

The story of Chi Si Chen (Autumn Silver Reed)

Chapter 77: Coldhearted co-operation (3rd ride of Eleint 1370)

Baldur's gate was my second city of these western realms, and it proved to be both as I expected and utterly weird. The lack of districts, the mix of humans, dwarves, elves, halflings, gnomes, and at least a dozen other races, I knew. As a harbor city the enormous flux of sailors, cargo movement, and tide bound activity was predictable. What was odd were the small things. No horses. An abundance of cats. A great many people carrying war grade weapons – although with the knowledge that this city was the home base of a famous mercenary group perhaps it wasn't so odd. A temple to a deity known for destruction, yet also a great temple to a Gond, and to 'balance' it out Tymora. I probably would learn to understand the dynamics. Probably.

Candle Keep was a good place to learn, but not such a good place to hear current events. Especially as it had been locked down by an army or two. Or three. So the first day I hunted for a residence where we could live and tried to pick up current events. Grimwald made contact with the small temple of Tyr and some fellow dwarves. He returned with the keys to a good smithy and a burly priest of Tyr who was going to help him craft items so we could do what was right. News was that the Pasha of Calimport, one Sufontis, had died and that it wasn't clear who would take his place. Also southern Amn had a problem as an Ogre led army had joined with Cyricites. Southeastern Tethyr was a war zone, it's army fighting against 'Knights of the Black Gauntlet'. Something odd was happening in the cities upstream, the Red Wizards played a power game in Soubar, and Waterdeep... to much politics. Of note were rumors that there was something going wrong on the islands. Two clans fighting and a third using that. Or something of that kind. So much to learn.

We were hardly installed or an odd fellow with wavy orange colored hair spoke to me. Lasham was a fire genasi bard with a extensive, if slightly chaotic, knowledge of everything. He also was a good percussionist, dancer, and mandolin player. He was asked to help me because he was a member of the Fellowship of the Burning Heart, a group following passion, creativity, and freedom. Not Harpers, cause Harpers were disliked in the south. He taught me much, but I had to admit it was slow learning all those aspects of music I had never even dreamed about. I even started to wonder if I had to leave the path of Wu Jen. Music encompassed so much, the whole, not the parts.

The people at the 'Keep were good for their promises. A woman named Brielbara was willing to help me for a ride. I tried to repay her by sharing what meager knowledge I had in the Art, but she was often way ahead of me. I had to admit that her Art was... odd. She had learned from her father, Briel, and the style felt... how to say it properly... alien. Ancient yet modern, based on assumptions I could hardly accept. I doubt she felt that, as 'it was the way it worked', but my crossover between Wu Jen and western magic, plus my understanding of my place in nature granted by Guan Yin made me realize this. She helped me focus that what I had learned. Not to learn new skills, but to learn who I was, to use magic as a reflector to strengthen my self. It was almost as an aside that we crafted scrolls that allowed me to sense that what was unseen and to be infused by silver. I had to sell that purple cloak for funds, but I did not like the color anyway.

The evenings I spent listening to other performers and sometimes performing myself. Lasham told me of different things I could do with music, but I did not see the point in several of them: a *suggestion* is not the same as truly convincing somebody. He seemed to understand and told he knew a few bards who had a different expression. One, a halfelf, had an interesting take on it, but I would have to practice a *lot*. When I got home late at night I smiled at the stars. Dog tired, but happy. If only Zhae... Later.

I hardly saw the others: Grimwald and Zhae were working in the smithy, Nethander and Felina likely learning how to become part of this city, Cuura and Kendalan were mostly outside – if I understood correctly they were teaching some members of the Flaming Fist. All fairly normal, yet there was something odd going on. To few people knew that we had been involved in the trouble

around Candle Keep, and to few seemed at all interested. It was almost like our actions were already forgotten. I tried to leave some heroic tales about Nethander so he wouldn't be tagged for bad opportunities, and picked up the signals that he tried to position himself. Was Baldur's Gate so used to heroics? If we ever got to Waterdeep (Grimwald wanted to north) I would be able to compare. Then Grimwald sent a note: he needed us to acquire some special materials.

Our esteemed dwarf needed something called *heartwire*, which was supposedly mined on one of the 'outer planes', the places where deities and souls rested. I had my reservations about disturbing the rest of those that were finding their new place on the wheel, but both Dumatoin and Mordadin allowed for priestly spells to visit a place watched by Haella Brightaxe, a dwarven deity unknown by me. Because any step is followed by another the foci of this spell were specially tuned forks. The tone determined the destination, and I saw again how limited my understanding was. Grimwald mumbled something about the fact that our destination was safe because nobody died there, and the fact that Cuura should feel quite at home. As I had no better lore I did not oppose this view, but to trust on these facts while we should not be there at all... Luckily Zhae is needed to supervise the forge, as such a place would surely make him focus even less on his own safety. I had picked up a complex melodic counterpoint that made the listener more in sync with planar energies, but when I tried it, nothing happened.

More practice is needed.

