

Grimwald's chronicles part 104

Everyone except me and Cuura is exhausted to the bone and Cuura and I have felt better as well. Reed insists she needs the Elven Trance. After being taken care of by the army's healers we are sneaked into a covered cart and left to go into trance. It is harder than usual with the bumping cart going through the trackless wilderness in the dark and the screams and shouts of alarm as the flanks are harried by the enemy. For a moment I feel I should be sharing the fate of the men being driven forth relentlessly after a long days march, now deep into the night with full packs and wounds. But it won't do much good to be as exhausted as them. The exhaustion itself is a weapon I am sure, so the men will be too weak to fight and will fall into the fiends clutches without a fight. Is that what this is about? Stealing a thousand human souls? Many questions, but for now I must concentrate and be empty yet filled as the Elf has taught me. Be one and separate will all.

We slowly start coming out of our trance when a messenger arrives. The pass up ahead has been blocked off and is being held by giants. So this is the end game. Drive an army forth harassing it into exhaustion and then use a hammer and anvil technique to force it to surrender. These cliffs are nothing compared to the world's edge mountains, but hard enough for pack animals and inexperienced troops to cross.

The officers see no hope or other options than to try to push through the pass. Once again all hope rests on our small group's abilities. We dare not fail! Against my council Nethander and Felina decide to split off and go sneaking and infiltrating again. We should really get somebody to do these things for us. It is not heroic. Close to the wall they find that part of the valley wall is 'different' and 'moving'. Hardly enough information to know if there is a clear ooze or a gigantic cloaker or even a Ghaleb-Dur. I really should teach our scouts more dungeoneering some day. If only they would pay better attention when I relate our lore. Jay would know!

The defensive wall is merely a stack of boulders which the giants can hide behind, but the grounds in front of it are strewn with caltrops and sharp spikes to break charges so the barrage of rocks will do maximum damage against the immobilized units. A Bone Devil and four Barbed Devils are in command of a score of giants and dozens of goblin skirmishers hidden along the flanks.

We quickly discuss strategy. Giants are raiders by nature, just like barbarians, not disciplined soldiers so they can be broken if we can rid ourselves of the devils.

As we pass the suspicious mountainside Reeds starts taunting it in giantish. The mountainside roars and rises up to reveal itself as a mountain troll. Jay, Cuura and Karl quickly charge the monster, but it's great arms sweep Jay of his feet and Cuura and Karl out of their saddles and send them flying through the force of their awesome blows. Jay and Cuura's armor have dealt with most of the impact, but Karl is badly wounded. Kendalan unleashes a torrent of arrows and I halt my charge and transform Valnogrod into a bow and do the same. The mountain troll goes after it's taunter, but Reed turns her arms into long whips of flame which score hit upon hit on the beast.

Cuura and Karl switch to their bows, but Jay rolls to his feet again and comes charging at the mountain troll again. The troll again swings mightily as Jay comes into his reach, but Jay nimbly jumps up and lands on the troll's arm and starts running up towards it's head. Jay reaches back with his hand to strike a terrible blow at the troll's head, but then the troll lifts his arm and instead of running uphill Jay finds himself unable to slow down his running descend into the trolls gaping mouth which fully encloses poor Jay.

We all fire at the troll to kill it before it can swallow Jay. Fortunately it does not take long for the mountain troll to collapse under our coordinated attack. Jay is severely wounded in his pride by being outwitted by a mountain troll, but not severely hurt otherwise.

Karl however is too heavily wounded to carry on. He shares with us a heartrending song before letting us go forth into the danger by ourselves. He is an inspiring commander and great tactician,

but not a front-line soldier. I hope Cuura will come to realize that such men are too valuable to waste on the front-lines. Often she forgets she can do things which cost lesser men their lives. She continuously overestimates her troops. I wonder if in her tribe somehow the tribe-members share in the strengths of their leaders. A great warrior does not make a great commander and vice versa is a lesson which still proves hard to grasp for her.

Reed approaches sweeping the area in front of her with her flame whips. Then it starts raining rocks around her. Kendalan responds with a barrage of his own on the largest giant she can see. Then our sneaking scouts are discovered while we are still separated by a couple of hundred meters of caltrops strewn valley floor and a wall of boulders. I knew this would happen. Nothing good comes of this sneaking business!

Two Horned Devils appear and one quickly trashes Felina forcing Reed to expose herself again by switching places. Remembering how the Horned Devil's fire almost killed me at the assembly I cast a *resist fire*. Jay rushes forward to aid our friends caught behind the wall. But unlike Rock Jay has no earthsense and cannot sense where the caltrops might be in this darkness. It is not long before his rush is broken by the preparations of the enemy. Fortunately Horse has been prepared with *Reins of Ascension* allowing it to tread the air above the field as if it were solid ground for a while. Cuura rushes over the wall but is confronted by a hill giant which moves to block them.

