

Journal 16 - the Royal Stag, in Shadow

I awoke sometime in the day. All I knew was that it was light outside, and I did not want to know anymore than that. I ate some fruit from a bowl beside the bed, and forced myself to take a look in the mirror.

Most of the white had faded and what was left came off when I rubbed it. I was still left mostly bald, though; only a few sparse patches of hair remained. I only just made use of the razor in the water bowl to remove what little remained so I would at least not look totally stupid. Then I stumbled back to bed once more.

I returned to wakefulness to find it was dawn, or close enough. I took a quick shower (I had not expected them; subconscious wish-fulfilment?) and went downstairs for breakfast. I amazed myself again by eating enough for almost two of me. The others eventually arrived too, in various states of hunger. Naturally, Victor outdid us all.

It took a while for me to notice it (I was concentrating on my food) but although Victor, Zatharuss and I were still bald, Morianna seemed to have regained her full head of hair. The benefits of being a shapeshifter no doubt.

I wondered how it was that Zatharuss could converse with the people of this world; then again, I wondered the same thing about myself and Morianna and Victor. I had never really noticed it before, but the fact that Zatharuss did as well as us raised an interesting point. If Morianna, Victor and myself could speak (presumably) all languages, and possibly even read them as well, and so could Zatharuss (as far as I could tell anyway), then if it was a 'family trait', so to speak, was Zatharuss a member of the family? Could his appearance in Tristram at the same time as us not been a coincidence?

Was there some mystical way of recognising newly found family members? Or a more mundane method? I think we would have to find out more to determine Zatharuss' origin for sure.

Since there was a blacksmith resident at the coachhouse (or at least he had a forge there), it was time for repairs. Zatharuss wanted to replace some of the links of his ringmail jacket; he required some very high quality metal too, so, being the only one possessing the relevant currency, I had to pay. And quite a lot too; it bit deeply into my reserves. Morianna too had a costly request; her sword needed some work done to it, mostly just sharpening and banging the nicks out of the blade. Because her sword was enchanted, the smith said it would cost extra, and not all of it for the work.

According to him, for some time in his land sorcerers and the like were forbidden, due to some cataclysm in the past. Only blacksmiths, with their (relatively) harmless smithing magic, were exempt, but they had to obey strict rules, one of which was not helping illegal sorcerers. Morianna with her sword effectively counted as such, so we were paying for his silence as well as his work.

By this time I had been reduced to minimal funds, at least for this place. Victor then decided he needed a helmet and a gauntlet the same as his right one, both made of the same tough metal as Zatharuss' armour rings. So, we needed yet more money. Victor led the way into Shadow until we found ourselves beside a long stretch of road, bordered by trees. After a short interval a coach could be seen coming down the road towards us.

It was remarkable; plated with steel, metal-plated wheels, and armoured horses. My attempts to get it to slow down or even stop by impersonating a mindlessly drunk man failed; the driver was intent on running me down. I suppose he had seen that trick before, but then I had never held up a coach before. Victor's method was more successful; when the coach drew level with him he stepped out and cleaved one wheel in half.

Unsurprisingly it toppled onto one side and slid to a stop; the harnesses broke, allowing the horses to escape. The guards proved to be little threat; Victor pulled the metal plates off the sides of the coach and bludgeoned them all unconscious.

The coach was carrying eight large chests, all chained together in a large circle. We dragged them away a short distance, and a small way into Shadow as well. Then we broke the chains (or rather Victor did) and we took three with us; Victor carried two and I carried one.

Back at the Royal Stag we gave one chest to the smith as payment for pretty much everything. To explain our sudden wealth, I said we had returned to where we fought off the bandits who had attacked us on the way to the coachhouse. Not terribly plausible, but at least it was consistent. He seemed content, but I could not tell if he believed me. He probably did not; I certainly would not have believed such an unlikely tale.

He then suggested we might want to exchange our foreign currency for local coinage. We settled on a four-to-one exchange, and in exchange for one of our chests he handed me a thick roll of notes from the back of his workshop. As far as I could see from first glance, the total value of the notes was about enough to buy another two weeks in the Royal Stag; in other words, a princely amount.

