

## Wrath of the Righteous



# The Prey

## PATHFINDER'S JOURNAL: SWEET ICHOR 1 OF 6

**L**etter received by Venture-Captain Zhanneal of Razmiran,  
30th Pharast

My Dearest Lord Zhanneal,

I trust that the pressing affairs which keep you from prosecuting your scheme in person will not find you too occupied to savor news of its advancement. After prolonged trekking along the borders between the realms of man and demon, I have found, if not him whom we ultimately seek, one of his key accomplices. Save for their documentary content, you may now safely disregard the content of my previous missives, detailing as they do a succession of cold trails and false leads.

Calliard is in Aaramor. As therefore, am I—Ba-El Racid, your most determined servant.

Were I an observer of niceties, I would withhold mention of the fact that I have succeeded where your previous factotums have failed: Omansil the Wary, with his endless meanderings in Mendev; Red Peri, his gut gnawed by the worms of Ardis. But, as none know better than you, my lord, Ba-El Racid is not an observer of niceties. My words are as blunt as my fists, my meanings as chiseled as the hardened muscles surfacing my sun-scarred frame. You did not engage me because I respect my place, but because I covet that of the next man's, and will do what is necessary to eclipse him. In this instance, I have broken noses, skulked in gutters, and abased myself in manners I will not here detail—all to find this Calliard, bard and thief.

From a distance I have glimpsed him. To be blunt, the description supplied by your informants must be



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considered misinformed at best, and misleading at worst. No effete, trembling sidekick is he. Following him through the narrow, stone-walled streets of dour Aaramor, I watched a man of certain tread, damnably alert, his every movement performed with grim economy. Several times he nearly nosed me out, forcing me to retreat behind some jutting pillar of this enormous fortress. As a seasoned cutthroat snuck up upon him near a bazaar where cloaked and goggled technicians from Starfall traded gears and wires, I observed, ready to intervene. Calliard made a backward flick of his wrist, undetectable to all but me, and the would-be robber shrieked in terror, a six-inch skewer protruding from the center of his eye socket.

From the concealment of a filthy alcove, I watched as he performed a most peculiar act. Calliard waited for the man—barely a boy, as now revealed by the harsh glow of an orange-tinted lamp—to collapse against a wall of crates. Then, the sheer cruelty of his demeanor holding shocked vendors and buyers at bay, he stalked up to his attacker and sniffed him. Placing slim fingers on the boy's bloodstained face, he pinched at it, as if testing the skin for signs of deception. The inspection took but an instant, after which he turned his back on his half-blinded victim, as if nothing had happened. Even after he had passed, the folk of the bazaar ignored the injured thief, leaving him to crawl off, whimpering and alone. They saw no percentage in angering a man who could do that so easily and casually.

Adopting my best moon-face, slumping my shoulders to lessen the intimidation inherent in my height and bulk, I bumped into a nearby stall. The merchant opened a battered metal box, revealing a tangle of glowing rope lengths made from a material I could not identify, offering them to me at a mere ten gold per inch.

"I'm a visitor here, unwise to machine-magics," I told him, with an idiot's shrug. "What use I might put your items to, I cannot fathom."

The vendor, a clean-shaven gnome who wore gears as hair-tassels, sank from avid interest to annoyed boredom.

I hiked a thumb at the passageway Calliard had disappeared into. "But I have been known to pay for an interesting tale to take back home to the Mwangi Expanse. Who was that?"

He squinted at me, weighing my potential worth to him.

"The one with the sticker in his eye? A wastrel and troublemaker. Ghero, I think his name is. He should thank that man for ending his career so fast, while breath still inflates his lungs. Unless the infection gets him. In which case, bad cess."

"I meant the man who put the sticker in his eye."

"Better not to speak of him," the vendor said.

"He's a menace around here?"

The vendor shuddered. "Far from it."

"Then why the reluctance?"

"He hunts what needs hunting." With unmistakable finality, the gnome slammed shut his box of wares. Not wishing to betray more than a casual interest, I wandered off.

Frustration ate at me, if only for an instant. Calliard of Aaramor, this hunter of hunters, gave off anything but the air of a man dependent on the assistance of others. Not even the man who stole from you the Sextant of the Seven Winds. If he had left his confederates behind, failure loomed for me, as surely as it had for Omansil and Red Peri.

The prospect of being lumped in with those laggards spurred me on. If the Aaramorians would not talk, I would take the longer, if riskier, route to an approach. I would find out what Calliard wanted, all the better to dangle it before him.

