

Grimwald's chronicles part 83

Back at the smithy I start some tests on the troll armor and weapons. Although there are no markings, not even filed of markings which I could try to recover, there is a clue. In the armor plate, which is too thin for any dwarf to have forged it, there are chromium pellets. So the armor contains remnants of a hardened blade rather than being pristine smelt from ore. The smith is using old gear to forge their equipment. Possibly they scavenged an old battlefield? But which one? Although a human smith is not unlikely it could be of bugbear manufacture too. But magical books? Must be humans involved trading gear for magical artifacts. Probably the Red Wizards. Why would they have an interest in trolls? Probably the trolls are just a means to scavenge for magic around here so not too much to worry about. Once there is no more to find the supply of arms and armor will stop and without proper maintenance they will rust away in years in the hands of those brutes. I wonder why the nagging feeling at the back of my mind won't leave me alone.

I pray for the proper protections so I will be well prepared to mine the secrets of the books we found. If only I had gloves like the priests in Candlekeep which prevent certain traps from triggering. I run through my list of preparations and scenarios again and start my first divination. The *Omen of Peril* should indicate the level of threat we are dealing with here. To my astonishment the runes come up totally blank, no dangers what soever for the next half hour. Whatever traps there may have been were probably set off by the trolls. Felina and I are overjoyed we can sate our curiosity immediately. She chooses the book of the mind while I choose the more earthy aspect of body. As soon as I start reading I feel the exhilaration of discovering the hidden powers within my body and can only with difficulty tear myself away from the page, which turns out to become blank after the words have transferred themselves to my mind. Felina's book turns out to be of a similar nature. I pray to receive a copy to preserve what we can of these books, but without the magic unlocking the power hidden in my body it turns out the mind of Kendalan at least cannot do it. As I read about the hidden reserves of power in the body and how to gain access to these the rest go wandering away so Felina and I can perform our studies in peace and quiet. The Elf is wise enough to decide to keep an eye on us while the rest goes to do their thing. There is some bustling and noise making when they return, but fortunately my concentration is strong enough to block it all out, who knew there was such power in breath and bones. Unfortunately after a while the book starts coming to an end. I have learned more about the nature of the body than I ever held possible when I trained as a field medic in the militia, yet I feel there may be more hidden talents in our beings. I feel the slumbering powers of my body awaken and deeper mines of resilience being struck. Felina also seems to be wondering at her newfound insights, exhilarated, but still unaccustomed.

We are then dragged along by an enthusiastic Nethander and Cuura, who went to visit Durgan Stonehammer. Apparently the dwarf has some new insights in the visions we were given in the Netherese Caverns. Then a planar rift appears in the street before us. Why would Timat waste more of her minions on us?

Out of the rift a Hezrou appears. Not a devil from the hells, but a demon, so not a minion of Tiamat's this time. I studied Hezrou in the libraries of Candlekeep, many of them are no larger than a troll, but this one is huge. Strong, tough, front-line demons commanding scores of lesser soldiers in the battles of the Blood War. They are pervaded with the rotting poisonous cadavers of the infernal trenches and their toxic breath and fuming skin at best irritate the eyes, nose and mouth, poison the mind and cause your skin to break out in welts, at worse their enemy's bodies are overwhelmed and collapse hurling and spasming. My ancestral memories are crystal clear from the desperate battles my forebears fought against their kind. Keep it busy while the others destroy it from beyond it's toxic range. I call upon the Hidden Keeper's blessing to shroud me in *crawling darkness* to prevent it from grappling me despite it's huge size and strength. The memories flooding back show mundane weapons shattering on it's skin, while the tools of gods strike true. Lightning

arching over their skin without harm. Then I remember an obscure little footnote penciled in one of the demonology tomes, "the hornless variant's skin seems impervious to fire". I yell this information to Reed and Kendalan, who's task it will be to bring it down from afar. Its bullet shaped head now swivels towards Nethander as he is yelling something in the foul tongue of the damned. The demon even though it towers over his frail form seems subservient or grudgingly respectful somehow. I knew there was more to Snake than he let on! Snake then dismisses the horror to return from whence it came. What the hell did Snake read when he was in Candlekeep? How much of his heritage's powers is he retrieving? Will he spawn into his true form of a demon prince or some similar horror now or keep up his charade for a while longer thinking he can continue to deceive us in his arrogance? Snake tries his winning smile and surprised look on us saying he tricked it. The rest seem to buy into this deception, but I know what I saw. It is clear though that if Hezrou obeyed him he is far more dangerous than I hitherto dared fear. Although Snake's soul devouring ability is clearly inherited from his mother, she in more than an ordinary succubus to have spawned a son this powerful. He really had even me fooled for a while with his frail body disguise and tales of being bullied by the evil humans of Calimshan. Why did he really leave? Apparently the great Pasha has died. Did he have anything to do with this? How can anyone trust someone so skilled at deception!

