

## Norbert's Notes

### **Planning and Execution (145)**

*In which those who forget this world while contemplating others  
(nearly) find themselves leave it*

My head is still swimming. Who would have thought that Reed and Grimwald would prove to be repositories of such knowledge? For these adventurers to be the ones to teach me? And there is so much still to learn! These glimpses they are offering me, glimpses into the nature of the universe! Although - from what they say, some parts of it seem almost... beyond knowing. Reed called the 'Far Realm' 'more chaotic than limbo, completely hostile to life', and 'opposed' somehow to the reality of the planes. We think on what is and encompasses all of reality, and recall how Ao, the Overgod walked amongst mortals, in the Time of Troubles... an ungraspable entity, slipping from the mind almost as soon as he is considered. And what did he, or it, represent? What is opposed by the madness of these Far Realms?

We speculate and philosophise, chasing the truth through consideration of eternal concepts. He must be Order, offers one of us, but I say no, not Order, as he represents all, including chaos; Reed offers 'Time', and I offer 'Existence'... and so on, For the first time on this forsaken adventure, I actually, truly am enjoying myself. For a moment I forget where I am, in a deathtrap-filled castle in a strange land, half a world away from Cormyr and from home, on a mission for a devil.

'But... how do you know all this?' I ask. And then, they fall silent. Grimwald looks away, shaking his bearded head, and Reed looks at me strangely; telling me she made a promise, and that she cannot tell how she came to know these things. I try to insist, asking her that she at least tell me all she can - and she promises that yes, once we get out of this place, she will tell what she can - but no more than that. Well. It is something I will have to settle for, for now. But this cannot be the end of it.

As I look up from our metaphysical discussion, Efira and Cuura are suddenly missing. Nethander informs us that Efira has jumped clean out of the tower, obviously without consulting anyone, because she heard her monstrous mount braying down below. Not to be outdone in brazen, unthinking rashness, and shouting that she will not let an ally stand alone, so has Cuura.

Splitting up like this, dividing our strength - I don't like it. But with both of our barbarian ladies temporarily out of the way, and only Nethander left to act on his impulses, at least things look like they will slightly more predictable. And as we find ourselves face to face with another door, I decide to get back to business.

The planes... no. The door. It seems to have been boobytrapped, possibly by the kobolds, but it's an easy door to open, and an easy trap to disarm. I'm still not really here, with my mind dwelling on the nature of reality, but I've seen enough to tell my companions with confidence that 'it's just a heavy log that will drop on your head if they're not careful about what they are doing. Nothing too complicated, though it would hurt. 'Just another reason to

always check a door carefully before you try to open it!

I toy with the mechanism a bit, then lock a bar into place. Done.

Grimwald marches up, armour chinking, and, as ever, goes in first. With the first creak of the door, there is a sound of tinkling and cracking and crystal popping. Some of us have the split-second reflexes to make a run for it, some - Grimwald, of course - can only stand firm. I press against the wall, making myself as small as I can. But this trap is undodgable: a billowing cloud of poisons fills the hallway, floor to ceiling. Cursing myself, I try to run, but my legs seize up and fall away from under me. Choking and grabbing at my throat, all my muscles cramp and are sapped of their power. I feel even my heart begin to slow. Is this the end, then? Dead like an adventurer adventuring, too eager to explore the next room. From the corner of my eye, I see Reed too collapse to the ground.

After a moment's hesitation, an armoured hand grabs me by my vest, and Grimwald slings me over his shoulder, carrying me out of danger. In a blur, Draeni charges past and drags Reed out and away from the poisonous vapours too. Nethander and Kendalan quickly approach, weaving some magic over me, telling me not to panic, and then, everything goes black, and white, and grey. Half-conscious from the pain and the shock, I find myself covered in some sort of sticky silken substance. But it's not a spider's web - I would trust the elf not to make my plight worse. These threads are less tightly wound, and I can wiggle and move around a bit. As I do, I feel all the bad stuff drawn from my body. As if I was reborn. I burst from the cocoon, ravenously hungry, and Kendalan quickly offers me some food from his backpack.

