

Journal 12 - Tristram, in the Demon Shadow

Returning downstairs I found the others were ready. I was handed a small bag of universal gold coins, milled around the edges but with blank faces, which I was to pay for things with. No barkeep or banker I knew would accept them, so I suppose we had to rely on their basic value as gold.

Corwin waited for a time and then he nodded, as if to himself; then another of those black portals appeared and Morianna (accompanied by Bernard), Victor and myself passed through.

We appeared at the point where a plain met a forest. It was dusk, and there was a faint drizzle of rain in the air.

Victor led us through Shadow for a short time and soon found ourselves on a cobbled road in the mid-afternoon. Just up the road few hundred yards was a typical roadside tavern, except this one was apparently deserted, for this time of day; no horses, coaches or wagons were in evidence in the courtyard behind it.

Going inside, we found only the owner was present; he had no customers. He was a slightly rounded gentleman, with thinning pale hair and a worried expression. We heard someone in the kitchen; his wife, or so he said. He seemed surprised to see us, as everyone else had moved out of this part of Tristram (presumably the country we were now in) to escape the demons. He then told the basic story; long ago a king had been possessed by evil and opened a gate to Hell in the catacombs below his castle. This released hordes of demons on the area. Eventually a mighty warrior had defeated him and closed the gate, becoming the new king by default. His descendants have ruled since.

Recently the gate had opened once more, loosing demons again and causing the current king, his family and everyone in the castle to flee.

He then told us three men were upstairs in the common room. They had tried to reach the castle in order to duplicate the legendary warrior's feat. However, they only just made it back, and one had died since. The other two were in various states of ill health.

We went up to see them. The dead one, crudely wrapped in cloth, was now accompanied by the second, who had died in the night. The third, according to Morianna, was in a very bad way and would probably not last the day. They had both taken a large number of injuries that looked as if they had been inflicted by both the claws of beasts and by man-made weapons.

Morianna crouched for a while over the dying man, holding his head in her hands and concentrating in some task. After a few minutes she stepped back from him and gave a basic report of what had happened to them.

They had approached the castle, moving by night. But before they could begin to make their way up the steep mountain pass to the castle itself they had been discovered by a patrol of small and large demons. They were forced to flee, but not before taking many grievous wounds. They barely made it back to the tavern, and the first dead man had died just minutes after they did. They had all been slowly succumbing to some sort of poison, or so our dying witness thought.

I do not know how, but I got a feeling of what I can only describe as Power from the recently deceased adventurer. It was similar to the buzz of energy I felt when I first beheld the Pattern, only on a much smaller scale. It appeared to be coming from the large wound in his left side. When I got a closer look, probing with a knife Morianna lent to me, I saw it was badly infected, putrescent and foetid smelling, far worse than any gangrene I have ever had the misfortune to behold. The feeling seemed to come most strongly from this infection.

I was forced in the end to touch it to get a better feeling of the stuff. I found myself mirroring Morianna's previous concentrated pose as I focused my mind on the gangrene. It was a similar level of concentration as I used on the lock in the mansion where Andreas and I had taken Julie from. It took some time, but I got a better feel of the power present in it.

The gangrene was magical in nature, probably demonic; some sort of poison used by the demonic invaders? When I had finished, I washed my hands thoroughly in hot and soapy water before using what Morianna called an 'antiseptic spray' from the first aid kit. The infection had somehow begun to grow on me.

We returned downstairs to talk to the owner again. He told us the infection was a poison called something to the effect of 'Rararoo'. According to the legend, it came from a plant formed from the blood of a demon that had been sacrificed to open the original Hellgate. The plant came in two forms; each grew berries, one white and one black. Mixed together the berries created the Rararoo poison; either by itself could cure the infection.

The Rararoo plant could, apparently, only be found in the vicinity of the castle, or only inside it; the owner was not sure.

He then told us we were free to make use of his tavern as he was leaving tomorrow morning, just after dawn; everything he wanted to keep was already packed into his wagon in the stables, so the rest was ours.

