

Grimwald's chronicles part 99

The next morning the army of Waterdeep arrives. About one third are members of the city guard. Their troops are well equipped with light crossbows, short swords, medium shields and chain shirts. The rest of the troops however look like they have been rounded up by press gangs or were too drunk to remember signing up. They only have leather jerkins for armor and short spears as weapons. The Waterthavian officers however sport richly plumed helmets, decorative armor and weapons. More the kind of equipment one would bring to an aristocratic hunting party than to a war. Fortunately I see some prominent holy and arcane symbols on some of them so fortunately they brought their own spellpower as well as divine guidance.

The rest of the day is spent setting up camp, coordinating watch schedules and sectors and exchanging supplies and stories. According to the rumors the assembly of the army was delayed by disagreements among the various merchant companies about exactly how much each should contribute to this punitive expedition. Then there was apparently another argument who would get the supply contracts and for what price. Then there were trials with equipment offered by various trading houses and finally the wait until the right quantities could be assembled. I find it hard to believe people can get so worked up about their gold while greenskins are preying on their people. Perhaps Reed can explain the thoughts of these merchants to me. When I lived in Waterdeep I marveled at their inefficiency and I still do.

At dinner I notice major Locke and his men are in high spirits. Major Oresund put them in charge of interrogation. I feel bad releasing our prisoners to them. I wish there was another way. Reed tried to speak on their behalf, but I feel that major Locke will have a rather unsympathetic ear to her wishes. Still their good spirits hopefully means the captives cooperated with little need for coercion, though I would not count on it.

Still while most humans prefer to be holed up in their cities the Zhents try to control the wilderness areas. For profit sure and they regularly trade weapons to orcs, but they never used to let things get out of hand this way. I wonder if the rumors that Sememon left are indeed true. I hope they manage to get organized again quickly or in 30 years the North will be swarming with green hordes again like we are just starting to see now.

Ever since I came down from the mountain I am feeling torn. Orcs and drow are enemies of the dwarves and need to be eradicated, just like giants, but I now realize there is a limit in how far we should go in accomplishing this or we may lose more than we gain, our very souls even. I still find it hard to see the line between right and wrong when it comes to these things, but at least I am searching and with proper technique, effort and patience eventually I will succeed.

After dinner we go to change for the war council. I brush up my armor and weapons and while making my way to the council I run into Reed on the way to the amphitheater. She is afraid we will be attacked there. For a moment I worry she may be speaking as the Voice of the Gods again, but from her look I see it is only her and her ignorance talking. Armies are quite methodical and learn from their history, I am confident the priests and mages will have performed adequate preparations as per standard protocol, what ever that may be for the Waterthavians.

There are about sixty of us in the amphitheater. The captains and majors introduce themselves and the units they are in command of. The colonel who is to take command of the joint forces is called Ribaldy. Although his dress is quite decorative I see in his stance that he is a veteran of many battles rather than merely a puffed up aristocrat like most of the Waterthavian officers. Then major Oresund introduces major Locke. Major Locke comes to the point quickly and tells us that we are on the verge of locating the enemy headquarters. But before he can speak another word the world is wrapped in silence and darkness.

Reed tears past me to a collapsed Kendalan who's blood is gushing out of his body. I never knew an elf had so much blood in such a small frail body. I see the blood pumping out of him and then the pumping ceases. Then a fireball erupts and while I am badly burnt the lieutenants in the rows before me are mostly dead. I want to run after Reed, but Cuura signs to me go reinforce the frontline so I make my way across the dead and dying littering the floor. Thank the gods we both learned how to use military sign language!

In the eerie silence it is almost as if it is not really happening, just as if it is all just a sick fantasy or nightmare. I turn Valnogrod into a dwarven warpike and go into *iron guard* stance interfering with the fiendish glaives hammering our frontline. My devotion to protecting the innocent is rewarded by Moradin and his holy protection blesses my comrades in arms. I switch places with the wounded captain Phic in the frontline and turn Valnogrod into a maul to hammer the enemy into submission. Realizing the skill of his devils is no match for our defensive preparations the horned devil turns to infernal magic and a bolt of lightning cuts through our ranks striking me squarely in the chest.

Still we are not stopped by this and it does not take us long to cut our way through the front-line, but then some dastardly rogue runs me through from behind twice, major Locke is paralyzed and our attack falters. I turn to intercept the devil about to give Locke the coup de grace, but Reed had already anticipated that move and switches him to safety. Then one of those accursed Orthons manages to land a heavy blow. I feel the world is starting to reel around me so I fall back to the second line turning Valnogrod into a warpike again.

Then it is almost as if the world starts to slow down. Everybody moves so slowly and in the same leisurely pace I see a flaming ball, no larger than a pea crawl through the air towards me. I know what is coming, but feel powerless to stop it. I feel my ancestors screaming in the back of my mind, "Use your shield! Prepare your armor!" I hear them, but my body does not know how to obey. As the fire engulfs me my righteous rage holds back the darkness for a moment, then my will fights to keep my tattered body moving through the power of spirit alone, but my barriers prove insufficient. I start falling into darkness and feel all control slipping from my grasp. As my hold on Ostalion fades I feel Ostalion reaching into my body with its adamantite grip, will some of me remain to serve the next wearer? With this last thought slowly fading in me I drift into nothingness.

I have seen the mountains from afar where the Soul Forger plies his trade, I have heard the chant in the halls of the ancestors, I have dimly imagined what it might be like to become a weapon or armor myself and witnessed what became of those held back by their entanglement with this world. I considered myself prepared for anything which might befall me and therefore beyond fear for the inevitable fate I would meet. I was wrong.

The deep sleep did not lead me to any of these fates, but with a body totally devoid of life and strength I find myself gazing up at the grinning face of Nethander hovering over me fixing me with a look of deep concentration. The horror of spending my afterlife as some puppet of Nethander unfolds in my mind, which for a moment tries to take refuge in insanity. But my mind is too stable then I feel the tempting lure of my body goading me back to unconsciousness. It whispers to me: "Rest, your body needs it, it cannot be without sleep now. Let it all go away again." But my spirit pushes back these temptations. Duty first. My heavily wounded companions are pursued by devils. The blessings of the gods are still with me so I command the earth to shield its children and a great *wall of stone rises* between us and the devils.