

## Grimwald's chronicles part 124

After a while the teleport gates start functioning again and we are escorted to the capital. It is a place of marvelous beauty, but utterly different from the splendor of the earth and our great halls. It is quite impressive though, it might even compare to lost Shanatar. Yet it all feels hauntingly familiar somehow, and what would I know about what Shanatar looked like anyway?

We are taken to a command post where we are informed that the situation seems to be under control for the moment. We are herded together and watched over. After a while Cuura and Reed join us. The elven warrior with them has some words with the guards and indicates we are to follow him. We are introduced to a venerable elf who exchanges some words with the elven warrior who brought us to him. I bow to show my respect for the elder. The elven warrior introduces himself in Illuskan as Omero Guamonte and explains that we are to free to leave and to be given what compensation can be made available. We explain to Omero that we are on a mission of some urgency but would prefer to leave together with those left alive of lady Illiana's retinue. We are given quarters under guard and told to wait.

Although we are all exhausted it is an anxious wait but also wonderful reunions seeing each other alive after our ordeals. There is much drinking, backslapping and congratulating. Except when Nethander returns with the grudge-bearer. We hear Nethander and her happily chatting as they come down the hallway. But as the door opens she sees our group and as she spots Reed fixes her with a stare full of pent up frustration. For a moment I think she will attack her even though she looks mangled half to death herself. She mumbles something about there being elves to save and stalks away cursing in that strangely accented dwarven of hers. I wonder what she means with 'Three strikes' but feel it is best not to inquire until she has released some of her anger.

As our last companions are brought to us Omero also hands over a purse with some donations he collected telling us we will be properly compensated once matters are more settled. We decide to return to Iliana's tower rather than tie up a squad of guards who would be of more use elsewhere. Once at the tower exhausted as I am I still can't sleep. We all had to perform dangerous missions, but two of my companions were brutally killed because I was not quick enough in defeating my opponents. That did not happen to the others.

Staying alive is all that mattered to our Stalwart Champions. It was their job to be the last dwarf standing so the knowledge and skill they carried would not be lost to future generations. So they could heal who was not beyond their help. But I have no clan left to carry my skill and knowledge forward. What was I thinking when I chose this path? All I have now is my companions and I may fail them as I failed those elves who counted on me being able to kill our enemy before it got to them. What use is it for me to be the last one left alive without them? Tormented by feelings of guilt and doubt I finally fall into a sleep haunted by strange visions. As I wake up I have the oddest feeling this is not the first time I had such visions and feelings, yet I cannot remember ever having suffered anything like it. I should consult Reed once this is all over.

We decide we cannot risk an attack by both wizards and devils so we need to keep their forces separated. Felina informs us that according to the elves we cannot drive the fiend away by force so we will have to use diplomacy. Reed's attack on the Eurinyes and Nethander's behavior means they won't be able to join us when we go to the fiend, for some reason Droyt wants to follow us. Damn what is he up to? We'll have to keep an eye on him while there are devils around, betrayal is a skill in which drow are unsurpassed. We prepare as best we can and set out through the mirror.

The great dismal swamp they call the High Moor, such a pretty name for a dump like this, becomes even more dismal as we approach the fiend's domain. According to Kendalan the animals are changing, probably becoming fiendish. The Eurinyes hesitantly approaches. It turns out be a wise decision not to bring Reed and Nethander. She complains bitterly how she unlike the other devils abhors violence and is so sad we chose violence over a more peaceful way last time. The way she

puts it is heartbreaking and I notice myself going along with her reasoning. Then I remind myself that her 'peaceful way' was charming the elders to bring the whole tribe to serve the devils. Still I detect no lies in her speech. As she leads us to her master she expresses her wonder at why we fought each other. Men, dwarves and elves regularly try to keep their world from being overrun by chaotic evil orcs, goblins and giants. Exactly what devils are doing, but then protecting the whole cosmos from being overrun by demons, even the heavens. My soul being torn between serving Dumathoin and Moradin has shown me there is a difference between 'true' and 'right'. The realization that a year earlier I would have been led to follow her reasoning is a sobering thought.

The Eurinyes explains that depending on the request it is dealt with on an appropriate level, but that for the request to be passed on to a higher level requires some effort or expenses. She is quite dismayed to learn that we intend to take our request to the Pit Fiend himself. After a few hours the landscape becomes more craggy and Bear and Horse become uneasy, even the stone itself which felt rotten before now somehow feels even worse. The Eurinyes explains we will have to either make a deal with the local commander, buy our passage to the next level or force our passage either in a battle between champions or in an all out confrontation between our forces.

According to the system of the hells the pawns go before the queen so as we go in the opponents will become more powerful. But each of us to be allowed in the presence of her master has to prove him- or herself at least once.

