

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

### Chapter 71: Worms and Wyrms (3<sup>rd</sup> ride of Elesias 1370)

I stared at the woman. Gajin still were a very impolite people, and sometimes it just caught up on me. Of course I wanted to know how she could be here, why she knew our exact – well, almost exact – movement. Then the timer on her table caught my attention. Time magic? Again? Was it the books, or something else around us? She gave us items, and rudely refused any answers: to state that you would answer and then reply to a 'can I ask...' question a blatant 'no' was crude.

Grimwald got a smoky gem, filled with uncertainty, Kendalan a twig of an elven tree (I guessed), a compass for Felina, a closed box for Cuura, a feather of an Erynne for Nethander, Zhae I did not see, and I got a wooden flute... I *knew* I should have payed attention, but that instrument never was *me*, even though many other cultured women in T'u Lung play it. It should not be difficult to learn. Even our invisible dark elf got something, knew exactly where she stood – invisible, without looking. She seemed most upset that the red haired leader of the wasn't there, so Felina promised to get the thing, a small packet, to her at the earliest opportunity. After warning us against the 'paladin', and telling us about an event we should witness but not disturb, she disappeared to whenever she came from. Somebody was playing a power game. Time magic was an almost lost Art, rife with paradoxes and frowned on by the gods – Chronos was long dead. The Daemon worried me less.

We went west, though a corridor the woman had pointed out. Even if it was before noon, I already used most of my magic, and I could feel the necessity building. Danger was closing on us.

The corridor was damaged, weapons strewn around, but no bodies, only damaged walls. Grimwald looked doubtful, mentioning that oozes would have destroyed the wooden stocks of the weapons too. Then, hundreds of yards further, he found the second part of a weapon. What could have done so? I felt/heard a tremor, a subtle rumbling of the earth, and a huge purple worm broke through the floor. It grabbed Cuura in its mouth filled with countless rasping teeth, even as she and the others hit it with impressive fury. Still, it was obvious that its thick hide and great mass would withstand blows capable of felling the strongest horse in a single blow. So I called on my fire, and, keeping it burning hottest, called on it again.

Before the beast could have swallowed Cuura it fell dead, burned and crushed. Grimwald stood with a gaping mouth, mumbling something along the lines of '*ten seconds... nobody kills a purple worm in ten seconds...*' before he managed to get a grip on reality. Cuura was a bit mangled, but the spikes on her armor had spared her the true fury of the bite. Creatures like this had choice skins, and often indigestible gems in its gizzard, so we took them. In a way I felt a bit sorry for the creature, but its mindless attack could only be stopped in one way.

After an hour we came to a grand hall. Perhaps 'grand' was to simple a word. It was an enormous hall, filled with pillars. It went on, and on, and on. Netherese according to Grimwald, or at least not dwarven. We crossed it, only to see an odd procession. Some kind of automatons bearing slabs. Felina climbed up a pillar and told us they carried children, human children, but each having a clear defect like missing arms and legs. They lay silent, in deadly stupor. It was apparent that this was the event we had been warned about, but could we not interfere? Was this event for good or for evil? Was it part of what would come? What now was? I could feel the *stretching* of time, telling me they were here only on the thinnest of borders. Then one automaton got attacked by a third party. The return some spell effect before they disappeared in the flow of time. This story wasn't over.

The third party turned out to be a single woman who stood staring at the place the procession had been. I told her it was temporal magic, but I didn't get any reply. Yes, the odds that she would turn out to be friendly was small, but to stop hoping for the best was a sin. We continued and suddenly she was besides me. Grimwald told us she was evil. No great suprise: the symbol of Auril and a skeletal hand told me that too. But was that a reason not to talk? Of course she didn't tell us much, trust is tricky, but in the end she agreed to bring the items to the leader of the mercenaries in

exchange for a single favour. How could I explain this to Grimwald? Guan Yin stood for compassion, for forgiveness. There were times when action was necessary, those Neogi for example, but that my Lady preferred me to show those bound to negative Karma that there always was another way?

In a way Auril was the opposite of Guan Yin, and her Cold the opposite of my Fire. But was that a reason for hatred? No, it was a reason for more compassion, more forgiveness. Like how a single dark deed could tarnish any soul, so could a single good deed show that a dark soul was not beyond redemption. In a way I trusted Guan Yin in all. Those entities that knew where we would be, why were they misinformed about the leader of the mercenaries? I could hardly see a path were she would willingly enter that Spider when it could still fly away. So she never did, so she never arrived with us, so what was the reason to give that item to us with the explicit orders to give it to her as soon as possible? The hourglass turned out to be hers – what an interesting way of luring her in. Plans within plans... I could see only one twisted path. The path I had just followed.

And if I was wrong? Well... I would try to repair my errors. What else could anybody do? Grimwald must understand: to trust the divine was an absolute, even if one's view was limited.

After some time we finally stopped. It was time to rest and restore our energy. I felt tired. Some choices I had made... I reflected on them, but did not see what other choices I had at that time. I longed for some rest and quiet, yet that was not to be. Nethander and I had first watch.

It was before midnight when I heard something in the distance. I notified Nethander, so he sneaked off to check. He reported back that it was the paladin, Marcus, who looked hurt and came limping towards us. Taking no risk Nethander moved back to keep tabs on him. When I saw him, some 10 yards away I saw something was off – he was acting hurt, but in truth he was not. I told him to stop, and explain his make belief, when he just smiled and told me he would take the book by force in name of Tiamat.

Probably Nethander attacked him then, because I saw a glimmer of movement behind him before a shimmering coalesced into a blue dragon that ripped into a totally surprised Nethander. I saw a limp figure slung away as I yelled 'Alarm!' and a *blade barrier* that sprung up around the not-paladin.

Tired the rest may have been, but everybody reacted promptly as I riffled through my equipment for something to fight the... priest, yes. Tired and without any spells I fell back to the wand of Scorching Ray... Marcus wore heavy armour so I doubted my chances hitting him with my crossbow, and to cross the barrier... I doubted I would make it through alive. Dying wasn't the problem, but the action would be futile.

The other attacked the dragon – but it was protected by more than its already strong skin. Grimwald noticed that and yanked out a dispel scroll as I let go a charge at the now enlarged priest. The dragon now became vulnerable to the blows of Zhae, Cuura, and Kendalan, and I noticed Nethander moving around while drinking a potion... actually I saw a whole series of empty flasks! Felina wasn't in sight, so that probably meant she was moving for the far side too. Then Grimwald got hit by a harm, followed by a barrage of attacks from the dragon. How was he still standing? Not only standing but attacking as an example to all of us. Another charge of my wand, but I began to suspect fire did less damage to Marcus than it should. Then the priest of Tiamat *healed* his companion to full health again. A deed showing a spark of good, yet he had used his divine gifts to protect himself, not to truly fight us. It showed when Cuura, Zhae, Kendalan, and Grimwald – who stood bloodied and swaying, but still stood – battered the dragon. For a moment it looked like it weathered the storm and would take Grimwald's life, yet it had missed the presence of Felina.

With a cry of anguish, Marcus tried to touch his fallen companion, yet the barrier blocked his reach and he was recalled to his base.

Oh for some sleep! I can't even heal Grimwald.