

## Grimwald's chronicles part 79

Work is progressing well but then Reed comes to tell me she does wish to be seen with Nethander. A sentiment which I can well understand, but find strange coming from her. Indeed she still turns out to believe in his redemption, but he has fallen in with a bad crowd again. Ha, does dung attract flies! Anyway Reed believes that someone may be causing internal dissent within the Flaming Fist and she wishes to remain neutral so she can gather some more information. I, in the meanwhile, am to function as carrier of messages, since all of our group have reasons to visit the forge. Though I protest that I have serious work to do here rather than gossip mongering Reed's arguments prevail on me.

Kendalan informs me he will be in the wilds for a while with his students because of some trouble with a group of archers who studied under him. When I ask him what happened he tells me he and Cuura had some of the Uthgard tribes studying at the same time as some of the archers and they came to blows. Cuura and he tried in vain to get the archers to stand up to the barbarians and learn to cooperate with them. Apparently by a week of exhaustion and intimidation they broke their resistance and got them both to follow orders. Who did they think they were training? A band of half-orcs? When an officer questioned their training methods they insulted him and now Kendalan is retreating while Cuura is trying to fight the enemy captain head on. Gods, the things they get into when I am not there to show them the proper methods!

Fortunately Nethander and Reed manage to douse Cuura's fire enough to make her more civil at least for her encounter with the captain. I have to listen for two entire days to the irritating noises of arguments between Reed and Cuura as Reed drills proper diplomatic responses into Cuura for the meeting with the captain.

When Cuura returns I do feel elated that she managed not to get herself arrested. More stunningly she has actually made amends with the archers and convinced them of her good intentions. She tells me of the archer's predicament. Lack of armor and melee weapons, low discipline, low morale, hardly any training in bow or crossbow and due to the low skill almost no pay. Fortunately I have seen much the same in my years in the Neverwinter militia, where the recruits were afraid to abandon their fortified positions and take the field.

I instruct Cuura in some drills whereby they can have a strong impact on the field without exposing themselves too much and the basics of volley fire training for various distances and elevations. Once they learn to gain a good firing speed and indirect fire discipline they will be much more confident in the direct fire exercises. Cuura comes by regularly to discuss the training of her men so we can create a good combat drill routine. I am proud of how she is learning her trade.

After a few weeks Reed asks me to see if the gods can tell me anything about a captain of the Flaming Fist men-at-arms called Narses. She got him to come by to see about commissioning some work from me. He and his officer corps seem more like Sune worshippers than soldiers. What is it with commanders and Sune these days? At least he has an eye for craftsmanship and when he sees the quality of some of the reforging I have done he decides his own sword could do with some improvement. I try to remain polite when he hands me his pearl handled, gold filigreed sword. Fine work by a talented jeweler, but clearly no swordsmith.

My prayers give little enlightenment. *True seeing* merely confirms he and his officers are indeed men, there is no poison on them or in them and no extraordinary magical aura's on either of them or their items. None of them possess strange powers or talents, but when I use my paladin ability to find if they serve evil I find myself confused. Clearly many of them have their impurities and Narses more than most, but these vices seem normal enough among mercenaries. There is however a hint of implacable darkness around the captain and certain of his officers. Thinking this may be an indication of possession I detect their thoughts, but I can find only a single set of thoughts active in them. Still none of those tainted individuals dares step into the consecrated area.

When I discuss my findings with the others none of them can find an explanation. A few days later at the midwinter festivities I manage to take a look at the captain of the engineers and of the heavy cavalry. The first one is normal enough, but the captain of the heavy cavalry has a similar taint even though he seems a rather wholesome individual by his own nature. Over the next two weeks Reed's rumor mongering and performances manage to lure the other officers to visit my smithy as well. It turns out that five of the seven captains is somehow lightly tainted as well as some of their officers.

Everyone goes out to collect stories and we find that in the last few battles some captains issue stranger commands than usual.

-Valentinus of the heavy cavalry several times had his cavalry charge at fortified positions on the battlefield and tried to break units of spearmen. Someone schooled in the warcolleges in Cormyr should know better.

-Bloody John of the light cavalry several times abandoned his duty as reserves and guarding the flanks to undertake plundering raids against enemy supplies unguarded in the rear.

-Marcellus Aurelius of the sappers has several times forced a short march only since there would not be enough time to set up a fortified camp thereby wasting many opportunities. He did not seem tainted though.

-Diomedes commanding an army of Chessentan spearmen has several times refused to advance and press the enemy.

-Ula, hetman of the Uthgard barbarians several times caused his skirmish line to retreat well before the enemy lines approach granting them the advantage of free deployment.

-Narses, commander of the men-at-arms at several critical moments in the battle chose to send in his regulars rather than his elite or guard troops whom he keeps in reserve. Risking defeat on several occasions.

-Saris, commander of the missile troops, although not seemingly tainted often exposed his archers, forcing the infantry and cavalry to come to their rescue or lose their missile support.

It is hard to see if they are merely trying to keep their faction strong or if they are purposefully lessening the effectiveness of the Flaming Fist. Only Valentinus and Saris are daring to risk their troops. It speaks of the quality and fighting spirit of the men that they come out victorious again and again despite these strange orders by their captains. In the campaign to protect Candlekeep their general was disintegrated and now the captains share command until one of them is chosen as the new general, which may partially explain their focus on battling the rival factions within the Flaming Fist. When the campaigning season starts in spring a new general will command them. Should we be worried?