

Grimwald's chronicles part 98

After Kendalan had guided us in a regenerative trance I erect a *runic marker* so later generations will know that on this site Cuura and her troops saved the village of Hillsfar from being overrun by greenskin and infernal hordes. The tunnel is ready and it is not long before we find a cavern which leads our people to the surface a few miles from the cliff town.

On our way back to the army camp we are intercepted by a unit of our light cavalry which must have been dispatched to investigate. The sergeant is quite stomped when he finds a whole tribe with men, women and children is heading towards our camp. We are rushed to the tent of major Oresund to report, but captain Ogg upon seeing Kendalan and Nethander recruits them for a special mission. Almost as an afterthought he decides to attach Zhae to the mission as well.

Poor Zhae, when a dwarf loses interest in his own life he decides to become a troll slayer, giant slayer or even dragon slayer depending how long he manages to survive against all odds. But what can a boy like Zhae do, who was all that before? At first I hoped it was just the aftereffect of the gnomish sleep draught, but now I am certain it must be a broken heart. That damned bard, who stole his Reed from him. Well he could have been more assertive himself. Still this has to stop, a troll slayer at least makes himself useful. What use is a Zhae zombie? Yes he eats, breathes and sleeps, but I can't say he truly lives anymore. It is clear the dwarven ways are better than turning yourself into one of the living dead.

Major Oresund is rather impressed with Reed's report, he of course debriefs me, Felina and Cuura as well, but Reed's story clearly carries the most weight. I am then called upon to report on the abilities and traits of our fiendish enemies. The major voices his concern upon learning about what we are facing. Apparently similar stories and worse have been circulating in the camp causing some misguided souls to forgo their duties. Reed offers to try to restore morale by sharing the stories of our adventures selectively. Ah hiding knowledge, Dumathoin be blessed!

Fortunately the major has good news as well. The Waterthavian army has arrived in the moors and we will prepare camp for them in ruins close by. The major's plan to skirt the enemy may have failed, but at least we won't be facing the greenskin and infernal hordes alone. To be better prepared the major asks me as ranking officer of our little group to lead a reconnaissance mission. According to the scouts and auxiliaries many tribes have fled into the underdark and may know more of how this situation came to pass. We are to bring back enemy or neutral leaders and report back to the new camp within three days.

Cuura also gets an assignment. Her stories have made it clear to the major that the auxiliaries and soldiers of Neverwinter have little in common and that liaisons are needed to ensure smooth cooperation. Cuura is assigned as liaison to the newly arrived bear hand tribes-folk from Hillsfar. After ensuring the tribes-people are cared for with food, water, medical care and other necessities as well as assigning them duties we make our way to some ruins. These ruins according to our auxiliaries are quite dangerous and should be avoided so they might contain an entrance to the underdark. According to Reed there may be flying predators lairing in the cliffs like griffins, manticores or gargoyles, possibly even wyverns. This is why a sensible people stay underground! If you know how to recognize the black puddings, olive slimes, gelatinous cubes and such they are a valuable extra defense for your hold rather than some random predator pouncing on you from nowhere. At least in a solid tunnel you know where the danger is coming from!

The village we enter is clearly of human build with some elven and dwarven elements in it's architecture. It must be a remnant from the kingdom of three crowns when the civilized people of the North stood together against the greenskins. Another dark page in our history when our combined might was shattered by endless greenskin hordes. My own hold managed to survive the greenskin domination, but the elves and humans were wiped from the land. They may have regained some power in the north but still the greenskins crawl around these ancestral ruins of our glorious past. Perhaps this war will show the humans and the elves the need to eradicate the

greenskin breeding grounds. But this is too much to hope for I fear. Why oh why can't they realize this necessity? The elves at least should see the long term importance for the stability of the region!

A search of the ruins results in Felina finding some large holes which according to Reed may be lairs for Rodents Of Unusual Size and snakes. Fortunately Cuura smelled some dank air which reminded her of a crypt. Unfortunately a building has collapsed onto the entrance. I noticed the fatigue in Sam and Moos, the two engineers assigned to me, I was wondering how human commanders motivate their men. With dwarves this is never an issue, if you do your very best then maybe not every last one of you dies. I guess the thousands of years of genocidal warfare have some advantages as well. I just did not know how to handle such a problem, but Reed's words have put the fire back in their arms and the steel in their backs and within no time they clear an entrance.

The ground under the stairs has sagged and tilted and moss, lichen and fungi are corrupting the littered stairway. Although Felina deftly descends I advise Cuura to try to secure a line to aid the descend. But even with a line the crooked stairs crumble under the combined weight of me and my equipment and I tumble down the stairs. Clearly I progressed with too little preparation. It turns out that my preparations although useful have proved inadequate as others also get into trouble with the steep descend. Fortunately the rope prevented the worst of the damage.

Felina has found an exit. Ugh the humans trusted wood to block a passage, well a lot of good will this pile of rubble do. Trust in stone. When Felina steps through the opening Reed detects some noise from above, probably an alarm spell. Something is moving through the ruins, Cuura and I take up positions at the bottom of the stairs to deal with the threat. I get into *iron guard stance* to shield our leader from whatever may come. A pack of owlbeats tries to charge down the stairs, but the one bearing down on me trips rolls into a ball and through it's mass bowls me backwards. Damn, why didn't I get into the roots of the *mountain stance*? I thought that the massive armor, steadfast boots, foundation of stone and bracers of strength would be enough to anchor me. I should be more cautious and prepare better next time! Sloppy, sloppy, sloppy... With great pleasure I hear the wet thuds of Cuura's giant flail making short work of the owl bears. The owl bear swipes me with one of it's claws and grabs me into a bear hug impaling itself on Osthalion's spikes and before it can do anything else Valnogrod ends the beast. I rush to the front and Cuura and I quickly dispatch the remaining owlbeats. Reed rushes over to me uttering the first syllables of a *lesser vigour*, but my preparations have not been so inadequate that I need such aid. Osthalion and the greater iron ward crystal have kept me from suffering more than minor bruising. Osthalion is proving worthy of it's name "stong fortress" in the common tongue as is Valnogrod "power of dwarf". I feel we must come up with a name for Cuura's flail soon before some commoner or bard decides to do so.

