

Grimwald's thoughts part 59

While we are still cleaning up and repairing our gear after the fight with the demonic horde Felina, Kendalan and Reed show up. Apparently Nethander is still hiding somewhere, or did his heritage give him some idea of what would come next? Do demons eat their own? Would he have obeyed the demonic captain? Would he have had a choice or would his taint have gotten to him. I guess we'll find out some other time. Perhaps I should ask Kakanos, he seems quite knowledgeable on the outer planes.

While we repack our gear and discuss the condition of the horses Reed takes some time to befriend our newest companion. After the way he saved our lives I'm sure he will pass the Reed test, not even Nethander can slip through her divinely guided perception so it is a welcome extra security. He is a magic user after all and outer planar things can do strange things to your mind or so the lore goes.

When we are just about ready to leave Kendalan spots a trio coming towards us. Rather than keeping their distance all three of them approach us. The sergeant on the horse rides forth and starts presenting us with his credentials and an invitation to a parlay, but before he can finish Cuura gets impatient with his courtly manner and tell him to speak plainly. Apparently his master wishes to negotiate with us and these negotiations are backed by several guilds.

The scout meanwhile is checking out the party. I open my senses but he does not reek of evil and the divine fire remains still in me so I let it pass. He gives me a small nod of acknowledgement as he does something similar to me. He apparently has an intense dislike of Cuura and Felina. A small scuffle arises between the scout and Reed. Apparently Reed heard him saying something offensive, which she considered so uncouth she wishes not to attend the parlay.

The sergeant is quick to explain neither the scout, nor the hulking barbarian are representatives of his employer and tells the scout to back down. Even though outnumbered and with Cuura giving him a menacing look he stands fast for his convictions. Something tells me the scout and I are not that different in many ways. Apparently he belongs to a vigilante group called the Punishers who track down criminals, but rather than bringing them to justice they exact retribution. A dangerous occupation both physically and morally. He does not seem as dangerous as the Ninja, but at least as persistent.

We are led to a grand pavilion tent in garish colours surrounded by an improvised wall of tower shields. There seem to be about 20 soldiers there, clearly veterans of a few campaigns. Kendalan decides to stay near the exit since he does not trust the guarantees we have been given. We are met by a Tiefling! He is however very welcoming and gets a table set up with terrific dishes. How this is managed in a field kitchen is beyond me. I detect no magic or poison, but we purify the food none the less. It tastes wonderful. After the first dishes have been shared and some wine has flowed he starts the formal introductions. I open my senses to our host and taste an unhealthy amount of self-interest and ruthlessness, but no sheer malignancy as would radiate from an orc or true creature of the lower planes. Kind of reminds me of Nethander, who is again conspicuous by his absence. Is he avoiding his kin? Why? Anyway we learn our host is named Aristoles Mefistofeles and he is well connected and definitely playing some games with us.

According to our host he has been asked by the concerned public to mediate in the matter of the artefact to prevent escalation of the conflict. At the moment our pursuers intentions are focused on us, but if their rivalry would turn violent it could lead to widespread destruction. The Zhentarim are claiming they have been robbed and demand return of their property. A claim which Reed rebuts by saying we are merely couriers and therefore exempt from prosecution. I hardly think this would be the case. A courier is something quite different from a smuggler and to tell the two apart is why guilds exist. One cannot claim a right without the dues and duties.

According to the stories of the priest of Myrkul who left the books to us they were once and integral

part of several holy orders. If the churches of Lathander or Kossuth and Myrkul would come to reclaim their relics I would probably agree, but a thief complaining about thievery... We learn that apparently there is some dissension in the ranks and the high mage we encountered is no longer the leader and the Zhent captain we encountered is considered a renegade, possibly aligned with the church of Cyric. They are now led by a warrior of some renown known as Peregost as rumor would have it.

When his appeal to justice fails he tells us of the threat: the local Zhent trading guild representative has made the unwise boast he would raise an army if need be to set an example. According to our host the threat of the Zhentarim fracturing even further is such that the Peregost would probably back his unwise underling as a show of strength and reward of allegiance to quell internal dissent.

The Zhents pulling their troops from patrolling the main trade routes and marching through sovereign lands create unfathomable problems for many. This is highly regrettable, but we must stand firm against tyranny and bullying. I'm starting to understand the wood elves a bit better in how they used the troll hunter and the ogres to secure their forest. The Zhentarim may be brutish thugs like ogres and trolls, but they are controlled and controllable and provide essential security in the wilderness areas.

Next there is the claim of the Red Wizards that the artifact is extremely dangerous and likely to go out of control spreading great harm to the world. This part of the claim I do truly believe. The next part of the claim is that only they in all the realms possess the depth of magical expertise to deal with the danger. This may unfortunately also be true. Despite the reassurance of our host that the Red Wizards are peaceful merchants peddling minor magic items from their enclaves we are disinclined to yield to their suggestion. I don't know about the others, but the bird which chased them away when they came to request the artifact felt touched by the divine to me and the will of the gods is sacrosanct. Kakanos also seems quite upset, he must know more about the cruelty rumours speak of. Anyway since magic is bad for the soul I'm sure they will fall prey to book rather than the other way around even if their intentions are good.

I wonder about the Red Wizards, are the rumours of their evil nature mere hate against foreigners or other trading guilds protecting their turf or is there truth to them? We have never found any proof of Red Wizards being behind any of the attacks on us. They showed themselves once and were told to back down and have not shown themselves since. It is in the nature of wizards to leave physically dangerous tasks to others though so perhaps they are merely keeping up appearances while masterminding dark plots. Strange to think that in the east there are huge groups of cooperating wizards, I thought most wizards are solitary by nature.

