

Journal 13 - Tristram, in the Demon Shadow

We checked the dead hounds and found they too had the Rararoo infection, passed on to their prey when they bite them.

When asked, Morianna explained about what she called her 'primal form'; it was an instinctive thing, her shapeshifting out of her conscious control and concentrating on survival; fight or flight were the only real options available in that state. Very interesting but no doubt rife with many potential and hidden dangers.

We continued on, moving from the grassland into the rocky wasteland around the mountains. We kept to the various gullies to avoid being seen, and Victor's hawks were put to good use as scouts, looking for airborne demons and any large earthbound ones as well.

After a time they returned with reports of dog packs guided by handlers of some form; man-shaped creatures with red and glistening skin.

At dusk we checked our wounds again to find them covered in scabs almost entirely covered in the infection. I had it worse, because of my leg wound. Morianna said she could do something for me in that respect, but that it required her to enter my mind to do so. Since I had been limping most of the day and slowing us down, I was tempted, but since I had been told of the dangers involved with such mental contacts I was wary of initiating one.

Morianna assured me she would not do any prying if she was allowed to help me, and considering our situation I finally agreed. So she laid her hands on my leg and went into some form of deep trance. I could feel the touch of her mind against mine, and before long my leg began to tingle.

A few minutes later it really began to itch and then, right before my eyes, the area of my leg around the wound rippled like water and a portion of flesh about the size of my hand just slid off my leg into the dust, where it quivered and lay still. The area from which it had come glowed with health, and I could almost see the new skin settling in place. It was uncanny, and more than a little daunting.

I stood up to try my healed leg out and found my sword slipped down a little. As far as I could determine, I had gained flesh in my leg to replace the lost tissue at the expense of losing flesh from elsewhere. I needed to lose weight anyway.

Suddenly something else called for attention. I found I was very, very hungry. I ended up hurriedly consuming three self-heating food bags, and promptly fell fast asleep.

The next morning I felt much better, though my leg remained sore for a few hours. Morianna performed the same trick on Bernard, and he seemed much less concerned about it than I had.

We continued on, with the hawks out scouting again. At close to midday they brought warning of a dog pack close by, accompanied by two handlers. We ducked into a gully just ahead, and prepared to fight.

Fortunately they passed us by, so we continued on when we were sure they had passed out of view and earshot. Hopefully the hounds were not good trackers.

Spotting smoke in the distance a few hours later, the hawks informed us that some hounds and their handlers had destroyed a caravan, and were now resting around it. We continued on once more.

The next thing we had to avoid was a small group of the larger winged demons around a campfire. By the smell of it they were cooking human flesh. The hawks also reported that a flock of smaller demons was approaching the area. Before we could consider any plans involving avoidance or attack, Victor decided it for us.

He just jumped up and charged right at them, leaving Zatharuss and I to follow behind, casting off our packs. By the time we got there Victor had already dropped one and was working on his second. Zatharuss leapt over the fire at the third and I engaged the last. The cut I made at his head turned out to be rather ineffective, so he made an underpowered strike at my neck that just (just!) broke my collarbone. Fortunately I stopped any further damage by thrusting him in the heart, or at least I hoped so. Whatever I hit, it did the trick and he dropped.

Once again I was subject to medical attention, and once again Morianna convinced me to allow her to fix my wound again. This time I did not lose anything; rather a sudden feeling of euphoria heralded a sharp crack as my collarbone righted itself. Not exactly a thrilling experience, nor one I would wish to repeat. The same, of course, could be said for being wounded, so I probably had little real choice in the matter.

We eventually neared the mountains, with the demon-infested castle about halfway up the side of the nearest. It was a thing of high walls, intended as a fortification rather than just a building, with several smaller towers surrounding a larger central one. In other circumstances it would have just looked formidable, but knowing who/what occupied it made forbidding instead.

We had to work hard to avoid being spotted by the increasing numbers of demon flocks that were patrolling the area. I suppose that the loss of some of their number had put them on a war footing, so to speak. At Zatharuss' suggestion the hawks were used to draw groups of them away from where we were, though at one point we almost lost one when we were forced to move away from where we had said we would be.

The day before we entered the mountains proper, we took our rest in a cave so we could eat and have a defensive position if necessary; we had been all but followed for an hour or so by a flock of small demons. But we found we were not alone; a recovered though drug-addled Tim was slumped in the back on a few thick blankets. He said he had only really just finished healing up from the wounds he took on the way to Rebma, and that Dworkin had brought him here to help us for a little while, 'between jobs'. Morianna took a look at him while she filled him on what we had done in this place so far.

Our plan involving the demon swarm following us was fairly simple; we would somehow attract their attention for sure and then destroy them. A plan with Victor-like simplicity. The only problem was how to do it and live. Tim offered a suggestion; he would give us magical aid, reducing our difficulties rather helpfully.

So we sat about eating for an hour or so as Tim quietly mumbled to himself, 'formulating and racking some spells', according to him. Even if he did sound like a mad old drunkard.