We come to what must have been the entrance to the keep. A rusted iron portcullis bars our way. As I consider if it would be easier to tunnel under, break through, lift or tunnel around Reed offers a bolt cutter and mobile support. She prepared! She prepared well! Oh thank the gods, they are learning. My efforts have not been in vain. I am almost overcome by emotion and curious as to what may remain in the basement of the keep, but it is unlikely to aid our mission and I tear myself away and decide to try the other tunnels.

We cautiously make our way to a tunnel spiraling down and away for quite a while. Reed proclaims a good campsite and we rest, eat and sleep. After a while we come to good solid stone rather than the corrupted, waterlogged limestone of the moors. Finally! It is not long before the tunnel branches out and eventually I detect signs of recent excavations. Given the nature of the stone they must be mining for gems. Felina decides we should proceed extra cautiously. I wonder if it is wise to let her keep point so long, but we have no one else with her skills. At least she is worried of stepping into an ooze or slime accidentally ever since I reminded her about the dangers of the underdark. That should help keep her sharp despite the fatigue.

Suddenly I hear the sound of glass splintering and green gas envelops us. I instinctively hold my breath, but Reed, one of the barbarians and Moos have collapsed already. Cuura, Sam and I quickly drag them out of the cloud. Fortunately they are not dead. I cast a *panacea* to rouse Reed, but before

I can do anything for the rest I hear orcish warcries howling for our blood. Felina reports she hears elven, there must be drow as well. I tell her we should capture the female leading them. While Felina goes drow hunting we prepare to keep the orcs at bay by forming a line and casting a *foundation of stone*. After a short hesitation I decide to go into *iron guard* stance rather than *roots of the mountain* to protect Reed and the barbarian, the foundation of stone should make us steadfast enough. Cuura tries to make the orcish warleader back down, but he is made of sterner stuff. The big deep hounds which are sent ahead to break our lines are routed by Reed and although the mob fights their way around them they lost too much momentum for an effective charge.

Reed flies away over their heads to aid Felina while the unit opposing us regains their cohesion and tries to overrun our position. Even though the barbarian and Cuura know nothing of shieldwall tactics we manage to hold the line and keep them from killing our unconscious comrades. Struggling to hold our position we can only grapple and I request permission to end this fight even though this may scare away the drow. Cuura agrees and the blinding light of the *holy smite* burns away the greenskin scum.

Rock and I surge forward while Cuura secures the orcish warleader and shields our comrades. Felina looks a bit like a pincushion with small bolts protruding from her body. The frail little bolts harmlessly ricochet off my Osthalion though. Seeing themselves outmatched the drow try to fight themselves a way back past Felina and Reed. I urge Rock to trip up the female, instead of taking my time to phrase it correctly as the lightest one. Oh this damn swiftness of my comrades is getting to me! The three drow surrounding Felina are dispatched with lightning speed and accuracy. Reed knocks out the drow leader while Cuura points out the last remaining drow by sticking an arrow in his chest after which Valnogrod settles an old score between our people. The last one beats a hasty retreat.

We search the remains and find that the drow had decently forged weapons and armor as well as some wax sealed vials, probably poison. Although I favor the destruction of these unfair weapons, Reed and Felina claim it may be necessary to keep the non-lethal poisons to capture enemies alive. What is wrong with systematically beating them into submission one by one I ask you? But no they have to do it the sneaky way. Bah!

Reed produces several donkeys so we can move our captives and comrades more easily and we start our way back to camp. After 10 minutes our comrades start reviving. We camp again a short distance from the ruins before returning to the new army campsite. When we get back to the army we find the area strewn with ruins is larger than the one we just visited and the delicacy of the stonework betrays a strong elven influence. Wind and weather have worn away all decoration and writing, that's what you get for building on the surface. Still even though there are hundreds camped here there is a quietness about the place. I cannot detect evil, but there is something wrong. It is so subdued, the only things moving are the buzzing mosquitoes. We release our prisoners in the care of the sergeant of the watch and make our report to major Oresund. The major invites us into the command tent where we find most of the officers assembled as well as some Waterthavian lieutenants who have been sent ahead of the main force. They are happy to hear our report, even major Locke seems to have some grudging appreciation.

We are relieved of duty until the Waterthavians arrive tomorrow. Tomorrow evening there will be a warcouncil meeting in the ruins of an old amphitheatre to brief the combined officer corps of the situation. Even though we do not yet have the rank we are still invited to attend as long as we sit with the Neverwinter officers, do not interrupt the meeting with unrequested advice and sit in the back row.

We walk out of the meeting, but rather than being joyful or even worried, all I feel is a kind of unfathomable sadness. A deep sense of loss. What happened here to leave such a mark? It does not feel like this was razed by greenskins. It is as if what was lost here was more precious than even the lives of the people of this city. Perhaps the elves in the tower on the trade route will know.