Over the next days I shadowed him, and saw that he pursued another in turn. In the identity of his quarry, I would learn the nature of his game, why he no longer conformed to the accounts you gathered of him. And in that, I would find my way to our true target.

Following Calliard unseen proved no easy matter, especially for a man of my size. Yet I had one advantage—a man can concentrate either on hunting or avoiding being hunted, but not on both at the same time. So I waited for moments when Calliard's quarry seemed to sense a harrying presence. When Calliard stopped to hide, I advanced. Soon I had learned enough of the man Calliard was after to stalk the prey instead.

The object of the poet's interest surprised me: a stooped old man, who tapped through the fortress's stone corridors with the aid of a gnarled wooden cane. Tufts of white hair haloed his bald and liver-spotted head. A thin line of drool leaked from the right side of his mouth, which twitched as if palsied by a stroke. At first I wondered at Calliard's caution in shadowing this faded old duffer through Aaramor's fog-choked passageways. Yet soon I sensed the alertness beneath the oldster's mask. Just as the city's incessant clang of smiths and weapons training momentarily quieted, I happened to stub my toe on a stone. This mere hint of a sound sufficed to stop the old man cold. He tensed as if ready to defend himself from attack. I gave up the pursuit and eased away, having already learned his place of business.

He maintained a brandy shop at the end of a cramped laneway zigzagging deep into the fortress. The locals readily shared what little they knew of him: recently arrived, gruff, unsociable, yet offering quality goods at generous prices. A barman surmised that he'd soon price his bottles to the sky, as soon as he taught his clientele to desire his finer grade of merchandise. Spelin, the old man called himself.

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The next morning I made my way to Spelin's shop, along the way spotting no fewer than three alcoves from which Calliard might spy on the man and his customers. I assumed an oblivious amble and strolled into the shop. From a high stool behind the counter, the old man cocked a caterpillar eyebrow.

"Yes?" he snapped.

Stacked casks filled the shop's musty confines. I made a show of examining them. "You sell brandy?" I asked him.

Spelin drummed on his counter with bony fingers. "What does it look like?"

"It looks like you sell brandy."

"Well then?"



*"Calliard may be human,  
but appears lacking in  
basic humanity."*

"I expect to be traveling soon. I'm looking for something with kick, that can withstand the rigors of the road." I hoped these sounded like the requirements of a drinking man. As you'll recall, Zhanneal, I have always regarded my body as a sacred tool of my craft, not to be dulled by indulgence.

The old man must have sensed this wobble in my confidence. He hopped from his stool, lifted a hinged leaf in his counter, and came at me, finger wagging. "You wouldn't know a brandy from a port, would you?"

I played the affronted would-be snob. "What sort of shop is this, anyway?"

His eyes, which I imagined as pale and clouded by rheum, burned with a dark fire. "Who sent you?"

I stiffened my spine. "The counterman at the Mammoth's Tusk. I told him he'd served me muck, and he told me if I didn't like it I could go pay the outrageous prices at Spelin's."

He scratched at his tiny right ear. "We're a connoisseur, then, are we?"

"I hesitate to label myself, but can tell rot from the good stuff." I let myself take relish in the role of buffoon.

"Good," he spat. Slipping behind the counter, Spelin opened an unseen spigot and poured a small quantity of brandy into a cracked china cup. He did the same with a second cup, presumably from another spigot.

His grin displayed a near-toothless mouth. "Taste these and tell me which is the fine stuff, and which the sludge."

Settling into the part, I couldn't help but pour it on. "I must object to your tone, my friend."

"In my own shop I may speak as I please." He swept his hand over the two cups. "Perhaps if you demonstrate expertise I will adjust my manners accordingly."

I'd left myself no choice but to quaff his stuff. There had to be a clear difference between good and bad brandy, one I could discern through simple comparison. If not, I would allow him to take pleasure in my foolhardiness. Either way, I would find a way to turn the exchange to the matter of Calliard, and what it was about this toothless man-crone that had so aroused his interest.

The dark brown contents of the first cup filled my mouth and nose with the unpleasant, scorching fumes of heavy drink. I let the liquid play across my tongue. I tasted sugar, and bitterness, and felt numbness course from my palate to my throat...