Before we go into battle I share my *conviction* that Moradin will aid us. Especially Felina feels moved by this blessing. The area looks like an ideal place for an ambush, Droyt claims the first challenge as his. As we progress we gather spectators, hell hounds exhaling flames come out of their caves, imps circle the skies above. Then Droyt staggers and rolls and starts casting spells while weaving side to side and back and forth escaping blows of some invisible foe. After a while a huge cat is made visible with *faerie fire*. It looks at the sparks in confusion for a moment then lunges at Droyt again. He quickly bests the beast which retreats trying to shake and lick the flecks of light of which cling to it's fur.

Our next challenge are the outer defenses before the stronghold proper. A gatehouse guarding the entry to a bridge. Kendalan spots creatures similar to Nethander, but also barbarians and even defectors from our army. Corrupted mortals are the next layer of defense. Their demise before they can turn from their path and atone ensures a steady supply of souls for the hells. Even though tieflings are looked down upon by true devils they are still considered better than mere mortals so the champion will be a tiefling or half-fiend. Lacking in physical strength to defend themselves against the devils they generally turn to trading souls for infernal prayers becoming priests which serve a hellish lord rather than true deity. Felina feels sure she can take on such a creature. I feel it might be my duty as well, but then I notice the fire stirring in her soul and see how it drives her into danger she would normally avoid to serve her mistress. I smile and let her step forward. The battle is over almost before it began. Felina is turned invisible by Droyt. A half-fiend flies away from the tower circling trying to see a sign of Felina's presence while enhancing itself with spells. Arterial blood starts pumping from his throat causing a rain of blood to fall onto those gathered below. He notices it falling as he prays for *infernal power* and looks at it in confusion. Then blood gushes out of him and he quickly yields. Among his belongings is a *lesser crystal of lightning assault*. That will be of use in later challenges. I make sure it is not tainted with evil and ask Felina if I could borrow it for my challenges.

The next layer of defense is manned by undead. Husks long deprived of their treasured souls. They are clearly plentiful in these parts. The walls are brimming with skeleton archers and their siege engines. I glance at Cuura whose face is grim. The high walls are adorned with skulls and strewn with rusty spikes and murder-holes. Is this anything like her nightmares? I am the most knowledgeable on such creatures so I stride onto the bridge. Before I go Felina insists on touching me again. Although she isn't crawling all over me this time (thank the gods for spiked armor) it still feels odd, weird as if I would want her touch. As I stride onto the bridge feelings arise of hoping

this will be over soon so I can go back to to her and having *fun* again. Thankfully I have other things to distract me. The vapors rising from the chasm make my eyes water a bit, probably poisonous. My opponent is a large skeletal being, in his chest writhe trapped souls. I cautiously move forward in *mountain stance*. It tries to command me and is obviously hesitant to approach so I turn my rod of dwarven might into a bow, but as I pull it the string snaps. Why do these things need to be made out of sinew rather than metal? I should have checked it before I left. The Devourer commands a squad of skeletons to push me off the bridge. Moradin's power turns eight of them to dust and the remaining two bounce off my armor. I cautiously keep on edging forward. The Devourer is trapped and frustrated and decides to allow me to pass rather than face me in combat. If it wasn't an undead I would call it a coward. It seeks to retreat into the fortress, but my ancestors whispers to me that unlike devils these creatures take souls by force and not by right like devils do. Since it brought possessions into our battle which do not belong to him I command it to release the souls it trapped invoking the ancient precedent of Thurim the Hammer who once did the same. It wails in pain, frustration and agony as it is forced to cede his captives. As they depart I feel the gaping presence of the Pit dragging the souls to their doom, but also a ray from Celestia piercing into this desecrated area to claim a soul noble and pure. The Devourer looks at me consumed with rage, Nethander would use this opportunity to corrupt it further causing it to break his word. Although the temptation to lure the creature to it's demise is strong I merely remind it who is strongest here by turning Valnogrod into a warpike set to receive his charge. I howl in frustration and clears the way.

At the next chasm we are faced with a moat of boiling lava and proper devils manning the walls. Mainly Lemures and armored legion devils, with just a few bearded devils and Orthon's to shore up the vital points. Kendalan and I discuss who will take this challenge. I feel confident that as with the Devourer my defenses will hold against a sergeant of the infernal legion, but I am unsure if I can deal with an officer who might bring unpredictable powers to bear. Kendalan may not have my defenses, but he has a veritable arsenal of offensive powers to bring to bear depending on the situation. A legion devil or Orthon is very dangerous while in formation, but I am confident of dealing with just a single specimen. Once we are decided Felina touches me again. For some strange reason my feet have a tendency to move rather than stay put. I try to ignore this distraction hoping this battle will be over quickly so I can just stand. My opponent turns out to be a Barbed Devil, a larger specimen than we have seen so far. It launches *scorching rays* at me, I ready Osthalion to deflect them but my resist fire absorbs nearly all the damage. Since it stays at a distance I turn Valnogrod into a bow and start pelting it with arrows. Although I remember all the vulnerable spots my arrows have little effect. I decide to ask Moradin's blessing on Valnogrod, the Devil tries to distract me plaguing me with a blight of unholy energy, but I grit my teeth and finish my prayers and this time my arrows sink deeply into it's body. The devil rushes me seeking to impale me on his spikes, but my ordeal with the crab on the island gave me new insights on how to use my shield in a grapple. Even though he is stronger by far my razor edged shield prevents him from getting a good grip on me although it is close at times. I turn Valnogrod into a frystaline short sword and start punching holes in it. Only once I need to call upon the power of the stone to mend my wounds when he scores a significant hit, but the rest of the time he merely provides good practice for my devoted spirit and mountain hammer maneuvers. Still it takes far too long for me to bring him to face the inevitability of his defeat. I am glad Jay isn't here to see this. The fiend performed his duties well and I see no glory in a trophy of this kind so I let it go.

