

Grimwald's chronicles part 93

After routing the goblins and orcs our army makes its way back to camp. The atmosphere is grim. The men are realizing the seriousness of the situation they are in. I can tell from the looks on their faces that for many it is the first time they find themselves surrounded and outnumbered and having lost friends. They are in shock and march back like mindless zombies. There is not even muttering or complaining. The men are exhausted both physically and mentally. I marvel at the sight. My people have known nothing but this for millennia and these... men are about to crumble at their first taste of a dwarven existence. Truly their spirits are not ready. I can only hope for Cuura, none of these have what it takes. Still my people need these humans and it is clear they need us.

At camp discipline is hard to maintain. Most just walk into their tents and fall asleep in their clothes. Still the officers manage to get the wounded cared for and the prisoners secured. How can they forget their duties so easily? Even men who have been trained and drilled. They are truly a surface people, they wouldn't last a year in the underdark. Still these are men of North, hardened by the climate and culled by bloody conflict. I wonder how the Waterthavians will hold up in the moors.

The men are debriefed and after action reports are made to see what went well and what went wrong. At least they are learning. The reports and repair duty get the men back to their routines. Talking about each other bonds the men, and they start to believe in heroism once more.

My lieutenant is furious at me. He can't believe from my service record that I separated from my unit and chased a band of goblins by myself. In over twenty years of service I had never disobeyed a command, now after two years leave I seem to have lost all discipline. Fortunately there are plenty other candidates for latrine duty who did not have the extenuating circumstance of capturing a goblin leader and securing the supply tents during the raid.

Lieutenant Turgu is livid with rage when he finds out his cousin was killed in an attack inspired by Cuura. Felina and Nethander tell stories of her heroics, but that doesn't change the fact that light cavalry should be used to harass the rear and flanks as well as chasing down retreating units. They do not belong in a battle line. Cuura has made this mistake countless times, often barely surviving the encounter herself. Since neither pain nor danger can hold her back I can only hope that the weeks of stable cleaning duty will make an impression on her. She has to learn somehow that she is actually herself behaving as the lancers she seems to abhor, but unconsciously imitates. Perhaps now she will be more amenable to playing war-games with me.

Nethander is snaking his way into captain Ogg's good graces. Zhae is upset at having missed most of the action and still too much of a lone wolf to make an impression on the men or officers. Lieutenant Dark seems happy enough to have Felina along and captain Phic is clearly pleased with Reed's blessings and healings and her subservient attitude. I think that with a few more wise actions some of us will be granted increased responsibilities. It will hurt Cuura if she will be forced to obey the commands of another of our group. But this pain more than anything will teach her there is more to being a great leader than personal heroism and fighting skill, the duty to take care of your men rather than to amass glory. With the guidance of Reed and myself she will be a great leader some day. If only she would accept a proper dwarven deity!

My preparations are proving wise, many wounds are getting infected and some of the men are coming down with blue cough and trench foot. Still with Reed, myself and the healing skills of some of the sergeants the situation is well under control. To prevent the supplies I brought from running out Kendalan and Reed find some herbs and mosses to treat the wounded. Apparently the moors have something of worth in them after all!

A few days after the battle the camp has returned to its normal routine and our group is invited into the staff tent. Major Oresund tells us the goblin tribe we drove away has grown over the past few months by taking in goblin refugees from the eastern part of the moors. The orcs who attacked us

were apparently trying to catch some goblins to sell as slaves to the Zhents to trade for iron and steel. So the Zhentarim slave trade seems to be the cause for the goblin migration and their invasion of human lands to escape the cruelty of other greenskins. It is clear that as long as the Zhents are stirring up trouble the goblin menace will continue. The main body of the army will march to intercept a heavily guarded caravan bringing weapons to the moor to trade for slaves, a smaller contingent will go to the Zhent trading post to gather information and if possible destroy or disrupt it. We are to travel with this smaller contingent under command of captain Ogg to provide support.

After a few days march we find the trading post to be a hilltop fort, probably a repaired ruin. The vale at the bottom of the hill is dotted with armed camps. While Reed goes to get a bird's eye view, Kendalan, bear and me circle around while Nethander and Felina scout the nearest camps.

