

The story of Chi Si Chen (Autumn Silver Reed)

Chapter 96: Withering the Storm (1st ride of Tarsakh 1371)

*F*elina, Nethander and lieutenant Darque went outside, hunting for whatever creature was responsible for those ice-walls, but the multitude of opponents made it hazardous – especially as we could not give them any serious backup. Grimwald had to return to the digging, as the escape tunnel ran into some instable rock formation – nobody was hurt, but several yards had collapsed. The warriors were nervous, even as Kendalan and I patched them up. Luckily Cuura returned with the champion of the tribe – Brego – so our defenses were about as strong as they had been. They informed us that there was a whole army of orcs (and others) near. How had this whole army been able to get this far north without alerting anybody? And why did they come here? The Bear-hand clan itself was not a prize worth so much effort, and to the north the high moor ended in cliffs, a river valley, and then the great forest that was Kendalan's home. The fiend was under orders. So what where they? A last question was: how did they feed all of them? The moor was incapable of feeding so big a group. Did they move because they had to, had they exhausted the south?

*N*o sign of Zhae. I worried, although Cuura told me he should return soon. The sappers returned briefly to reduce the tower to rubble – it wasn't as effective as we had hoped because of the ice walls – and one should not give your opponent a place of strength. Then Kendalan saw some movement, and I heard somebody clambering on our flank. It sounded bigger than an goblin scout, but with clear skill. Enemy was likely, but not certain, so we informed it that we had spotted it. This turned out to be a lucky decision, as 'it' was a messenger from Silverymoon, a halfelfin named Aurian. Silverymoon clearly was no backwater place, because Aurian wore as foppish a clothing as I had ever seen. Yet the thin sword hanging from her belt, her obvious skill in sneaking, and the ease with which she accepted the current danger told me she was far from a beginner. Her message, however, was not so encouraging: Silverymoon might not come at all! Nethander returned, and we once more prepared for an assault that was to come.

*T*ime passed, but not nearly enough for Grimwald to solve the tunnel problem, when the enemy advanced once more. Their use of drums, show of strength by the ogres, and the massed units of orcs held under control by those bearded devils threatened to break the barbarian's morale. I readied myself to restore it if it was broken, but then Cuura showed her mettle. She stepped forward, alone against the multitude, and shouted them down. She invited them to come, and he slaughtered till the last ogre, orc, warg, and goblin. Kendalan did an assist by shooting three arrows in a bearded devil, disrupting it.

*S*uddenly they weren't so willing to charge us. Instead they blocked the entrances with ice and removed all dead orcs from the field. What were they planning? Then the orcs returned, but they moved slowly and haphazardly. The ice inhibited my sight, but I could feel the unnaturalness radiating from them. Zombies! How did those devils manage to create undead? It was worrisome, and I contemplated the question as Cuura tried to get a dozen barbarians to form a formation she had devised.

*W*e could not tell which of the three caves would be attacked – perhaps all three – so we distributed the two score barbarian warriors equally. Nethander and Kendalan joined the far cave, Cuura and Brego the center where morale was most critical, and Aurian and myself supported the last. I told her that her blade would be not very effective against those zombies, but she just smiled and swiped the blade through the air. That gleam... adamant? She also quickly checked the content of a pouch and I saw a piece of fur and amber... Yes, she clearly was no beginner.

*S*lowly the ice wall melted. I chatted a bit with Aurian about Silverymoon, and what kind of skills she had. In truth I did it more to show the bear-hand warriors that we were not worried at all than for a true need for information. As far as I could tell it would be a nice place to visit. Suddenly bigger chunks of ice started to fall down, and finally the wall collapsed.

No undead stood before our cave.

I hurried towards the far cave, leaving Aurian in charge of the right wing. Was this bad? Aurian felt dependable. To late now, the decision had been made. I grabbed my horn and urged the warriors to fight, which they did with fervor. From the center cave I could hear Cuura encouraging her men, her stratagem clearly working. Before the zombies could attack back I used a *snake's swiftness* to allow the barbarians to attack once more, which thinned the opposing ranks considerably. Then I heard Cuura charge. Wasn't that too soon? Indeed it was, so Nethander jumped out to attack the flank of the center. The zombies clawed down most of the barbarians (no shieldwall skill), and for a moment it looked like we would lose a dozen or more. Then Aurian led the charge from the right flank, and Bear waded in. I quickly expended a *mass vigor*, so we only had two killed. Cuura needed to learn that men follow their leaders.

Learning from ones mistake is critical in growing. We really should start looking for the lesser devils: the Pit Fiend was clearly beyond our skill, but by denying him his trusted lieutenants we might weaken his cause. An added bonus was that by showing that his servants could be beaten, we might degrade his hold over his troops. Orcs were aggressive, yet also quite sensitive to morale. Then the Erinyes popped in again, with her 'flag of truce'.

With Grimwald busy shoring up the tunnel, I decided to talk to her alone. That single female was probably worth more than any other lieutenant, as she gave him troops for which he did not need to fight. She told us that although we had won the first few clashes, our situation was dire, with no hope for success. Then she told me she wanted to speak to the elder of the tribe. I could not gainsay that: I had no standing and she might easily charm him again. This time I might not be able to block that. It was a violation of the spirit of the truce, but was it a violation of the letter? Grimwald would know, but I did not have him around. Time for a gambit. I accused the Erinyes of violating the truce and that I could kill her for that. Her response was a disdainful 'Yes, you could,' as she clearly did not see me as a true danger. Her admittance of that fact allowed me to attack her with cold. Of course she survived, and in truth I would have felt awful if I had succeeded: the souls of four score people were at stake, and this was a devil, not some misguided person, but this ploy should have been beneath me. She told me we would all die, and teleported out. The talk to the elder was of the table.

A mere minutes later Felina and the lieutenant returned. They had seen who had created the zombies: it were the orcs themselves. It might very well have been a device or item of some sorts. We truly needed to inform the army, so Aurian and Lt. Darque left. The half elf even was able to cast *improved invisibility* twice, so that should give them enough lead to breakout. It was clear that for all their valor the barbarians were not up to such an assault, so we tried to limit the front so we could hold off that army. The low ceiling was to our advantage, but if somebody started to throw *fireballs*, or other area magic then we were in deep trouble. Grimwald managed to set a collapsing trap on the ceiling of the left cave, and the right cave we could fill with rubble and my last *spike growth*. Still, I heard a voice telling me that this wasn't the proper path.

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