

The story of Grimwald

Chapter 26: Faith and Filth

After dispatching the gnolls at the base of the stairs Snake slithers away into the darkness while Cuura orders me to lie to Jay. I protest, hiding truth from the unworthy is only wise, but spreading falsehood is polluting the purity of knowledge. She however insists and because she is our leader I must obey or challenge her position. Even if I wanted this it is hardly the time and place to do so, besides she is a far greater warrior than I. I cannot serve two masters if she continues ordering me to betray my faith I will be forced into exile again. Why is this cruel fate befalling me again? I walk back to the camp pondering the many times they have stopped me from searching deeper knowledge and reevaluating the wisdom of their arguments, which do still seem mostly sound. But this turning me away from the path of knowledge has become suspect in the light of this new escalation.

How has it come to this? Our leader was infused with the power of the book of light, becoming it's avatar in guarding the vile book. Now her light is fading and she is abandoning her duty. This all started when she abandoned the strength and moral duty which are hallmarks of the dwarven gods and allowed the sweet honeyed poison of vanity to become her guiding light. What a subtle trap of the vile book to use beauty itself to weaken it's prison guards!

Then I remember our recent discussion about equipping our group and can come to only one conclusion: OUR LEADER HAS GONE INSANE!

This is what happens when you abandon the wisdom of Dumathoin and go for some prancing human goddess unconcerned about grave decisions. She, our leader, claims that people should all decide things for themselves! Anarchy, what kind of leadership is that I ask you? Rather than leaving things to a professional who has studied weapons and armor for decades she feels that equipment should be decided on the whim of the moment rather than through months of consideration. The arguments she used make me suspect she even values looks over practicality. Style and fashion over the ability to sever limbs! Can she have slid this far? How did this happen? I thought a goddess of pretty things was rather undangerous, but now I see the perfidy and decadence dooming us all. Once again I have failed to dig deep enough. How can I ever face my grandfather while I remain so stubbornly blind to hidden dangers? She will get as lazy as Felina and become as slack in muscle in a few years if this goes on. I must find a way to restore the steel in her spirit. Perhaps Jay can help, but how....

Why does she want me to lie? She is our leader and could simply order Jay to come as quickly as possible. Why is she using these methods to hide her motives and actions. Why manipulate Jay whom she could simply control. These are not the ways of proud barbarian strength I know from the North. This reeks of the decadent weakness and manipulating subtle ways of the soft humans from the south! Aha! South, Felina and Snake! Felina's magic must be eating away at Cuura's mind somehow or it is Snake who is slowly devouring her soul? Perhaps both? How to prove it and stop it? I must pay better attention to protect our leader from the hidden dangers of magic and the lower planes. I must deepen my understanding of these things!

Suddenly I hear my ancestors whispers again at first agitated and unclear, but then it comes through more strongly and with just one voice drowning out the agitated confusion. That is it! Knowledge must be the key to saving Cuura hence all these attempts to keep it from me and to bring me from the path! The books may hold the key to her safety, yes I can sense it, with proper preparation It's power can make us safe. In Candlekeep there are loremasters who have mastered many a dangerous tome. I can learn from them the proper preparations to safely delve into the deep darkness to save Cuura and thereby us all. But their weak minds have become the tools of evil, I cannot reveal my insight to them or they would foil my plans to save them.

Jay and the sergeant are watchful at their posts, I obey my orders and Jay hastily rushes off and then needs to return because he left without enough knowledge. When will he stop being too hasty? Wisdom comes with age, but I wonder if Jay will ever get old enough to become wise. I lead him through the ogre's camp and down the cave. I can feel his disappointment in not having been able to hone his warcraft and gently restrain him from waking up and challenging some opponents.

I bring him into the darkness, symbol of ignorance, and he recognizes that in ignorance he cannot simply storm ahead, but rather needs guidance and cautious exploration. I reveal to him how one blessed by the Hidden Keeper does not suffer as much from the darkness and can indicate what may be found in the unseen realm. I even reveal the secret that we ourselves are minor crafters ourselves and we may embellish what the gods have forged, the true art of our lives and ultimate praise to our maker. I relate to him how we dwarves who spend our lives working in the unseen can actually start to use the darkness to our advantage and are no longer held back by it. I wonder how long it will be until he understands...

When I return Snake is already reporting on what he discovered, but neither of our two leaders is even paying heed to him! How duty and discipline have already dissolved! This was not so clear when traveling, but even more so while in peril. I must prepare more diligently to stop this infection which is enfevering the brains of the body of our group! We proceed and find that indeed there is a cave, but the little Snake has been unable to see much.

This cave is not forged by hammer, pick and chisel, but by water. But forged it is, walkways, benches, buttresses, arches, thrones, tables all in smooth flowing limestone. I look at the sediment layers and dried up watermarks and gauge the forging must have taken at least a hundred years, possibly much more. How was it done? How did they guide the water for such a long time over a changing surface of uneven hardness? Who were these elves? The others walk through with ease, unthinking, but I see Felina's sharp eyes dart around: she too has spotted the hidden craft.

