

The story of Chi Si Chen (Autumn Silver Reed)

Chapter 97: Removing the Middleman (1st ride of Tarsakh 1371)

Grimwald returned, the tunnel once more safe. We discussed how to proceed. Our dwarf preferred to stay here, let the enemy break their strength against our defenses. I preferred to go out, take out the devils themselves. I did not have one solid reason for that, just a lot of minor ones:

- The devils were the true evil, not those orcs and goblins; they might still be saved. I knew Grimwald and Kendalan would scoff at this idea, but the principle was correct.
- Each orc killed might mean another soul for the Fiend. Again I wasn't sure. Was joining such an army enough for eternal damnation? But could we take the risk? It would explain why he expended his troops so easily.
- Letting the other determine the pace was weakness. At least that was true in single combat, and I suspect it was also true in massed combat.
- Without his cadre the Fiend would be unable to control his army, and the best way to win was if the opposing army just fell apart.

Zhae returned, having wandered over the moor. What was the matter with him? He was withdrawn and clearly looking for answers. How could I help him? Only if he allowed it. He did not even object when we finally decided that we would leave Cuura and him preparing for the inevitable assault, while the rest of us would try to infiltrate the Fiend's army. Grimwald grimaced over that word. Infiltrate. Heroics were nice, but saving souls was much more important. The weather was cloudy, the acidic smell of the moor held only the least taste of spring, and the smell of blood was still strong in the air. I could not read the stars properly, but we were still going from nexus to nexus. It was time to act and pray the gods smiled on our endeavor.

After half an hour we reached the skirmish line shielding the main camp. Goblins, lots of them. Felina and Nethander tried to sneak through but what Nethander thought was a hole in their line was actually a well placed guard. The goblin shrieked once before he was silenced and I tried to cover it by letting sounds of a wolf pack appear from that position. Alas, some of the goblins either were woodcrafty, or they just preferred to err on the side of caution. They raised the alarm, while running away in several directions. Kendalan shot a few of them. Why? It was his way, but I wasn't to happy about it.

Within seconds we heard sounds: Wolfriders, orcs, ogres. I told Nethander to fall back, Felina's position I wasn't sure of, but if I wasn't the enemy was likely unsure themselves. I angled away from Grimwald and Kendalan, as I needed a position to take care of the wolfriders. Nethander joined me, helping me to hide.

Making sure the wolves fled was easy, but some orc noticed me. Nethander pulled the attention away from me by challenging the inevitable bearded devil to a duel, and I let a glowing shape appear in the air using a *dancing lights*. The orcs were uncertain, and clearly were waiting to see how the duel would end, while the six ogres gathered around, leaving me no room to escape.

Before Kendalan and Grimwald could come to us, the six guard devils – Orthon's Grimwald called them – teleported into our rear. Our dwarf warned us that they were much stronger when in formation, and that we should try to disrupt their 3x2 stance. An interesting idea, but while Nethander played with the bearded devil, I was confronted by six ogres. My long-stance and *yak-woman shape* held them at bay for a moment, but then three of them attacked. Why I still stood afterwards I did not really understand. Probably because they hit me from all sides, breaking at least two ribs, but not disrupting my balance. The other three tried to crush Felina, but she too withstood the onslaught. I considered for a moment. Should I heal myself? Flee in flight? That would expose Felina. No. I called upon the powers of the sea, the *kelp-beds* far below, and bound the three ogres fast. Nethander ran the bearded devil through and Felina started her dance of death, dropping the ogres one by one.

Kendalan and Grimwald in the mean time had fought the orthon's to a standstill. But at a price. Kendalan's *lightning* was strong enough to damage them, and his defensive style – force and movement – was effective, but Grimwald clearly was worse for the wear. His *holy rain* damaged the devils, but the effect was stationary and they retreated. Then Nethander ran forward and fearlessly tumbled past the hedge of polearms. His

quick footed style allowed him to close in unscathed, whilst Grimwald would had to wade through. The orthon's crossbows now targeted our dwarf. They shot some sort of hellish fire that was even hotter than I was able to produce. It burned right through him and his armor, so I *mastered the wind* so I could support them. I closed and shared Guan Yin's family blessing, and Nethander managed to disrupt one, then, with Grimwald's help, a second Orthon. Maggots burst out after each serious hit, but it was not enough to stop our warriors. Would Kendalan run out of power? I could sense the orcs behind me waiting to see how the combat would go. No, our elf had exhausted his blood's power, but not the power of nature. *Lightning* from the sky started hammering down, and the Orthon's had enough, quickly followed by the orcs, goblins, and remaining ogres.

Of course Kendalan was upset that the enemy again fled the scene.

Back in the caves it became clear how badly we had broken their morale, as no attack materialized and we could rest and refresh our spells. Shortly after dawn we left with the whole tribe for the army; the elder had decided that neutrality was no longer possible. We held, we lived, but the war was far from over.

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