While trotting the long way around I ponder the worthlessness of the region. Just waterlogged limestone, no ores, not even decent wood! It must be hard to inspire humans to fight over such land, still here they manage to send an expedition to cull the goblins. Why can't we get the humans to clear the world's edge mountains? Pah Kendalan claims his bear is smart. We are supposed to sneak around quietly and here he goes puffing and snorting. Where was I? Fortunately those sounds are quite natural here. There is plenty of ore and even decent timber to be had and history has shown many times how if left unchecked hordes of orcs can come down the mountains and sweep away whole kingdoms. Damn that bear getting in the way of where we are going! Almost made me fall. We dwarves have shielded the humans south of the mountains for centuries and when we finally failed the humans were swept away as well and only with great difficulty, sacrifice and toil we have somewhat restored our position. Will we let all that toil and sacrifice come to nothing? No you silly beast, the spikes on Osthalion are far too sharp to use me as a scratching post! We should saddle you since this is not working out, clearly no concept of marching in a straight line wandering off to the side like that. No we must drive forward and secure our hold on the region. What is that irritating screech like nails on a black board? Can't a dwarf ponder the hopelessness of the situation in peace anymore! What is bear making such a huff about now? Hey what is that green smear on Osthalion. Oh a dead troll, recently dead, very recently dead. Did bear do that? Pretty sizable troll, just a small scratch on bear and a smear on Osthalion. Good, very good bear. Damn that Elf for always being right! Infuriating! I'd better get used to it though, he is older than me and this will always be so. Another unbearable burden added to my load, an Elf who always knows better. I can imagine why my ancestors grew so tired of them.

Nethander's blood-lust emerges again in the form of a wicked scheme to set one tribe against another. Weren't all those dead just a few days ago enough for him? The more souls he can reap the more he hungers for them. His dark insatiable lust must be overcoming him. I wonder how long it will take? We may have less time than I had imagined. Still part of me admires his cunning and skill at pitting Greenskins against each other. But can such a being as he safely be harnessed for good or this a folly which will be our doom? The captain has the good sense to bely his plans.

Fortunately the camps have banners flying over them. With some discussion to and fro we manage to link the banners to some tribes described in the book we took from the Red Wizard cache in the green fields. Of the six camps two are orcish and four are local barbarians. Three of the barbarian tribes were said to have druidic sympathies. The rest of us hold position as Kendalan and Reed are to attempt to make friendly contact with them. Kendalan approaches the Bear Hand clan, according to the notebook one of the more powerful barbarian tribes living in the cliffs on the northern edge of the High Moor. He learns that although they are not themselves under threat their shaman wishes his people to be prepared for a battle against some other worldly evil. Reed meets with the Sky People who have apparently been taught how to domesticate horses by an avariel which allowed their small tribe to survive by adopting a nomadic lifestyle. They tell us they may seek shelter in the domain of a dragon in the eastern moors and inform us that a tribe of what are probably devils have begun commanding orcs.

Not surprisingly the devils in the past became so irritated with the chaotic nature of the orcs that they slew their servants in frustration. Why are they trying it again now? We learn that three orc tribes have come under the influence of these devils and that although the devils are known as a small tribe the orcs they command number around two thousand. I would estimate that with the devil's sense of strategy and the lack of cohesion of their enemy within a year or two they will gain total dominion over the moors, except for the regions where the dragons have their lairs. The goblin raids which we were to end now seem like a minor side effect rather than a true concern in the light of these new developments! The devils used to live in the center of the moor, but the orc tribes under their command live in the western and north western parts of the moor. Still some orcish shamans reject the devils and now seek the weapons to fight them by trading slaves with the Zhents. This orcish war against their own species has often been the saviour of many a civilization for their warriors are strong and fierce and most importantly they regenerate their losses almost as quickly as a troll heals its wounds! While we ponder this new information and I worry at how firm the devil's grip on the center and southern moors might be Nethander seizes the initiative.

He takes the bear's catch and marches into the Troll Hunters' camp and somehow manages to get their leader to agree to a parlay with captain Ogg. The captain seizes the opportunity Snake affords him and arranges for a meeting between Major Oresund and their tribal leader to gain valuable native allies in this campaign.

I am asked to relay the new information to major Oresund with a *sending*. His reply orders us to seize the initiative and gain a position of strength with regard to the Zhents without escalating the current situation. Our blockade and possible siege of their trading post and the caravan in jeopardy with possibly supplies running low in the fort should let us force a settlement on beneficial terms. Reed's intuition however guides us to a more risky path with greater possible rewards, but possibly ruinous results: the taking of their commander as an ultimate show of force.

Cleric 4/Crusader 1/Prestige Paladin 3/Stalwart Champion 4