

Norbert's Notes  
**Wall of Fire (144)**

*In which light and shadow dance within*

I find it increasingly difficult to focus: my mind no longer wants to be in one place for too long, perhaps emulating my body, escaping one death trap after another. It is a good thing, then that for the moment, all enemies are fended off. Reed takes up first watch, and I finally get to get some sleep. Without hesitation, I close my eyes, and let myself fall through down past and through the common dreams...

*(and down, - elephants, dancing, the smell of porridge in the morning, dragons and devils and dead wizards... and my uncle Lobo... the headmaster's secret supply of ale, stashed away under the third drawer, only a few in the orphanage know of it... the smell of Cormyr's nights, rooftop wandering, listening in on whispers and sighs...)*

... into the subconscious layers of my psyche, below...

*(Tumblebrook! ... nature-lover! ... so much like your father... so much... you were... burnt by spider-apes... wrapped in a cocoons... eaten by trees... / Wellington! adventurer! so much like your mother... drink me they say; drink it... who goes and puts hatred in a bottle? who goes to visit the dead in their homes? who seeks danger out like that? never a true halfling... were you?)*

... and down and down and further still...

Below it all is the familiar blackness and silence I seek. Here, below, in the place without mind, where the first impulse of thought is yet unformed, at the root of my psyche, far away from the craving and thoughts and counter-thoughts and manipulations of the Id and the Ego, is my place to rest, and to restore my strength.

Yet... something is different. Out of the nothingness, a wordless song forms and surrounds me. It turns into a toneless humming, then, a sound without sound, then, fades away, and as I strain to listen, to catch the last of it, I suddenly see, far-away before me, the sound crystallised in a silhouette; outlined as stars against the dark of space. I drift closer, and closer still, until I recognise the figure to be me, or some reflection of me. Who else to find in my own mind, I would think, if I could think, but I can only see -

the other-me's eyes are closed, as if in meditation. His arms; outstretched. And in his open palms, he holds up one orb of shadow and one of light. Each is growing and shrinking, tipping the scales ever so slightly, shifting the other-me's arms, before it diminishes again, and on, and on, and on, in a precarious dance of balance. I will myself closer still, and suddenly see through the light and the shadow, recognising the orbs in his palms for what they are: not orbs, but smaller figures of me, each holding the same position, and each also balancing, with arms outstretched, little figures of light and darkness of their own. And as these smaller versions still, balance tiny souls of their own, and so on, moving, and balancing, ad infinitum, I throw my gaze into the depths, trying to see how the balance

is kept and where it all ends... and a million million eyes times two all open at once and stare back at and into me.

I sit up, shaking and shivering. My feet slip, my hands can get no grip on my bedroll or staff. And yet, my mind is whole and unbroken. What did I just experience? Was this a vision?

Nobody seems to notice my confusion: many disturbances have kept my companions busy through the night.

Desperate to share my experience, I reach out to Watson. He reports in, briskly and with some disdain for me having 'slept through all the action.' If only he knew! But my adventurer spirit has no time to listen or contemplate. He boasts that while Efira and Nethander had been at first watch, it was \*he\* who had spotted the enemy first, and, while admittedly ignored by the jungle woman, had tried to warn everybody... and he drones on. Long story, short: Reed took care of everything as she ashed the Onis downstairs, throwing up a wall of fire.

Soon enough, everyone is awake, and as we set off, I too find myself back into the land of stone and mortar.

Grimwald is drilling through a wall with his adamantite pickaxe. He enters the hole, and is nearly frozen and robbed of life by some sort of negative plane material - 'salt'. We pull him back to safety. Far away in the distance, a faint glowing spot is visible. It is only with Kendalan's exceptional sight that we recognise it for what it is: a Phoenix in a cage! A being of light... or of fire, at least, balanced by the darkness of a negative plain. It reminds me of my own... vision... this night? I reach inside myself and assist Kendalan in his shot, willing the ambient light to focus on the spot itself, to be magnified...

With a <zwish!> the arrow hits home, striking through the bars of its cage without hurting the firebird. We pull back the arrow-cum-rope, and I warn everyone to keep their distance, as the power of the Phoenix, now unopposed, allows it to be reborn in a flash of elemental fire. Freed, it thanks us, and flies off.

We proceed, and get into another fight.

Thinking to flush out a host of kobolds, we handly a door without enough care, set off a trap, then are ambushed by some sort of shapeshifter, slushing its way through the dreck and the filth, and moving from floor to ceiling. This is the one who had eaten the kobolds I had slain, only to reform them again: an evil being without order or substance of its own. While a nasty battle, this is another fight won - and with a strange twist: Cuura's mind is suddenly sharpened, as she delivers the killing blow. I see her light up. Perhaps she will be taking less hasty decisions from now on, and discuss things with her allies before breaking down any doors? Well, one can hope. But as interesting as this development is - I must remember to engage her in serious discussion soon - even more fascinating is the talk that Reed and Grimwald were having on the creature's otherworldy origins. I question them and press them on - talk of planes and demiplanes and ways beyond these, outside of the concept of

reality, outside of Ao, something... 'Far Realms', they say, but Efira implores us, shaking, to stop our discussion at the merest mention of the Yuan-ti, who seem to be somehow related to it.

I am intrigued. These are, in the end, the fundamentals of reality, the pieces of the puzzle that holds up all the other puzzles. If one is to hope to bring some measure of order and stability to the world, to make the pieces fit together as they should, one should start by getting to know what the puzzle looks like.