

The story of Chi Si Chen (Autumn Silver Reed)

Chapter 104: Blocked Pass (1st ride of Tarsakh 1371)

Back in the camp I quickly made way to colonel Ribaldi. The camp was not nearly ready breaking up, but the near panic was subsiding. I requested permission to rest, because I could predict the near future. Odd. I had so become used to feeling the future, reading the future, that just thinking things through came as a bit of a surprise. But the idea was clear: the Fiend would attack us again before eight hours had passed. Perhaps I had better write down my reasoning if only if I would not survive what would come next.

Our adversary was much stronger than we were, but he had rather a gap between himself and his troops. He knew that, and, more important, they knew that. Most of his units only followed because of fear. So any loss of his devil force was bad for his hold over his troops. It followed that he would try to keep his units unaware of just how many devils there were and their exact powers. Likely he would have tried to keep several of them outside the picture, so he could show them in time of need... Or use illusions to make them think they were there. It was a truth known to all bards that an illusion used when the public was already convinced was a lot easier than using them against opponents who were ready to doubt. So I had to keep in mind that I should doubt what I saw, only consider what truly happened. If only I had read more about them in the 'keep. My knowledge was limited and likely full of flaws. But doubting what they wished me to see was always smart, as long as I made choices when they needed to be made.

Why eight hours? We, the Accidental Alliance, were currently the Fiend's strongest opponent. And a major part of our power was in the arcana and divine might we had learned to channel. Power now spent, yet reborn after eight hours of rest. So if his army was ready or not, he would be sure to stage an attack of some sort that would need our skills before that time had passed. There was nothing I could do about our understanding and handling of magic. Or at least nothing that allowed us to free ourselves of the traces of our spells that still lingered around us. It took a sixth of a day to disappear enough that one could learn or pray without corrupting the new energy. So in that sense a four hour trance with Kendalan would not help. We could reselect spells with the little energy unspent, a small boon, but that wasn't the reason. In the silence of the ambush I had heard a note, a chord, a sound so sublime, so soft yet pervasive... I knew that if I let my mind go to rest with that sound, that I would gain access to a shadow of the primordial energy that once was present when this world was born. And although I wasn't sure that I was ready to handle it, I knew that I had better shape up. I was asked for help.

I didn't awake from the trance. It was no 'sleep'. At one point I knew I was ready reflecting about the days, months, years past. And I wondered about the small inconsistencies of the day before:

- x** Why had the Fiend been about as effective as the horned devil? It was clear that the horned devil only had a limited number of fireballs (3?) each day, or else it wouldn't have chosen to use that lightning bolt on me. It had some dispelling power too, a fear aura... Yet a pitfiend should be more powerful than that. And he had done nothing beyond that as far as I could tell. Even the damage Grimwald had taken...
- x** The barbed devils could have been very dangerous – assuming their hold person powers were not exhausted. But if so, why hadn't they moved in? Several holds at the same time likely would have been more effective than pummeling our dwarf's armor. Or where they needed to keep the army under control? The fiend had lost twelve of the attacking bearded devils, and almost all orthon we knew of. His army might be in worse shape than ours... As long as he attacked it would still be his. But what would happen if he was not victorious?
- x** The creator of ice walls had been conspicuously absent. True, I had planned to use each wall as additional defenses, but it suggested that whatever was the source, it either had few other battlefield powers, or it too was needed elsewhere. The Erinyes too had not shown herself. Was she already preparing the next move? I had hurt her, yet I could not believe she had not healed by now. To many infernal opponents unaccounted for.

A scout returning stopped my reminiscing. Indeed a problem had come up. The pass through the steep hills on the northern edge of the moor was blocked by a fortification manned by giants and lesser creatures. It needed to be cleared before the bulk of the army arrived, otherwise it would be a hammer-anvil problem. More fighting, more violence. Dawn was not yet upon us, but the night was nearing its end. I heard a complex sound reverberating in my mind, the endless possibilities of sound over a bass of crackling fire. Even time... even time was not as fixed as I once thought. Oh, mistress, let me not fall to the lure of power!

Fighting our way through those fortifications was only the most visible of our problems. I had to think like the Fiend, consider what he would expect us to do, plan around his plans, and then plan further. If we succeeded in leaving the moor we would not have lost, but it was not a victory. Future first, I mentally heard Grimwald groan, but the future was a past he would one day remember. Future, like reality, had to be believed in to exist. Harmony. We were seven, a chord to save one.

