

## Grimwald's chronicles part 109

As the crab continues mauling me I see the answer to freeing the maimed elf in how it's armor plates are joined. It may be as resilient to my blows as a mountain, but even a mountain has cracks and veins one can exploit with the proper skill and tools. I transform Val Nogrod into a heavy pickaxe. With a carefully timed swing I jam it into his joint jamming it's scissors. It will have to release the elf to pry the pick loose with his other claw. Unfortunately instead of simply releasing and dropping him the crab has pinched his frail body in two freeing his claw. Here no mere healing spells will suffice, his body is too mangled to be raised. Droyt and the lieutenant must have struck some vital point for suddenly the crab convulses and I am trust underneath. Fortunately I have practiced what to do in case of a cave in enough to know how to prevent being crushed by the immense weight above me. But instead of a pile of boulders this is a single creature, which means a rune may be triggered by it if it still lives! I thrash around to find a way to press the rune on top of my boot against it and the *Uplift* rune launches it high into the air and I manage to scramble out from under it before it descends again. I pay to be prepared! It is a good thing it was still alive otherwise I might have had to expend my *airbubble* rune to breathe long enough to get out from under it.

We notice a few hundred yards away the remains of an elven war-party. My first thought is that they fell victim to the crab as well and that perhaps some of them may still be alive, but the signs are different. I use my healing skill, *lore of the gods* and consult the *tome of earthly wisdom* to determine what fate befell them. The first has the rigor characteristic of a death spell, two others have had all their strength drained out of them, two have drowned, sampling the watery residue oozing from their mouths indicates a difference in salinity indicating two different drowned being responsible. The last one was killed by a longsword thrust. The venerable ancestral lore masters instead of remaining caught up in their lore chant, from which one has to distill wisdom, are guided by some divine power to chant as one the characteristic phrases indicating the powers of the shadows, drowned, death bringer and a cursed nightcrawler.

These elves, according to the patrol's lieutenant, were an elite squad known to him. They died doing their duty defending their home. As honorable a death as any could wish for but still a terrible loss for like with dwarves any elf lost means a loss of decades or centuries of lore and skill weakening the clan and not easily replaced. They stood and died together heroically, it is good to know that not all valor has been drained from their bloodlines. I wonder if the maimed elf had any offspring to continue his heroic lineage...

As I and the lieutenant collect the body of his maimed comrade so we can lay all seven of them to rest together we find that the two magic users are scavenging the dead. We are both disgusted by this behavior, the lieutenant more so than I. I had the disadvantage of traveling with Snake so I am virtually used to corpses being defiled. Since the lieutenant is the representative of authority here I consult him as to the local regulations. The elves planned for this eventuality and soldiers are granted permission to take and do whatever is beneficial to the defense of Evermeet. Since their behavior is not illegal he allows it to continue while we give the soldiers their last rights and I use Moradin's powers to heal our wounded. The degenerate wizard did not even stop his looting while his comrade in arms was being laid to rest, his body still warm. It is obvious why the Evermeet elves as a whole have received such a bad reputation. If this is how they care for their kin, I dare not think of what these magic using elves would do to their allies. Working magic seems to take the heart out of people, fortunately Reed is blessed by the gods. These acts will stick to memory as much as any heroism. I can only imagine the anguish our lieutenant must be going through having had outsiders see his culture and own soldiers at their worst.

Still an elite unit would not be here without purpose. Rock quickly finds out that they have been patrolling a secret entrance. Another clear indication of treachery that the enemy is aware of such weak points in our defenses. The lieutenant of course wishes to travel overland through the storm to report. But being usure of not being fired upon yet again, and this time without a *celestial fortress* to shield me, and fearing delay by security protocols as well as the danger of falling into one of the traitors' hands directly I advice hunting down the group of invaders. We head down a tunnel double time to catch up with the invaders. It is a good thing we forbade our degenerate wizard to make any light for I would not have seen the shadows lying in wait if he did. I call upon the powers of Moradin to drive their evil out of Dumathoin's domain. As they dissipate I hear an elvish whisper, a word of gratitude for their release. Truly Moradin was not far amiss when he wrought the elves, if only he had foreseen the corrupting power of the godless arcane magic he blessed them with. Still some bloodlines were spared are remained true to the soul forger it would seem, despite the influence of their rabble of gods. Yes nearly perfect, they can even make things of great beauty and splendor, but only the dwarves can combine such beauty with durability of course.

Going over the situation in my mind it is clear that the drowned should be our first priority, but also that my companions might be too ill prepared to take on the enemy without divine assistance. I distribute my supply of holy water while asking Droyt and Rock to scout for our enemy. Before Rock can return reporting on creatures touching the ground ahead Droyt is telling us about an ambush site where the enemy lurks behind two illusionary walls. He would be the expert in cowardly ambushes of course, never thought I would actually be glad for a drow to have such knowledge and experience. Not that I need his help of course having Rock to rely on. We decide that the lieutenant and I will hold the line while area effect spells should soften up the enemy assault. I share with my companions the *conviction* that the powers of the enemy will not prevail against our defenses.

As I hear the sound of banded mail rushing closer I begin the *recitation* of the holy text impressing upon all the guidance of the Soul Forger. I feel my body, mind and armor shifting under His guidance to deflect blows and magic even better. I finish the *recitation* by repeating my powerful vow devoting myself to the protection of the innocent. I failed to protect the maimed one, I shall not fail again! The tunnel soon becomes a torrent of arcane fire streaming from our two arcane casters while the lieutenant and I hold the enemy at bay. As the drowned rush closer I feel my lungs filling with liquid and I start getting light headed. Then my mind is guided back to a passage in The Book of the Dead on how to repulse the vile powers of the unliving and I can breathe again. I smite the enemy with Moradin's holy power and cause his *spiritual hammer* to come down upon them.

Just as I begin to transform Val Nogrod from war-hammer into a war-axe to cut apart the zombielike forms of the drowned the death bringer manages to rip the blessings from me. I feel alone again, the elven voices of my companions become unintelligible sounds and the clarity fades from the chant in the halls of the ancestors. I feel even my conviction is dissipating. The life-force I bled into runes on my armor, shield and rod is silenced. I feel like I did when I was a child and my father was guiding me through the lost halls, fleeing to my grandfather. It was still there, the honor, the glory, the beauty, but it was silenced in death's grasp. All the craft did not suffice to hold back the evil. As Moradin's protection leaves me I again succumb to the power of the drowned and water fills my lungs. Even though Val Nogrod hangs lifeless and useless in my hands I have prepared the tools to continue my duty unto the end and I start tearing into the drowned with my adamantite armor spikes and cold iron mailed fist. As we end the drowned and breath returns to me I stand face to face with the death bringer. He is torment incarnated, even though he is scorched, cut and hammered he seems to be enjoying the very presence of pain, death and destruction even if it is his own. He tries to draw me out by pummeling me with his twin flails, but I will not follow him down that path of pain and destruction. I stand guard protecting my allies from his foul powers until he is destroyed.

The encounter with the death bringer made clear to me that devotion alone can not suffice, the encounter with the drowned taught me that I in myself am insufficient as well for without the skills of my companions I would not have been able to bring down the drowned in time. To be prepared I will need to deepen my skill in the sublime way of my forefathers. Strange how such a skill long lost has found it's way to me. How to find and mine this vein more deeply... I must have a chat with Jay about this.

Cleric 4/Crusader 1/Prestige Paladin 3/Stalwart Champion 4