We ate the fine if simple meal the tavern owner's chubby wife cooked for us, then rested for a few hours before retiring to our rooms for the night.

Disturbing noises occasionally broke the quiet of the night; flapping, scratches and the calls of some sort of hunting bird. Or so I hoped.

The tavern owner woke us in the morning just before he left. We wished them luck as they moved off, and then Victor set about cooking breakfast.

While we were eating Morianna thought she heard a strange noise, and went outside to investigate. She was at that moment jumped on by a small, grey, winged creature about three feet tall. Scrabbling for my sword I leapt up and headed for the door. By the time I got there she had thrown it off and it had flown up into the air and was swooping down for another attack. Victor, being in the kitchen at the time, missed the whole thing.

It was of human proportions, though small, with bat-like wings springing from its shoulders. Its hands and feet were clawed and it had a face like that of a fanged gargoyle. It was aiming itself at Morianna, so I stood behind her in case she missed it. She did not miss it though; she split it into two halves. I found myself engulfed in what could be described as 'cold fire'; it might have been the demon's blood. It did not burn me; it just chilled me to the bone.

We recovered from that encounter with a glass or two of fine wine from the cellar. Morianna was unharmed; her armour had saved her from injury.

An hour after breakfast, when the sunlight had brightened further, we heard the sounds of a horse outside, coming from up the road. After a time it went quiet, then we heard hoof-beats in the courtyard. Morianna went through the tavern while I went out the front and around the side, through the courtyard gate.

There we saw a man tying up his horse in one of the stalls in the stable. He was about my height, with very short, black hair, an athletic build and wore some sort of ringmail armour, painted or enamelled black. He carried two shortswords, a collection of small knives and wore a hat.

I greeted him, and he said he was just a traveller seeking good cooked food. I invited him to partake of ours (what was left of it; Victor had eaten most of it) and he joined us inside the tavern.

Foolish? I prefer to think of it as limiting his options if he attacked us. A man eating hot food at a table must get past his chair and table before he can reach his foes. Hopefully.

He told us he had encountered the tavern owner (who he called Odgen) on his way south, and that he had told our guest we were here. Victor went into the kitchen with him, to show him where everything was.

It was not long, however, before Victor called us both into the kitchen; our guest had the Rararoo infection. I presume he had felt its magical presence the same way I had. We both had a look at the infected wound, a small pair of scratches on his hip, and then Morianna got out her first aid kit and saw to removing it. We did not know how effective it would be.

I returned to the main room, leaving them to see to our guest. I noticed Bernard at the door, hackles up and growling quietly. I looked out the window to see what had disturbed him and saw a group of perhaps half a dozen, red, man-sized creatures flying over the tavern. I called the others in to see them, and we watched them fly around the area and then land close by. We stayed concealed in the tavern in the hope that they might pass by.

I would suppose they smelt our guest's horse and headed our way. Just as one reached the door and scratched on it like a dog, Victor charged it, cannoning the door off its hinges and trapping the demon underneath it. Bernard leapt through a window, with our guest following soon after. First Morianna then I went through the now empty doorway.

Bernard was already mauling one demon off to the right, so I lunged at the demon closest to it. It was holding the upper half of the winged demon Morianna had killed earlier, and so was easily despatched by a thrust, followed by decapitation. It too produced a burst of flame like the first. Morianna finished off the one under the door, Victor broke one with his bare hands, and our guest and Bernard dealt with the last.

We left the corpses where they had fallen and returned inside. Cleaning off his swords our guest, probably deciding that, since we had fought off the demons beside him, we were to be trusted (at least a little), decided to introduce himself as one Zatharuss Jones, traveller and mercenary. We introduced ourselves also, and he asked if we were going to the demon's castle. We eventually admitted that we were, and he offered the services of his blades for equal share of whatever things of wealth we found there.

Since any help is useful, we accepted.

We told him a little of what we knew, primarily just the legend and about the Rararoo poison. He then told us it was at least a four-day forced march to the castle; we could use his horses to carry our gear.

