

The story of Chi Si Chen (Autumn Silver Reed)

Chapter 105: A fish called... (1st ride of Tarsakh 1371)

Fatigued, but still in cohesion, the army traveled to Llorckh. I wondered why we didn't travel to Loudwater, but Llorckh was only fifteen miles to the east, while Loudwater was eighty miles to the west. Three forced march days for an army. It was just too risky. He had clearly lured us in: the army had moved across the whole High Moor without encountering even a scouting group of his army, but when we reached the point the farthest from our base then he attacked. And if major Locke hadn't been 'friendly' then we would never have turned to Llorckh, and would have lost several scores of soldiers trying to reach Loudwater. Double or triple that for deserters, the raw recruits of the Waterdhavian would have been broken... End result: no more army.

Orlbar – a village near Llorckh – could have been another valid retreat ('reposition') if it hadn't been spring. But the Grayflow wasn't fordable after it merged with the Loagrann, and Orllbar was only a small town, with about as many residents as our army. It wouldn't have the capacity to shelter or feed us. Llorckh too was actually too small for that, but the defenses on the Grayflow ford, and the extensive caravan support structures allowed for a fairly secure temporary camp. It turned out a few of the barbarians had a handful of blood relatives living near Orllbar – and the Loagrann could be forded with the help of several ropes – so the whole contingent, including Cuura, was moved there. The lesser officers were sheltered in the town proper, behind the newly built walls, towers and barbican gate, while the majors and colonel were offered rooms in the keep. With the Neverwinter troops pitched in the 'east-bound' serai, and the Waterdhavian troops in the 'west-bound' we were nicely separated. Thus divided we were no major threat for the 300 odd Lord's Men of Llorckh. Anyway, to attack one's host was the worst form of betrayal.

Raging almost twenty miles to the northwest was the mighty river Delimbiyr, and beyond that the High Forest. Because of the spring floods nobody without wings could reach it. I wasn't sure if Kendalan would go and visit, so I told him that he would probably be allowed to go, but that he really should ask permission before he left. As Lieutenants we were stationed in the city proper, but Zhae was bivouacked with the swordsmen. Bother. I got a room in the house of a pair of fervent Cyric followers, so I just switched to smile and nod mode, making sure that I brushed my hair often, and helping them in any way I could without asking for anything back.

Even after a night's sleep everybody was still tired: loss had that effect on people. We started rebuilding the army, focusing on the future, learning from the past. Major Oresund was raised, and he thanked me for my help during the fight in the amphitheater. He was changed, like most that return, but he clearly believed for the cause more, knowing that goodness is a reward in itself. Politics started almost immediately. Three-way politics. Major Oresund and colonel Ribaldi mostly agreed, but major Locke and Lord major Geildarr (a wizard of some power and Cyric follower) did not. Major Locke's men were also doing their utmost to keep things civilized. Locke was probably closest to Bane, so his effort to keep things under control was logical, but the way he did it... It felt like he was a foreigner too, trying to trade for the best result... Best result for him, not the Zhentarim. But he would not profit from this – a freeing of assets in Neverwinter – so he had to know somebody else who would. This smelled like long range planning by somebody related, but not part, of the Zhents... I could name somebody...

Still... I decided that I needed to create a story/song at which everybody, soldier and Zhent alike, could laugh. I wrote 'Locke, stocke, and broken barrel' about what happened (more or less) on the High Moor. The soldiers were brave, fighting against impossible odds, the goblins were cowards, the orcs were dangerous, major Locke a hero, and the merchants of Waterdeep penny pinching idiots. Oh, and while Locke was a hero, the pitfiend was a devilish depraved tyrant. So I let him be bossy like Bane and tricky like Cyric. I based it on a story which had made fun of the Emperor of Tu Lung, but which had taken four weeks before people actually realized what it was all about.