Once he was ready, we moved to the cave mouth and watched as Victor jumped up and down shouting at the flock overhead, throwing quite large rocks at the wall of the cliff the cave was in. Unsurprisingly they responded quickly, diving on him like a great swarm of dog-sized bees. They were met with a sudden massive burst of light from the rather unsteady Tim, promptly followed by another. The light practically burnt the skin right off the front ranks of demons but only stunned the back ranks. The majority fell twitching to the rocky ground and perished, while the rest just quivered where they fell, at least until we killed them.

We elected to quickly move on, but Tim stayed behind saying he needed the rest; Dworkin would come to fetch him soon enough.

By the time we actually approached the base of the mountain, Victor and Morianna had already made several comments about the similarity of the place; it closely resembled Amber's Mount Kolvir, with the castle halfway up the mountain and a city around part of the base.

With reports from the hawks it transpire that there were three ways up; a zigzag road up the north face, an older route up the west side, and, of course, climbing the whole way up. Climbing was just too difficult, as none of us had any real climbing experience of the sort required. The north road left us too exposed. So we decided to try the old west road.

The hawks reported that three lower roads joined together further up to become the west road, so we trekked through gullies to the nearest and camped in the lee of the road for the night.

In the morning, before the sun was even visible, we began to make our way up the road, keeping to the shadows as much as possible. It was wide, probably intended for caravans and wagons.

A few hours later we found the way was barred by some sort of barricade, just around a corner. The road was bordered on both sides by rocky inclines; a natural ambush site. A heavy pole ran across the road between two small structures about the size of a large wardrobe. Small gaps could be seen in the structures, facing down the road towards any traveller approaching the castle.

I (stupidly perhaps) approached them to talk and was greeted by a hail of arrows that I barely dodged. They came from the gaps in the wardrobes ahead. Our journey temporarily interrupted, we stopped to plan.

Eventually Morianna agreed to Victor's suggestion to use her shapeshifting to fly us past the barricade. Going further around the corner to undress (otherwise she would destroy her clothes) she came back as a winged, human-like creature similar to a large gargoyle. We wrapped Bernard up in a blanket for Morianna to carry him across, after which she returned for each of us. She could only carry one of us at a time, plus packs, though she had to strain a little with Victor.

Out of sight of the guard boxes, Morianna changed back again and we continued on once more, stopping at midday in what was more an overhang of rock than a cave. There we stayed until dusk, at which point we proceeded up the road.

No sooner had we started than Victor suddenly leapt to the side behind a rocky outcrop. He returned with a couple of extra small cuts and a bloody gauntlet. Taking a look we saw what he had killed; it was a small, wiry, dog-headed creature. At least I presume it was its head; it was no longer attached to its body. It was smelly, and showed the taint of the Rararoo infection in several places.

Then it was Morianna's turn to abandon us; she threw off her pack and sprinted ahead at a remarkable pace, Victor following after at a much slower pace. Zatharuss and I remained where we were. After a minute or so Victor came back and picked up Morianna's pack, saying she would rejoin us soon. He gave no explanation, and since they knew each other the longest I did not question him. We moved ahead.

True enough, Morianna came back to us after about a quarter hour. She too gave no explanation.

Once again we were forced to seek cover when a group of perhaps three hundred almost naked, bat-winged demon women passed overhead. By the way they flew and looked about them, they were on patrol.

We stopped in another handy cave close to dawn, to eat and rest till midday. I caught a few hours sleep before I was awakened by the rather distinctive tones of Dworkin. He asked for the rings we had taken with us to Amber (Victor had Joe's) and proceeded to mumble vaguely over them. He was adding some spells to them, a dozen flash spells (or no doubt Flash spells) we could activate just by thinking a command phrase while pointing them at our intended targets. The command phrase, of course, was typically singular, and unrepeatable in polite society.

Unfortunately for him Zatharuss did not fully understand, so we were treated to a demonstration. Zatharuss did not wake for at least five minutes after the stunning light hit him right between the eyes. Dworkin gave Victor a spare ring for Zatharuss for when he awoke, then left us in his usual way, though a wall (or so it seemed).

At midday we all ate again, and continued afterwards. Avoiding all the patrols we encountered, it took us a little over two hours to reach a point from which we could see the castle. The ridge was about level with the top of the walls, and we could just see the north entrance from where we lay. We could easily see the west entrance. Both massive gates were heavily guarded by more than twenty huge, muscular creatures that looked like inflated men in torn armour, each wielding a giant sword one-handed. There were no actual guards on the walls; they were probably too confident. Each gate was reached by way of a drawbridge that ran over the foul, no doubt demon-infested moat.

We weighed our options. We could charge the demons guarding the nearest gate, but then we would still have to fight the whole castle. We could, however, sneak in by having Morianna fly up to the walls and drop a rope for us to climb. Or perhaps she could carry us up, like she did at the barricade the previous day.

We decided to wait until dusk before we acted.