

The story of Chi Si Chen (Autumn Silver Reed)

Chapter 94: Inviting Trouble (3rd ride of Ches 1371)

My plan to get the leader out with stealth were at least partially accepted: to get him out, yes, but by which means... Grimwald proposed that he could just walk up and destroy some doors. I didn't doubt his armor, nor did I doubt his convictions, but one dwarf against sixty? He was sure his divine magic would shield him against attacks, but I feared that he forgot that they might have dispels, force spells, or other things that would cut through his defenses. The siege proposed by the lieutenant was luckily quickly skipped, but Nethander again had one of his cunning plans.

Then Cuura marched in. She had taken either the right path or the wrong path, depending on rules or fate, but she showed herself a quick learner by being to the point, suitably submissive, and willing to follow captain Ogg's lead. Nethander was frank about his connection to Semmemon. Not something I would easily bring into the open, but I could hardly fail him for being honest. In the end the captain decided on our plan, a plan I personally disliked, but was the path that would hurt the fewest. I hoped for none, but knew that to be optimistic.

Cuura was sent to the Skyriders, to see if they knew anything about the leaders of the Zhentarim. I had to admit that I doubted her skill in this, but she too had to learn. A general needed some diplomacy, and a rather well developed sense for building his plans on vague and wrong information. When she returned we pieced together the facts that they were led by a major, a captain, and a lieutenant. The major was clearly the odd one out: sixty men had no need of such a high officer. It could be that he also had command over the caravan, but then the question became why he wasn't with them...

We prepared our spells, but made a rather big mistake in forgetting that Cuura needed to be there when I shifted position with him. So we got discovered and I had to expend some spells to get Cuura out unscathed. I could hear Grimwald muttering about the proper preparations, and, in this case, he would have been totally right. We waited and reshuffled our plans: Felina and Nethander would go in, Kendalan and I would be the receivers, and Grimwald and Cuura would stay back to lead the major to captain Ogg.

Even with the gargoyles flying around and more than the usual amount of men on the walls, we did not have any problems thanks to Felina's *invisibilities* and my *climb walls*. I could keep tabs on our two scouts as they sneaked over the wall, and wrung themselves through an arrow-slit. Inside, on the floor we expected they found two men guarding a door. Felina had the proper spell, but it turned out they were only guarding the captain. Two corners further they found two more guards, but this time they were forced to kill them. Not what we planned at all, but it was done. I prayed that this deed would not come to haunt us.

A magical trap on the door gave them some problems, and I had a premonition of alarms going off and the major standing ready, sword in hand. For a moment things hung in the balance, then a quiet 'we're in' allowed me to breath again. Felina had prepared multiple *charms* (preparation!) and then they woke him and a woman sharing his bed. Things seemed to move smoothly because I got a light and shape visible behind an arrow-slit. Once inside the room I smoothed things over with the major's woman, who was fairly miffed with Felina. I had to remember this side effect of charm spells. We waited as the major walked with Kendalan to the horses – no problem there from the hold, but some from the orcs – and then to the camp.

Negotiations went not as well as expected, captain Ogg clearly being not up to the skill of the major. We just got note that Grimwald put forward a suitable solution when I heard a sound of the changing of the guard. That was our second mistake this night: we should have planned for it. I was ready for more violence, when Nethander made enough noise to be detected. There was no way we could keep things silent, so I switched to talking mode. I really should have chosen that option first, my mistress is clearly kicking me gently against my shins. I tried to convince them that the major was just away for a short moment, but the lieutenant saw a possibility to advance himself, and things started to go bad. I wouldn't let myself get at the mercy of the Zhentarim, because they have none. Felina, again, showed why she was so important to the group. She tumbled past the guards and made the lieutenant reconsider his options. Knife or no, she saved a lot of lives.

As we had a standoff I could make our case at least likely by showing that I could indeed talk to the major, and we waited for several tense hours while a contract was hammered out. Finally we got word the major was returning, so I proposed we meet him at the gate. I really need to learn how to project strength: it is not a nice thing to do, but it can save lives.

I almost ruined things. The major saw me and was ready to explode. Little remarks I had picked up suddenly made sense: he had been the commander of the cavalry unit that I **fireballed** near Candle Keep. And I clearly was on his short list. I almost blurted something – I really disliked this contract between the Zhentarim and Neverwinter – but Felina distracted him for a moment, and I got my flames back under control. I apologized to him, because part of his anger was because of his failure, but some was loosing men who were his responsibility. And that pain I truly was responsible for. The same training that fanned my flames had taught me to dampen them, so with gritted teeth he stood by his pact. I knew another enemy and I should strife to make him forgive. So we went back to our camp, preparing for the fight against the devils.

The major brought a dozen loyal men. Loyal was the keyword, not skills. They would only be a minor asset in the fight, but, like in many things, this was a smart move on his side: they were clearly no troops to be used when a gap just **needed** to be plugged, thus ensuring their chances of survival. I heard most news second hand, as Major Locke was present at all meetings, and I made sure to stay away from him as best as I could. I could use the time to do what was right. Finally I found a path where heartfanner and Guan Yin were in sync: I repaired the damage the Major was doing by reminding the men of the warmth of their home, the love, the cooperation, in comparison to the harshness of Zhentarim life. The mage lieutenant of major Locke willing to sacrifice him to advance himself, the fact that they would need to accept slaves as part of life, so many things that made life worthwhile that the Zhentarim stomped over with steel shot booths. When I talked this over with Kendalan he berated me for not having asked his help, and he was quite right. Nethander, Grimwald and Felina were in good standing too, so I would ask for their help.

Zhae... He slowly drifted away from me, from the group. Should I try to pull him back? I wanted too, but was it the proper action? His Karma was his own, and no action of mine could truly change that. My protector leaving me was a slow and painful feeling, totally different from the aggravating actions of Nethander. He was a huge disturbance in my effort to lead captain Ogg back to the path of light. Yet his actions too were bound in Karma, because if the captain could not stand on his own two feet, then any change was only superficial and would, in the end, change nothing. I just could try to help others, but the choices stayed with them.

During my talks with the Skyriders I could often feel Grimwald's gaze. He was scanning me for taint, and, from his confused expression, finding none. Should I explain it in terms of fire? Like a forge needs to be heated to a higher temperature than the one wanted, and then allowed to simmer? Then he would probably retort that I missed the mark by quite some margin. The heart wasn't a forge. Correction: **My** heart was not a forge. Perhaps I could/should have tempered the fire by now, but the **Music** just won't let me. Every time I listen, every time I hear the echo of those primeval sounds, I knew that to stop listening was to stop following the path to true self awareness. A Tu Lung lady would follow only the most passive route that my Lady of Compassion showed. I left that route behind. A Wu-Jen had a different view, a Naturalist another. Yet what was always true was that one should listen, should heed the pain, and care for the wounded first. Lasham taught me another side of fire, but I needed to get back to being the caring fire, the caring fire that sang with the music of life.

I had a long way to go.

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