

Journal 14 - Tristram, in the Demon Shadow

By the time the light had faded, we had convinced Morianna to carry us up to the wall top one at a time. She would have to rest once she finished though, to replenish her energies, since all the effort and her shapeshifting would tire her out. We moved around the ridge until we were out of sight of the west gate and Morianna shapeshifted out of our view into some sort of bird, wide of wing with a body about the size of a child's. Despite this she easily carried each of us over the moat to the thin strip of land around the base of the walls. Bernard submitted himself to being carried in a blanket again.

Once there, Morianna changed once more into a hairy creature similar to an African ape and clambered up the walls to the battlements above. We had decided it was better done this way, as men pulling themselves over the wall between crenelles was not as obvious as a big bird carrying people over it. Once there, she secured a rope and we climbed up before lifting Bernard up in his blanket. Victor then held a blanket up (though not too high) so Morianna could change back.

Looking carefully into the castle itself we saw the walls contained a courtyard with the castle proper inside. Several patrol groups of demons could be seen coming, going and preparing around several large groups of crates that contained various supplies. Some had weapons but most contained food, of sorts; most of it still lived.

After a short rest of perhaps ten minutes we moved around the walls, always in shadow, until we found some unguarded stairs down. Once in the courtyard we moved stealthily between the crates under the battlements until we came close to a doorway just around from the north entrance. Taking a better look revealed that beyond the door was some sort of corridor, probably part of the servants area of the castle. Through it moved a number of all but naked demonic women, fine specimens if you could ignore the smell, the fangs, the claws and the desire to eat human flesh. They were carrying trays and bottles, though whether they held food of a type a normal man could eat (or want to eat) I did not know.

Just beyond we could see a doorway that led downwards, possibly to some sort of cellar. We could not get in that way, that much was clear, so we looked for another method.

We decided, in the end, to climb up the wall of the castle through a window on a higher floor. This we did, Victor first followed by Morianna, myself and Zatharuss. It was not the most agreeable place I had ever entered; something in the room smelt worse than someone dead of plague in summer. I was glad we did not have more light to see by.

Pushing on into the castle we furtively made our way down several staircases until we were halted by the sight of two grey-skinned, half-dozing guards at the end of a corridor, leaning on the wall on either side of a heavy oak door.

After some discussion, a plan was put in motion. Morianna, again utilising her shapeshifting powers, mimicked one of the demonic women and walked down the corridor towards them. At a suitable distance she waggled herself at them, hissed and darted back around the corner. They gave chase, of course, though whether it was due to soldier reactions or male ones we will never know. Victor attempted to stop them dead by catching them with an outstretched arm as they rounded the corner, but they were too fast and ducked underneath them. Fortunately Zatharuss and I caught them before they could recover. Bernard tried to eat one but found the taste not to his liking.

Morianna changed back again, out of sight of course, and we continued, passing through the doors to a balcony above some sort of entrance hall. Two wide, curving staircases that had seen better days led down to the floor from opposite ends of the balcony. A number of demon women were moving across the hall, carrying the same sort of trays and bottles as we had seen before.

We were in need of some serious rest, so Victor went and investigated a room off of the balcony. He came back from one room saying someone was still in there, so Zatharuss drew a long knife and crept in. We heard a brief scuffle, and then Zatharuss was at the door beckoning us to come in.

A strangely shaped body lay in the bed; its body was of normal human proportions but the head was almost twice the size. Its skin was a sort of unnatural pink, and its blood

was green. The rest of the room suggested the apartment of a man of substance; bookcases, a desk and a very small strongbox. The books (apparently) dealt mostly with magic; two were written in what Morianna assured me was the language of Amber, Thari. The others were written in some weird, twisting script that hurt my head just to look at it.

The strongbox was about half the size of a good quality bible, covered in velvet, with a solid lock. It was incredibly heavy for its size, and something about the way it felt told me that it had been touched by real Power. Victor's attempts to tear it open failed, much as I expected it would; he should learn subtlety. Zatharuss attempted to pick the lock with some tools he produced from his small pack and he too failed.

As a last resort I attempted the same trick I had used on Andreas' suggestion in Amber. Inserting one of Zatharuss' tools into the lock I concentrated hard on it opening. I think it took close to an hour, though it was hard to tell; I lost track of time as I strained at whatever it was I was working against with whatever I was using. I was dripping with sweat when I finally did it.

The box contained a frame of metal with a solid metal back, screwed on very tightly. It too had a feeling of Power about it, no doubt due to the portrait card the frame held within it. It appeared to be a Trump card; it depicted a being similar in nature to the creature that lay dead in the bed, wearing a mask that was a cross between a fencing mask and the sort of thing one wears to a masked ball. Morianna unscrewed the back plate with her knife to reveal what can only be described as a brain, from the few anatomy lectures I had been to. It was flat and fit the shape of the frame exactly.

I suggested we should take it back with us, so Morianna replaced the back plate and stowed it in her pack.

Despite the sounds of demonic celebration below us, we settled down for about an hour and a half to rest and doze. First Zatharuss then I kept watch, listening as the demons became less boisterous and fell into drunken stupors. When the time came to move we crept down the stairs and down a short corridor past where we had looked in only a few hours ago. We took the stairs down and descended cautiously. Until we heard the sounds one would expect from a kitchen occupied by foul-mouthed harpies.