We walk past a statue broken from its pedestal, according to Reed it may be Hanali Celanil. I hate to admit it, but I am awed. Our temples to Dumathoin are resplendent with the beauty of stone and metal ore, here the beauty of the natural rock is also present, but in such a different and even hidden way of harmonious composition. This place also venerates the earth and rock, not focusing on the gifts it hides within, but as a whole. Perhaps these elves were not yet so fallen Moradin banished them to the surface. But what corrupted them? Yet tales relate that the drow came from the surface to invade our kingdoms. Maybe this was drow before their corruption caused them to be cast from Dumathoin's realm, where they grew even more evil and disobeying the gods invaded the sacred earth! What a treasure trove of knowledge we have found. My companions who can read elven relate some of the texts, but until I find a key to the code they make no sense: talking about nature and songs, not revealing the gems buried in them. How artfully hidden, I must return here when I know more. Perhaps I can learn more of the drow so our people can drive them back to the surface again!

We fill flasks with holy water from a spring in the center of the cave. Parts of the statue are missing, but I think we can reattach rock using stone shape and if I got some stonemasonry tools for my unseen crafters it would please the Hidden Keeper to see this place restored, even if it is elven it venerates my Lord's realm. It is a gem buried in the earth. While I am sampling the stone used in carving the statue so I know what to bring I suddenly hear the sound of battle and rush down the tunnel. Apparently they tried to rush a goblin position and Cuura got impaled by a goblin ballista. I manage to stop Felina from making things worse, doesn't she know light bolts are usually barbed? I tell them to apply pressure as soon as the bolt moves to stop the bleeding. Cuura was lucky the bolt did not fragment into her body as they often do and I manage to remove it in one piece.

There is another statue in the room, was it carved or is it simply a petrified centaur? Going through the rooms we find several forest creatures with eyes gouged out and hands or arms broken off. Probably to remove precious stones which once adorned them. Minute scraps of gold leaf and blade marks in the stone bear testament to the despoiling by the goblins.

Even though this is not a dwarven crypt desecrated by greenskins, it still is an offense in a long list of offenses the greenskins have committed. It makes my blood boil and brings back the memory of our annual clan meet where we would spend every evening for a month listing our unrepaid grudges against the foul vermin. Even their numerous people have not enough blood to pay for their crimes against our people, but I plan to help them pay right here and now for what they did to the elves and the craft beloved by my Lord when Reed stops me. How can she decide to stop me with their crime so evident around us? It is clear they destroy and despoil yet the Voice of the gods tell me not to shed their blood in this place so I obediently put away my axe and take out my hammer. Then she claims that not only should I not shed their blood, but not even kill them here. I am stunned into disbelief. These are greenskins of the least variety, goblins no less! How can she value their lives? But the Voice of the gods is not to be argued with and lays down the higher law and orders we should release them outside. So I winch up my crossbow so I can work on my aim outside which could use more practice, but she says not even to shoot them outside. Even the knowledge of how they breed into civilization swamping hordes and tales of the fall of the kingdom of three crowns won't sway her and I must relent in my duty to my clan and Lord. What is happening here? Are all conspiring against me? Only Snake agrees with me they should be eradicated, although he probably only does so to gain power by devouring their souls.

With a heavy heart I make the decision I must betray my duty to my clan, people, and god not to blaspheme by going against the Voice of the gods. I feel I will certainly be damned for all eternity by this betrayal. How can I ever face my ancestors who died fighting the green hordes? What intolerable shame... My heavy mood must have been clear to Reed and she pronounces that no evil will befall me because of this decision and implies they have been ordained to be eradicated in another way. For minutes I walk after the group in confusion before I remember the old saga of Olgin Blackbeard and the 300 goblins. How he alone killed them all, by capturing one and releasing it after infecting it with a deadly plague which spread like wildfire around their tribe. They must be carrying a curse for defiling the sanctity of this place. I walk proudly again humming the victorious phrases Olgin uttered after slaying the last disease weakened goblins. It is true I am still far too young to be wise, fortunately my adherence to the proper hierarchy prevented me from making a decision which would have claimed fewer goblin lives. When I start paying more attention to my surroundings I notice Reed bringing Snake back to the group telling him nature kills, confirming my suspicions. I guess his hunger got the better of him, but did not escape the attention of the gods.

After the religious quarter we have made our way into an area which I think is devoted to the ruling noble houses. I recognize recurring themes reminiscent of heraldic arms, but none I can relate to anything. We would have to return some time to make a proper study after removing inches of dung from the floors and walls. Apparently this was a place of gathering, so the writing must hide ancient pacts between the people of the forests both on a religious and nobility level. The altar or council table was apparently used as a butchering block which Reed burns cleaner. We find that besides normal animals, which according to the Elf don't live around here, they held humanoids. From what I can tell from the bones they captured humans and orcs, who died in their shackles. Apparently they used to have much more slaves given the amount of anchoring pitons in the rock. I am getting annoyed by all these elven claims to knowledge about what belong where. At first I thought he was just making it up, but Reed seems to agree. Perhaps there is a system to it which I can discover. These are just cows and goats like those I grew up around as far as I can tell, nothing special.

