

Grimwald's chronicles part 116

Although we managed to take out the rear guard we will still have to deal with the Nightcrawler and unknown creature. My ancestors have battled these creatures before and inform me that they are more vulnerable on the inside even though the acid, negative energy and crushing make it unhealthy to stay there for long. It is obvious that I am the only one who could attack such a creature from the inside and live, but how to prevent it from swallowing the others? No matter how I rack my brain I cannot see a way to ensure the Nightcrawler will attack only me. The best we can do is to ensure we kill it as quickly as possible. We load a backpack with all the oil and alchemist's fire we can gather and I jam a dagger through the stopper to act as a fuse when I cast heat metal on it. I collect all the holy water bottles and have them strapped to my armor. After the preparations we go on our way. The elves seem doubtful my plan will work, but then they don't have my advantage of contact with brave ancestors who died getting this knowledge so their kin may live.

We hear some sounds followed by a sharp crack of stone snapping. We are running out of time, I ask Rock to take me through the tunnel as fast as possible. Immediately the Nightcrawler rushes from his ambush beneath the floor behind me and it's jaws scrape my armor. The very stone beneath my feet seems to lose it's substance, corrupted. Rock tosses the backpack, but just too late. Damn I thought it would grab and swallow me, can't trust the bad guys to do even that! Well I have plenty of experience with half blocked mine tunnels! I pray for a heat metal and wrench myself through his jaws into his mouth and slide deeper down into his gullet easily. The acid burns into my skin where it is not covered by my armor, instinctively I start moving to keep the acid from touching me and start chopping my way out with my light pick. I can feel the creature's muscles convulse as I hack into it, I wriggle against it bursting the bottles of holy water, which causes the creature to heave violently. I get tossed around violently and find myself spewed out. Damn! My armor starts to glow red and the Nightcrawler's mouth spews fire. Ha! Take that! I start chopping away with my pick and soon the Nightcrawler dissolves back into the shadow that spawned it. Good riddens to the foul stone defiler! I hear the sound of mithril full plate running down the tunnel behind us. Reinforcements! Good and just in time. I command them to follow us and rush forward again.

The tunnel opens up into a huge spherical cave, the statues and ornaments have a sea motif, in the center hangs a burned out blackened husk which must once have been a holy relic. Damn we are too late to thwart their evil scheme. I tell Rock to find our hidden foe, but he cannot detect anything. Then Droyt creates some light for our elven allies and our enemy is revealed, a Bodak. An unfortunate elf whose very essence became infused by the Abyss. Before it can do anything Droyt casts a spell robbing it from it's senses. So this is how the drow gather slaves when their poison darts fail.

The room is still sanctified, but the corruption in it's heart is spreading. This must stop! I take out my rod of extend and pray for the footsteps of the divine to grant me the power of flight to take me up to the corrupted relic. With my gauntlets I rip the befouled sphere from it's moorings, it's power sends shivers through my body, but my many years in the forge have hardened it enough. But then the deep, dark, crushing power of water rises like a wave and drags away my thoughts. I feel my mind eroding and dissolving into an eternal blackness sinking deeper and deeper. Then a burst of white, divine light thrusts aside the darkness and pushes me to the surface like a beached shipwreck victim. For a moment I don't know if an age or a moment has passed.

Then I see the moorings and feel the power of flight still in me. I hurtle myself upward and latch onto the moorings before the power leaves me. I unwind the rope still tangled around my armor spikes from attaching the bottles and let it down so we can place a new focus in the moorings. A flawless diamond I saved to restore life is now the new heart to preserve life. The shields of the valiant dead continue their duty by guarding their island. The ring which allows one to move as water lends it's essence. My prayers clear the way, I gauge the energy flowing from the room and the objects and feel the perfect harmony I crafted, almost divine in it's composition, ready, but

waiting. Then our lieutenant once more pledges himself, his life, his all to the good of his people. His spirit, clearly saintly in nature becomes the conduit for the power of the sea god and my life blood leaves me to join with his spirit to awaken the new heart of the island. We collapse onto the floor, barely clinging to consciousness, but bathed in the glory of the marvelous new heart. Reed's profetic words float into my mind: "You will reach perfection when the last drop of blood falls." Indeed never before and never again will I craft and object of such power, beauty and harmony. I am now a worthy craftier, even my grandfather would have approved of this, I just know it. We slowly recover our senses. I bring out the last remaining runes and prayers to mine the hidden reserves of strength in our bodies, for our task is not yet done. Now that our duty is fulfilled I notice the elven mage is gone. He perished fighting the Nightcrawler. We will treat his body with more respect than he did with his comrades when we come back for him. But for now we must stop the traitors from creating more harm.

