

The story of Chi Si Chen (Autumn Silver Reed)

Chapter 74: Bluff against Karma (1st ride of Eleint 1370)

I healed our group as well as I could, but we could not linger. We were closing on Candlekeep and our hunters were still getting into position. Still the danger of being caught up with was notable, so Felina and Cuura took the rear: Felina to remain unseen and Cuura to stop them for long enough for us to rethink the situation: being caught two-ways would mean disaster.

We found a stairs winding ever upwards, with an empty column in the middle. The fact that light would shine far meant our scouts had to be fairly distant. A risk, but one that seemed inevitable.

Suddenly I heard the sound of battle faintly echoing downwards. Nethander investigated and reported twelve or so bodies and a stack of Zhentarim uniforms, guarded by a visible fighter and a hidden rogue. The enemy of my enemy... yet even to me that seemed a bit too optimistic. The odds that a friendly from the 'Keep predicted our route felt slim. Grimwald managed to step quickly and silently, so we advanced. We had to take them without letting them alert others.

Yet even as we blocked their escape routes, we were shown that their intentions were not aggressive as the hidden woman showed herself and the warrior women did not even draw her weapon as Zhae advanced towards her. I called for a moment of reflection and they told us they were sent to help us evade the Zhentarim camped above. Their words do not contain any lies, yet they refuse to elaborate on some other details. I would worry, but I was sure Karma would balance out: if they were trying to misuse our trust, their own actions would be their downfall.

The hidden woman did most of the talking, although I could feel some emotions behind the silent countenance of the warrior. They had a plan to disguise us as Zhentarim and then smuggle us through the camp above. We considered it for a bit, but how could Grimwald, Kendalan, or even myself ever disguise ourselves adequately? Then Grimwald proposed a better solution: to use one of the cracks in the ground to hide ourselves and then to tunnel towards Candlekeep.

The speaker nodded and told us she would lay a false trail. Her silent companion would join us. Grimwald found a usable dead-end and blocked it behind us like it had not been there at all. I was impressed by Kendalan's calm. Nethander and I talked to our new companion, but she answered only in monosyllables. Odd. Yet I was sure that in the end things would work out.

After rest with the air getting a bit stale I changed in a form more suitable for digging and added Guan Yin's blessing to make sure my speed was good. Grimwald's elemental companion was a real boon as he could inform me of places to swerve around. So, after a couple of hours we were close to the walls of the 'Keep. No doubt it had defenses against those trying to tunnel, so we popped up. Kendalan would run for the walls, for, with the books safe, what would be the point in fighting further. Cuura, Zhae, the fighter, and Felina would swerve out to protect our flanks, and Grimwald, Nethander, and I would cover our elf. Our new companion... she could make her own decisions.

As we scrambled out we called on nature to give us cover. I saw the others run off – Kendalan was as quick as a horse on full speed, but a glance of the fighter suddenly made me rethink things. He had promised to help us, but he would not fight against his former employer... and since we met the Two he had been silent and reclusive. Almost like... I turned and I saw the woman throw an object on the ground, summoning her companion, Marcus, and the Spawn mage. Betrayed again!

Grimwald, however, showed he was well prepared. With a single word he created a half sphere of stone over them, then turned and followed Kendalan. Most of them were captured, but the Spawn mage was not. To leave a powerful spellcaster behind was foolish, so Nethander and I engaged. If he had surrendered I would have had to make some difficult decisions, but he chose to fight.

I took his body with us – a decent burial was his karma, and used what magic I had to help Nethander and keep the Zhentarim at a distance. How I disliked to fight! Choices forced were bad.