Kendalan comes to a cleft with acidic vapors. A maze of ice starts to grow connecting one side to the other, but Kendalan prefers to fly. Aside from a rush in which the ice devil cuts Kendalan's bow in two I see little of the battle. Walls of ice collapse, lightning strikes, hail stones fall. Droyt however is enthusiastically calling out places where he thinks the Gelugon is hiding. Bah how do you see a white creature on a white background? My power of stone would have been unusable and while some of the ice is thick and sturdy in other places the hail stones smash right through. A treacherous place for sure. After a few minutes the barrages of hail and lightning stop and the

Gelugon flies up to hand his hellforged glaive to Kendalan. Before I can yell out a warning Kendalan yelps out upon touching the hellforged weapon and drops it. The gelugon scoops it from the air and is gone before Kendalan can reclaim it. The devils too believe in multiple layers of defense and a hellforged weapon depresses any goodness in it's wielder to prevent desertions to the good side. I think it is for the best it stays with the gelugon. I shudder to think what would happen if such a weapon fell into the hands of one like Nethander.

We are now faced with our final challenge. The head of the Pit Fiend's personal guard. Felina realizes that this devil is the only other than the Eurinyes who can speak in her master's name and plays on this rivalry. We listen silently as the Eurinyes is coaxed to share her tale: Because the threat to the heavens was too great she realized the power of the evil mortals needed to be turned to save the heavens rather than threaten them. That to save the very heavens she would have to abandon them so they could be preserved for the good gods and good souls as refuges. I too abandoned my clan to aid my people. I too have fallen like she did. Have I erred or might she be right and was her sacrifice worthy and even necessary. I cannot judge, just feel sympathy for her sacrifice and mourn what was lost for both of us. Speaking about her past has led her pain and frustration at his brutish methods to rise and she offers Felina to tell all she knows about our foe in exchange for one of Felina's trinkets. An action she will surely be punished for gravely. Another sacrifice to aid the good or merely and act of fiendish vengeance? I cannot know anymore and am horrified to realize they might be one and the same.

Our greatest champion rides onto a bridge of half molten lava defying the most powerful of the hellish lord's servants. If he cannot stop us the Pit Fiend will be forced to deal with us personally, if our champion fails it will all have been for naught. We are fortunate that despite all their striving for perfection the devils do not realize how their pride is their main imperfection. If this horned devil had done like his lesser brother and wielded a spiked chain he could have cut Cuura to shreds with fly-by's without coming in her reach. But this horned devil who sought to deceive us by impersonating his master at Hillsfar has shunned all weapons, thinking that he, like his master, no longer has need for them.

He roars in defiance and his wing flaps create torrents of glowing embers whirling through the air. The spectators, devil and mortal alike, feel awed by the devils magnificence. But Cuura is non-plussed, the faceplate of her helmet grows fangs and the eyes burn with baleful fire as she becomes equally terrible to behold, Horse rearing on his hind legs as she whirls her gigantic flail. They regard each other for a moment, what was that saying of Reed of unstoppable force and unmovable object? The devil takes to the air pelting her with fire and lightning to no avail. He then lands and finds that Cuura is not exactly where she appears to be. We dwarves do not practice blindfighting much since we can see in the dark. A creature who can see even through magical darkness thought that because of his power he would not need to develop this skill. Wrong! Cuura uses his confusion to hit him with a blow which would have crushed a small giant and the devil bursts into laughter. Cuura challenges him to fight without aid and gets of Horse. The devil thunders into the bridge and says "DONE".

It is no longer a battle of grace and wits, but of brutal savagery as the two champions tear into each other. The devil's claws are losing chunks of flesh with each strike against Cuura's *acid sheath*, but he is pays no attention to this. The bridge itself cannot stand withstand the force of their blows and starts disintegrating underneath them tumbling into the molten rock. The devil's skill at striking and dodging is phenomenal, but Cuura's flail strikes home again and again. Then the horned devil clamps his jaws around her and she rises up trapped in his maw. He grabs her with his claws set to rip her limb from limb and his razor sharp tail comes in for the coup-the-grace. It is all over. The tail flicks and he releases her.

She is still standing! The devil soars of the bridge roaring with laughter: "You are worthy, pass." It bellows as he flies over the flowing lava, his great body rocking with laughter.