

Grimwald's chronicles entry 143

Cuura signals us that she will meet us in the armory. Kendalan and I however feel that it is best not to provoke whatever lurks in the infirmary needlessly and decide to provide an alternate route of progress or escape and start tunneling. Kendalan is not nearly as flimsy as he sometimes pretends to be. With a few years of back breaking work we could make a man out of him yet! I think the loss of his bow might be a blessing in disguise. Maybe if we could cure more wood elves of their fear of enclosed spaces they might amount to more. Oh what am I thinking in going against Moradin's wise judgment, they belong in the woods. Still such promise in an elf is tempting. Who would have thought that I would ever see a tunneling wood elf! Norbert, in spite of all his zeal for setting things right, decides to stay with us as well.

After a while Reed returns with Cuura and somehow Snake has wriggled his way back into our group. Apparently Cuura got possessed again while passing through the infirmary. I knew Kendalan and I were right in trying to avoid it. Fortunately Reed could *banish* the entity before Cuura did too much damage. Apparently Cuura managed more restraint. Yes, whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger, or at least weirder. I am proud of her that she is building up her defenses. I think I should talk to her about the iron will discipline of my people and improve her magical defenses. The savage has grabbed one of the spears from the armory and nobody makes any remarks about it. Pah, a rather mediocre spear, but when I liberate and interesting piece of craft everybody gets into a tiff about it! Why don't they trust me? Why?

That lazy bum Snake is immediately trying to dissuade us from performing our duty in cleansing the fort. He probably needs more time to desecrate bodies when we are not around to stop him. Unfortunately he has a point in that night is coming and we will need to rest at some point in time. According to our savage there have been things moving through the tunnel below. I try to get the others to press on a bit further and barricade ourselves in the room, but the wards on the door in the tunnel below show that something is being caged there and I have to agree that going into battle needlessly unprepared is not wise. We go back up and I start arranging the bits of floor into a defensive position when battle drums sound a "TO ARMS".

I turn to face the open corridor to meet our enemies head on, but turn around in surprise hearing yelps of alarm to find that somehow the savage has impaled her own arm and Snake is writhing in pain. The sneaky bastard must have hidden some weapon under his clothes, I hope he learns that such treacherousness has it's own karmic effects. I attend to my duties taking care that the dao-dao I brought does no harm, then help Efyra get rid of the spear which she caught in some armor. As I have come to expect from Snake he tries to catch those trying to help him unawares and impale them. Fortunately Cuura is ready for his treachery and restrains him until his excuse for harming us is removed.

I hear the sound of dozens of weapons marching. We did not destroy the hearth of the forge and now it must be animating them. Animated items are like orcs, nothing without their leader to command them. Driven by the power of duty I set out to destroy the forge, Nethander joins me probably thirsting for vengeance. Not a noble motivation, but good enough in the circumstances.

In the infirmary the weapons are massacring the wounded, who themselves fight back with surprising tenacity and abandon, akin to dwarven battle ragers. I could stand here and destroy the innocent weapons one by one, but the others would be cut to ribbons so I decide to rush to the forge followed by Nethander while the weapons harmlessly bounce off my armor. He arrives first and provokes the forge's fire elemental to attack him. I had intended to crush the forge, but why harm an innocent forge now that the evil has been drawn from it? I have to destroy the fire, but it is also the sacred fire which transforms the gifts of Dumathoin and although no formal challenge was uttered it is like a duel is it not? Still it has to be done and there is no telling how evil and depraved Nethander would return from the afterlife a next time. Beset by doubts and regrets I swing halfheartedly and ineffectively at the elemental, but at least manage to disrupt his attacks on Nethander and get it to

use it's flame projection on me. Even though I have taught myself not to cringe and freeze letting the heat burn through and find me, but rather to expand myself and funnel the fire so my armor can absorb the heat a bit of it seeps through. Rather than trying to douse the fire I try setting the elemental up for Nethander's attacks with a *vanguard strike*, but this attempt at tricking myself is dissuaded by Dumathoin and Moradin who make my blow fly wide to shatter a blade into splinters. I bow my head in shame, my behavior is both dishonorable in interrupting a duel and sacrilegious in harming a forge. I don't deserve to win this battle. But somehow even at my lowest point of shame and despair having failed my clan, betrayed my craft, trampled the honor of the duel and committed sacrilege against both my gods I feel there is a power which has not abandoned me something stirring in the depths of my being. Some hidden seam of strength, but before I can catch it it is gone again. What was it? Then Nethander's sword cries out "I knew I was right. There!"

He is doing it to me again! I went there intent on crushing the forge and he got me to interfere in a duel and seek to harm the sacred fire of creation turning me against my gods. He is twisting and corrupting me! If I lose my faith my soul will be forfeit and he can devour it, that fiend! And he lulled me into the belief he was merely vengeful. What a fool I am!

Fortunately I can see my way clearly again. I move to the forge and turning my hammer into a pick hook and tip the forge revealing a gem of stunning size and beauty! The logical, practical part of my brain is telling me that this must be the source of power and it must thus be destroyed, but it is so powerful and beautifully cut I cannot commit another atrocity against the Great Maker and The Gem Under The Mountain by harming such a gift. Snake would surely devour my soul as just punishment for such a crime! Just as I bow down to shield the jewel from the chaos of the melee the elemental rushes at it. Immediately I interpose myself so it may not corrupt this precious shard of perfection and the gods bless me with the strength to resist it. They have not abandoned me! Cuura rushing in performs a perfect hammer and anvil maneuver on the elemental which is caught between my shield and her flail and it's flame is scattered to the four winds. Nethander is clearly elated and overjoyed by his great victory over the elemental and over my morality and virtue and comes to me to reap the fruits of the corruption he spread, but at the last moment hesitates and turns away. The gods have not abandoned me to his grasp completely despite my failings, my soul is still mine for the time being, but it was a narrow escape to be sure. Nethander's happy face and attempt at embrace will haunt my nightmares for months to come if I have that long.

But the power of the gem is too great for any of us to hold since we are unprepared. How to keep this precious gift safe? Reed is summoned to council us, but what she says sickens me. To allow this great gift to rest in the gullet of a dragon. Those thieving hoarders of the great crafts of my ancestors! And to make things worse she suggests I make a deal with it to give it back. Oh gods how deep do I have to fall before I reach the depths of the bottomless pit? Perhaps it is my inevitable doom and Nethander is merely it's instrument since Reed too is now trying to make me abandon all that is right and holy. Me, make a deal with a dragon, my grandfather would die of the shame at having raised such a dwarf. Is there no end to these attacks on my very soul? Reed then assures me that it is alright because Draeni would keep to it's word. As if I wouldn't know about dragons! Oh yes dwarven history is full of ill conceived deals with dragons keeping their words and our treasures both! The hearth wardens taught me well enough indeed!

Realizing my anguish Reed assumes the burden I cannot bear and makes Draeni promise to give it back. Me a servant of the Soul Forger and the Hidden Keeper unable to keep a precious gift of the forge and earth safe. Unworthy and unable to bear a burden a frail, slight human can bear without effort. When will the hurting stop?