Back from the future. We needed to know who had summoned the devils and why they had received what orders. To do that we needed Zhentarim help as clearly no leader of the Lord's Alliance had accurate information about this problem. Somebody powerful enough to summon and control fiends would have oodles of magical shielding. We needed a proper secret society to uncover this information and I was pretty sure that the Zhentarim knew – which did not mean that major Locke might be informed. So we had to make sure he stood in good position with his superiors. This was a problem, because it would be wrong to break the fiend's rule, but strengthen something as dark as the Black Network. So empower the major, while sowing the seed of compassion. He hated me. Yet I had to try, Guan Yin herself would, had, traveled this path.

Major Locke... A brave man, a man who believed in power. Yet also a man who feared power. Surrounded by people who were fully dedicated, yet also much weaker. His lieutenants ready to betray him. He was a clever man, deep in his heart he knew that, skillful as he was, he would never lead the Zhentarim, his lack in faith and arcane art a hurdle too high to jump. Yet an independent command, filling the gap left by Sememmon... if he had truly had considered the future he would know that as his power grew that both the leaders and his followers would look with envious eyes. What path could I show him... What path could I show now major Ogg... What path could I show them? I knew I could not save all, their karma was, in the end, their own.

The pass, the fortifications were their own problem. I had to consider the road beyond. If the fiend had stationed some troops – giants throwing rocks? – on the heights then expending all our energy on the fortifications would be a trap. How many of those guarding would be illusions? Likely the barbed devils would be there. Orthons (several!) had been attacking the army as it moved, to the detriment of morale and some loss, so they were assigned harassing roles. The defensive setting would make those ice walls a power, where they had been a double edged weapon against the rear guard. The Erinyes... The giants (hill? hopefully no Formorians) were a lesser, but still serious, threat, the orcs and goblins in fact no more than difficult terrain: we needed to ensure that they were gone, but if they were the only danger left then the battle would be winnable for the Neverwinter troops. I reminded myself: no **heart of water**, no **protection from teleportation**, I was stronger than yesterday, yet also weaker. Which troops should we take with us to secure each step taken? One constant worry was that I had no idea who betrayed the Waterdhavian troops. The person who ensured that the amphitheater had been safe. Had it been one of the devils in disguise? Why had the colonel not found out? He felt a bit like Nethander or Felina: a certain amount of distrust should come natural. The lack of arcane casters or priest of some standing should have told experienced soldiers that this mission lacked that vital bit: a reserve for when things went haywire. We too lacked that bit, and I finally understood Grimwald's lamenting.

We moved forward towards the pass, joined by the lieutenant who led the lancers. This Carliss Fraisor clearly had been tutelage by bards too, but he also knew other ways to lead men in battle. I knew that look on Cuura's face: she was considering adopting him in her future army. A much better choice than those people in Waterdeep, but I wondered if he was up to the action ahead. An odd realization, but us seven were honed by

threats in a way not many could have survived. Would this fight mean the loss of some of us? It didn't *feel* like that, although the possibility wasn't gone. Of course. If it was easy, then they would not have needed us. We would allow the army to retreat. A minute or two to discuss our strategy, then in we went.

Felina and Nethander took the vanguard, scouting the left and right of the valley, slowly moving towards the wall blocking it. Felina reported that something was off on her side of the valley, the steep slope giving her pause. What she described was too vague to make sense of, but I decided that it would be unwise to leave a danger in our flank or rear. They found the wall just a stack of rocks, but the ground was littered with sharpened rocks and wooden stakes. They moved up the slope, around the wall, past the higher grounds where numerous orcs and goblins were hiding. We would need to do something about that too, but in truth they were only a minor threat – if we would be able to scare off the giants and banish the devils then I was sure that their morale would break. Behind the wall were four barbed devils, a horned devil, and about two dozen giants. I had expected the hill giants, the stone giants were a bit of a bad thing, but the single cloud giant was really a problem: as long as he stood we wouldn't be able to break the lesser giant's morale.

