take out the two attacking me, as I felt vulnerable and afraid. Steeling myself I choose the Way of Guan Yin, I should arise above myself and help others, no matter the consequences to me. The last bead exploded near Cuura and the sole Displacer Beast that attacked me got its tentacles confused. My mistress is trying to tell me I am on the right road, even though the doubt was a weakness.

The four surviving around Cuura ran, heavily wounded, while the two near Zhae and Grimwald fell as Kendalan stabbed with an accurate sword trust. Grimwald prayed for our healing, but we have to be careful: it is only a little bit past noon and our healing is all but expended.

What will the rest of the day bring?