The guards are easily shushed away by Reed and we continue to where Durgan should be staying. Our Elf apparently has not spotted it so I doubt if it is still there, perhaps the fold in reality closed when he saw the demon coming for him. Apparently we are not the only ones keeping an eye on the area so Cuura orders us to lie low in the tavern close-by while we strategize. How wise she is becoming! Reed excuses herself and walks up to one of the spies who immediately seeks to remove this obstruction to his duties. A few others move in, but it is clear they are bullies, not warriors like Zhae so I assume they will soon be cowed into submission or flee. Most unfairly Snake uses the distraction outside to run through a man with his back to him. I'm sure he will claim it was an enemy and it's unlikely the man will ever speak again in his own defense or otherwise. The lady for whom Snake has the same fate in store however manages to evade his treacherous attack. Even though she is skilled the odds are most unfair with three of us pressing her back under a hail of blows. I try to make her submit, but she resists my will and continues her desperate fight. Outside Kendalan apparently is overcome by his blinding hatred again shooting down fleeing adversaries mindless of Reed's reactions to this. Then the fight in the tavern takes an unexpected twist. The lady calls upon the secret name of stone and it's power overcomes Snake. Ah. We found his weakness, his abysmal nature is no match for the power of stone. This is already the second time he has been petrified. Good to know. Good to know.

I call upon the sound of the Soulhammer to shatter my opponent. For a moment I hesitate who I should crush, but unfortunately like last time I can find no justification for shattering Snake's petrified form, nor would it be a fair fight so I turn the forge-master's wrath on our unexpectedly dangerous assailant. I just hope no innocents will perish because justice stayed my hand here. I must keep a tighter check on Snake. It is amazing how time and again he gets me to lower my guard. With a crack like thunder she is struck down and while the rumblings die away Jay captures a fleeing enemy while Kendalan grabs another one. Felina heads over to the lady and shakes her head. The wrath of the All-Father has not spared her. I walk over to Snake's statue still wielding my adamantite war-hammer in my hand. One small tap would be enough... But I must resign myself to fate and bear the burden of his continued existence until his fate has been fulfilled for better or worse.

I stand saddened by this whole turn of events. The one with the answers is most likely dead by my own hand in a battle most unfair and ill prepared. She had to be punished for the murder she committed, no that is just a justification for revenge at having taken one of our own. She struck in self defense since Snake killed her companion and attacked her first. I have acted wrongly, unlawfully aiding Snake's murderous schemes. At least he is no longer living so there is some justice after all. Our Elf cannot contain his blood-lust shooting down fleeing creatures and people

alike, although for him it is probably just the same. Our heroic leader is not above ganging up on a lone enemy with three against one. I really have spent too much time in the forge. I cannot imagine how I managed to let things get so out of hand. Once we have taken care of our fallen 'comrade' I should ask advice from the temple of Tyr and do penance. We dwarves don't have the impractical chivalric code of human nobles, but this feels very wrong. It was easier when we had evil groups chasing us, we had little need for a moral compass, but now we must forge one quickly!

The temple of Lady Luck is 'fortunately' prepared for this strange eventuality and they hasten Snake's return to the flesh. Through interrogation of the prisoners it quickly becomes clear that the lady's death at my hand through the power of Moradin was no more than just for her many crimes. I have been an instrument of justice even though I am most impure myself. I feel hardly worthy of such a blessed calling. Here I am sensing Snake's corruption of the others while being blind that I too am become his tool and that the corruption of my being would probably be his greatest triumph. Today I have learned of my weakness and his. Now we will have to see who will manage to be best prepared when the time comes.

Experimenting with the magic items Felina found on my victim shows me whoever crafted them had skills beyond my own and little regard for others who might benefit from her craft. Almost everything she has is rendered unfit for use by others. Not even Snake manages to deceive the items and returns from a coma claiming a Medusa is behind all this. Is he trying to hide his own power and involvement again with a fiction of a common enemy or is there some truth to his words? Even my ancestors have no recollection of such a medusa so probably his is deceiving us again, but you never know with Snake. You just never know...

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