

The story of Chi Si Chen (Autumn Silver Reed)

Chapter 75: A Candle in the Dark (1st ride of Eleint 1370)

We had arrived, the long journey finally over. The entrance examination was quickly passed, and we were greeted with the friendly words “You're late!” and a truthing on our intentions. In a way that female had prepared me for such statements – we had been send on a mission woefully under prepared (but not in the way Grimwald had complained about) – yet we had succeeded, and even prospered. If they wanted it done differently they should have done it themselves.

We were led inside, suddenly entering a oases of calm and tranquility. What was lacking was fire. It isn't there. For the first time since I came to these lands I lost my connection to the eternal flame. Good? Bad? Neither, I realized, but a good moment for reflection. Natural springs, and other aspects of nature show these people look further than books alone. Inside the keep, we passed through many hallways and corridors, as I allowed myself to relax for the first time in... months at least. A grand hall, heavily shielded with many a protection spell and runes. Zhae whispered something to Grimwald about us being led the long way. They did? Kendalan looked withdrawn, Felina sardonic, and Nethander alert but out of place. They wanted us to take out the books, yet I delayed that, telling them we had another part of the Daemon. Clever they might be, but some assumed we had it with us all the time, even asking why we did not tell them! How? We had no way of establishing a guaranteed path of communication.

They summoned the 'First Reader'. Clearly a man of great standing, yet also a humble man, who was the first to reflect on the fact we had no true rest till we got here. Tethtoril asked to tell our tale as scribes stood ready and a dozen others stayed to listen. Together with Felina and Cuura I spun our tale, and found it was quite a tale to tell. Some things I glanced over – my problems with my nemesis, the encounters with history of the twelve, Sememmon's game – others I left out – the Tower, how we acquired the sheet of the elven Tome – yet there was still enough to tell: the undead creature, daemons and gnolls hunting us, the slow creeping power of the Manual of Malevolence, the red wizard in the ancient elven temple, the Zhentarim ploy in Naskhel, Grimwald breaking an ancient curse... all a prologue to the true story, the story of the Fortress of Light. I held little back, the events writing the story. Our run through the underdark with Neogi, the deep dragon, and the games of the Cult of the Dragon were a nice epilogue.

Clearly we had given them a lot to think about because they were silent for at least five minutes afterwards.

Then the first reader took us to another room. Where I had understood some of the Art used to protect it in the first room, I clearly lacked proper insight here. Kendalan, however, understood – or at least could handle it. We were asked to leave the books and sword in certain specific spots, Cuura and Nethander (who of course used his protection from good again), did so while Grimwald and Felina had half voiced objections against to many people knowing the location of the books. It was understood that we could take the page of the elven book later, but for now it stayed, shielding the Manual. By now it was quite late, and time for food, a bath, and a soft pillowed bed.

The next morning we were allowed access to the library – the public part, of course. The Seekers are most helpful as I try to unravel some mysteries from the past few months. I tried to solve things more or less in chronological order, as it was easiest to remember, but, as lore is wont, I had to zigzag back an forth to understand some tales.

Those discs that called a skeletal creature was easy: Zhentarim are known to use them on the battlefield. The Zhentarim themselves I studied only in the broadest of strokes: Fzoul, Manshoon, Sememmon, and their major know bases and routes. The Red Wizards too was a subject to big to handle in a Ride, so I just refreshed my memory and how gajin sources had a different opinion of them compared to the few things my great aunt told me. The cult... I just learned about Sammaster, the punctuation error, and the fact they were a scattered group, each cell striving for power.

One thing I did pick up was the enormous variety of scripts and alphabets. I found at least a score of different versions of the draconic script, and two dozen versions of Thorass. I would need to put some time in to get a grip on these sources. Mostly I tried to pick up a little bit of everything, as it gave me the best basis to cover all those branches. During my reading I found a reference to that Raven woman, the Symbul. That led to the Seven, Elminster, and Khelben, and back to the Harpers. Suddenly the day was at an end.

The next day I had a nice little talk with a Harper Agent. I decided to join the organization as its purpose and mine more overlapped than not. He told me he will have a teacher meet me in Baldur's Gate, somebody who understood my fire. The pin I got was pretty, but I'll have to wear it under my clothes. The finger we found was all that remained of a Harper who was sent to Soubar where a powerful faction of the Red Wizards had held at least the page of the Elven book. I was warned against taking action: they outclassed us. What was odd was that they had bought 'ancient' Golems for a whole stack of lesser scrolls, and that they were selling magical things to orc tribes. In exchange for what? Nobody seemed truly interested in what was happening on the High Moor for lack of a real leader. I feared it would become our concern. The Tiefling was a known intermediary from Waterdeep. I did not inquire any further. I did start some careful inquiries about the people present when I told our tale to find out who the non-surprised woman was. I also inquired after Grand Reader Ishmael Grail to give him the package the Auril lady gave me. They would tell me when (if) he had time. I had to stop early as I was to sit next Ulraunt, Keeper of the Tomes, and it wouldn't do to be sloppily dressed and properly cleaned.

