

Journal 29 - in Shadow

The cabin had four bedrooms, two to each side of a corridor that opened onto the combined living room and kitchen. It was very early in the morning and by the look of the sunrise we were probably either very far north or high up. The snow outside almost reached the bottom of the windows.

Zatharuss and I took a look in the kitchen. He found some meat and vegetables he proceeded to make into a broth while I covered a plate in bread, butter, some cheese and a section of spicy sausage. Most of the food that I saw appeared to be simple but filling in nature; a little like expensive rations might be. As I put my feet up next to the fire Morianna wrapped herself up in a blanket and took Bernard out for a walk. She probably kept herself warm in less obvious ways too.

My lunch completed, I restlessly stayed in my chair before setting about examining the cabin more closely. I had just finished taking a look in the bedrooms and picking one for myself when I saw a cat outside, through the window. It was black and white in colour, and appeared to be larger than most housecats I had seen before. It gingerly crossed the snow-covered ground to reach our door and as I entered the living room I could hear it scratching on the door. Seeing no reason not to, I let it in.

The cat immediately rushed over to sit before the fire where it began to dry out. Then it surprised us both by turning round to face us and asking us where it could find Amber. Zatharuss almost dropped his spoon into his broth, while I carefully took a seat close to it (but not too close).

After some careful questioning it transpired that it was some form of scout, part of an army that was under some form of official contract to Benedict, Oberon or Random; it was not sure which. It had been attacked by a skirmish party of ten men, part of the army from Chaos; they had belonged to a House by the name of Nalveer. They had attacked it with magic, which turned out to be their big mistake. It appeared that the cat had the ability to magnify their magic and reflect it back at them as some form of defensive mechanism.

The only problem was, their attack had been particularly potent and had stunned it, causing it to become lost, separated from the main bulk of it's forces.

Somehow it knew we were from Amber; I do not know how.

At this point Morianna returned with Bernard. She appeared unsurprised as to the vocal capabilities of our guest, and coolly asked it some further questions. Bernard appeared unperturbed about the presence of a cat in his vicinity; perhaps he sensed it's abnormality and decided to leave it alone.

The cat, whose unremarkable name William, told us his masters were called 'Vregorians', or something close. They were 'like us' but sometimes took on another form. We did not give it – him – our names, just in case. Eventually he tired of our questions and slunk off somewhere in search of peace. I think Bernard kept an eye and ear on him, though.

An hour or so later Morianna set about making a meal for her and something for Bernard; William the cat returned to the living room at this point, lured out of hiding by the smell of cooking. No sooner had Morianna started eating than there was a solid knocking on the door. Zatharuss and I answered it to find an exceptionally large gentleman on our doorstep. He was dressed in red clothing of some tough material, with only a thick jacket to protect him from the cold. He probably felt it less than we did. His hair was dark and thick, and his eyes were dark too, set in a rugged face. He was huge, easily as big across as Victor but not as tall. He had the same feeling of prodigious strength about him as Gerard.

He was accompanied by three cats of various types the same size as William, though perhaps a little larger. They appeared to be male. He just looked at us until we let him in.

Seeing William, he claimed the cat as one of his, and revealed that 'William' was in fact a she. William expressed the opinion that when one has a lot of kittens, names are not always properly distributed. Taking a seat before the fire, he told us he knew we were from Amber, and that one of us had walked the Pattern. I was all for not saying whom, but Morianna told him it was me. We might have needed that advantage. Or most likely not.

Our large guest introduced himself as Garath; we too made our introductions. He then set about getting his report from William. This involved some vocal reporting, but mostly

relied on a direct mental contact. William did not seem too impressed by this, and I could well understand it.

Satisfied with William's account of events, he directed one of his cats to make his way to a certain meeting point to ask if we were supposed to stay where we were and be collected, or if we could make our own way with Garath.

Then he settled back in his chair and we talked for perhaps an hour; that is to say, he asked about where we came from and we told him what we wanted to tell him. Then we all got some sleep; Garath in a chair next to the fire and the three of us in the bedrooms.

About six hours later I was awoken by movement in the living room. Looking out my door I saw Garath letting in the cat he had sent out before we had gone to bed. Or it looked like the same cat. As it sat by the fire I heard it say that Benedict and Fiona wanted us to join them near to Amber just before the army moved into Amber, and that Garath should bring us. I got dressed and joined Garath and the cats in the kitchen for breakfast; soon the other two joined us.

He told us what the cat had told him, and said that we had a choice: we could leave almost immediately and walk there, or we could leave in about an hour and fly there instead.

Fly?

I asked Morianna for her opinion on the matter, as the most knowledgeable of the three of us on matters relating to Amber and Shadow. She suggested we take the flight option. Zatharuss agreed, and did I, though I think none of us really knew what we were getting ourselves into.

We made the most of the hour available to us by cooking a large breakfast. Then we wrapped ourselves up in blankets and made a sort of blanket-sack for the rather unimpressed Bernard. Our preparations complete, Garath led the way out into the snow and sent his cats on ahead.