Nethander, meanwhile, helps out Reed, giving her a magical belt to enhance her strength; something that will allow her to carry herself around, at least, if not swing a weapon with any chance of success. And though he does not ask anything in return, Reed gives him the cord she was wearing instead. Grimwald seems shocked, for some reason; I cannot fathom why. Perhaps he is thinking of how this could have happened to him, instead, losing his strength and vitality to that poison cloud, but... no... he doesn't seem like him to worry about personal safety. Maybe he's blaming himself for what happened?

Truth be told, *I* am supposed to be the skilled investigator here. *If* I had taken proper care, I could even have looked through the door, and saw the poison vials waiting for us. I am the one to blame, having my head up in the clouds, not being in the here and now when it mattered! I turn to Grimwald, to offer my thoughts and apologies, when suddenly, a voice booms through the hallway.

‘Silence!’ , it cries out, ‘You are disturbing my studies!’ .

There is no one around. But by the sound of the voice alone, drier and dustier than any human’s, we conclude that it must be a lich. This next Wu Yen to face must have spent his many hundreds of moons trapped here in this keep gaining ever more knowledge in his undeath.

Since Efir and Cuura aren't here, we take some time to plan and strategise. Chastened by my previous lack of care, with a door trapped by lowly kobolds, I propose to stop and consider all the possible things that can go wrong with meeting a lich on its own territory. In other things – to finally start doing things the right way! And the party agrees. Well - sort of. The undead wizard must have had decades of planning, setting traps within traps, and preparing for contingencies, and we? We take only ten minutes to go over our situation.

But ah, at least we plan! I make it my mission to spot the traps, and most importantly, seek out its phylactery, if I can, while the others should engage with the lich more directly.

We approach in silence, so as not to disturb and anger it before time. But as soon as we enter his sanctum, Nethander starts with flattery - 'oh learned wizard, we have come here to learn from you, oh you wise lich, your knowledge is renowned through all the lands', and those sorts of things, which is poorly received. The lich, seeing through it, starts to rise in anger, his hands moving to cast some terrible spell... when suddenly, Reed launches off into a monologue on the arcane, gingerly pointing out various interesting items in the lich's study.

'Six fingers... major helm... how to fuel it... travel to many primes... through the quantum lattice of our world shell... substance of the ether...'

The lich, no doubt as impressed with her knowledge on the nature of reality as I am, and happy to find a partner worthy of scholarly discussion, throws himself into it entirely.

I wish I had the time to take notes! But alas, no – the here and now must now be carefully considered. Let me not be like this lich, caught up solely in arcane studies when threatened from all sides. Or like myself, with my mind dwelling on the nature of reality, declaring a door safe, only to nearly die an infamous death adventuring.

So as Reed engages the undead wizard in conversation, we start a careful game of exploration. Grimwald spots the marks of diamond dust, ruby dust and more – and we sketch out the various wards that would protect the lich from any assailants; I start spotting traps, and, shifting my perspective, notice something odd about the window. It isn't where it is... or, where it is supposed to be?

It is a plan well executed. We best the lich at his own game, seeing through his decoys, and with some assistance from Draeni, find and destroy his phylactery. At the same time, everyone who can starts attacking him, from a distance, so as not to set off the many wards. It works quiet well, except for poor Grimwald, who decides to charge his opponent head-on.

When the dust settles, the lich, despite all his planning, is dead – truly dead. And our dwarf, strong, dependable, uncomplicated, unthinking Grimwald, is mad. Well, a bit. He stumbles, he sits down, and he starts mumbling to himself. Even as we clean out the floor, disarming the traps as we can, and marking them where we cannot, he sits there, dejected and passive. A veritable treasure trove of arcane goods emerges from the lich's cleverly trapped armoire, yet he has no eye for them. After we are done liberating these objects of art and study, I come back to the dwarf.

I decide to try to talk some sense into him, and to see, if I can, what damage his fight with this lich has done to his mind. But he will have none of it, telling me to go, to keep my distance, that he cannot trust himself not to harm his companions. He, who only an hour ago saved me from my own foolish lack of planning. As he starts a ritual of prayer, I make it appear as if I leave with the others, sneaking back to keep an unseen watch over him.