

## Norbert's Notes

### **Unseen (141)**

*In which the dangers of acting alone become apparent*

As the siege engines thunder and crash into each other, we run into a long corridor that stretches off from the main hallway until we're sure we are out of dodge.

I need some time to catch my breath. Fortunately, Nethander and Reed have the same idea. Even Efira, who seems built for this kind of thing, stumbles and catches herself. Perhaps she is more seriously wounded than she's been letting on?

Before we can call on our over-eager vanguard to hold their horses, Cuura moves up in front with Kendalan, probably getting ready to charge in and clear the way. Then - a grinding, violent sound. Two giant slabs of stone come crashing together between them and us, blocking off the corridor. To my dismay, Grimwald, too, following the horsewoman's lead, is trapped behind the barrier. The party is split.

Careful study of the design and markings on the barrier reveals two things. One, fortunately: this was not a trap. Cuura, Grimwald and Kendalan seem to be in no immediate threat of drowning, being possessed, poisoned, eaten, burned, frozen, magically or physically assaulted, turned to stone, dropped into a pit, exploded, or cast off into a faraway dimension where tentacled creatures with too many eyes and too many faces would try to consume their souls. Also, where they know nought of tea, nor elevensies.

Two, unfortunately: while not a trap, this barrier is virtually impenetrable. We speculate, and come to the conclusion this may in fact have been a safety mechanism of sorts! Maybe the warlord who rose against his master wanted to prevent his own underlings from from getting too close to (or with) each other? There is no honor amongst thieves, less so, one would think, amongst the would-be thieves of an empire.

Separated as we are, Reed, Efira, Nethander and I patch up the worst of our wounds and draw up a plan. The only way out seems to be back past the siege engines. I propose outwaiting them, as they are busy tearing each other apart, but Reed counters that the machines can take a lot of damage indeed before becoming disabled, and Nethander concurs that we ought to make some manner of haste if we are to become reunited with our fellow travellers. I can see their reason: it is going to take a while before the last bit of murderous equipment comes crashing down, and we don't know what the others are facing. Besides, I am in danger of being outvoted. Therefore, we decide to take our chances, moving through the debris one by one, hoping not to be 'seen' by these giant, semi-living rocks.

I have little trouble hiding my presence from the machines, and also manage to deftly avoid slipping in a pool of oil. Yet through the sound and the fury and, above all, the

smoke and the wreckage, I simply cannot find a clear path through all the debris. Our plan, as it turns out, is not without its flaws. Confused, I manage to step into some mysterious fluid that has started to leak from one of the machines, and before I can clean it off, my boots burst into flames, quite ruining my stealthy traversal of the battlefield. The automatons creak and swivel my way, and start firing.

With a deafening blast and a terrifying 'woosh', I am nearly hit by a cannon ball that comes screaming by. Suddenly, Reed comes running forth with an incredible burst of speed, and, grabbing me, makes her way to the staircase. Her fanaticism may not always be reasonable, but in terms of personal appreciation: the count is now 'saved from rampaging semi-sentient siege engines twice, nearly burnt to a crisp due to some weird nature-loving impulse, once. Moral judgments should not be made this way, but as I risk a glance back over my shoulder, I can see the spot where the cannon ball collapsed the better part of the inner wall. Imagining what it would have done to my head instead, I have to confess my opinion of Reed is once again on an upward trajectory.

Once everyone is safely out of reach of the war machines, we discuss where to go next. I propose returning to the room with the 'blood' pool. What if it starts to refill while we are away? Could it recharge or even resurrect in some way the evil creatures that challenged us here, and whom possessed Cuura? We need to neutralise this threat!

Fortunately the party agrees with me, or anyway, does not object. Once we get back to the room, I am confirmed in my suspicions, as the pool turns out to be slowly refilling from the bottom and sides up. I ask Reed, both out of curiosity and out of concern, what the nature of this substance is. I collected a vial of it, after all, to study - and potentially, to use in self-defense. Reed ponders my question, and tells me the pool was filled with an 'essence of hatred and control'.

I am intrigued by this, and frightened at the same time. Control I can understand; it is one way to bring order, and possibly a vial that contains the essence of this could be used, with predictable effects, in the defense against chaotic creatures. Yet \*hatred\* is a dangerous aberration of the normal. It is so often blind, and in fact wont to escape control, that I am uncomfortable wielding it as a weapon. And yet, this combination is a topic worthy of careful study. The emphasis being on 'careful' study. I would not want to find myself again in the clutches of a Pit Lord. I also do not want to find myself again in some sort of fight with Reed, so I decide to keep quiet about all of this, for now.

Suddenly, as we stand there, looking over the pool in silence, Reed, with her excellent hearing, notices something is off. Efir has disappeared; gone off, as it turns out, to explore the empty upper room by herself. Nethander and Reed storm up a makeshift rope ladder, and I too, climb up, with only moderate difficulty. A nasty battle ensues, in which her unseen assailants are exposed by a cloud of glitterdust, and yet still nearly manage to suffocate Efir before we can pull them off her. I manifest some mental

energies, erecting a wall of cold to cordon her off from most of her assailants. Yet while this keeps out most of these, for lack of a better term, evil air elementals, Nethander for some reason chooses to charge through my barrier, flourishing his sword, taking quite a bit damage, and looking both heroic and stupid for doing so. Once everything is said and done, Efira is saved, a bunch of alchemical equipment previously hidden by the elementals is discovered, and we all return to the pool. The pool, which is, indeed, still slowly refilling...

I ask Reed if she can counter the magic before it is fully reconstituted. She ponders this, answers me 'yes', and then simply sits down again, her black hair flowing over her shoulders. A serene image, perfectly still, I ponder how much she and her sister really look alike. Then, she starts a silent sort of crying. Tears flow, falling down, and the evil essence melts away. The pool stops refilling; then, it cracks. The blood no longer flows. The stone seems stilled, normal, simply dead.

Amazed, I ask her what she did to counter the magic that was flowing here, and she tells me it was indeed based on hatred and control, and that therefore, she gave it love and sadness in return. I take a mental note of this. To be able to use emotions and metaphysical concepts as instruments, to power or de-power such tools? This is wonderful! What knowledge of the inner workings of the universe can be gleaned from such a display? To be sure, all of this is not \*quite\* the same as my own way of seeing and, sometimes, revising reality. It may in fact be opposite. But, through her description, I feel empowered to experiment. I sense, here, a piece of the Puzzle. Perhaps I too should try to wield this as a key? I start by looking, again, for the secret door we know to be there. We find it, but there's no way to open it. Inspired now by Reed's explanation, I attempt to open it with my mind by temporarily assuming the mantle of evil. I consciously try to think the most hateful ideas I can conjure up - something terrible, I have to say, the inner thoughts of which I will not commit to this paper - as a sort of identification, a mental fingerprint or forgery, with which to open this dead lock.

As I do so, my mind starts to wander... drift... and I suddenly notice my hand moving as well, moving of its own accord to the flask with the sample I had collected earlier. I feel a desire to open the bottle... to... release it, maybe... even ingest... NO!

With a quick thrust of my mind, I cut off the impulse. I don't need to wonder what happened. I thought of hatred, and this... essence... tried to control me. Shaken, I carefully wrap the flask in a covering, tie it tightly together, and return it to my handy haversack.

The door has not opened; this way to us is closed.