

The story of Chi Si Chen (Autumn Silver Reed)

Chapter 4: Cleaning the complex (2nd ride of Alturiak 1370)

Kendalan had great feeling for the land, because he found a good camping spot near the top of a hill where we could still see most of the lake under the waterfall. Then the spirit and I left for the valley where we hoped to find Cuura. I expected it to take hours, perhaps days, but within ten minutes Kendalan had pinpointed not Cuura, but her horse - finding the barbarian was a matter of waiting a few minutes. We returned to the others, who had little to report: nothing had either left, nor entered the secret entrance. After much discussion if we should look for another entrance, one big enough to handle carts, it was somehow decided that Felina and Grimwald would scout behind the waterfall, with cover from Kendalan. Cuura had been making fun of Grimwald's sneaking ability, but his lack of stealth was disconcerting for one who would go into an unknown cave. Zhae, Cuura, and I stayed at our camping site. I got the feeling I was getting close to understanding the lesser scrolls my great aunt gave me. It was almost like a pressure in my mind.

Zhae asked what I meant by 'Disaster is reached one step at the time'. I did not recall saying that, but it did not sound good. Cuura walked by and asked what Zhae and I were talking about (she didn't speak our civilized language), and seemed upset when Zhae told her. She climbed up her horse to warn the others down near the lake, but then we saw Felina make her first move to look behind the waterfall. To my amazement she did not use the stepping stones, nor swam in the icy water to get below, but she calmly clambered around the vertical rock face, which was dripping from the fall mist. Truly she had understanding of the mystical art of Magic. She looked for a while, made a small gesture, and then signaled Grimwald to cross. He did so without falling off, or even slipping; his balance must have improved. Together they entered and we started to wait, it wasn't more than a handful of minutes, but it felt like hours.

When they returned, hurrying but not fleeing, I allowed my tensed muscles to relax. A fight is scary, with death waiting for those whose time has run out, but at least one can act. This waiting was terrible. I quickly stored my scrolls and waited for what our scouts would report.

It was an old complex, if I could trust Grimwald in this, and it had been reused by others, some of whom took good care, others who did not. But the important matter was that Felina picked up sounds of at least a score of other Orcs. This must be their main base, for it seemed unlikely that another group of these Shadow folk would despoil these hills and not be noted by the villages close by. It was clear that we could never fight such a big group - let alone the creature responsible for that Cold spell - so we broke camp and started the difficult matter of finding the main entrance.

Moving from cover to cover we checked the area, over the hump of rock which formed the roof of the complex (Grimwald was sure it is sizable, and Felina did not disagree), looking at little valleys and twisted rocky outcrops to determine if there could be a hidden entrance. We did not find the entrance, but one valley was almost ideal for such a purpose, so we went and tried to find if wagons ever rode towards it. Of course we stayed away from the valley itself, as it is surely watched.

Carefully checking the ground for wheel ruts, Kendalan first found a trail of blood - or better where flies had hatched in bloody ground. Such amount, and in a strait line, suggest the transportation of a dead or dying body, and, after some more hours of searching, we also found a pin which was part of the harness for the pulling animals. No trail in sight for miles. We had found it!

We decided to return to Berdusk to inform Weldin, that 'harper' fellow, of our findings. The road back was tiring but uneventful, and we entered the city with but a casual glance of the outer guards. I am still amazed about the lack of control those in charge apply, but I must admit it was easier to travel and we could all share the same inn. Cuura wished to sleep over, but others prevailed and we were going to report directly.

*W*eldin was happy to see us return and glad with our tidings. He paid us this gold money they use in the west, and a performer paid us for the remains of that two-header creature. We were asked if we would not mind guiding a punishing expedition to this hide-out, and we were to return the next morning. I helped Grimwald buy some better clothing and we were all set for the next day.

*T*he next morning my view of reality was no longer the same. I discovered that some of those texts my great aunt had given me actually resonated within me. They spoke of elemental powers, powers of detection and understanding. Did I just make the first step on the path to Wu-Jen? Still I had much to learn – I did not even know which was my heart element. Perhaps it is wisest to start with water. Water and stone, it was to be.

*T*he punishing expedition consisted of four persons. Four! But that did not seem to phase them at all. The leader, a Shugenja of a War temple no doubt, wore more metal than the richest Noble I'd ever seen. Come to think of it, I'd seen more of these Crab people, it must be because it was cooler here. A warrior stood to the rear. Oddly enough he appeared to be the one with the lowest standing. A master of magic of some kind and a woman of uncertain character, but definite skill, completed the quartet. The Shugenja was a man of conviction and strength of character, so until we reached the hills he told – not asked. None of the others was interested in us. They might be strong, they might be mighty, but they lacked humility. Oh, who was I kidding, back home those of name or power acted the same way, yet here I discovered I'd always disliked it.

*N*ear the complex he told us he wanted to let some of them escape to lead them to the instigators, so Kendalan and I guarded the waterfall entrance. An hour later a score of Orcs fled past us, a few of them with minor wounds, but most of them unharmed. Their panic, however, told us about the carnage inside. Was this the right way to solve problems?

Human female Paragon/1, Wu-Jen/1