

Norbert's Notes

Standing Strong (143)

In which we say 'oh no' to Onis

In which all of our carelessness catches up with us at once

More or less regrouped, we give each other the scoop on our most recent adventures; among them, ambush, possession, a pool of evil essence, invisible assassins, the weapons in the forge room; the infirmary of doom. Opinions on what terrible place to go next are divided, and even before we can make up our mind, we lose Cuura, who decides to test out the 'secret' door, as she steps through the portal using a piece of obsidian. Turns out the portal exits into the 'pool room' - not a great place to go by yourself.

She has no way to come back to us, except the long way around, back through to the armory and infirmary, so, without any other options, she will try that. We have a hard time deciding how we can best help her reach us. Reed, Nethander and Efirra want to head back to the armory to meet Cuura there, or perhaps, in the case of Nethander and Efirra, to plunder it. Kendalan flat-out refuses to head back to the haunted infirmary, fearing whatever lurks there, and I cannot blame him for it. As the debate drags on, and some of the already start retracing our steps, Grimwald decides that it would be best if we simply take the fight to our enemies, and provide for more options to boot, as this hallway is, after all, a dead end. In short: he starts digging a hole in the ground. This is a dwarf's instinct at work: when in doubt, tunnel down. Surprisingly, Kendalan helps him, and before I know it, the dwarf and the elf are tunneling down, together. Unsure if this 'providing options' of theirs is wise or not, as I deem it to apply equally to the enemies who are likely waiting for us below, I still decide to stay with them. For one thing, if Grimwald wants to make a hole in the ground, a hole in the ground he will make, and there will be no stopping him. I'd rather know up front whatever emerges from it than to have it put up a surprise appearance in my back as I'm off exploring some other room! Or perhaps you could simply say this is my instinct at work, then: when in doubt, wait it out. I take up a strategic position and keep an eye out for trouble.

After some time, it arrives, in the form of Reed and Nethander returning with Cuura.

They seem to have gotten rid of whatever was still left of the presence in the infirmary - although it did temporarily try to choose Cuura as a host. (What is with that barbarian woman? Is her mind so empty that those of inclination to possess one find it the most attractively spacious of their options?) Regardless, the damned thing had poor timing, trying to possess someone with Reed at her side; she quickly spotted the presence, and burned it out. I hope to Urogalan the Protector that this was 'Stitches', and that we've seen the last of him and his work.

It's time to move on, but we are spent. We decide to camp out around the hole, and recover a bit before venturing forth. Yet I forfeel - even though we are not going down yet, whatever is down there soon will surely come and visit us soon. Sure enough, before we can get the rest we need, it does. A drum starts beating, a terrible sound, and with a rumble and a growl, a trio of 'Onis' starts moving about through the hallway below. They try and fail to come up all at the same time, and, unable to

get past each other, start not only climbing but heaving each other up in order to do battle with us. I am not much of a tactician, but I recognise a superior position when I see one, and Efira and Kendalan stand ready to meet the apparently not-too-clever beasts with some confidence.

Our confidence soon starts to look like arrogance. As we wait for the first Oni head to pop up, and Efira brandishes her curving, too-long daggerswords, a strange rhythmic sounds, an unreal machine cadence, starts shaking the walls.

I am at a loss for its source, but Cuura recognises it, somehow, as 'metal marching on stone'. I don't know how she can tell, but she and Grimwald seems to concur: the armory itself has come alive!

I am furious at myself for not pushing the party harder to disable this threat earlier. Why did they not listen to me?

Why did we not melt those obviously evil weapons down when we had the chance? The answer lies, surely, in the fact that a dwarf's love of digging is only surpassed by his love for gold. Now, as we are being attacked from below by the Onis, Grimwald is suddenly under siege by his six feet long golden giantslayer trophy of a sword, Efira is impaled by a spear she took, and Nethander, too, screams out. I should have guessed: the Tiefling, too, has had a hard time listening to the angels of his better nature - of course he too has stolen something from the armory. Writhing in pain, his eyes opened wide in shock, a dagger, out of its own accord, is burying itself up to the hilt in his kidneys. Efira and I jump to his rescue, trying to get the damned thing out before it decides to head for his heart. It's already wriggled its way in way too deep, and we fail to get a grip on it. Nethander, panicking, gets it in his head that we're trying to kill him by pushing it in further. There is no time to calm him, if we are to save him however, and as he strikes out at us, since we cannot reach for it physically, I reach out mentally. With a careful but irresistible force pulling on the dagger, slowly drawing it out the same way it got in, a terribly deep hole is left in the bloodied Tiefling. As he slumps to the ground, some of the members of the party start working their healing magic. Efira seems ok; her spear broken and under control, and Grimwald seems to have managed to tame his giant sword by putting it into a bag of holding.