We make our way up a very long staircase. It is fortunate our elven reinforcement is one of the inner guard, otherwise we probably would not have made it past the many traps along the staircase. There is something sad and bitter about him. The elves here are quite different from what I had expected except for the mage. The armored elf has a kind of shine to him, but although strong and light it somehow seems a bit dulled. As if the metal is still smooth, but not polished anymore. As if it is kept in good condition, practical, useful, but the love, beauty, wonder and enchantment have left. Millenia of genocidal war have made my people this way, but what made the elf this way I wonder... The lieutenant is but a shadow of his former self, but that what remains is holy, pure, the heart of the mountain, the hidden gem itself almost but uncovered and his beauty revealed. He sought and found all what was hidden in him, then crafted it into perfection. A more true seeker has seldom graced even the ranks of the followers of Dumathoin. Although I am not without honor I feel shamed at having been outdone by an elf, but proud to have stood shoulder to shoulder with one of such a great spirit.

We come to the door leading to the council chamber. The traitor may move against us as soon as we open the door so we prepare and step forward. The eight members of the council all stare at us in disbelief and consternation. In horror I realize they have all betrayed the trust placed in them, the entire council! Unbelievable! I feel my ancestors nudging me inside my skull, just because the elves I met have been better than I was led to expect of course does not mean that all the stories of vile betrayal are untrue. How could I ever have started to doubt them, even unconsciously. What an idiot I am not to heed my ancestors more strongly! I shake myself from my shock and move to take custody over the two mages. The lieutenant's rage is one with the outrage of the god himself and thunders across the room as he shouts: "Traitors! Repent!". I feel the power of the words pulse through me, tugging at my impurities. Ghost Mountain rushed into my mind. I feel that I too wish to surrender to divine judgment rather than bear my burden, but that is a luxury, duty comes first. Two warriors and one of the priests fall to their knees, broken, in tears, but the others persevere in their wickedness. One mage retreats, while the other attempts a spell which I disrupt with a sound tap from ValNogrod. I see the noble grinning wickedly, relishing his depravity, there is no goodness left in him for the divine power to latch on to. He is just about to take action when suddenly his face becomes vacant. Droyt has surprised their leader and taken him out in one fell swoop decapitated their conspiracy. So that is why he needed to be here, silent and deadly like the darkness that spawned him. Fortunately there are few of his kind, but still far too many. The warrior quickly finds out that elven weapons are no match for dwarven armor and beats a hasty retreat while I drop the mage, the other one is taken care of by Droyt. The priest yells a word of dark power and darkness takes me once more. I am again trapped in darkness, silence and immobility, but this time my mind is free and my preparations in place. My mind reaches out to my remove paralysis rune and I launch my blinded, deafened body in his direction. I sense Rock's shock and frustration pulsing through me wildly. I felt he became agitated when I was paralyzed, but now it feels different. What happened to him? How did he manage to get up here? This is worked stone and he never leaves the earth, far too dangerous without proper protection! Poor Rock, damn it I won't lose another comrade in arms! I

cast a panacea restoring my sight and hearing and rush after the retreating priest. There are some guards streaming into the chambers ordering us to stand down, but I won't leave my duty unfinished so I rush forward and tackle the priest and turn him over to the guards.

Our inner guard companion manages to secure the golem's command words from the noble's broken mind. Messengers are sent to gain control over them. With the golems under military command they should have little trouble in using them to smash the drowned and other undead. The fortifications should prove a sufficient obstacle to the larger crabs, but I am worried as to where the other fighter fled to. 'Warn the others.' Who are these others and how do we stop them? Since the guard won't let us leave we will have to delve into the noble's broken mind to find out more or see if the repentant traitors can be more enlightening.

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