

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

### Chapter 60: Negotiate for passage (3<sup>rd</sup> ride of Elesias 1370)

As we left the forest the morning sun already heated up the land. Kendalan spotted the others, at least most of them. Where was Felina? Nethander? Grimwald was awfully quiet, but I just knew he was still alive. Several more horses stood nearby. Another person? Not an enemy, that much was clear. Remains of horrible constructed animals, lesser demons... Zhae was okay, but I hurried to cure both Cuura and Grimwald. The others had been 'ahead', scouting, and had missed the attack by demons and aberrations. I saw Felina return. Still no Nethander... but he was smart enough to hide if things went wrong. I got introduced to Aloth Kakanos of the White Raven, a mage from Unther, who helped them in the fights. I tried to do my utmost to be polite, correct, while I tried to find why he was here. A specialist – I guessed – and he said he hated the Red Wizards – a personal matter I suspected – but I could not read him further. Even Nethander could learn from him. I worried: hate was not a good thing to base your life on, so I subtly tried to make him rethink his ideas.

I was just trying to come to grips with what had happened, what it meant, when a group of people approached. The three of them were interesting: a sergeant with a kind of invitation, their scout who turned out to be from some kind of group called the Punishers, and a tall fellow who immediately made friends with Cuura. The sergeant was polite and the invitation looked valid. If somebody was going for a forgery, they had spend money they also could have spend on a *disintegrate* scroll. The scout... actually it was good he was so outspoken. Now we knew they existed and that we were on their 'kill' list because we were 'thieves'. The question was, how could I teach them that their accusations were invalid? The reasoning of the scout did not promise well. The big man turned out to be a sailor/fighter from some islands 'nearby' called Oddvar. His mail had an odd gleam, and his ax... it seemed 'nervous'. He had a cheerful disposition, though, and Cuura shared some beer we had bought from the Gnomes. It reminded me that the land needed some moisture too.

We followed them a few miles to a rather opulent tent, guarded by Flaming Fist mercenaries. Now I know little about these parts, but I heard of them. Their leader was also grand duke of Baldur's Gate, and their existence alone made sure nobody in his right mind attacked the city. We left the horses outside, guarded by Kendalan's bear and Cuura's horse. Inside we met somebody unexpected. A rather charming tiefling called 'Aristoteles Mephistopheles', who was a negotiator of some kind. He said he worked for the Zhentarim, Red Wizards, and an unknown party as a mediator. All at the same time. He tried to convince us to return/sell/exchange the Book(s) to either one of the parties involved, using money, then guilt as a ways to convince us. I was quite proud of the others as they shrugged of a reward that would have a Warlord reconsider, and Cuura amazed me by utterly polite answering any proposition with 'we can do that at Candlekeep'.

I kind of liked Cuura's new friend. He just wandered in with us, joining a secret meeting. His actions were totally wrong, but he felt guileless, just interested. I could see the mediator blinking as he tried to come to grips with this unusual situation. It was good to know he can be surprised too. Sometimes you need something unstructured to see reality in its whole.

I did worry about the threat of the Zhentarim to wage bloody war to get the books. By keeping them we endanger the lives of many. But if we return it... the souls of an even greater multitude is at risk. To bow for a show of might is to reward it. So with pain in my heart I refuse. We did learn some things: the Zhentarim are in flux, a shift from Cyric to Bane. Wasn't that one of 'the Gods that died'? Perhaps, like Mystra, he had prepared himself. The Captain was no longer part of the Network, now being aligned with the church of Cyric. Sememmon too was out of favor. I wondered what a man of his position would do. He knew too much, alone he was target. Did that elven female abandon him? Whom would he ally with? His successor was named Pereghost. An aggressive kind of person, known for following up on his threats. The fire in my soul flamed, perhaps icy calm is better.

The offer of the Red Wizards was easy. They being the only ones capable of understanding it? Knowledge of the Arcana was not the final skill. History had its say, insight in the battles between Good and Evil, and meekness to admit that even the best intentions could be flawed. The Manual used fixed thoughts, warping them to its own use. Doubt perhaps the only self defense. We should never give the book to somebody stated that nobody else could solve this problem, never to a group who were not prepared to die to stop Evil. I knew I was far from perfect, we all were, yet the stars told me we were fated to do this. I might die, but I would not fail.

Yet the final offer, to 'take it from this world', needed some careful thought. We were told it had been made by the 'enemy' of what was locked into the Manual. Problem was, we did not know who that was, and our host did not wish to disclose it. It might of course be Azatoth, "The great Lich King, High Theurge of the church of Myrkul" that wrote the Book of the Brotherhood. We were offered wishes as payment, but that made me even more doubtful. In the end the deciding factor for me was that we did not know whom we would give it to. The risk is just too great. Cuura and Kendalan's reaction was also a tell-tale. Like Grimwald often trusted my predictions, so I trusted those two. They were in close contact with the land. Intuitive. As Zhae said: "we would make our wishes come true ourselves."

As we left, our host told us he was willing to delay informing the other parties for a day for a mere 1200 gold. I suppressed a smile, his pragmatism is perhaps bad, but not tainted. Kendalan and Cuura paid as each day extra made us more difficult to find. We then proceeded to check the horses for unexpected removals or (worse) unexpected additions. We didn't want a tracker device. None were found so we left. The tall human decided to come along to the chagrin of the sergeant. Cuura had no problems with it, so I kept silent. After a mile, we checked ourselves for anything 'unexpected'. And we got a hit.

But not one we expected.