With Nethander and Felina waiting for the right moment to strike, Kendalan and I moved forward. My *luminous armor* was still active, so I thought it best to attract attention anyway, giving the others optimum time to analyze our opposition. When I passed the 'off' spot, I taunted it in giant and my gut feeling turned out to be right. A gargantuan mountain troll reared up and assaulted me. Cuura, Carliss, and Zhae attacked it, but it swept them aside before they could even reach it. I called on my new music and reformed my arms into *whips of flame*, lashing it while Kendalan and Grimwald peppered it with arrows. As bows were clearly the best weapon, Cuura and Carliss switched, but Zhae tumbled towards the troll, over its arm, towards its head... straight into his mouth. I disliked killing it, but I couldn't let it kill Zhae.

Carliss was severely wounded, and we needed somebody to bring the colonel up to speed, so, after a rousing song, he left for the main army. I continued forward, sweeping the area with my flames to clear a path thirty feet wide. After a while the giants start lobbing boulders, and although I was hit several times I considered my pain a good exchange for the safety of so many. Kendalan targeted the cloud giant. It was regrettable, but he, together with the horned devil was the lynchpin of the defense.

Still a long way from the wall I heard that one of the devils had discovered our scouts and Felina was held. I had tried to prepare my friends' minds against this, but I could stop one of such attacks, not multiple. Therefore I let go of my flaming whip arms and *switched* with Felina. The horned devil saw me and another popped in. The way how the first looked at me told me enough: he had been the 'pit fiend' on the battlefield. I really needed some any illusion magic. Cuura and Zhae hurried towards the wall, but Horse could fly and Zhae could not, so he hurt his feet on the remaining caltrops. Nethander attacked the horned devil valiantly, but the fiend was very hard to hit. I did see how Nethander's blade scored nasty hits though – his rapier had changed to pierce his outer planar resistances. The barbed devils targeted me, but my mind was supported by Guan Yin: no devil will break through that. Cuura pummeled a hill giant blocking her path, when the cloud giant called out towards Grimwald: "Are you the oath-breaker?"

I could sense Grimwald's chagrin, even if I could not see him, but he confirmed the fact with astounding results: I could clearly see the giant leader gesture towards the stone giants, and a clear order: "*we will not fight him.*" The hill giants were not listening, yet they were clearly shaken that these allies were leaving. Then I had to concentrate as the horned devil closed in. He hit me till I could barely stand, but I first used my music to change my *flame whips* to cold hitting it twice, then used my new understanding of *time* to allow me to *switch* position with Zhae before he could act against me. I felt bad for exposing Zhae to danger, yet I knew he craved action, and with his damaged foot he would take far too long to reach any serious opponent.

Grimwald was close to Zhae's position, and Kendalan inched closer, now searching for another target as the cloud giant was retreating. One of the horned devils flew over the wall, likely thinking that four barbed

devils and his mate would be enough against three mortal. Then I heard Zhae hit. It was like an iron shod battering ram hitting a sandstone wall, cracking and shattering it. The horned devil reeled, and Kendalan found his target with a lightning arrow. One horned devil gone. The bickering of the hill giants was clear, but I could sense that they decided that the devils could fight us – if the devils clearly were winning they would join in again.

The remaining horned devil *called* in a group of those spined devils, but Grimwald showed how Moradin stood on his side. I was still waiting for time to catch up (and praying that Zhae and Nethander would withstand the barbed devils powers). A noxious cloud engulfed us, but I knew that spell and responded in the proper way. Felina had shaken the hold effect and Kendalan sought position, as Grimwald showed how unimpressed he was by this attack, as well as the fire attacks that followed. Then again I felt a ripple in reality and realized that one of the barbed devils had succumbed to Cuura's charge, followed by strikes of Nethander and Zhae. This was enough and the horned and barbed devils teleported out while I disrupted the fleeing spined devils. I felt bad about that, but they did not belong here. The remaining hill giants saw that and fled, shortly followed by orcs and goblins.

Grimwald immediately started to open a breach in the wall helped by Zhae, as I swept the ground to remove all traps. Cold was less efficient than fire, but it still was a lot faster than removing things by hand. Rock help was also very handy. We were hardly finished when the first elements of the army arrived, many wounded among them. The orphans had killed at least sixty men, likely more, and for a moment the erinyes almost had them convinced they would loose. Alas for her, but Guan Yin listened to true prayers, and would always help those in dire needs. The colonel took a moment to salute us, and we joined Carliss who led the rearguard.

We had not won, but it was more important that we had escaped the trap and most of us had survived. I wondered how the city of Llorckh would receive us. This game with the Zhentarim was far from over.

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