Victor then left us, saying he would be back soon.

The next few hours of boredom were only interrupted by Bernard bringing in a strange creature from outside. It was like a spider, only the body was about a foot long and it had ten legs. It also had one big eye. When I examined it more closely, I felt the same emanations from it as I did from the Rararoo infection. We killed it and threw its body out with those of the other demons.

Eventually Victor returned, leading a cart pulled by two horses, or something very similar to horses; they had silvery manes and their hooves were cloven, like those of a goat. Obviously he had fetched them from some nearby Shadow.

We packed up our gear and distributed food from the tavern between them. We took the two 'horses' off the cart harness for Victor and I to ride, while Zatharuss rode his horse and Morianna rode the last surviving horse that had belonged to the dead adventurers in the common room. Our plan was to approach the castle from the direction of the mountain range it was situated in, so we would circle around the castle in a huge arc until we reached the foothills.

We travelled for the rest of that day, stopping just before dusk to set up camp. At this juncture I discovered what the silvery bags in our packs were for. They contained food, and were sealed until a strip was pulled across the top, opening the bag and activating some mechanism that acted to heat the food within. The contents of each bag was written on a label attached to the heating-strip.

We talked for a time over our varied meals, and over the course of that conversation it became clear that Zatharuss was familiar with the idea of there being many worlds. Indeed, he had travelled to some of them. When faced with too many unfamiliar terms he turned to a ring on his left hand for guidance. Surprisingly, he was not mad, for the ring answered his questions in a quiet voice I could only just hear.

Of course, he could still be mad; he could have been responsible for the voice. But, by the responses he gave to us after consulting the ring, he was either getting information out of the ring or he already knew about what we had told him, and was just putting on an act to convince us he knew nothing himself. For the moment I assumed it was the former.

In fact, it appeared to be the ring that was responsible for moving him between the worlds, somehow drawing him to and through 'shadow gates' (or perhaps 'Shadow gates'?) into those other worlds.

Eventually it came to the time to explain the supposed origin of the worlds called Shadow. I decided that I would give it a try, and gave him the very basic description Andreas had given me on our first meeting. My attempts to make sense of it as I went along only served to confuse him more, so Morianna took over. And then, as if he was not confused enough, Dworkin put in a sudden appearance and gave his more than slightly complicated version.

I do not think Zatharuss' view of the universe was any clearer than it was before we started, but at least he was aware of the terminology we were bound to end up using eventually. Fortunately Dworkin left before he gave Zatharuss (or any of us) any more headaches.

We held watches over the night, about four hours apiece. The sounds I had heard the previous night were still in evidence, only louder and no doubt nearer. In the early morning Victor left us again to make a foray into Shadow; he returned soon enough carrying four bags each the size of a man, made of some padded material (they are sleeping bags, for keeping warm), and a few large portions of beef and a couple of bottles of red wine.

Just as we had started on our way again we spotted a large grey cloud in the distance, flying just on the horizon. It was probably a really large group of the smaller winged demons we had encountered at the tavern. Deciding we would travel more easily concealed without our horses, we distributed the packs and supplies between us and sent them on their way, dragging their saddles to create as much attention as possible. As for us, we could always dodge 'sideways' into a close Shadow.

We continued on, and it was decided to explain our purpose here to Zatharuss. He seemed a little confused, but then it made little real sense to me either. He appeared content with our intentions, and was unconcerned as long as he got his share of any treasures we found.

After a few hours the swarm of demons moved out of sight and we continued on.

Suddenly we spotted them coming in low over the gnarled forest of to our side, perhaps twenty minutes away. We carefully made our way deeper into the waist-high grass alongside us and squatted down to avoid being seen. The swarm moved overhead in a vast blurring of wing-beats and were soon far away. We continued once we were sure it was safe to do so.

By late afternoon the air had begun to gain a faintly sulphurous taint to it. We came to a decision; we would stop and eat now, rest until after dusk and then continue on through the night. So we sat down in the long grass and broke out a food bag each (Morianna gave one to Zatharuss).

