

## The story of Chi Si Chen (Autumn Silver Reed)

### Chapter 100: Holding the Rear (1<sup>st</sup> ride of Tarsakh 1371)

The devils were still holding the center of the amphitheater, but colonel Ribaldi was already trying to restore order, the three remaining captains – captain Ogg included – were promoted to major. Kendalan appeared, he looked as bad as Grimwald, Cuura, and Nethander. I worried about somebody popping in, and turning the dead into zombies, so I kept tabs of what they were doing. As far as I could hear they spread out a bit, probably trying to make certain no valid targets were still reachable. I shouted to Kendalan to bring the sky people with their horses, we needed to recover the dead as soon as those devils left, then called up some lightning to be useful even if another silence should drop on us.

Suddenly a fireball went off in the direction of the kraal. The horses! Kendalan was already traveling in that direction, but Cuura immediately ran off, dragging Zhae along. Kendalan shouted a warning about four assassins, but I decided that running to and fro would be doing exactly what the Fiend wanted: each of us should do their job and do it well, not doubt that others were capable too. A shield enhanced my defenses, and I heard the devils teleport out. Yells by Nethander and an attention grabbing sound by Felina told me that they were taking care of at least some of the assassins. Had any of the Neverwinter troops joined the Fiend's infernal cause? If so then I was guilty of negligence. Such corruption I should have picked up.

A shape flew through the air, towards the position where the colonel had taken cover. Invisible for most, but not for me. I threw a minor cold ball towards him, and shouted warning. Grimwald used my magic as a target marker for a holy smite, and the fifth assassin spiraled down. A double 'ha-hah!' told me Nethander was his usual deadly self, and then Felina downed the last one. I heard inquiries, but it turned out nobody had fallen to the assassins attack. The first strike was for the Fiend, this second was ours. Fireballs still erupted here and there, but I quickly informed the colonel that these were 'device' magic, hidden traps with a set timer, so that hunting for an attacker was futile. The assassins turned out to be waterdhavian troops. They truly had infiltrated that army! Even with the posing and money first attitude, I was sure at least some of the leaders of Waterdeep would take this lack of security seriously.

The dead were removed from the battlefield, I quickly stripped the fallen invisible assassin of items I could use (2 arcane scrolls, 2 lesser abjuration rings), and was informed that I now was officially a sergeant, but had a battlefield rank of lieutenant. We were offered equipment of the fallen officers for the duration of this campaign. I could tell Kendalan did not quite grasp the concept. I minor thing I should make sure did not set bad blood later on. I mentioned that it might be wise to offer such lesser protective items to the leaders of the barbarian tribes: we were short on officers, and it would also show we appreciated their presence.

War-council II was called, but this time it was secured, checked, and placed in a position where it was close to impossible to teleport in. Kendalan cast a mass vigor for those wounded, which I enhanced with bardic music. That made rather a difference in how people stood. With close to 70 percent of the officers gone, we were now invited as part of the staff, and the colonel quickly asked the opinion of the four majors. Major Locke, now in command of the auxiliaries, suggested that we retreat towards Lorcke in four columns. It was likely one of those would be overrun, but if we made sure the routes were separated enough then the orcs would not be able to reach the second column before we reached the cliffs which were the north side of the moor. A truly Zhentarim solution, and one that I was not happy with. Also the fact that he commanded the moor tribes was bad: it gave him more hold over them, and that wasn't a good thing, but all other options were worse.

One of the Waterdhavian majors suggested we used the farmer units as rear guard. They would be overrun, but it would protect the core strength of the army. What was it with these people? This solution was worse than major Locke's four column strategy. The other major suggested we use our current defensive position to stop the first attack and then negotiate with the Fiend. With the Fiend. I was silenced by utter amazement. Then major Ogg suggested we used a standard retreat pattern. A vanguard to find a safe route – and with the bear-hand clan and the sky people on our side we did have scouts who knew every inch of the terrain – and a rearguard

that would allow the army to disengage and retreat. It understood that by suggesting it, it was kind of implied that Neverwinter would lead both vanguard and rear guard. As these were the most dangerous positions, I was neither surprised that the Waterdhavian commanders had not suggested it first, nor that major Ogg had.

In truth it was not a brilliant plan, but it was clearly the most worthwhile, and major Ogg at least knew that some audacity was mandatory to extract the army from this position. I mentioned that it was likely that the vanguard would meet devils, while the rear guard would need to hold off against more mundane units. With Nethander, Felina, and myself supporting major Ogg's plan, it was accepted by colonel Ribaldi. It wasn't a surprise that we were assigned to the risky positions, but it was noteworthy that Cuura and Zhae were assigned to the vanguard, and the rest of us to the rear. I got the feeling colonel Ribaldi was planning something. How likely was it that there were still spies in the army? Pretty likely.

