

Journal 15 - Tristram, in the Demon Shadow

We rested for a while in the slight wind that passed up the stairs around us; the heat above had turned the whole stairs into a giant chimney. Despite the fact that all of us were covered in splashes of blood, both red and otherwise, I was still an off-white colour. Presumably the white berry juice was still at work.

We walked down the stairs to find it had come down into what looked like the middle of a very large room. I could not see any walls beyond the light our torches and lamps gave off, but the floor was earthy, as if soil covered the rock underneath. Victor headed off into the gloom, saying he was looking for a wall. Before long he was lost in the darkness.

Then Morianna set off as well, heading off away from the stairs. I took a look at the stairs themselves; they appeared to be built from large, slightly irregular blocks of stone, seeming to sprout directly from the floor and disappearing upwards into shadow.

After what seemed like twenty minutes (it might have been more) Morianna and Victor returned almost simultaneously. Neither of them had found any walls, so, presuming we were in the centre (as seemed likely) the chamber was at least half a mile across. We must have been very deep inside the mountain.

We decided it would be best if we walked away from the front of the stairs, so we did. After an indeterminate period of time we hear the chattering of some beast in the darkness; it then howled. Continuing on cautiously, we heard a few similar noises behind us and to the sides, as far as we could tell anyway.

Then Zatharuss, who was at the front, saw another of the bat-like creatures, glowing faintly in the dark ahead of us; it vanished soon after.

After perhaps another thirty minutes there was a bright flash ahead of us and the sound of some sort of explosion. This was followed by faint clinking sounds, similar to the sound of very hot metal cooling rapidly in air. That might well have been the case.

Later yet we could just see in the distance a strange sight. A black gate, perhaps ten feet tall and four wide, somehow lighting up the area around it and reflecting our torches despite its blackness. Its size was actually hard to determine; in the gloom it could have easily been more than a mile distant and twenty times larger. As we got closer, however, it was possible to see it was set into a portion of rocky wall. Judging by the size of what looked like half a doorway on the left side, it was nearer fifteen feet by eight. Without doubt, this was the Hell Gate we had come to close.

Any more contemplation was stalled by the sight of the three muscle-bound, red-skinned demons staggering around in front of the Gate. They appeared to be stunned, probably by the flash we had seen earlier. As a result, they were easily despatched, putting up little resistance.

Taking a closer look the section of wall stood incongruously in the chamber unconnected to anything. It looked as if it had been torn out of a larger wall and transported here from somewhere else, though it did not look like the sort of wall one would expect to find in Hell. It was a good ten feet wide, twenty feet tall and twenty five feet to each side of the Gate. Behind the wall the most of the stone had turned soft, similar in texture and viscosity to thick porridge. Growing along the back of the wall were several Rararoo bushes, each with almost a dozen of both types of berries.

Victor uprooted two and brought them over, whereupon we harvested the berries from them and placed most of them in pockets, separating the two types out first of course. Morianna treated Bernard's and Zatharuss' wounds with juice from the white berries, and they too turned white as I had. Morianna herself only turned a little white; I suppose her shapeshifting meant her wounds were not open long enough for the infection to take hold. Or maybe she had just not been wounded.

Victor refused to make use of the juice until we were finished; I do not know why, since it would not hinder his ability to fight.

During this time small flecks of light had begun to appear in the Gate. As we watched they grew gradually larger and more mobile, like fish in a pond. Then Morianna threw a severed limb into it, and we finally found out what had caused the big flash earlier.

Once I had regained the use of my eyes and stood up again, I stumbled my way back to the Gate and recovered my sword. Then I saw Victor; he had lost most of his hair, and his clothes had been faded by the brightness of the light. As he turned round I saw that it was only the case on one side of him, presumably the side that had been facing the Gate when it had flared. Looking around I saw the others too suffered from similar hair loss, and feeling my head I too had gone about half bald, including my beard. As if being pasty white did not make me look stupid enough already. Bernard, at least, was better off; he had only lost the top lair of his remarkably dense coat.

The light flecks were still increasing unabated, so we concealed ourselves around the edges of the wall. After the bright flash we looked out to see an easily eight foot tall, spiny demon stagger into view. It shook it's head to recover itself, and Victor led Zatharuss and Morianna into the fray. I stayed prudently back, to survey the situation before I joined them. I could see myself being impaled on it's spikes long before I had achieved anything by just charging in.

The creature steamed as if it were hot; but then, it had just come from Hell. Despite being slightly stunned by the flash that heralded it's arrival, it held off my three companions readily enough, throwing a charging Victor aside as it leapt at Zatharuss. So I yelled at it and when it looked my way I let it have a Flash from my ring.

It blinked in a rather comical way and staggered a little. I saw Victor circling around behind it so I Flashed it again, distracting it as it flailed in the direction of Zatharuss. Just then Morianna speared it through the chest with her sword, and Victor called for another Flash. As I unleashed it Victor, in an incredible acrobatic feat, leapt over the demon's head, cleaving it's skull in half as he did so, right down to the chest. Morianna ducked and dove to the side as it tumbled over forwards. Victor ruined the impressiveness of his manoeuvre by catching his feet on something on the ceiling and tumbling painfully to the floor.

