

The story of Chi Si Chen (Autumn Silver Reed)

Chapter 22: Hungry Herb, hag, and many heads (2nd ride of Mirtul 1370)

I was really unhappy about the prospects of attacking any part of nature just to get at its treasures. We discussed it, but none of my companions shared my view, and their different viewpoints were based on their own cultural beliefs. It might be wrong, but I felt that I had little power to speak against that. Nethander even showed a bit of his caring side, while Cuura, Kendalan, and Grimwald just plainly did not understand what I worried about, even if Grimwald objected to recklessly looking for danger. Still, in the end, the group just readied themselves for possible combat without starting a true hunt. I would have to accept that as the best possible I reckoned.

As we neared the marshy areas the possibility of our coach getting stuck became a worry, so we stopped and I wove several coarse mats of local fibrous plants. Hanging them on the sides for easy access we followed a wounding path between multiple small lakes and trees which grew at the waters edge: Kendalan ahead, Cuura leading the horses, Nethander and Felina on top, the Sergeant and Grimwald protecting the sides, and finally Zhae, Rebecca, Paul, and me in the rear. Clearly many plants here were of value to an alchemist, as Paul collected as we went. Rebecca stayed but a few paces from the rear door of the coach, she really seemed loath to be here. Swamps have a bad name, so I couldn't really fault her.

Our elf spotted a sudden movement in the lake on Grimwald's side, and the others prepared for battle. I myself are still not sure what to do about it. The whistle like warble from a Muck Stalker sounded from the opposite side across a second lake. Those birds are quite shy, so I was amazed one was sounding so close, but I was even more amazed when the slight ripple in the water stopped. I heard the twang of bows as Kendalan and other started shooting at something on the other side. I peered and thought I saw something moving, then plunging in the lake. Rebecca has taken cover in the coach that had stopped by now, and Paul – smart man – was hiding next to a small willow. Zhae and I looked at each other: whatever it had been, it was no shambling mound. Then a tentacle grabbed me from behind and started pulling me inexorably towards the water. Next to the coach I could see Grimwald fight in vain against a second tentacle, before he stopped struggling and invoked a simple spell. Slash! Zhae was next to me severing the tentacle. How would I survive without him? Grimwald got pulled into the water, but his head stayed up – quite a feat in his armor.

With the attack coming from the other side, Cuura came racing in even as Grimwald was finally pulled under – but not before he marked himself with *light* so we could track his location under water. Both Felina and Nethander jumped for the creature, both too short, and Zhae hurried for our doomed dwarf too. Felina cast an expeditious move and hurried around the lake to the other side even as Zhae and Cuura followed Grimwald underwater. If I hadn't known where our dwarf was fighting the creature I would see it now, the light of Cuura shining like a beacon. I started filling my lungs with air in case they were unable to free him.

Kendalan was collecting rope as I saw little waves were a fearsome underwater battle must be taking place. Grimwald had had little chance to prepare for the dive, but he was a dwarf so I was planning to wait just a little longer. Then I saw Felina almost at the opposite site of the lake, running past a flower whose petals fell off. A sign. Now.

Cold. Dark. Water. A tentacle constricting me, piercing my skin, blood in the water. Above, oh so far above, I spotted the glowing shape of Cuura. Then a shudder went through the creature as Zhae hit – what else could hit with such a force? Still the creature held on, grinding it tentacle, squeezing the air out. Cuura came down again, holding a rope thrown by Kendalan. Pain lanced through me as Zhae stayed at my side and Cuura wrestled to tie the rope around the tentacle. I wondered what would come first: getting crushed by the shambling mound, or drown, as I was quite unable to wrestle myself free, even with Cuura's help.

A shudder went through the rope as it was pulled taut. It kept shuddering as slowly – to slow for me – the mound was dragged through the water towards the shore. I saw a different light closing in and felt my lungs burn. Then Grimwald was there, funnily looking like he needed the rope to stay submerged – full hauberk notwithstanding. Another yank on the rope and suddenly there was space to move. As soon as I was free Grimwald grabbed me and we went up like a cork.

