

The story of Chi Si Chen (Autumn Silver Reed)

Chapter 42: Almost Finished (1st ride of Elesias 1370)

Grimwald was unhappy about leaving the coach behind. Nethander was impressed by the price I got for it. It took some puzzling before I figured out he thought it is still in bad repair, while we (Cuura) got it fixed two days after the fair closed. I decided not to tell him. I preferred it that he stopped looking at me like some kind of saint. His grin from Kendalan's warhorse (which isn't spooked by his aura) nicely complemented Grimwald's frown from the pony we bought for him. Riding didn't really suit him, and to be honest I couldn't really disagree. Walking was also more me, but we need the speed.

We had hardly left the village when, in beautiful synchronisation, twelve figures teleported in. Eight Red Wizards and four men in full plate. From a quick glance it looked like they might be from all the eight schools taught there. If I had to estimate I would rate them at sixth of seventh circle, and those warriors were up to par too. I might take out one of them – might as in a slight chance – and perhaps Nethander and Zhae could win from one of those warriors if they teamed up, but even Grimwald's healing would not last against such like these. I noticed Rebecca already fading in the background (artfully done), and for a moment I feared Cuura would give the order to attack. Kendalan... he just stood his ground, unperturbed by this possibly fatal encounter.

One wizard stepped forward – a diviner – which told me oodles (funny word that) about the politics of that western... ehh eastern... land. In polite words he demanded the chest. Of course only Grimwald understood, but the rest did not react with the utter confusedness they had before. It's true, a new season has started. Felina stepped forward to try and talk things out, but she clearly wasn't sure about that chest thing.

For a moment Grimwald and I looked at each other, then a crow in a nearby tree made it's presence known. The reaction of the wizards was funny. An irritated glance, followed by a look of fearful realization. The bird flew over and landed on Grimwald's helm and cocked its head to one side. Kendalan cast an eye at the bird like it had sprouted purple wings and I felt how the powers of water and earth, wood and steel, all others, change as the bird flew by. This was no ordinary bird.

The bird shook its head once, and the wizards said some word of recall, because they all disappeared again, teleported away. By now we all looked at the bird and Cuura suggested that Grimwald feed it, so he pulled out a bit of sausage. Then it shape-changed to woman with wild silver-blond hair and black, tattered, robes. I wracked my memory of what little I knew about the Red Wizards and anybody who they might hold in awe. The Symbul. Ruler of Aglasomething... Wasn't she related to somebody important in the Harpers?

She told us we were a bit late to leave, as the druid wrought shielding on the chest no longer was at its peak. It was still impossible to pinpoint, but scrying worked – so if the location was known... She suggested we travel through hills and woods, with safe locations near the dwarven tower up north and some ruined wizard school near Beregost. The last stretch to Candlekeep was the true risk, as our destination was known by now. She was ready to leave – for some odd reason it feels like she wants to interfere with us as little as possible – when she saw Nethander. For a moment a huge smile appeared and she named him 'puss in boots'. I found out later that it is the name of a fairytale character with questionable morals, but very resourceful. Nethander looked a bit doubtful.

We quickly travelled on when Kendalan (or his wolf) noticed the smell of smoke in the air. Something was burning in the woods east of us. The woods we had just saved from utter destruction. Even though we were in a hurry, we could not let that pass, so we hasted east. Grimwald could not stay seated, and I had serious doubt I could cast any spell like this. Perhaps I should learn to focus on a proper rhythm and verse to help my concentration.

With Grimwald in front of Cuura we rode on. When we saw what was happening in the distance we stopped to prepare. A score of bugbears mechanically destroying the woods, making pyres, and an armoured fellow directing them. I spotted scorch marks where he lighted the woods with *fireballs* and at least one *flaming sphere*. Coupled with the armor we likely had to do with a wamage. Narrow focus, but lot's of evocation spells – mostly fire according to the stories I heard. Grimwald and I protected the group as well as we could against fire, then Cuura proposed a simple plan: Zhae, Grimwald, and herself would attack the bugbears, while Nethander, Felina, and myself would try to close in on the caster. Kendalan stayed here, convinced he could hit the man without moving. Over 300 yards, but our elf just shrugged. He never bluffed.

The other group was off, Grimwald looking quite uncomfortable, and Felina and Nethander spurred their horses, while I flew. It was a bit slower, but I had more control, so could more easily cast spells. *Fireballs* erupted around both groups, and Felina's horse when down hard. Kendalan was true to his word and scored several hits on the mage – disrupting at least one spell – but he ducked behind a tree, now unreachable by our elf's arrows. Felina played dead, Nethander did his darkness trick, and Cuura pulled all attention to her with a fierce war cry, so the next spell was a *cloudkill* around Cuura and Grimwald.

Grimwald hasted out, still looking okay, while Cuura's horse stumbled away. Cuura herself calmly shot another bugbear, then ambled out of the cloud. She must have been effected, I was sure of it, but nobody who did not know her well would be able to tell. Such aura! Magnificent! Zhae had been slightly behind, and he now went for the mage, ignoring the bugbears – who did not change their routine... Were they dominated?

Nethander ran for the wamage, now utterly silent despite his speed, and Felina must have sneaked forward too. I saw a splash of white on her downed horse: she must have used one of those blessed bandages we received. I didn't think I would be in time to help, but I could switch with Kendalan, as I could see him and the wamage clearly. Once switched I saw Cuura's horse stumble towards me, so I healed it as well as my understanding allowed.

The fight was over seconds later, and the Nethander and Kendalan went to kill those bugbears. They were evil, but they seemed to be unaware of attacks unless somebody stood right in front of them! Even a domination did not suppress self protection in such a way. Mind burn! The psionist! Irrevocable, but for magic far out of our capabilities. They could no longer care for themselves, we could not because of our mission, and Nashkel would not. Death would be preferable, but I hated the choice. I turned to Grimwald and saw the same realization.

Cuura sat down, drained by the 'cloud, and we walked towards her except Felina who started checking the wamage's body. We had to heal the horses of Feliana and Nethander, because... Suddenly a shape, a monk of some kind, ran out of the bushes and attacked Felina, scoring several hits despite her defensive magic. Zhae and Nethander ran to help, but Zhae got intercepted by some shadow. I lay blindness on the monk, but he did not seem slowed, even though the spell took effect. Grimwald destroyed the shadow with a spiritual weapon, and slowly they surrounded the man, who managed to break Zhae charge with a nasty kick. With regret I closed in, and waited for an opening to touch him. My fire killed him instantly. I felt no victory, just loss.

He was a monk of Shar. The same goddess of those poison users in the tent on the fair. Is Felina marked in a way? That psionist has a lot to answer for, but we have to be at Candlekeep before Highharvestide. We must camp here until we can heal Cuura and her horse of the poison damage