

The story of Chi Si Chen (Autumn Silver Reed)

Chapter 93: a lesser Evil (3rd ride of Ches 1371)

It took two days for the army to recuperate. Again I learned something. Our group could easily be ready a day after a much worse mauling, but an army needs far more time. I used my *healing hymn* on many groups, allowing them a restful and soothing sleep. Captain Phic commended my actions, as I tried to improve morale wherever I could. I got permission to collect healing herbs with Kendalan and some sergeants. Somebody tried to mention that a small group leaving camp was vulnerable, but was reminded the elf would go along. Amazing how quick word got around. Zhae, Cuura, and Nethander were most dangerous one-on-one, but Kendalan showed himself to be a general's dream. Not that he cared, of course; Kendalan seldom cared what others thought of him. Cuura was busy on the horses, her reputation had gotten a nasty bite. Felina and Nethander were probably up to something: they never came together unless they actually had some cunning plan. After some internal deliberation I decided not to inquire: I might very well be mistaken, and, even if I wasn't, it was a sign of mistrust to assume it was something bad.

Early in the evening we were called to major Oresund's tent. We were recruits, but we also packed as much a punch as the whole Neverwinter battalion combined. A sobering thought, why wasn't the whole army that strong? I thought about it and saw the awful truth: how many would have survived our first battles? None? How did we get so lucky? Or skilled? I had learned about two dozen stories and song about heroes, it was odd to discover we actually were too. The major informed us that the captured goblins told a story about something dangerous in the east – the Serpent Hills? – pushing them westwards, but that the Zhentarim to the north of our position had established a strong point from which they sold 'protection' to the local tribes. This hold was supplied from the city of Llorkh. As the Waterdeep contingent hadn't yet arrived the major had decided to intercept the next caravan, but assigned us to captain Ogg's task-force, who was to scout on the hold and do whatever it could without endangering his troops. I thanked Guan Yin for the opportunity to know him better so I could perhaps lead him to the path of peace and happiness.

The force consisted of the sappers, a unit of archers, and some swordsmen. No scouts, but I was sure that Felina and Nethander would be more than ready to fill that gap. I tried to get to know the captain better. Not to try and change anything yet, but to establish the base rhythm, the base feel. He was striving for more, but would more be enough or would he need still more... Was there a hidden wish, not the obvious craving for a noble title or other sign of status? Perhaps it was foolish of me to put so much effort in this single man, yet a single soul was still a soul. Something worth saving.

We traveled light, a ram diminished by Felina, and the other heavy equipment carried on my pouch's mules. We had quite a baggage train, sixty odd people needed food, tents, and so forth, yet we managed to carry all on mules and some pack horses. We kind of missed the bag of holding Cuura had, but the cavalry stayed to protect base camp. After a two day journey without any mishap – my *easy trail* made a lot of difference – we arrived near the Hold and put up camp some two miles away behind a small hill. No fires tonight I was afraid.

As there was still light for an hour, captain Ogg agreed on a scouting mission by us. We learned something: Felina and Nethander would scout the near side, Kendalan, with his high speed, would cover the far side, with Grimwald and Bear being fallback in case of emergency. I would fly high *altering myself* to avariel to find information on the hold itself, a *message* would keep us connected.

Six camps lay at the foot of the hill crowned by the hold of the Zhentarim. Two orc camps – the Stone Throwers and the Deadly Axe – and four human barbarian camps: the Sky People, the Bear Hand, the Troll Killers, and the Swift Runners. We knew them because we had read that booklet of the Red Wizard... I could feel story lines connecting. Grimwald of course had a run in with a hunting creature – a lone troll – but he now discovered something I had know for ages: Bear was dangerous. I was in luck because the Hold was defended from aerial recognizance by a dozen or more gargoyles, but I managed to spot them and analyze its defenses before they spotted me. Twenty men patrolling: captain Ogg estimated sixty troops in residence.

*A*s we reported back to captain Ogg, it was decided we would try to get on the good side of some of the barbarian tribes as the book noted that they revered druids. Nethander's plan to set them up again each other would probably work – like most of his schemes – but friends were so much better than less enemies... It pained me that his first incline was conflict instead of cooperation. Kendalan would take Bear to talk to the Bear Hand, I would fly in to the Sky People. Without informing us Nethander picked up the smashed head of Grimwald's troll and planned to enter the Troll Hunter's camp. Kendalan and I were well received, although the leader of the Hand was not the brightest light in the sky. But we discovered a lot:

- x* The main threat on the Moors was a devil infestation. It had been present for many years, but this time the diabolical lord managed to work with the orcs, who usually were more Abyss aligned. The main tribe was the Marsh King, but the smaller Silent Death and Unseen Hand tribes were also involved. The first had its base in the center of the Moor, the other two closer to the Misty Forest.
- x* The Zhentarim were buying slaves for silvered weapons. So they were actually opposing the devils, even though I was sure they only did so in a way that ensured the continued fighting and improved their market. Attacking the hold and caravan became a lesser target, perhaps even counter productive.
- x* The Sky People were taught by avariels how to handle horses. They still had a wonderful tale of days gone by. I will need to talk to Cuura: their horses seemed of excellent stock and Cuura might want to crossbreed her stallion. Could I teach them anything that would improve their living here?
- x* This was actually a perfect proxy for the captain: trying to win, trying to gain without looking for the common good. With a situation like this, you can never trust anybody, never be sure that somebody else was trying to double cross you. Win each battle but loose the war... Captain Ogg wasn't a truly smart man, but if I gently repeated the theme, he might slowly get it.
- x* The elven princess was unaware what happened on the Moor, she just took care of troll incursions near her tower. Goblins and Orcs had already learned not to get too close to that place. She would be working on that shadow dragon right now, so perhaps it was best to keep her out of the loop. She will not/had not said anything about these problems, and I didn't want to mess with Time.
- x* Dragons lived in the eastern Moor, and they did not like the devils at all. Judging from the rather limited descriptions it sounded like a black dragon, possibly more. Likely some metallic dragons lived in the Serpent Hills (Brass or Copper – I didn't know the average temperature), but also probably Yuan Ti... I should really try and find the two druids walking the Moors: 'Barra' and 'Vincen'. I asked captain Ogg to add a branch of the Deeproot bush to our standard for the duration. If I told the men this would appease the land, they likely wouldn't mind.

*N*ethander listened, then walked into the camp of the Troll Hunters. Of course they thought he was a devil, but he managed to talk his way out of it – enough that they accepted him as a hostage while I brought their leader to the captain. The trade opportunity made Nathaniel's eyes gleam, even though the merchandise was poor. Still the end result was that three of the four barbarian tribes were agreeing to work with us.

*G*rimwald used a *sending* to talk with major Oresund, and the focus of the army switched to the devils. The Zhentarim were a dark force, yet they were men, led by a God. An infestation of a diabolical horde would be worse, so we were ordered to find a way to take care of the Hold without a major battle. I had some experience with negotiation, so I proposed a plan to kidnap the leader of the Hold, make a deal with him, and safely return him. I never thought I would use such a stratagem, but talking from a position of strength gave the best results, and if we returned him without anybody being the wiser it would be to his disadvantage to explain or even take revenge. I just hoped my Mistress would agree that this was the best solution

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