Anyway since neither justice nor threats make an impression now comes the bribe: the Red Wizards are not merely trying to save the world but also willing to pay the staggering amount of one hundred thousand pieces of gold or their equivalent in magical items to us in exchange for the artifact. Enough gold to retire, to set up a business or to serve countless needy.

Aristoteles seems genuinely dismayed when even this combination of pressures doesn't even begin to move our position. After some appeals and reiterations he progresses to his final trump card. A mysterious party who is willing to guarantee removal of the artifact from this plane of existence and the prevention of its return here. This does seem a good solution to all, but the catch is that the party wishes to remain unknown. It could be anything, a lich wishing to study it, a lord in the lower planes desiring its powers in the blood war. We just don't know, but there must be a reason for the secrecy. To help us to lull our suspicions and leave all the troubles behind he tells us this mysterious party is willing to pay the best price of all. Our wishes...

His wording is such that Cuura freaks out and Kendalan probably feeling the possibility of corruption of our resolve by this final onslaught decides we are leaving and opens the tent flap. Indeed tempting to many to leave your burdens behind, but hardly the dwarven way. We gripe

about our burdens, but wouldn't want to lay them down for all the gold in the world for they are what forges us.

As we are resolutely leaving his hospitality behind Aristoteles realises he is fighting for a lost cause and decides to change sides offering to support us against these three parties. I guess by working for all sides you are assured of always ending up on top. We decide to pay him to support us against all three of these parties and leave 1200 gold pieces lighter. What he will do for us is still unclear, but it is better than him telling them there is no way to stop us short of killing us and where we are right now, which is a treat not uttered but very much hanging over our heads right now.

Shortly after leaving his encampment we decide to thoroughly check our equipment and each other for anything planted on us or taken from us while in the camp. Reed notices a thin mithril sheet in one of Felina's pockets. After some examination I think it was created using a process called acid forging practiced by the elves before my ancestors came north from Shannatar. When we shared our metallurgically hardened tools with the elves the method went out of use so this might be thousands of years old.

The sheet has many interwoven clusters of symbols on it which are so intricate that it would take me weeks to engrave. Even with the helmet I cannot comprehend the symbols, so what ever it is it is not a language. After some study Reed recognizes some of the symbols are used to refer to stars and Felina notices some arcane symbols. As they tell me what each symbol means and by looking at their ordering we start to find groupings which could be words or sentences. Apparently the structure of the message is elven. The sheet I now realise is more than a mere masterwork, but a work of great genius, each symbol can be combined with symbols all around it to form a great many different concepts, but rather than a garbled mismatch of concepts a theme evolves. This one sheet contains as much information as would comprise a hefty chapter in a normal book.

The arising concepts tell of a disagreement between a mage and a priest. Both agree dragons hold untold powers, the priest believes the dragons to be guarding powers too dangerous to elves, while the mage feels the dragons are the key to a deeper understanding of magic. We don't have the weeks needed to create a complete translation, but this may be part of the final relic we have been looking for. When we bring it close to the other relics it is as if a weight is lifted of our minds. The druids spell was waning and my sleep was getting restless, but now I feel secure again at least for a while.

We are not set upon by any parties so I guess Aristoteles hasn't alerted the other groups to our position and in providing us with the mithril sheet he has made our job a lot easier. I wonder how he found it and knew about it. Probably "as rumour would have it" in his words.

Our elf spots a two groups forming a picket line across our path. Two hidden humans positioned on strategic hill tops to our left and a band of goblins guarding a vale to our right. We theorize the humans must have back-up, but we don't know what that might be. Goblins on the other hand have assets we know all too well, numbers and violence, and we can probably deal with them. But how to take them out without raising any alarm? Kakanos suggests we use magical mist at dusk to hide our approach. The barbarian Cuura befriended has a mist horn and by using my wand of silence we can approach unseen and unheard. Because the perimeter is two hundred yards from the camp Felina sneaks in invisible to prevent their leaders sending for help.

Cuura and her horses will take the left flank, while Kendalan will take the right flank, the rest of us will go through the middle. Since I have no armour I decided I will practice my archery rather than head into the melee. Stepping out of the mist we start dropping the goblins in the guard ring, while Jay and the barbarian charge the center to aid Felina. I am really getting the hang of archery, the slow steady flow of the movements and the focused concentration are soothing somehow, I can see how elves would enjoy this. When I run out of targets more than half the guards lie dead and rest is running pursued by Cuura and her horses on one side and a giant mantis, bear and Kendalan on the other. Reed has joined Jay who got himself hurt again fighting two crazed hobgoblins. Our barbarian has engaged in a slugging match with the hobgoblin leader while Felina is dodging the

great axe of a crazed half orc. Guessing Felina is the one who needs my help the most I start running full tilt towards her. I will not be able to do this when I wear mountain plate, could I reforge it into interlocking plate? We'll see about that some other time. I see the half-orc axe splitting a medium sized boulder where Felina just stood before dancing away. I just hope I'll get to her in time, that half-orc looks tough. I feel the comfortable feel of my god chosen weapon in my hand, perhaps I should abandon my Urgosh and focus on the hammer? Because of all the running I cannot focus on the whispers of the ancestors, but I feel driven forth like an avalanche and my hammer shatters the half-orcs helmet, skull and spine ending the fight before it started.

When I look around I see no opponents threatening us, just Cuura playing with a goblin trying to crawl away through the bushes. We start loading the dead goblin leaders onto the spare horses so we can search them later and leave before anyone finds out their lines have been breached. Reed has some spells which can help us outrun our pursuers, but is only a matter of time before they box us in. We can win many fights, but I don't like the odds in the long run.