He then walked about a hundred feet away and with a huge rush of air tinged with Power his outline rippled and then expanded at great speed as he changed from a large man into a big, dark red dragon about eighty feet long. It had four legs and a set of huge, leathery wings just above the front limbs. Its eyes were serpent-like and as dark as Garath's had been before he changed.

Then the great fanged mouth smiled and he bid us to climb up his leg and take position just behind his wings. His voice was the same as before, only much louder, of course. Morianna was first up with Zatharuss just behind her, lifting Bernard up part of the way with Morianna pulling him up the rest. I went up last; Bernard lay in front of Morianna on one side of the spines that ran the length of Garath's spine, while Zatharuss sat opposite Bernard and in front of me.

Zatharuss took a firm hold on the spines and Bernard's sack, which was hung over one of the spines, while Morianna's grip looked much firmer; her fingers appeared to have elongated to give a better grip of the spines. I just gripped as tightly as I could to the spines closest to me.

With a sudden, powerful lurch Garath launched himself into the sky. His wings flapped until he gained some height, after which he glided fast and low over the snowy landscape. I could just see this by turning my head to the side and peeking out from under my blanket-covered arm.

It was not that I was afraid of heights; it was losing my grip and being dashed against some unyielding section of ground that worried me. If I did not look at the ground rushing below us and looked upwards or outward instead it was quite exhilarating. If it had not been quite as windy or felt as unsafe as it seemed to me, it might have been more fun. Fortunately I do not think we suffered as much of the wind as we might have; I think Garath was protecting us somehow.

After a while we felt Garath take a deep breath; then he breathed out a huge gout of flame ahead of him that somehow made a doorway appear ahead of us. By the slight tingling I felt as I looked at it I think it must have been some form of gate through Shadow. My suspicions turned out to be true; we passed through it into another place that was definitely another Shadow. It was a desert to begin with; also, the sun was another colour altogether.

Garath seemed to have reached some form of critical speed, because we began to make numerous such jumps through Shadow. The regions we passed through were very diverse, but were almost entirely in the countryside; on a few occasions we saw towns and

cities in the distance, but never anything that was closer, not even lone cottages or farms. We got rained on several times, and baked almost as often.

Though it was hard to judge, after perhaps ten or twelve hours had passed Garath swooped low over two herds of animals that resembled cows and sheep respectively and collected two examples of each. Then, once he had set a nearby copse of trees alight with his fiery breath he dropped them in it to cook them. He landed close by and we climbed off. I for one was glad; my hands needed the rest from the tight grip they had maintained all day, and my ears required rest from the constant roaring of wind.

We all spread ourselves out on the grass to rest while the beasts cooked in the copse. Once they were done, Garath casually strolled into the raging fires and came back, one at a time with them. The cows he kept for himself while we took what we could from the sheep. Suitably fed, we covered ourselves with our blankets and went to sleep in the shadow of the dragon.

The next day our breakfast of cold sheep was interrupted by the sight of a large group of people in the distance. They appeared to be carrying long sticks that eventually showed themselves to be various forms of farming tools. They sounded angry, no doubt at the dragon for eating their cattle.

Once we had climbed back into our places, Garath ran towards them before taking off, scaring them rather severely and scattering them like frightened mice (which, by comparison, I suppose they were).

They next twelve hours (?) were spent clinging onto the back of the dragon as we flew through Shadow once more. Alternately soaked and boiled, the journey was not pleasant.

Eventually we found ourselves flying low over a wide, paved road. This, Garath told us over the roaring wind, was a trade road that led through Shadow towards the staging area for our army just inside Arden. In the distance we could just see a number of what looked like small, moving houses, but as we got closer it became obvious that they were huge caravans, each easily as large as a two storey house, on six big wheels and pulled by huge, eight-legged lizards.

Several groups of smaller lizards could be seen around the procession, each with a rider; outriders, moving before, behind and to the sides of the caravans.

As we drew nearer, Garath got lower and lower until he extended his legs and came into contact with the road. What followed were several minutes of huge, bouncing leaps accompanied by dragon curses. Apparently he had been going too fast. I would have cursed too, if my lungs and stomach had not been left behind after the first bound.

Fortunately he slowed eventually so he could run instead, a much more comfortable experience. We caught up with the last caravan as it came to a halt, as did the others. Two outrider groups came in alongside us, and as the men dismounted I saw they were not exactly men; they had blue, scaly skin and spoke in hissing voices. When they got closer I could see their eyes were slit like those of a snake.

As we climbed down an old man in fine red clothing approached us. He greeted us and then there was a rushing of wind behind us; the feeling of Power I had felt before returned and I knew that Garath had returned to his human form. He passed us then and greeted the old man warmly, naming him father as he did so. He introduced us to his father, who told us the first caravan had been set aside for our use. There we could eat, drink and sleep; we would arrive in Amber a few days hence.