*H*onoring his word, major Locke made sure we were allowed to read numerous spy documents. I was impressed about the quality, but I could taste a certain amount of uncertainty: the Network had changed religion four times in the last decade, and that had left its mark. As I feared the Red Wizard's enclave of Soubar was hip deep in this muck. Trading with the tribe's shamans, followed by 'accidental' deaths of the warrior leaders, resulting in hellish combat support. An invasion of lizardmen from the Serpent Hills had started this. Wasn't that a place strong with yuan-ti? After they forced the lizards to retreat (illusions?) they started fighting together, with the help of their devilish advisors. The end result was the current situation. Of course the main school of Soubar was Conjunction, and it's leader (a 'zulkir') had a private retreat in a fortress on the Moor near the Hills. Filled with devils, hobgoblins, and probably a dozen lesser wizards. Not easy. Not easy at all.

*A*n odd thing happened: we got a ride's leave?! By major/captain Ogg. With major Oresund back I wasn't sure if Mr Ogg would keep his commission. Grimwald protested that he could do a lot for the army, and I seconded that motion. Kendalan just nodded and left for the High Forest and Nethander and Felina sort of disappeared from my view. Zhae... sigh... he got back to training again. The army is serious depleted, with the Waterdhavian troops having the most casualties. This was the result of major Ogg's offer of letting the Neverwinter troops form the van- and rearguard. The orthons had teleported in to flank, and mostly attacked the main body. The Waterdhavians also had the most sick, perhaps because the poor were less healthy, perhaps because some devilish attack. With the food situation fairly bad, many hurt and infected, and morale dropping, I did my best to heal, cure, feed, and entertain. It was luckily still to cold for midgets, but that also meant to cold for any serious harvest, even supported by Kendalan and myself. I prayed to Guan Yin for assistance and she answered.

*D*awn the next morning Kendalan returned and asked me to accompany him for a few hours to the Forest. Grimwald, who had been working a twenty hour day the last ride was disappointed, but I spent all Guan Yin's favor on the army and I would be gone less than a day. Major Oresund gave his permission, the political situation wasn't improving. As I left the town I saw Nethander and captain Ogg. Nethander was busy again, but I trusted that his actions would be for the good of all, even if he did not realize it. Kendalan told me the barbarian's had found a druidic marker, which told him that the druid Bara had gone north into the High Forest and requested assistance. The marker had been there for several months. The second reason was that he was going to meet some copper elves with important news. Like their cousins in the Misty Forest they were distrustful, but I managed to show that I was a true protector of nature. There I heard that Kendalan's parents had been killed. Ripped apart in the night. Their souls were gone, and no divination gave any answer. Kendalan... I could not describe what I saw in his eyes, but I know what wasn't there: forgiveness. Whomever did this would pay. I fell silent. There would be a time to talk about this, but that time was not now.

*O*ur second aim, finding the druid Bara, succeeded. As we were walking an ancient tree grabbed Kendalan. I politely, but firmly, requested that the ancient one should not be hasty and release him, and it complied. I told it we were looking for the caretaker of the Moor. It strode away and returned with Bara, a female still in her prime. We showed ourselves to be druids, and she showed herself uninterested in anything but the conservation of the situation as it had been the last few centuries. She was here because some elf (auburn hair, female, now that rung a bell), who was an arch-mage (well... almost) had stopped the magic responsible for the March of Celimbryr, and she thought that elf lived here(!) She was also disparaging toward the Ent, who was probably both smarter and wiser than she thought, and she even said the Red Wizards were a good thing. I told her I would try and have the mage fix her to-sudden change of the swamp, and also what the Red Wizard were currently up to. I did learn a few things of unexpected consequences. I also told the ent the history of Shou Lung, as seen from nature.

*W*hen I returned I saw that Nethander's plan, whatever it was, had born fruit. I just smiled at him. He liked being famous to much to not tell me what he had done. Grimwald informed me that we would be allowed to go for officer assessment, and, after some talking, I convinced Kendalan to join me.