

The story of Chi Si Chen (Autumn Silver Reed)

Chapter 38: The Right Path (3rd ride of Flamerule 1370)

As we stood surveying the burned and bloodied ground we saw Felina and Nethander closing on us. They looked with a bit of apprehension on how we would receive them. Something mesmerized them, akin to a *suggestion*, but it disappeared to dawn. Cuura just shrugged it off, and Grimwald accepted Cuura's judgment, as Felina quickly changed the subject of how to remove the skin of the Displacer Beasts. Most of them were burned to much to be of any value, but... Wait, Cuura gurgled and fell down. We hastened over and found her hand cut on some projectile, a poison capsule, still embedded in a skin. Grimwald declared it to be of Hobgoblin make, a paralyzing poison that would take a day, perhaps two to run its course. The antidote was not to be found here, so we carefully put her on her horse, took what skins could be salvaged and went to look for the lair. To be quite honest I did not see the importance of doing so, but it turned out to be fairly close and in the general direction so it costs us perhaps an hour and netted us some treasure; handy because the others still could use better equipment.

We marched on, the hills rapidly turning into the rocky steeps, and I wasn't surprised when we spotted yet another creature in the distance. This was a harsh land where the fight for survival was at it's top. It looked like a thirty foot blue snake, but Grimwald told us that it was a Behir, which had a lightning breath and could coil around creatures it bit to claw with its eight hidden legs. It moved unseen, but not unheard, between the rocks towards us, and we spread out to make sure its breath could only touch a few of us, screening the horses and Cuura.

There is was a moment of tension, and there is was. Kendalan fired an arrow, lightning flashed toward Grimwald and me (I ducked out of the way as I learned from Kendalan's wolf), and I threw an *acid bolt* in the open maw of the beast. As other missiles hit it (Grimwald threw his *heat metal*'ed hammer with a slab of bacon to it – munch), it turned towards me as my bolt really hit it in a vulnerable spot. I had a dwarf in front of me, but if the creature slowed down in it's rush towards me, I did not notice. There was little he could do, of course, the Behir is huge! The maw opened, teeth ripped with ease through the magical protection of the bracers, and it swallowed me like I would swallow a dumpling.

Bleeding I found myself in the narrow confines of the stomach, and I knew it would be seconds before the acid and crushing would kill me. I had only one way of escape, as I could not move enough to cast any spell which needed specific movements. Nethander was harmed by acid, Cuura had spiked armor, but was unconscious, Grimwald had a job to do... So with doubt in my heart I asked Zhae to take my place. As soon as I was out, I tried to concentrate on rescuing my protector, but the other were already in full swing. Even as the beast dropped, Grimwald wrenched open its mouth, helped by a very capable Nethander. These two working together harmoniously to rescue a friend... Maybe this fight was needed because of that.

Zhae flushed clean with water, I could not but embrace him, even if such act brought shame on my family. Grimwald and Felina considered the hide to be useful for barding, while Kendalan kept his vigil, and Nethander searched the cave the creature had lived in. He returned with a number of gems – one very costly according to our dwarf – and some gold. I am sure he kept a large part without telling us, but I kept silent as I am sure he will use it for a good cause anyway. Nethander tried so hard to be evil, but in truth he was one of the good people. He just had to accept that one day.

We decided to use the cave as a place to rest, even if we could have traveled for a few more hours. Kendalan stayed just outside as we tried to make it a place where we could sleep. Suddenly he ran inside, his wolf close. Before he could finish a cry of warning a nightmarish beast with three different heads dropped from above, one head spewing acid. Warned by the elf's movement I dodged that, as Felina called a warning not to close with it.

Why? Why did Zhae feel the need to prove himself against any danger? He rushed forward, his cut precise and deep, but three heads and two front limbs ripped him open. Like this morning I felt what was happening before it did, and Guan Yin again allowed me to keep him with me, I mean us. Still he was in a vulnerable position, so Grimwald ran forward to shield him, even though his defenses were unfinished. Again the creature struck, and again I managed to keep the dwarf with us, while Kendalan healed and Felina sought position and Nethander tumbled to a flanking position. I cut it deeply with my Guan Dao, and the others finished it off. Guan Yin is ever merciful, but others are not. Zhae must learn to be more careful!

The next morning we left, today we would reach our destination. The first hour or two was alright, but as soon as we started to climb the mountain things started to feel wrong. Plants grew, and I saw enough small movement to know that nature was not damaged, but the pressure grew. We were being watched. Then we found the remains of a dead dwarf besides the trail, and half an hour later a whole group. They had been fighting to leave the mountain but they had been overwhelmed, that we were sure of. Little remained but an ancient stone hammer that had some clear importance seeing how Grimwald reacted finding it.

Suddenly we saw a shape near. Large, but transparent, its hatred oozed around us. Another, more, giant shapes with palpable disgust. There was no way back, even though the path was clear. Only forward was allowed. A fork in the trail, but Grimwald had our destination firmly in mind. They were waiting for us to leave the path, to pick the wrong trail, but we did not and arrived at our destination, only to find another choice: a magical axe buried in the rock, a simple temple, and a unseen harpist playing a song of unending sorrow and pain.

I felt attracted to the pain, how could I not try to help, but the decision was Grimwald's. Kendalan, Felina urged Grimwald to go to the Oath Temple first, but our dwarf was humble and bowed deep to the ground. Standing up he removed his weapons and armor and walked towards the sound, we following and the ghosts letting us pass.

A huge ghost was there, ozone filling the air as he played expertly on a lyre. Before him was a child, a baby, of his race. It wasn't there, but the memory was stronger than the mountain. The child was dead and his father mourned for what had not been. All these ghosts held here, I broke down in tears. This was wrong.

Suddenly there was silence and both father and child had gone. Turning to Grimwald I saw tears dripping from his beard on the ground, and somehow, I don't know how, I felt that his sorrow was the sorrow of the whole dwarven race.

The temple was next. Ghosts were still near but the hatred had changed in anticipation. They would still kill us if we made but one mistake, but no longer was that what they wanted. Grimwald read the inscriptions inside, an oath that spoke of hubris of dwarves losing sight of what was good, only seeing themselves, never the other.

I heard him renouncing his clan – did any of the others understand what he did? Then he used that ancient hammer to make himself part of the clan, whose oath had held this area. Outside, to the axe. It wouldn't budge by hand, so Grimwald tapped it with hammer and both turned to dust.

The ghosts left, as Grimwald sat down, and I felt divine power present for a moment.

Another piece is in place.