At Zatharuss' suggestion I returned to the top of the stairs to block the door there. It was fortunate it opened into the staircase; I wedged one metal tray under the door and another between the side with the hinges and the wall. Then I rejoined the others.

Once we were prepared, Victor and Zatharuss leapt into the room and opened up with their magic rings. They each gave off massive flashes light like an exploding keg of gunpowder, or curtains opened to reveal the midday sun. We were not in any way blinded by it (I suppose we were protected against it somehow), but the simultaneous flashes momentarily banished the shadows from the room and sent the various demons in the kitchen staggering around the room with their clawed hands over their eyes.

Bernard charged in after them but only succeeded in breaking a table and stunning himself on the large oven opposite the door. Victor and Zatharuss dealt with most of them while Morianna and I dispensed with the remainder. It was mostly butchery; those who might have been a threat were disposed of while they were still stunned, while the others were easily killed as they recovered.

Once we had recovered from the fight, we inspected the two doors that led off from the kitchen. One was a disused storeroom, but the other was a set of wide stairs that led down to a landing. More doors led to more storerooms and another staircase led further into the depths of the castle. Victor and I both took an oil lamp off the hooks they hung from, leaving a third behind, and we went on.

At the bottom of the next stairs we found a small bush growing from a gap in the walls. Strange, curved leaves sprouted haphazardly from the main stem, while a couple of berries clustered around the base of one clump of leaves. One was white, the other black. We had found the Rararoo plant at last.

Victor picked both berries and crushed the white one between his fingers, rubbing the white juice it produced onto a few of my smaller wounds. It did nothing initially, but then my whole body started to tingle; not quite irritating enough to become an itch, but just below the threshold of awareness. Then my skin turned white, pale as new snow, and my hair too; then the tingling itch spread to everything. Inside my mouth, my eyes, up my nose; it was almost unbearable. It did not abate even after some minutes; rather it just became possible to ignore it.

I would guess the Rararoo infection had spread more than we had realised, and the berry juice had gone forth to remove it from everywhere it had reached. Though I wish it had done it in a more pleasant manner.

Suddenly Victor pointed into the shadows, and I looked round in time to see a small, bat-like creature fly off down the stairs. He charged after it, followed closely by Morianna and Bernard. Zatharuss and I followed after them, more cautiously.

At the bottom of the stairs was a large number of the large demons we had seen guarding the castle gates. They occupied a big room with several doors off it, with yet another set of stairs at the far end. Bernard was inflicting relatively minor but distracting wounds on the demons while Victor and Morianna fought them, making occasional use of flashes from their rings.

Zatharuss joined them, but I stayed back to deal with any that wandered out of the fight. I was not in the mood for sustaining any more wounds just then; I think most of the contents of the first aid kits had been used up on me, rather than the others. I do not think I am cut out for all this fighting. I would benefit greatly from wearing some armour too.

Only three demons avoided being killed by the others, and I finished them off, not without, naturally, taking a few more injuries. The bat-thing was killed, too. Fortunately, they were very minor, little more than scratches; the wounds were pinker than normal, and my blood had been turned pink too. The white Rararoo berry at work, no doubt. The others had taken rather more; a few long but shallow cuts. Once our wounds were seen to, we crossed the bloody floor to the stairs beyond.

The stairs led to another landing and the next stairs to another. In the distance we could hear chanting of some sort, accompanied by the clinking of metal, sounding a little like the meeting of swords. It sounded like some form of ritual was in process.

At the base of the stairs we could see a large room, perhaps forty feet across, filled with a profusion of demons; big and small, horned and spiked, red and grey, carrying swords and spears or unarmed but for long claws. There must have been more than fifty, and that did not include those I could not see beyond the top edge of the opening at the base of the stairs.

Victor asked me to take his place at the front for a moment, and headed back up the stairs. I do not know how he expected me to fill in for him. He came back after close to five minutes empty handed. I asked him what he had been doing and he told me he had been looking in storerooms for lantern oil. I suggested he try using the probability controlling trick that is one of the Pattern skills we both knew of. He went off again and returned carrying a small barrel and carefully rolling a larger one along the floor in front of him.

Taking two torches from their brackets I handed one to Zatharuss and went to look in the storerooms higher up, carefully employing the frame of mind necessary to produce the result I required. I succeeded in finding two small barrels of lamp oil, but not without giving myself a painful but short-lived headache. I suppose I had been pushing probability too far.

I had. One of my barrels turned out to contain fish oil, not exactly what we needed.

Once we were ready, Victor heaved the largest barrel down the stairs into the middle of the chanting demons below. It was followed by the two smaller ones; one towards the far stairs and the other in the space between them. As the second was thrown the rest of us began to throw lit torches in as well. As a result the room exploded into flame like a lit powderkeg. We had to retreat up to the next higher landing because of the smoke, as well as the foul smell of roasting demons.

Once the heat had begun to wane somewhat, it was decided we would brave the fire rather than waiting for it to go completely and find ourselves trapped by demons in the meantime. So we got out our blankets and soaked them in fish oil, then wrapped them around ourselves to protect us against the heat. Bernard we soaked in fish oil too, though he tended to lick it off as soon as it was applied. Victor and Zatharuss went first, being the most capable fighters in our little group, followed by myself and Morianna. Bernard would accompany her.

By the time I got there our two hardy warriors had slain a handful of small, red creatures that looked like fairytale goblins. Bernard arrived slightly steaming and smelling strongly of fish, but he was unharmed, as were the rest of us.