We each got command over 2 squads, or one platoon. Twenty pikemen, twenty swordsmen, twenty harassers, twenty archers, twenty sappers. One hundred to save the life of one thousand. We did not get a captain: they needed every officers they had to keep the army under control. Retreat was a far more difficult maneuver than advance: every soldier knew that the enemy was stronger, and that the threat came from the rear. The rear we were going to protect. We could not fail.

Strategy, what strategy. Zhae might have known stories, Grimwald knew dwarven tactics, but I picked one which, I hoped, gave us a chance. As we moved on the battlefield we could see the enemy already getting into position. Eight platoons of orcs in the rear, and two squads goblins, four barbarian platoons, two wolf squads, and two worg squads in the front. The barbarians to absorb the damage, the wolves/worgs to flank us and stop us retreating, the goblins probably because they didn't step back quick enough, and finally the orcs to squash us to bits. Three against one odds, if one forgot we were there. Three against two if one did not. A symmetrical placement without much ranged power, nor serious magic support... We might actually manage to win this: our asymmetrical stance with left middle pikemen shielding archers, center rear the ballista's en right front swordmen and scouts. Our right was to pull the advance to the side, but I hoped Felina and Nethander would remember to fall back in time. I spoke to the men, telling them we would stop this attack, that we, the men of Neverwinter, would never fail, never bow, never allow the winter to overcome our souls. Nethander said some words too, and I think that they just stood a bit straighter, a bit less fearful. We could do this.

The enemy sounded the advanced and I took my horn and encouraged the pikemen and archers. I could hear my aunt whispering advice, pointing out weaknesses in my defense, ways to act before the others. This would be a balancing game. How much spell power would Kendalan and I use to stop this attack. Because it was likely that we would need to stop more assault. The fire arrows for both archer squads meant that Kendalan was out of 3<sup>rd</sup> level arcana spells, and he had little offensive power in his lesser arcana. He still had most of Mielikki's power, which was nothing to sneer at. Druidic magic was the power of nature, and the moor, however damaged, was still a place teeming with life. Felina had given me a scroll with a wall of fire. It could use that spell.

As I expected the worgs and wolves surged ahead, and with their speed they were my biggest worry. If they could flank us, get into our rear, then the battle was lost for us. I decided the use spike stones to slow the worgs, and a center orc platoon. It didn't work as well as it should, but it broke their speed permanently and it started the shift of concentrating the enemy in the center. My pikemen I put into a spear hedge. Strong to the front, weak from the side. Another lure. Kendalan's archers slowly got their range and the scouts started targeting the wolves on their flank. The swordsmen and scouts looked awfully exposed, as did our archers left flank. Exposing our flank was the point. Timing... it was like playing music to an unknown dance.

I tried to use an acquired scroll to dominate a barbarian leader, but there was hardly a mind to grasp, just a bestial lust for blood. I didn't like dominate spells, and likely my concentration had been lacking. The archers slowly took their toll on an advancing barbarian platoon and the ballistas started to take their toll on enemy leaders. What a loss of life, what a waste. Yet I could see no path to change this. So much to learn! Nethander and Felina got ready to block the first attack, and I prayed they would not overextend. Should I order them? No not yet. Like a spring flood, like taught in many martial styles, I needed to force them into position, a position from which they could not recover. How much blood would be on my hands?

*The wolves had reached our flank, so I dismissed them, showing that they should return to their natural life, not join an infernal army. The first attack line was getting into position, but the 1<sup>st</sup> barbarian platoon had fallen to the archers, and the left wolves were decimated by the scouts. I felt horrible. I hated war. Those barbarians and orcs might be evil, but they were pawn in the vile plans of the Fiend. Who had summoned him? Whomever had a lot to answer for. If he repented... Yes even this action was not beyond forgiveness. I had to believe in the way my Lady showed me. However vile an act, true goodness meant the willingness to forgive. I heard Nethander goading a barbarian platoon, so they were vulnerable to his counter charge. Felina fell back slowly, the wounded worgs incapable of the speed that made them truly dangerous.*

*With our left flank still to far forward I had little choice. I used a wall of fire to turn the front ranks of two orc platoons to cinders and burn most of the rest. But most important, they had to fall back, and, predictably, the right most squad forgot the spike growth. My rightmost squad I ordered in shield wall position. The 2<sup>nd</sup> barbarian platoon was heading straight for my left squad, and I needed them ready for a flanking charge. The worgs were 'clever' and deducted that we had some anti-wolf defense on our left flank. It made sense, even though it was wrong. The curse of intelligence. They traversed, planning to go through the center. The orcs second line on our flank also moved towards the center. The barbarians on the right flank collided with the swordsmen, pushing them back, but Nethander managed to restore their position somewhat. The left squad downed the first rank of the barbarians, but the second just moved on and cut down the front five spearmen. The sergeant barked an order and the fallen were taken to the rear of the formation.*

*I had hoped that the center would have been smaller, but it was time to change the game.*

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