

The story of Chi Si Chen (Autumn Silver Reed)

Chapter 98: Digging for Info (1st ride of Tarsakh 1371)

Devils were crafty, so we were careful in making our way towards the army; it would be very bad if we led the Fiend straight to his main opposition... If he didn't already know... The bear-hand clan's warriors were nervous, the women and children close to panic. To leave your home, to accompany weird strangers with fey powers... I tried to play songs, told stories to calm them, but it must have been a harrowing experience.

A screening patrol of the army, led by Captain Ogg, intercepted us. He had not expected us to return with the whole clan. Did lieutenant Darque not warn them? Or had they expected never to hear from us again? In any case he asked Kendalan, Nethander, and Zhea to accompany him, as he was looking for 'stragglers'. As I understood it, Kendalan's lightning show had shaken some troops into leaving their post. Understandable, yet an army could not function if they allowed that. I just hoped their punishment would be light.

Reporting to major Orisund was easier than I expected, as the Zhentarim commander, Major Locke, was not present. We described what had happened, and, although I tried not to embellish, it was a pretty good tale. He wasn't happy about the presence of the Fiend's army, but our actions met with approval. The extra mouths to feed were a drain on resources, but Cuura promised that the clan would be useful in foraging, scouting, and other needs of the army. She then proceeded with the 'duel' with Brego, because she had promised the duel for our right to cross the bear-hand's lands. She lost more than she won – clearly she was more tired than she showed, or she had a lot more subtlety than I knew she had.

Knowledge was our current weakest point. I had foreseen that yesterday. The major requested that Grimwald select some troops and 'dig up' some information underground as the major expected deserters from the Fiend's army to be hiding there. We left soon after, with Grimwald's 2 sappers, Cuura with two bear-hand scouts, Felina and myself. I hadn't really prepared for underground action, but my spell set was adequate, if uninspired.

Easy half a day south we found ruins. Human style from the Three Kingdoms according to Grimwald. The scouts named them taboo – with giant rats, snakes, and other vermin nearby I understood. We found a collapsed entrance to a cellar, which the sappers quickly cleared when they heard dusk was the quiet time: snakes ruled the day, rats the night. The stair was slippery, and only the rope we carried allowed me to descend safely. Grimwald bounced down. He wasn't harmed much, but he was miffed.

Leading deeper into the ground was a second door, but Felina triggered an ancient **alarm** spell which we heard go off above, in the ruins of the house. It awoke some creatures. They quickly figured out where we were. Large humanoids, back-lit by the setting sun. The sound they made told me they were owl-bears, aggressive and fearless predators. Scaring them off would be almost impossible, alas. The fight was one sided, although one owl-bear managed to charge/barge through our dwarf.

Via several corridors we went ever deeper into the earth. Grimwald was happy, and I even found a sign the druids used this passage. But as we went deeper I considered the fact that we would find any deserters of the Fiend's army smaller and smaller, and the chance on an encounter with dark elves or other dangerous underdark denizens ever greater. And indeed we did. The scouts did their best were totally outclassed. Felina went for a deep strike even as Grimwald, Cuura (and I) held the line. I used what magic I had to capture, not kill, any opponent, as we had crossed in their territory and we were ordered to bring back information, not bodies.

Experience was a double edged sword: we learned, but the fiend had been learning a lot longer. That meant he had learned from our strengths, and probably inferred our weaknesses. And he would plan to negate our strengths and attack our weakness. So we should analyze those too – never a bad idea anyway – and counter his counters:

- X Cuura was a master of morale, and dangerous in melee and archery. But her actions showed her rashness, so she was vulnerable to an attack on her mind or luring her into a dangerous situation.*
- X Felina's power was striking unseen. So highlight her, then crush her. She might also be vulnerable to poison or other full body attack.*
- X Grimwald was clearly a priest, and a dwarf, so attacking his health or his mind was unlikely. But the orthon had shown his weakness: touch attacks and his lack of mobility.*
- X Kendalan a master of lightning and a student of nature. Dispensing attackers would negate his power, and then surrounding him, interrupting his casting. He would be the main target, followed by Grimwald.*
- X Nethander a master of the precision attacks. Mental attacks, the lure of a duel, and then surround him, letting most attackers only support a single executor.*
- X Myself, my power over the elements was clear, as was my power over sound and meaning. But that also meant a single **silence** could negate all my power. My power and that of the dwarf and elves...*

*S*o how would the army stand up to these conditions? To fight orcs and ogres was one thing, but these devils were almost as troubling as undead – and they had proved to be capable of creating those too! The most critical part was that the Fiend wasn't our true opponent. Somebody had given him orders. So we had to find out what those orders were, who issued them, and what was the reason for them. Would that be the same somebody who had been trying to disrupt the Flaming Fist? Would we be able to find out what made them do this, and would we be able to show them a better road? Nobody was past forgiveness, but sometimes it meant another turn of the wheel.

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