

The story of Chi Si Chen (Autumn Silver Reed)

Chapter 61: Darkened Light (3rd ride of Elesias 1370)

It was truly dark when we made camp. Not a perfect place, but not easily found. Kakanos' view on life had not changed at all, and after some deliberation I decided it might be best if I first concentrated on the banite priest – at least I was on firm ground theologically. We made sure he had no weapons, components, or foci, then bound his hands in a way that was not to uncomfortable but did allow for only the least amount of subtle movement. Invoking the blessing of Guan Yin I healed horses, Oddvar, Zhae, and the priest. Of course he wasn't glad to be a prisoner, but his assumption of torture was just wrong – although Cuura did promise to leave him helpless in the middle of nowhere should he try to escape. I just had to shake my head about this.

We buried the hobgoblins and halforc. As I knew a little about their customs, I made sure they had some grave gifts, armor, and weapons. Nothing worthy of great chieftains, but enough to show we saw them as worthy warriors. Hopefully their spirits had learned and would return again with improved karma. The few potions and scrolls we discovered we distributed amongst ourselves. There was even a cloak which protected the wearer from harm, but I managed to not be considered. In truth Zhae needed it more than I did – or so I thought.

We divided our watches as we were wont, but I worried a bit about Nethander. Of course he could sneak through where we had to fight, but he was no tracker. An odd, thunder-like, sound to the west suggested we are far from in the clear. I prayed for a solution and looked at the stars. Guan-Yin blessed me with the knowledge of how to help Nethander and Kendalan was willing to ask Mielikki for further assistance. We will bring our little brother home. The stars were veiled, but this in itself might be the answer: go underground.

The current terrain wasn't one where Grimwald expected openings to the underdark, so we took a slightly southern route. Of course the earth elemental trailed Grimwald again. Should we tell him? I could feel a personal connection, no hostility, so I kept my council and returned to considering our change in route. Even if we were not going to look for caves it was a smart think to deviate a bit from the straight track. Being predictable can make one easier to find. But it would be wise to think before we acted. If we did find a way underground... what about the horses? What about Bear? Kendalan could send it away, ask it to return later, I knew that much, but to ask Cuura to leave the horses behind? I looked south and the route beckoned. Guan Yin heard my prayers, I was sure.

After pointing out our route to Nethander should he be in the neighborhood, we traveled. Hours past, and I was quite sure the priest thought us insane or utterly twisted. He just could not understand why we took him with us, if not for his knowledge. I continued my talk as Kendalan and Felina went to investigate a far away house. I could see that long ago this area had been habitated. Yet nature was... a bit like the area haunted by the Banshee. Our bright day was darkened a bit.

The building turned out to be an inn, run by a man Dorlas and his daughter. Nearby was a ruins of a once mighty fortress-abby. I could almost hear this man cry out for help, but of course he needed some assistance to open up. As his daughter went out to catch some rabbits, I found first Felina, then Kendalan going out too. I later learned from Kendalan that the girl failed utterly in setting traps, so he caught a few for her. She did, however, know how to cook a fine meal, even if I missed some spices. Even the nicest food is so terribly *bland!*

Grimwald and Zhae each knew a lot of facts about the destroyed fortress, and the story of Dorlas was one of redemption gone wrong. New settlers under the protection of a priest and monk of Ilmater. Yet a dark curse still lay over the ruins as the monk Kolakas fell to a dark lure, and his brother Ozias stayed to shield the world from what his brother had become... until he fell to a band of robbers, and they fell to Kokalas. Now the ghost of Ozias and tainted Kokalas haunt the ruin. We cannot leave here before we put things right again.

We decided to check out the ruins and help them find their rest, but our guest wasn't really in the right frame of mind to come, so Oddvar, Bear, and Kakanos stayed to watch over him. I urged the others to leave the Manual behind. Odd but the decision felt right, wrong, right again. Karma. It felt like the sliver of stone on my great aunt's garden path. Necessity, we each have our role to fulfill. We crossed the deep moat with little trouble – Zhae jumped it easily – although Cuura had to act fancy. I thought about bringing the Scripture of the Sun, but decided that it would be best to leave it behind. Bear is watching the chest.

I lack the knowledge to see how this place looked in the days of old, but the sorrow, loss, and darkness was almost palpable. I reached out, opened myself up to the unliving and called out. The greatest risk I knew was that the hatred, the disinterest would take hold of me again, yet I was not prepared for his anger. He ordered us to leave and I felt cold fear take hold of me. I tried to stop it taking me over, and I almost succeeded. Almost. Perhaps this was my Lady of Hope showing me to not think myself above needing her help. Or, in this case, Zhae. He stood steadfast, and held me as I tried to flee. Then the ghost of Ozias floated towards Zhae, icy death threatening. I shamed myself, did not trust me protector to stand up to the onslaught, and fled again. Of course he shrugged of the threat, then hastened to grab me again. I was safe in his arms, even as Grimwald helped Cuura and Kendalan saved Felina before she could try to jump over the wide chasm.

With Grimwald taking the lead and me supporting him we convinced this lost soul that we were here to help, that his God has not abandoned him. For a moment his actions hung in balance, then he moved forward to merge with Grimwald. To house a spirit was a heavy burden, but I was sure that the stone strength of our dwarf could carry this.

We went into the dungeons to find the root of this evil.

Human female Paragon/3, Wu-Jen/1, Naturalist/3, Ancestral Hierophant/2