

## ***Grimwald's chronicles entry 148***

After prying loose the debris impaled on shield and armor spikes we are ready to confront the next challenge. Nethander however is using the pause to try to pick a fight with the captive dwarf we released. He must have been impressed by Norbert's body suddenly twisting and snapping the heavy branch the nature spirit tried to bash it with. Always trying to prove himself. Why can't he just accept his heritage and bear it like a dwarf? Well because he isn't! Sigh.

I try to put a stop to Nethander's fortunately fruitless attempts at provoking the dwarf to fight him. He should know better than to risk Norbert's body like that! Or his own for that matter. Perhaps his kind is simply unable to grasp the concept of sacrifice. Norbert sought to release the captive and in doing so sacrificed his body. I really don't understand what the problem is here. Norbert was successful and paid the price. Perhaps he will get his body back, perhaps not. This is the nature of sacrifice.

We make our way to the barred gate and inspect it, alas without Norbert's guidance. We notice nothing, except moaning sounds and a lead cladding. I urge the others to stand back as I open the gate. We see a strange ribbed hallway with a stone head and several urns at the end. When I try to localize the treat by opening myself to the evil corruption I am almost overwhelmed by the wave of darkness emanating from the hallway. I pray for Moradin's protection, in my haste almost breaking the *circle of protection* against the room's threshold.

Nethander is lured in by his ancestral calling and revels in the evil aura, obviously enjoying himself. I rush in to pull him out before he becomes irrevocably corrupted or his own blade finished him off in it's attempts to free itself from evil's grasp. For a moment I think things are going wrong when I notice the *circle of protection* collapsing. Then I realise that I have come too late and Nethander is no more, only Snake twists and exists now and he must be stopped! Even though he is a better skilled fighter than me, my duty is clear, even if it will take my life I have to make a stand against corruption! Finally no more pinpricks of defeat in the arena of words, but a true judgement once and for all!

I remove my gauntlet and slap him across the face challenging him to a duel. Then I go into *mountain stance* and await his first move. He makes no move towards me, but I do not fall for this obvious feint. Some of my misguided comrades dare to intervene and insult the sanctity of the duel by trying to rope Snake away from me, but fortunately our dueling space is warded against such intrusions.

Then the music changes and not just the music, but the whole hallway starts to change. Tentacles writhe out of the walls and start sucking me and my party members draining away our life force. Suddenly I remember. This elder evil existed where the abbys now lies. It is but a minion, of what master I do not know. All I know is that it returned for the seventh time now to our world and that it must be stopped before it can drain away too much power.

I move into *iron guard stance*, pray for a *ring of blades* which starts spinning around me and move towards the grinning head. The tentacles grab hold of me, disregarding the blades chopping away at them. Snake uses his ample experience in petrification to trick the head into petrifying itself. I never knew the crystal I made could do that! Evil is famous for turning against even itself, still it is impressive trickery.

Efira wails for help, I take a quick look back and see her deadly white face sticking out of a pile of tentacles draining away her blood. For a moment I hesitate about coming to her aid, but then I feel

the pressure of unavoidable Duty. The elder evil Must be stopped regardless of any losses and I start turning my back on her just as she erupts like a volcano tearing away the mountain of tentacles smothering her. I activate my *third eye crystal of freedom* and turn my *rod of dwarven might* into a cold-iron waraxe as I move to the nexus pointed to by Kendalan disregarding the tentacles flailing at me. I draw up my deepest reserves of life force and praying to Moradin to smite this Evil strike a *mountain hammer* blow like I have never done before. A shudder goes through the beast. All it's tentacles relocate to strike at me. I am surrounded by a ball of tentacles and feel how their deadly force will strike me from all directions. If only I had had the time to pray for Dumathoin's protection, but it is a good end having reached and displayed my pinnacle in fighting prowess.

Then Norbert's body pops into the protective ball of tentacles raised around the nexus and his small frail body darts towards the center dodging and blocking. Then, with a shriek which must have been and impressive bellow if only he still had his own body, his hand darts into the beast up to the shoulder and yanks out the creature's brainstem. I gulp at seeing such power, realise what would have happened to Nethander or anybody else standing in the way of his Duty. The elder Evil slumps and disintegrates and for a moment I feel elation at our triumph and my survival before the realization hits me how inadequate the best blow I ever struck in my life is. I now feel Duty, but also realize I am too miserably unskilled to bear such responsibility. I am a pathetic little pebble, dreaming of restoring the ancestral empire.

Still he has shown me there must have been a path to the necessary skills. I know I am unworthy, but also that I cannot turn away from my Duty. I must beg him to teach me when our current task is done. If only he could stay with us longer, but the needs of Norbert and Duty won't allow it.