We stood in contact with each other as Grimwald stroke the master tuning fork and our forks started to resonate. It was like Lasham's music: beautiful, but breaking out the rhythm. Not my kind of music, but music still. Guan Yin taught compassion, and an important part of compassion is never to refuse just because it is different, even if it was opposed. This tone wasn't that bad, there was still joy, joy because of unbridled energy, but joy is more important than the lack of structure. Truly this was Cuura music... but not Nethander music. And again I learned something important.

Snow swirled around us, and ice cracked beneath our feet. I just knew that an icy river was below, ready to sweep us to an everfrozen death. A booming voice (mental, real? not important) demanded to know why we came. I tried to explain, but that was not the right tack. Cuura, of course, reacted correctly by telling that she was willing to fight whatever. Including him if he had the courage of showing himself. Again our battle leader showed she had more natural insight than I had through all my training. The voice roared out in joy and the snow disappeared to show us a world of huge mountains, lit by streams of fire and two suns moving across the sky in drunken stupor. A crude village was close, villagers already reacting to our presence, and we started to make our way towards it, only to be attacked by icy creatures appearing from the snowdrifts.

I reacted without thinking, and the creature in front of me disappeared in a flash of steam as my fire negated its cold existence. Felina got mangled, and Kendalan got out his sword. How long ago was that? His whole stance showed his displeasure. The reactions of the crowd make it clear that magic wasn't really appreciated, so I started to introduce the others as Grimwald and Cuura pummeled the ice demons and Nethander helped Felina. Kendalan showed he was following his own route (as he always did) and called on the air to smite the creature. Not lightning but a hammer, the morphic essence of this place altering the expression. With exquisite timing I could introduce all before the last ice creature was vanquished. And for a moment I thought we were ready.

One of the villagers (its leader?) and Cuura went into one of those 'I'm stronger than you are' shouting matches. So there was to be a fight in a circle. I brought some drums as I thought them better suited than my pipa, and that turned out quite correct as they also brought in a bear about twice the size (in all dimensions) of Kendalan's Bear. To put it in Baldur's Gate terms: "That beast was frigging huge!" Cuura, however, was not phased and started showing all kinds of combat tricks: grappling, tripping, clever maneuvering. I tried to help her with the drum, supporting her best moves. It was a good thing that I had seen her dance and fight, so I knew her style. The other fellow followed suit and both tried to use the dire bear as a weapon. Then suddenly the fight is over. Not by any winning, but by the fact the man accepted Cuura as a worthy opponent.

Finally we had some time to talk and ask for the *heartwire*. The question led to much merriment and it took a while to figure out the rather unstructured way of sharing information: everybody talking through each other, with some telling a rather rambling story about heroes, others pointing to the gletcher on the mountain, and still others warning about being froze inside the giant unless one managed to get it to change shape. Luckily Grimwald, slow and methodical, managed to get the facts straight. So the gletcher is the giant, and heartwire grew in its *heart*. And it was upset if people tried to harvest some, because they disliked about everything.

We better think before we act on this one.

The only person qualified to harvest the metal was Grimwald, but, to put it crudely 'he could not sneak up a drunken blind idiot.' With the giant asleep we mostly had to worry about touching him, so I proposed flying in, then switching places with Grimwald. That took care of part one, but how to get him out again? I had only one *transposition* spell. But we had a ring of feather-falling. So we just needed to force the giant to change shape, and let Grimwald drift down. But being caught by an angry giant who was several hundreds of feet tall did not feel like the wise path. So Felina, Kendalan, and I tried to look identical, as to fool the creature to our true location.

Grimwald crafts himself some icy exterior so the Giant would not feel him. I heard of sculptures in the Kyoro that were made of ice, and here I saw how such an odd tale could indeed turn out to be true. Perhaps that tale of the blue iced Guan Dao is true too?

The flight up made me see how *big* this creature was, and the winds around it almost blew me of course. Using the wand of detect metals I found the correct crevasse to enter. Entering a corridor made of living rock, pulsating and undulating I was extremely happy that I was the person trying this: Grimwald just would not have fit! Sometimes being a skinny waif is Inside I find the heart, but the whole ground is pulsating so I tell Grimwald to start rocking so he was in sync with the grounds movement. Then we changed position.

He was in counter-position! I felt the disharmonics as we merged for that fraction of a second. With a quick prayer to Guan Yin I sent him part of my music, trying to get him in tune again.

That seemed to have worked.

For long moments we waited while Grimwald applied his craft, then he signaled he was ready. I attacked the gletcher with a fireball, putting everything I have in it. I felt a bit guilty doing it, even if I knew I would not kill it, nor wound it for long. Attacking a sleeping person was *wrong*. I hoped Guan Yin would forgive me. The attack had the desired result in enraging the giant, and he spotted me flying high above. Suddenly a storm of razor sharp icicles flew towards me, but let the storm blow me along, evading all those spikes. The giant then turned into a white dragon that was only slightly smaller than he had been before and launched himself at me. I flew being a rocky spire (a toenail of a rock giant?) and Kendalan popped out to launch an attack. The giant was indeed not the smartest and he fell for the trick. Felina was next as we maneuvered to get him away from our meeting point. When we got the signal that Grimwald had rejoined the others we quickly gathered and left the place, leaving an angry giant behind.

Next time our dwarf said something was 'safe', I would just mention 'giant'.

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