Then the big cloud giant which Kendalan peppered with arrows bellows out in the giant tongue "Are you the oath-breaker?" while pointing at me. For a moment I falter feeling the crushing shame of what I did again on the mountain so many months ago. Then seeing there is no escape I confront the accusation and decide I must bear what ever the results will be of my actions. Nothing can be won by dishonesty in the end. I stand up straight ready to face my fate and bear the shame of my actions openly and yell back defiantly in giant: "I am HIM".

Then to my amazement the giant turns around and beacons his companions to leave with him. This sends a shudder through the ranks of the enemy as the stone giants start bickering with the hill giants and devils. Using this confusion Jay slips over the wall to come to Reed's aid. While Rock and I reach the base of the wall.

Jay, Nethander and Cuura against six devils and a dozen giants doesn't look good, but the second Horned Devil attacks us as we approach the wall preventing us from helping them. Then I hear a sound coming from the other side of the wall which I never heard before. It sounded like the Horned Devil, but it sounded shocked, surprised, hurt, uncertain. What could make a millennia old veteran of the blood-war do such a thing?

A fight between the Horned Devil and me would take too long since neither of us can effectively harm the other. I must seek to break it's resolve and intimidate it into leaving. My old adversary also recognizes the impasse and decides to take to the air and summon a flight of Spined Devils. I answer by yelling "So you decide to up the ante? Well you force me to show my strength as well!" then I cast a *Righteous Wrath of the Faithful* showing him that until now I have not bothered using this awesome power to deal with him, while preparing to follow up with a *Righteous Might* to negate his greater reach.

The Spined Devils envelop us in a toxic cloud. I take off my helmet for a moment, inhale deeply before encasing myself with the poison again demonstrating the weakness of their power. Then the Spined Devils rain down a barrage of flame with great accuracy. I welcome the inferno with open arms shielded now by my *resist fire*. After witnessing the utter ineffectiveness of his new allies the Horned Devil decides to teleport away. The Spined Devils are not given that opportunity by Reed who unleashes a barrage upon them which destroys each and every one of them. Seeing how the powerful devils desert them the giants break and run, followed by the goblins which scramble away searching for safe hiding places.

I still follow through with my *Righteous Might* and together with the others we start making a breach in the wall while Rock clears a path through the spikes for the army. We are cheered by the weary soldiers as they pass by. The officers salute us, while Karl's lancers provide us with a honor guard on the way to Llorck.

Around the city of Llorck a great network of defenses is being erected, but it is still weeks if not months from finished. Still the stone towers, earthen walls and palisades already provide a solid defensive position and with the hundreds of veteran Lord's Men in town I doubt the Fiend will decide to attack us here. Cuura and the auxiliaries camp across the river between the town and the large forest behind it. From the wistful looks of Kendalan I take it he knows these woods well.

While we see to it the men from our units find each other as well as good quarters and care major Locke and colonel Ribaldy can be seen in heated discussion. A few days pass while Locke's men do their best to keep tensions between the different factions to a minimum, but it is clear that if we stay here sooner or later armed strife will erupt between the Zhents and our men. Major Oresund is raised from the dead by the colonel's priests and eventually a deal is struck between Waterdeep, Neverwinter and colonel Locke. I would have said the Zhents, but according to Reed Locke seems to playing his own game. The concept of a man thinking just of himself, rather than of his people will always be a hard one for me I am afraid.

The result of the deals seems to be greater control over some trade going to the Zhents, Reed might understand the intricacies. More important for us is that we have been given access to stacks of reports from the black network. From these we learn that several years ago the Red Wizards founded an enclave in the town of Soubar just south of the High Moor. They hired some adventurers to scout out routes into the High Moor and started trading lesser magic to the tribal witch doctors, sorcerers and magical adepts. Then over months the powerful leaders of the tribes started dying. Falling prey to strange monsters, diseases, curses and poison, leaving the tribes without strong leaders, while the magic users gained more power in their societies. When tribes of lizardmen started invading the eastern part of the Moor these tribes turned to their magic users for leadership. And their new leaders turned to the Red Wizards. And then new powerful war-leaders were given to the tribes in the form of cunning devils helping them to defend themselves from incursions. Emboldened by their successes these tribes started raiding their neighbors and slowly but surely the area of the controlled tribes grew and grew, until by now virtually the whole moor is under their influence.

The leader of the Red Wizards is apparently a young leader of a summoner's circle. A position of some authority I gather in Thayan politics. His base of operations is probably a hobgoblin fort in the south-east of the Moor near the Serpent Hills. Besides his hobgoblin hosts, there are apprentices as well as a small army of devils guarding the place. Despite my inherent dislike for subterfuge I must admit I see no other way yet of trapping this fiendish summoner since he will surely teleport to safety if we allow him the opportunity. We cannot hope to traverse the entire moor undetected so we must seek help, but from where?