Effortless he held me above in the sweet air and cast a *cure*, the courtesy which I returned. As we returned to the lakeside, I spotted how the sergeant let our four horses as the pulled the Mound from the water, Zhae and Cuura bashing it furiously. I would have liked to call them to halt, but stopping Cuura in battle mode is pointless and Zhae was just trying to make sure I was no longer threatened.

As we clambered on terra firma, I spotted neither Nethander nor Kendalan, but I did see how Felina went into cover at the far side of the *other* lake. Really that *expeditious move* gives her great mobility! We collected our gear that we had dropped as we were grabbed by the Mound, and I saw a pool of greenish red blood close by, trailing towards the other lake. Ripples in the water told me something was there, and then a shimmer jumped out of the water near Felina, hastening away. A shout of Nethander popping out of the water made her jump aside, but not enough for a cat like strike by Felina. The female shape, green and uncouth, whirled around hitting Felina with a glancing blow, but something happened as Felina collapsed. I heard the twang of Grimwald's crossbow and the hag dropped like a rock.

In the background I heard the satisfied grunt of Cuura, while Kendalan also surfaced. He looked at what remained of the Mound and calmly remarked: “I know a rather tasty receipt for soup using that.” We hastened towards Felina, who had been drained of her physical strength by the green hag. She could hardly stand, and we brought her to the coach. After we had discovered the hag's shack and cleaned up the battle scene, we were some items richer. A few well made things that had survived being part of a plant, and a dented armor that Grimwald was sure he could repair.

We traveled on, hoping that we would encounter no more dangers, but a couple of hours later we heard some yelping sounds in the distance. It felt like a call for help of sorts, but not made by a human. Kendalan was suspect of something trying to lure us to our doom, but the urgency made us speed up, even if we were wary and on guard.

Grimwald was well prepared, because when we were close he signaled for a stop and cast a spell which I recognized as a *clairvoyance*. He described a many headed creature attacking a group of lizard people. Now lizardmen are of no great standing, but they care for their sick and wounded, and as such must be considered civilized. Felina had almost encyclopedic knowledge about the creature – a Hydra – so we went in well prepared.

When we reached the embattled group, which had retreated to a small island in the middle of a lake, Grimwald was the first to act. His first spell touched all of us and all of the lizardmen with the raw health of the earth. One of the defenders was grabbed by a head, but where it would have died before, now it could break loose, bleeding, but still standing.

Zhae, Nethander, Kendalan, Grimwald entered the water. Zhae in a direct path to the best fighting spot, the others in more careful routes. Kendalan and Zhae were both bitten, but Zhae already started swinging at the heads, while I slowly moved closer cauterizing the cut necks to make sure they would not grow back. Cuura used the fact that lake was not very deep and raced closer on horseback, pummeling the creature and retreating before it could retaliate. Felina stayed behind, guarded by her sergeant. Zhae, supported by Kendalan and Grimwald – a rapier just isn't a cutting weapon – was decimating the heads. The Hydra all but ignored me, enraged by the valiant stance. Then Zhae cut through two heads in one swing, and my fire wasn't strong enough to stop four heads growing out seconds later. This had to stop and I focused my inner fire telling my friends to step back lest they be hurt. Never felt I such energy flowing from me. Even if the creature had been healthy I am sure it could not have withstood this inner heat. Only moments later heat cracked bone was all that was left, a column of steam and soot rising in the air.

The lizardmen stepped back as I joined with Zhae, but turned by a *YIPP* sound made by a large humanoid creature on the other side of the lake. We recognized it as a Gray Render, this group of lizardmen clearly being his protectorate. The shaman of this clan sprayed us with some foul smelling liquid to mark us as part of the tribe, which we received in the way it was meant. I am sure even such a creature as that was no match for Zhae, but it is so much better to work together in friendship than to fight needlessly.

Grimwald asked for directions and got extremely agitated when he heard of ancient ruins to the west. As far as I can understand their marking of the ages it is from before the time of Giants – ancient beyond belief. He wants to go there even if our hosts strongly disadvice such a route. After some argument we prevail on Grimwald to listen to the view of his Deity, and he is willing to wait after hearing their advice. When we left we got some potion to tell other lizardmen we are their friends, and some things they have no use for. One being an ornamental silver longsword. Totally impractical in a fight but wonderful to look at.