The tunnel widens into a giant steaming stinking refuse heap. When Felina tries to climb over it two tentacles reach out and seek to pluck her from the ceiling. An Otyuch! The Elf decides to try to negate it's main weapons, surprise and cover and we begin pulling it free from the dung heap and pelting it with bolts and arrows. Things are going really well when suddenly everybody surges in to hack at it. I haven't heard Cuura give the charge order, but since my aim is spoiled I decide to support the charge. Jay decides to try a body slam of sorts, but not wearing spiked armor slamming into an Otyuch the size of a small horse doesn't do much. Felina and Snake however use Jay's distraction to tumble past it. While I dispatch the wounded Otyuch another one manages to

distinguish Snake from the other vile substances surrounding it and pulls it in to the heap. We surge in to battle our new opponent, but it is hard to distinguish its skin from the identical looking muck. Not having learned from their mistakes failing to forge a united front, but relying on mobility underground causes Jay to get grabbed by yet a third Otyuch. I can tell they are not used to tunnel fighting. I quickly carve up the second Otyuch and wonder in the back of my mind if Cuura is properly appreciating the axe yet. For a moment the thought flashes through my mind I have just lost a chance to be rid of Snake and reconsider the worth of the many decades of battle drills drilling in automatic actions of the body in combat.

Jay always known for his strange fighting style is apparently trying to wrench open the Otyuch's maw by putting his legs in. I did not have the chance to warn him about the filth fever Otyuch's carry, but although highly unorthodox he is managing to keep the jaws needle like teeth from closing on his legs. Those deep wounds are hard to clean and likely to infect! I almost trip over the many arrows scattered about. In the back of my mind I wonder if expelling the elves from the earth was an act of mercy or if the elf is suffering from a curse for disobeying the gods in returning to the earth. This distraction almost causes my axe swing to the body to go foul, but then I remember Otyuchs always shift their weight to the left leg when raising their tentacle to strike and bring my axe in lower and lop of the immobilized paw. The last Otyuch collapses, shudders and dies.

Apparently both Snake and Jay have lost their weapons when they were grabbed by the Otyuchs. For a moment I consider fitting them with laniards to prevent this from happening, but I think the search for the weapons will be memorable punishment enough to ensure it will not happen again.

The final tier of the complex seems to be devoted to the magic users. At the end of the central axis there is cave with many holes in it's roof at different angles. When you stand in just the right spot you can see a bit of the night sky. The floor is littered with a forest of silver trees with of silver mirrors as leaves, I make sure to watch Snake so he won't pinch one while Reed wanders about. There are two central pillars supporting the cave's roof. Both are strewn with strange symbols in no discernible pattern. But Reed grabs some piece of paper with similar symbols from her robes and starts looking for specific patches of sky to be glimpsed through the roof and wandering back and forth to the pillars. After ages of wandering about starts to give tentative twists to some mirrors and making notes on her piece of paper. I wait breathlessly for what will happen, but Reed just walks away and asks if we are coming. After this anticlimax we all shamle out of the cave. I make sure Snake does not remain behind to use the cave's power to summon some demon or something.

One of the remaining passages is barred by a newly installed metal reinforced door with a double lock. Reed produces the key to one of the locks, but Felina's fiddling with the other one fail. It is decided we will smash the lock, which seem just to be mediocre human metalwork. After the first two blows a howling echoes through the caves seeming from all around us. The sound of hundreds of terrified souls in eternal torture rips at my ears and makes my hearth quail and I feel panic rising to my throat. But then I realize a great secret must be guarded here and push down the fear and clear my head. I discover Snake has fled the call home and seeing where the others are moving discern two eyes burning with baleful fire. Cuura is quickly brought down by the wolf fiend, but continues to battle on fiercely even from her disadvantageous position while we rush to her aid. Silver cuts through it like an axe through a spring sapling and it is quickly dispatched. Cuura staggers to her feet, quaffs a potion and collapses into a deep slumber. The door leads to a well furnished study with a four poster bed. We find some red robes, writing implement and a huge double locked chest. Given what happened at the door I feel I must restrain my burning curiosity for a little while longer. I decide it can do little harm to take a quick peek inside with a clairvoyance and discover several fur wrapped parcels and yet another chest within this one. What a tantalizing glimpse!

We return to where the elves left us to find the elf which accompanied Reed waiting for us. He beckons her to follow and they return in a few minutes. Snake breathes a sigh and looks as if some great weight has been lifted of him. The elves speak a few words in elvish, from what I gather he seems to be giving directions to Kendalan and bids us to leave.