

The story of Chi Si Chen (Autumn Silver Reed)

Chapter 46: Passing the Gates (2nd ride of Elesias 1370)

As I walked silently behind the group I tried to look into the future. Who would we become? The difficult part was to look beyond the obvious. What would Zhae be but a blade's master? Where would he find the wisdom to become more than that? Perhaps the question was: would he start teaching – and I did not mean the Art of War. Could he ever teach about the futility of aggression?

Nethander and Kendalan spotted a few skeletons in ambush. Equipped with bows according to them. They proposed to sneak past, attack them in the rear while we rushed in to help them. Should I tell them that swords are bad weapons for this? Passive, I should be passive. They sneaked past and the fight began. They had fire arrows – magical fire arrows – so it was less easy than expected. Still the fight was easily won, yet the true success was when we buried the remains. I did not know why, but felt it clearly. The prayers for their rest.

Grimwald... It was a major thing to switch faith, even if he felt like he was closer to his Karma. He was also moving closer to being a warrior, slowly losing the sanctity of his faith. There would be many fights, but in a way he was our only true priest and if he lost that, if he lost his connection to his past, we would lose a fundament, a rune carved cornerstone. I could see it, but could not tell...

We arrived at a valley with a stream in the middle. To the east was a waterfall, salmon springing up, and a group of worgs and winterwolves trying to grab some. We discussed plans of perhaps detouring or other solutions. Kendalan mentioned he could see no way of feeding those wolves without exposing us to great danger. Then I remembered an amulet I got from the kobold caves. It allowed me to summon a giant praying mantis, and the creature was very good at fishing the stream. Was I too actively involved? At least we could pass the stream unmolested.

I worried about our leader. She was as easily grasped as a shadow. Being good meant making choices, and Felina was very good at not making them. Her heart was at the right place, but to get beyond the basics, to become a true force for the betterment of others... She would need to take position, and I feared that might be beyond her means.

It started to rain, and I felt a pressure in the air suggesting a thunderstorm in the distance. The road climbed up and suddenly, in gloom of darkening clouds and rain, we saw the tower. It was huge, squat, ugly, as it and its shielding wall grew from the rock like it always had been there. This was my first encounter with dwarven defensive works, and I had to admit, I could not see how even an army could take this if it was defended properly. Kendalan spotted some skeletons patrolling the walls, but no attacks of any kind took place.

Kendalan... Our ever watchful elf. Would he be able to change? He was as forgiving as nature. I did not think he would ever become as forgiving as I was, and in a way I was sure that wasn't needed. But some more compassion, some more care for non elves... To be kind to others outside this group. It's odd, in the stars I could read we should be together, but I felt nothing of the kind from Guan Yin. It is almost like she ignored the subject – and she never, ever ignored things like this.

There was a small, gate like, rocky arch before us, directly behind it a bridge over a chasm. As Nethander checked it out, lightning arched under the gate. He jumped aside, and I felt a short time pass before the tense feeling returned. I tried it too, while Nethander figured out what was on the other side. Blue white energy jumped, but with Nethander as example it was easy to evade. Again it took some time before the feeling returned. Some skeletons started firing arrows, but I understood the mechanism. Zhae, Felina, and Nethander ran over the bridge as I danced under the arch. It was quite exciting, and it allowed the others to pass unharmed. Then we discovered the bridge was unnaturally slick and Nethander fell off, landing hard on volcanic sharp rocks. Grimwald used a hammer spell, as I used my fire to take the skeletons, while Zhae and Felina took on a Doomguard.

It was a dark battle, and Grimwald gave Zhae some extra protection as Kendalan started fishing Nethander out of the chasm. When would Zhae learn that skill in surviving a battle was as important as fighting well? With the danger cleared we crawled to the other side.

Cuura was silent, and I could feel her being a bit distant because she lacked her horse. She had been coping well, but sometimes it pressed down on her. How would she change? Good and evil were not concepts she thought about. In a way she was much like Kendalan, only even more focused on her own rules. Perhaps I should tell her the stories of true heroes. Those that lead armies centuries past that we still talk about. In a way she was the person I least understood.

The next gate was damaged by the elements. I looked closely and it felt like intense cold had damaged the rocks. Cold was there. Not the instant blast of cold, but the slow creep that inhibited movement and speedy actions. In itself not a major problem, but shadowy tentacles of some kind tried to grab those affected. We helped each other break free, and my fire negated most of the cold.

Nethander, our problem child. His Karma was ever closer interwoven with his sword. In a way he found himself, but sometimes I feared it was just exterior, action, show off. Would he try to become a better person? He still hated his heritage, and hate was a lousy base to build on. True, his outside evoked negative emotions by many, but with the gnomes he showed he could *be* beyond that. If we ever reached a city, would he remember or fall back?

The last gatehouse before we entered the true fortress, and Nethander spotted something on top of the building, but it was gone the next moment. His description was accurate enough that we suspected a phase-spider, a rather nasty creature that attacked and faded before most people could react. We stayed close together, roped so it could not easily take one of us. When it popped up and grabbed Kendalan I feared for a moment our preparation had been in vain, but luckily our elf managed to break free in time. Then it tried again, but we were prepared and killed the creature. I am not happy with that, but most normal creatures would have fled after the first damage, not try again.

What about myself? Although I sometimes feared I didn't give the group what they deserved this mandatory quiet helped me to think. I planned to continue reading some chapters of the Book of the Brotherhood. It was all well and good that I worried about the others, but I should give the right example first.

I suspected the rest of the gatehouse to be a den of spiders, and asked the other to please spare them, just chase them off. Zhae, immediately saw an option to show his empty hand technique and stepped forward. Would it be too much to ask that he used some reflection before acting?