I concealed the money in my room, and came back down to see Victor just carrying the last chest into the coachhouse's strongroom.

Returning to the lounge, I asked Zatharuss about his plans for the future. He seemed unsure, so I made him an offer: he could join us and help us to free Amber. He asked about payment, and I asked him how much he wanted. He inquired if I could pay him with enough gold to cover the small table we were sitting by, two layers deep. By a quick calculation that came to almost two hundred thousand in local currency, a substantial amount of gold wherever you come from.

I agreed, and said he would receive a further four hundred thousand at the end of the campaign, as well as the possibility of another form of payment. It was possible that my word and promise was not enough to achieve it, but I offered him the opportunity to walk the Pattern. If he was part of our slowly growing family, it was (as I understood it) his birthright. If he was not, of course, he would die. I even told him that part.

I then explained that if he survived the ordeal, he would no longer require the talking ring he used to move between worlds.

He gave this some thought, then asked for eight hundred thousand, and said he would try the Pattern, if we won. I agreed, and the deal was struck. I was just about to take him to the strongroom to pay him his recruitment fee when he caught the arm of one of the serving women and gave her a present; his ring. I do not know why he did it; I suppose he could have been making a point, though I could not work out what it was. The woman, more of a girl really, was almost as confused as I was.

Once in the strongroom, I opened the final chest and just pulled out handfuls of coins, dropping them in a sack Zatharuss found at the back of the room. I trusted to luck, or rather my Pattern skills, that I would in all likelihood pay him just about the right amount. As I worked I told Zatharuss that, in effect, I was sponsoring his entry into court; that I was effectively working to gain him entrance long enough for him to talk to someone with more influence. I was not sure who that was going to be yet, but it would probably be Andreas, Corwin or perhaps even Benedict, though I doubted that he would be concerned.

Once I was satisfied the amount was right, we locked the chest up again, left the bag alongside it and returned to the lounge. Morianna was sitting by the window, and opposite her sat Andreas. Victor sat a few tables away, eating (again). Andreas asked a little about how we had got on, and then I introduced him to Zatharuss. Unfortunately, Andreas was not in a social mood, or perhaps he and Zatharuss just shared some common dislike of each other. Either way, Andreas was a little impolite, Zatharuss reciprocated and went to sit with Victor.

At his request I gave a more complete report to Andreas, and he seemed satisfied with what I told him. He told us Intruder would be arriving in a few days to look at the things we had found (the brain/Trump thing and the berries). Andreas left soon after, after which Morianna went off her own way, so I joined Victor and Zatharuss.

Victor asked me what I meant about introducing Zatharuss to court, so I explained my metaphor to him, but I do not think he understood it. I made another attempt using a different metaphor, but failed again. I gave up after that. I also tried to explain to Zatharuss that if he was part of our family he would not need any payment, as we could find whatever wealth we required in Shadow; he could not quite grasp it. Understandable, since one had to experience the ease with which we could become very wealthy to understand it.

Andreas came back down and at my suggestion Zatharuss asked him about being paid the second part of his fee. After a brief moment of thought he said he would pay him. Andreas then told me it was time for another one of my lessons in Pattern, so he took me

outside into the field behind the coachhouse and drilled me (so to speak) in the most basic Pattern skills, concentrating on the mental defence aspects.

It was frightening how easily he threatened to overwhelm my mind, and while I was no match for him normally I easily held him off by concentrating on a mental image of the Pattern. It was not something I found easy to forget; I think it's curves are permanently burned into my brain.

Once we had finished I asked him how he was, approaching his earlier testiness obliquely. He told me that he had had struggles of his own and been wounded several times in a battle where the enemy had proved to be more of a threat than expected. He was still under the effects of a few medicinal drugs, so he was not entirely himself.

He said farewell, and concentrated on a Trump he produced from a pocket. Before long he vanished, and I walked back towards the coachhouse. I saw Morianna out walking with Bernard, going much the same way, so I angled myself to intercept them.