Felina now carried a mithral 'page' written in an ancient elven/star positioning language. Its subject: the opposite ways the elves considered to take care of dragons. It is old. Very old. Also very, very, valuable. It was clear to me that this was a page from the elven book, the fourth book needed to shield the Manual. I added it to our chest and I could feel the difference. Dear mister Aristoteles is working for the Harpers too, or a fifth party, or were the rest false and this was just a test. The fact that he used the a tracker from the Punishers made me believe he really worked for four or five parties at the same time.

Grimwald was almost out of spells, but we had to make speed. With Kendalan in the vain we continued west, our speed higher than walking speed, but slower than horses. I had to think about a way to improve our speed. Aloth Kakanos sat on the horse like he never had done so in his life, while I cheated and walked, blessed by nature. Cuura made sure the horses are on their best behavior. We will know soon if the tiefling really delayed informing his employers.

I talked with Grimwald about protecting my newly made Jian against acid and other like dangers, and he agreed that such properties were possible. Alas, although he had seen such metal work, and although he was sure he would be capable of calling the strength from the metal, he had currently not the knowledge/insight to do so. I continued querying him about the possibility to make the Jian resize to a dagger, so I could try and start practicing the dagger stance described in my aunt's scrolls. Again he agreed that such should be possible, but that the three changing patterns he knew to exist were either specifically for spears, resized a weapon to the size of his wielder, or morphed to any weapon. I could help him with the latter as I had the correct spell, but it did mean we'd had to research a more limited form of the morphing enchantment. I did not see the point in having an 'anything' weapon: with my limited understanding I would not be able to handle it properly. The last item was a bit easier – I thought so at least. A simple locking mechanism on our scabbards to block a *magnetism* spell I had just learned. Of course Grimwald thought further and he proposed more elaborate system. Interesting, as long as it wasn't too complex.

Having talked about practical matters I returned to the rear to think about the reasoning of the scout, a reasoning subscribed to by Grimwald if I read him right. They seemed to think that laws were inviolate. Odd. A country's laws per definition only applied to that land. Treaties then promised another country certain rights. The land we were in was neither owned by the Gate, nor by Zhentil Keep/the Zhentarim. So to refer to a 'law' was invalid per definition. Another approach was right and wrong. It was wrong to steal, that much was clear. But how could an organization like the Bane/Cyric allied Zhentarim lay claim to a holy relic of Lathander and Myrkul? The only way they could was by right of conquest... which invalidated their whole claim, as a successful theft was 'conquest' too. So it was not 'wrong'. The last basis is moral/immoral. Did we deprive them of something they needed, but we did not (or to a lesser degree). The way they asked... they showed no need. But we had a need. Whatever was inside had to be stopped getting out. I turned to speak to Grimwald, but then Kendalan returned: people were blocking our path.

Two groups, one to our left with two human (?) scouts on hill tops, the other to the right a score of goblins – likely with some heavier troops in the center. We discussed it, and decided that the goblins were a known threat. The scouts had to have backup, of which we knew nothing. We needed to fight through – we were too many to sneak past, the horses too big. Fighting meant killing, a fact I did not rejoice at. Necessity, however, did not leave us any choice: they were there to stop us. A plan was quickly formed: the tall human had a horn that could create a fog cloud, while Grimwald had a wand that could silence the sound of both the horn and our passage. We would wait a bit for dusk to come, then sneak closer under the cover of 'evening mist'. Bear would just amble past, while Felina would sneak to the middle of the camp and keep me informed through a *message*.

We closed in and were informed that the hard core was formed by three hob-goblins, one in full plate, the others with breast plates, a half orc with armor, and a human, also in full plate. As the human seemed to wear a medallion of some kind we took it to be a cleric of some kind, and the one most likely to raise the alarm. When we could get no closer without attracting undue attention Felina took him out. She did not kill him, but even, with some risk to herself, kept him alive. All my doubts about Felina were proven invalid. Perhaps she liked money a bit more than others, but this showed her best side.

I listened to my great-aunt's voice as I stepped out of the mist cloud, and released the giant Praying Mantis on the right flank. Grimwald and Kakanos started taking out the outer guards too, as Cuura and Kendalan raced to envelope the goblins left and right. Oddvar and Zhae raced towards the beleaguered Felina who managed to make four trained warriors look like bumbling fools.

With Bear returning, and Cuura's trampling foursome of horses we quickly locked down the battlefield. Cuura was capable of shooting accurately from a racing horse, and Kendalan showed his skill by having several arrows, all precisely aimed, in the air at the same time. When the hob-goblins saw Zhae and Oddvar closing they counter charged wild eyed. Felina still evaded the half orc to its chagrin. He hit her once, but her returning blow was a nasty one. Oddvar did well against the hobgoblin leader, but Zhae got mangled by his two opponents. We really had to do something about his protection. With me close to Zhae I asked Guan Yin to spread her protection over both of us. I disliked interrupting his fight, but he was losing. Calling upon the *combust* power I took one out in two bursts. I could have done it in one, but I got the feeling I would need the true energy later on. Grimwald charged forward and brained the half orc, while Cuura hunted down the last goblin... I felt a bit bad about that. It had not surrendered, but still...

While Kendalan checked if the scouts had not spotted the battle, we quickly loaded the leaders on our horses, taking care that the cleric would not start bleeding again. I found it interesting that Kakanos had not used any evocation spells, but used acid arrows, and could call upon mist spells. My guess that he was a specialist was not disproved. A conjurer would be likeliest. He did not feel like a necromancer, diviner, evoker, abjurer, illusionist, or enchanter, and I suspect that Felina would know if he was a transmuter.