As some of us head back to meet the threat of the weapons, another offensive begins.

First, the Onis, then, the weapons, and now, shrieking and falling over themselves to get to us, yapping and snarling with their foul snouts, a veritable horde of kobolds, bursting out of one of the doors. I knew we should have investigated into them further after that first ambush! Why did they not listen to my careful advice? Now there is nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. We are being attacked from both sides of the corridor, as well as from below. But the kobolds at least, are foes my size, and I do believe I've proven I can handle them before! Let those masters of weapons and combat deal with the animated armory, and those of strength with the Onis. I will protect them and myself so they can do their job.

I manifest a wall of cold, blocking off the kobolds, keeping them away on their side of the corridor. They dare not pass through it, but start launching attacks at us by throwing each other over the wall.

Some of them even fly, clumsily, with mutant little wings. We take them out left and right, but even with my blockade, there's a lot of them - a LOT of them - to take care of, especially while we're split off from Grimwald and Nethander, who have set out for the weapon cache, and while the Onis are trying to make their way up at the same time.

The battle turns however as Efira, practically bathing in blood, and with her eyes glazed over, climbs on top of one the Onis, and starts stabbing it with her kukris. It swats at her, trying to get her off - and manages to bash its giant sword against its own skull. Seizing the opportunity, and more, Efira gets the creature in a headlock, and then, with a shove and a push and a grunt, in a most grotesque manoeuvre, simply twists off its ugly head, tossing it back down the hole at the other Onis.

Fountains of blood spurt out of the beast's neck, gushing over the floor. Our savage rides it for a few seconds more, before its body catches up to the recent separation of its head, keels over, and hits the floor with a violent thud. A moment of stunned silence follows. More chaos and more movement follows, but now generally into the other direction! The Onis, dumb but not stupid, decide to retreat, and we hear them running away through the corridor below.

The kobolds, shocked by Efira's show of strength, start jumping and flying and even running back straight through my energy wall - freezing, dropping dead, and sometimes, being launched right back at us again from the other side by their still-oblivious brothers.

From this point on, it's mostly a clean-up operation. As the battle subsides, our companions trail back to us and we all report. The fate of the infirmary patients and that of the weapons sudden life both become a lot clearer. Night by night, those 'patients' were reanimated by 'Stitches', only to be carved to pieces by the weapons, again, and again, and again, and again. The evil that animated these weapons by night seems to have been driven by some sort of spirit - one of the Wu Yen, no doubt - that had taken the form of a fire elemental - residing in a red-hot elemental crystal.

Grimwald refers to it, with great reverence, as 'the heart of the forge', but refuses to explain what happened to it or where it is now. I notice a new glow emanating from Draeni, however, and decide not to pursue the matter any further.

I was right on count of the weapons; and while it now would seem Reed was right on the 'patients', who seem to have benefited from her 'healing whisper', or whatever it was, to recover enough to fight their tormenters for us, coming to a final and understandably vengeful death... well. It is right that this should have happened, the tortured getting a chance to avenge themselves against their torturers, so I will not complain. Yet it was a dangerous decision she took, nonetheless, giving them a chance at life. What if those weapons had not come to fight them, as we did not know they would? What if those stitched up half-dead warriors, mad with a hundred years of anguish, would have risen up to simply fight against anything in their way? Would we have been facing them instead?

Well, it's done. Trapped and besieged on all sides - by animated weapons, by Onis, by a horde of kobolds to our front, Grimwald, who gave the Onis the opportunity to attack us in the first place, compliments us for 'standing strong'. I no longer think him possessed; I think him inane. Yes, we

stood our ground. If we hand't, we would've lain on it! And since I helped protect our savage brute, so she could slug it out with *their* savage brutes... I guess I myself too 'stood strong'.

A fine thing, that. But as my name is Norbert Tumblebrook, rather than standing strong, I would rather have stood somewhere else!