The combatants caught their respective breaths and retrieved their lost weapons. And then, as if we had not had enough trouble, the flecks started up again. So we hid around the back again, with Victor dragging the corpse behind him.

Victor must have bored waiting, because he started to scoop great handfuls of porridge-like stone out of the wall behind where the Gate was. Before long he had revealed a metal plate, perhaps a foot larger in each dimension than the Gate itself. He then used his belt knife to unscrew the large screws that held it in place. When it was removed it unveiled a piece of parchment about the size of the Gate, covered in the strange, squirming scrawl we had found in the books of the large-headed gentleman Zatharuss had killed in the castle.

He attempted to cut the paper with his knife, but it failed. Just then there was another flash like before, and Zatharuss quietly reported that two of the large, spiny demons had come through. By then Victor had got the claws of his gauntlet to tear a hole in the parchment. He then pulled away the rest of the parchment to reveal the other side of the Gate. He squashed the parchment up into a ball and before we could top him he threw it into the Gate.

I must have flown back though the air for a good ten feet before rolling a further five across the ground. I shook my head to clear it, but it nothing except give me a more serious headache than I already had. I found Morianna, Zatharuss and an incredibly surprised looking Bernard easily enough, but I had to look further afield for Victor; he had been thrown at least three times as far, since he was standing right in front of the Gate at the time. I also noticed that they, and by inference me as well, had lost what little had remained of our hair.

The Gate was gone, as was much of the wall; it had been blown into rubble, which had fortunately shredded the two spiny demons. Unfortunately a piece had also found Victor, denting his breastplate and probably breaking a few ribs in the process. To make it worse, the whole mountain then began to shake around us; it was probably going to collapse on us, knowing my luck.

So we picked Victor up and headed off into the darkness. I concentrated hard to move us out of that world and into Shadow, and soon my efforts were rewarded. The cavern became a corridor, the corridor opened to the outside around the next bend, and we fled out and away into the cornfields, outside again at last.

Stopping to rest for a moment, Morianna finally applied some white Rararoo juice to Victor's many wounds, and he too turned white as snow. She then suddenly flinched violently and threw away a small flask she pulled out of her pack. She suggested that we leave fast,

and as we passed into the next world I looked back to see the flask burst open, and green mould expanded from within it like fire in a dry forest. She had probably been experimenting.

I led the way through Shadow for perhaps an hour or two. I had a particular destination in mind: a coachhouse like the ones scattered across Europe, opulent and luxurious. We all needed some extreme comfort and pampering after what we had been through.

Once I had everything set up in my head, we found ourselves at the coachhouse soon enough. It was a massive, three storey affair, made from the finest timbers and bricks, and I knew it would have an elegant menu of the finest food and the best wines. The rooms would be sumptuously decorated, with big baths filled by plumbing carrying pure, hot water. I knew this, because I had intended it thus.

I knew it would be expensive too, so it seemed likely to me that I would have just the money we required to stay here about my person somewhere. What was likely became certain, and so we were provisioned for a long and comfortable stay.

Of course, I forgot to have an explanation of our strange and singular aspect.

Being a luxurious and expensive place, the Royal Stag coachhouse employed guards to keep away bandits and other riffraff. We were stopped by three of them as we turned off the road towards it. Despite our wounds, weapons and the fact that we were all pale white and none of had any hair, we eventually convinced them that we had encountered some particularly enthusiastic brigands. I can not recall exactly how we explained away how we looked, but I am sure it was interesting and creative.

Once in the entrance hall, the manager himself greeted us. It cost an incredible amount of money just to have two hours there, for a bath and meal, but, fortunately, I just happened to have the necessary money on my person. Once that was decided, I had to strain somewhat to produce an even greater sum of money, this time in the form of some kind of banker's promissory notes. This was enough to get us rooms for a week; food and other services would cost extra. This emptied my pockets, at least for the moment.

We had our baths, Morianna in the women's baths and us in the men's. Once done, I ordered some clothes from the Royal Stag tailor. He took our measurements and noted down our choices of styles, cuts and colours; the garments would be completed in a few days. In the meantime we were forced to wear what amounted to other guest's cast-offs. I got some fairly respectable if rather tight clothing while Victor had to wear a sort of overrobe he disparagingly called a caftan; it was the only thing they had to fit him.

Baths completed, it was time for dinner. Bernard, alas, had to stay outside with the other dogs, not something he enjoyed. I think he would have preferred being nearer to Morianna. The restaurant was suitably impressive, and the menu sumptuous in the extreme. We ordered some improbably large steaks, accompanied by potatoes, with wine, brandy, bread rolls and salad.

We all ate quite a remarkable amount, but Victor ate about twice the amount I did. I do not think we made a good impact on the other guests; the fact that we each ate enough for two grown men was one thing, but Victor's massive belch when he finished upset an old couple across the room. The dessert was just as fine as the rest of the meal, as was the accompanying brandy.

We may have irritated the other guests, but we needed the food much more than they did.

The first two things we required completed, it was time for what we now needed most: sleep. With a final goodnight to Victor and his bottles of expensive liqueur, I staggered off to bed for an excessively long night of sleep.