An interesting man, the Keeper, but not a nice man. He knew a lot, but somewhere deep inside insecurity was gnawing at his soul. He thought he was entitled to answers, so answers I gave him. Perhaps in a decade or two he would find out that I told him what I told the First Reader, that he did not learn more. He had been practicing questioning people from a position of strength for years, I'd been practicing answering from a position of weakness all my life. Plus, I must add, my verbal skill had been sharpened on the edge formed by Nethander and Felina. I heard how the others did: Kendalan still stayed near trees, although he spent some time in the kitchen cooking, Cuura busied herself with the horses, Felina I wasn't sure about (her remarks were unusually cutting, perhaps she was letting go of the stress that way), Grimwald was as focussed on learning as I was, and our two warriors were digging for information about the twelve. Perhaps I should help them – neither had any experience in this.

The third day I found conflicting sources about the Twelve and Grimwald & me managed, after some serious talking, to learn a bit about the Neogi and the concept of Spelljamming. Very interesting, very weird, and currently not our thing. I tried to find leads to next of kin for the deceased priest of Myrkul, but nothing was to be found. I made a more detailed report about the procession in the netherese halls, but we found no definite answers, just the feeling that the temporal occurrence was a lot more recent than the creator races (40 millenia ago, they estimate).

The day after started with some finishing details about Blade, then I (and Nethander who was there too) got summoned to speak with Reader Grail. He seemed not very interested in receiving the package, well, not until he opened it. Then he blanched and hastened away, asking us to wait. The oddest thing was Nethander's reaction: he looked almost as shaken as the Reader. I just saw some glyphs, yet they seemed special to my eyes, wrapped in meaning. I learned that Nethander had been away in spirit twice: once in a hall, the other in a cavern of some kind. Both times sigils like that had been everywhere, as had a medusa. The Auril mage had been in the hall too. The returning Reader told us these were Words of Truth, and that the place was likely a netherese flying city. Nethander was carefully questioned but I just discovered I lacked the necessary background. The remaining time I spent learning what I was allowed about Netheril and the Auril mage. I found that the Auril mage went by the name of Revan and had been in Neverwinter. Some history, Karsus' folly, and a total lack of information on Garath, the insane lich we had encountered.

Slowly I learned how little I knew.

Halfway through our stay we met Tethoril again who offered Felina the promised funds, and asked us to consider a quest. They wanted the elven tome restored, because they needed it to bind the Daemon once again. They were willing to offer a retainer and permission to scrutinize the other three tome. That and the gratitude of Candlekeep, which is nothing to frown at. I wasted two hours to see if that drow had entered the 'Keep, but if she did, she evaded my attempts. I spend the rest of the day and the day after learning about the tomes and the Daemon. The oddest thing is that the Scripture of the Sun should have been a perfect match for me: Fire and Good... and wasn't. Perhaps because I was bound to nature. With the Book of the Brotherhood – magic and (evil) extraplanars – probably more corrupted than the Scripture and the Tome (death and entropy), I decided I was glad I only read one part. Perhaps when I was better prepared I could learn the final chapter. The elven tome was much older. Dragons and stars. The subject attracted me, but I was sure that tome too held more power than most mortals could handle.

The Daemon was likely called in the war between Narfell and Raumathar, more than a Millennium ago, a century before Dale Reconning. Azatoth led his followers to Narfell in -60 DR and gave the book containing its spirit to the Abbey of Eternal Light in -54 DR. There it stayed until 343 DR, when the rage part escaped. Possibly the elves know, but the library of Myth Drannor was lost. Silverymoon might still have some lore. Azatoth, I discovered, was an anathema to me: he wanted to stop the souls of the deceased to continue on the wheel, but instead keep them here. Had he no idea what kind of taint that would bring? It was as bad as the Cult... The books were not mandatory, just the powers they stood for. So likely the powers of the Daemon were steeped in shadow, ice, and draining. It somehow felt awfully close to Shar. Azatoth returned to Narfell a long time ago, but nobody heard of him since. Nobody knows the whereabouts of the Daemon's body.

Our time here slowly came to an end, and I tried to tie of loose ends. People talked about a prophesy concerning this, but they got evasive when I inquired – they keep mentioning the Sword. I did find out about the acting-surprised monk: Seras, a follower of Oghma, and joined the order as a teen. She was a senior assistent to the politics of the southern empires: Amn and Calimshan. Possibly natural telepathic. Why do I suspect that Zhae and possibly Nethander are mixed up in this? The flute is from Halruua – the survivor state of Nethril – and made of Duskwald. I could feel a web woven around us. The glass city was a possible remnant of an aquatic creator race, extremely dangerous, and the elven temple was an kingdom called Shantell Othreier. Kendalan told me he will have left the remnants of the gold and gems with the elven princes we will meet. More research!

Everybody I talked to mentioned she was crazy, but the Harper admitted that she was a fighter against tyranny and supporter of freedom. She was clearly an expert on some terrain, but again I could not find out what. I better go to the primary source on this one. My digging for further tales on Trinezalisee draw a blank. Tomorrow morning we would leave for the Gate.

The last day started interesting: the mercenary group (and Bear and Horse) arrived and a woman called Tamalandis – visiting the 'Keep every fifty years (!) – came to thank me for helping the Lt, who turned out to be called Tamara "Whistler" Landis. Grimwald got his gear back, and I my wand. I forgot to inquire what happened to the barbarian in stasis... Ten days was not enough.

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