

The story of Chi Si Chen (Autumn Silver Reed)

Chapter 69: Danger from Beyond (3rd ride of Elesias 1370)

Darkness, dampness, the soft jingling of the mail worn by the mercenaries, and the sudden return of the *message* made it clear I was back when I belonged. Had this been a vision? I could hear the mental outburst of Nethander about what he said to that wood-elf, I could see the look in Grimwald's eye, the way Cuura checked for Horse. It had been there for all of us. It had been *real*, seeing that Cuura pulled out the book she had been given – would be given – by that elven mage.

Presence took precedence, as the bugbears detected something, and called for reinforcements. A big brute of a monster, identified as a UMBER Hulk by Grimwald, popped out of the rock, but wasn't able to find our scouts. We closed in, and I filled the cave with fire, taking out the guards, but not the 'Hulk. Its eyes were a threat, but before it could reach us, it was riddled with Kendalan's arrows.

I was amazed that my fireball hadn't attracted more attention. Clearly those inside trusted the capabilities of their guards, but somewhere between Nashkel and here we had become quite a dangerous group. With Nethander and Felina in the lead we found another grotto, this one filled with a score of working orcs and kobolds, directed by an odd snake/spider creature. I had heard a rumor that Shou Lung fought them in the 'aether' expanse (whatever that was), but always thought it was a fanciful tale. Our dwarf knew more, warning us of their domination powers and the fact that even after negotiating they might still attack. It was clear they were not from this world.

The Way wasn't clear, not like the Path was. Grimwald followed the Path (dwarven interpretation) so he was always sure. I had to consider Guan Yin's teaching but also the need of those that would fall if the books would fall in the wrong hands. While I was pretty sure I could withstand a mind trying to overrule my own, I wasn't to sure about the others. Zhae defenses were formidable, yet brittle, and the other's – Kendalan and Grimwald excepted of course – could not be expected to hold. The fact the neogi used slaves weighted against them too. I considered it again and I could not find a circumstance where I might show them the proper way. A sudden insight enlightened me: it was not their power of domination that forced us to fight, but their inability not to use it.

True mastery showed in not using a skill.

We perforated the Neogi with arrows, and then Zhae, patient as always (groan), ran in toward the sole remaining 'Hulk. The slaves cowered and fearfully looked at a corridor where three huge scorpions appeared. I managed to join Zhae as the scorpions moved in, separating us from the main group. The battle was hard fought, the pincers of the scorpions grabbing Zhae, Grimwald, and Cuura with ease. I was doubting if I should use my fire, but I *knew* that greater dangers lay in store. So I use an odd scroll I still had, and the long stance of my guan dao to fight these creatures. It did not help that they are blameless, they just followed their basic nature. To my regret we could not be food – to many future lives were at stake. In the end my protection against poison on Zhae turned out to be not needed. Healing, however, was. Would he ever learn?

Even Grimwald did not object to just letting the orcs flee, instead taking time to pray. The dark elf woman we had been trailing popped up again, and told us there was a kind of 'ship' nearby. Ship? We were thousands of feet underground. What kind of multi-planar apparatus would that be? I wondered about the woman, but my doubts about this 'hunt' were long gone. This was a political game. Do not play if you do not know the rules, nor know the ante.

There was a narrow corridor to our left – one that Nethander and I could probably wrangle through, and a much larger, but blocked, passage going on. The cargo put here was most food stuff. Good food stuff, though, and we spend ten minutes restocking. We considered calling in the The Burning Bridge Mercenaries, but the threat of further 'Hulks or a Neogi made us decide to secure our flank first. So I took the shape of an Asabi: they can borrow quite well. I was amazed at the lack of response by the others, then realized that western druids could of course shapeshift, and that shifting

wasn't seen as evil in these lands. Oddly enough, Kendalan also followed a different path too: he was a hunter. So Nethander and I tried to find out what was behind these walls of stone.

The first place we reached we found a pit guarded by a sole bugbear. It wasn't a match for Nethander, although I felt sorry for it. Inside the pit a few humans and orcs. We freed the humans and advised the orcs to leave, which they did without a problem. Two wide paths left and right. although the right one was blocked too. That one will lead to the 'ship' no doubt. A single narrow corridor went on, so, after getting the slaves back to the group, we kept in. We arrived at cave with a richly dressed neogi working, with a 'Hulk standing nearby. Luckily it was far enough from our, well hidden, exit point that we were neither seen, heard, nor felt. I returned for reinforcement, and then we gave the neogi leader as much chance as the other one – none at all. The 'Hulk was a tougher, but it fell soon. Why did I feel so little? Perhaps because I just *knew* that they did not belong. Outside the Karmic circle.

Again a corridor to the right (north) and a wide passage left. This latter led to a cave with two Neogi and three 'Hulks. We decided that we needed Grimwald, so, with much digging and expansion of my knowledge of dwarven curses I managed to get him to the slave cave.

Logically the Neogi would fall back when we attacked from the slave cave, so Nethander and Zhae waited in the passage coming from the neogi boss. One thing I learned here: one 'Hulk was tough, three were nasty. Grimwald took most of the brunt, because Kendalan's aim was way off. Luckily Grimwald was tough as bones, and together we won the day.

Nethander healed himself by killing the 'Hulks. It was a dark item he carried. Not *evil*, but dark. I saw the look of Grimwald. Yet I had a simple reason to not interfere: one day, not soon, but one day, he will look at it and ask me to get something else.

One day.

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