I had only just finished when I began to get a feeling of unease, as if someone was staring at the middle of my back. By the way the others were acting, they felt it too. Then Morianna quietly murmured she could hear lots of things around us, hiding in the grass.

Before I could learn more I was bowled over by a huge weight throwing itself on me. I rolled into a half-crouch to find myself confronting a huge dog, more brutal-looking than Bernard, with far more predator teeth than any natural creature should possess. This was clearly a beast intended for killing. It growled at me so I thrust deep into its chest with my now-ready sword.

The next thing I knew another devil hound had bitten deep into my leg. It hurt like Hell, but I swung my sword at its thickly muscled neck and all but decapitated it. I recovered in time to notice two more of them about to leap at me, so I just threw myself to the side with all that remained of my strength.

It turned out to be quite a bit, as I found I had moved about twice as far as I had expected. The family strengths run true, obviously. While the two hounds recovered from their surprise I had enough time to recover from mine and make ready. The first to reach me died in a single swing that split it in half; the second took a lighter slash and a deep thrust before it was ended.

I looked around in time to see yet another coming at me, but its charge was halted by a rushing, four-legged blur that could only have been Bernard.

There was a brief lull in the fighting around me, and I noticed that we were being assaulted by enough of the hounds to outnumber us by at least five or six to one. I could hear some sort of massive struggle occurring to my right; I presumed it was Victor.

Just then I saw Zatharuss through the grass, holding the hounds at bay with quick slashes from his swords. I moved over to join him, and we fought off the last few dogs back to back. As far as I could tell the last were already wounded; when I looked to see where they had come from I saw an explosion of movement off to one side. The grass rippled like it was in a strong wind, and in the centre of it was a strange creature.

It appeared to be an amalgam of a number of beasts and even seemed to be mineral in nature at times. Its form changed rapidly, twisting into new shapes to face each dog that jumped at it with an appropriate defence. Sometimes it engaged two or three at once. Each hound was dispatched with apparent ease, some torn apart from within by chitinous blades that thrust deeply into their bodies. Only those wounded at the peripheries of the fight survived long enough to seek weaker foes.

With our collection of hounds defeated I decided it was time to rest, and collapsed on to a fine bed of flattened grass. Other than the big bite in my leg I had sustained a few small wounds, mostly just scratches and nips. Zatharuss had similar wounds and I noticed his were starting to go green as they became infected with the Rararoo venom. Mine too were tainted.

Dragging out my first aid kit I applied antiseptic on his wounds in an attempt to kill the infection, followed by bandages. Then I directed him to do the same for me.

Before Zatharuss had finished on me Victor joined us, wounded like the two of us. He then told us that the beast-thing that had torn the hounds to pieces was in fact Morianna. I looked at him as if he were a madman, and he went on to explain that he had seen something like it before. The last time he saw it the person who had done it was a shapeshifter, so Morianna must be one too. When she returned to normal she would be hungry and very tired.

We tended to his wounds and before long the strangely altered form of Morianna dwindled down until we could no longer see it above the grass. Victor picked up the first aid and went over to see how she was. Before long he brought her over to our now bloody campsite, wrapped in a blanket but clothed underneath.

Our wounds were not fully recovering; despite the attention they remained open and infected. Victor made the entertaining suggestion of cauterising the wounds; not what I would have considered a good option personally, but it would probably work. We gave it a go, and despite the pain it seemed to have a beneficial effect. The wounds certainly closed.

We tended to Bernard's wounds too, even going as far as to cauterise them; fortunately he did not decide to attack us.

We ate again, and eventually Morianna awoke, ravenous as a bitch with ten puppies. Once we had all finished we each went our own way for a short distance to change clothing. It was then we found that the Rararoo infection was still with us; although the wounds were in effect closed the infection still grew about them, no doubt feeding on us. We would have to seek the Rararoo plant in the castle to be free from it, though it was possible medicines from some other Shadow could help us better than our simple antiseptics.