My knees buckled. Spelin and his counter and casks swirled around me. As I fell, my head hit a hard surface. Consciousness wavered. In my addled state I thought I saw the old man transform—his hairless dome becoming a skull, his eyes disappearing into cavernous sockets, his mouth opening into a maw of needle-sharp teeth. His skin seemed to blacken and twist into a thin, rubbery layer stretched tight over an unlikely skeleton. With impossible



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strength, the old man stripped me first of my blades, then of my armor. Threads ripped in the collar of my under-tunic as I was dragged from the shop's front room into a darker chamber. With rough force this stick-thin figure hurled me into a wooden chair. The strength with which the figure tossed me about told me that Spelin's transformation was no hallucination. I now beheld the brandy seller's true form, one that was far from mortal.

I flopped over, only to be held in place by a viselike hand, the surface of its skin greasy. Working quickly, the creature stripped me to the waist. It pulled my arms behind the back of the chair and bound them with a rope or cord. Then the scuttling being tied my ankles in place, too. Awareness ebbed for what might have been a few seconds as the creature disappeared to the front of the shop. I heard a deadbolt slam shut and a tumbler click in a lock.

It returned and advanced on me, a viscous substance dripping from its leathery hide. Droplets of the excrescence landed on the tile floor. They hissed, danced, and resolved into a vapor. The creature cocked its head at me, a skull's grin widening on its skeletal face. "You were sent by the hunter," it said. The voice had altered, dropping into the gravel and glass of what I could only assume to be its natural register.

"The hunter?" I slurred, the toxin dulling my verbal agility.

"You know who I mean." The creature placed a clawed hand on the side of the face. Pain radiated through my cheekbones, up into my forehead and down into my neck. I felt my flesh bubble under its touch, smelled it burn and melt. The creature withdrew its acidic hand. "You are his scout, yes?"

Despite my distress, my goal remained uppermost. I would learn from this monster as it sought to learn from me, and gain knowledge useful to our quest. Then I would somehow effect my escape and slay it. "I am no man's scout," I managed. "But if you tell me more, maybe I can help you."

It jabbed me in the side. I looked down, to my instant regret, and saw its fingers sunk to the second knuckles between two of my ribs. The wound blackened and suppurated. I saw fingers moving under skin and parted muscle, curling around a rib bone. "Foolish human," the creature hissed. "Do not trifle with me."

"Who is it you seek?" I cried.

"The hunter!" It twitched its emaciated frame, and I heard my rib crack and crumble. Blood, dark with poison, gushed into my lap and down my legs.

The creature juddered, withdrawing its hand from my abdominal cavity in another rush of tearing flesh. It whirled, hands groping for an object protruding from the base of its neck. It was a dart, at least four inches long, well buried in a spot the creature couldn't quite reach.

Decorative knobs and whorls covered the dart's brass haft, glowing from within as if imbued with arcane power.

In the doorway, with the enraged creature now facing him, stood Calliard, his sword at the ready.

"Hunter!" the creature wailed. "But the latch..."

Cruel humor danced in the poet's eyes. Though I was not its intended audience, his expression terrified me all the same. "I was already inside."

The creature shuffled backward to take me by the throat, the fingers of its left hand singeing my skin, the claws of its right poised to penetrate my skull. "Back off, or I snuff your lackey!"

Calliard surveyed me without particular curiosity. "Lackey? Never met him."

The creature took its anger out on me, tightening its acidic grip. The reek of liquefying flesh assailed me. I begged my goddess for the mercy of unconsciousness, but this boon was denied to me. "But as a champion of good, you won't stand idly and let him be slain," the creature said.

Calliard smiled. "Good? You mistake my business here, demon."

"Your false confidence won't save you," it said.

"I've harvested your kind before," Calliard replied.

"Then I'll even the odds!" The demon let me go and embarked on an incantation. The air clouded and swirled, and a portal appeared to form. Through it I glimpsed the hazy shape of another demon, identical to this one.

Then the dart sticking from the Spelin-thing's back pulsed with a yellow light that echoed down the creature's shriveled body. The demon fell to its knees, keening. The portal to the Abyss—for that is surely what it was—sealed, preventing its comrade from crossing over.

Calliard rushed at it, and with violent precision directed a sword blow to the back of its head. The demon swiped at him with its claws, a move he anticipated and danced away from. While it was still off balance, he slid off to its side and landed another strike against his foe, this time slashing into the narrow cords of leathery flesh connecting its ribcage to its pelvis. Screaming, the demon skittered back, groping for the hampering dart, and tried another incantation. Again the haft of the dart flashed, sending scourging light through its body. This time, however, the demon's claws caught, and it ripped the weapon free. The dart flashed a third time and then went dull.

"I was hoping you'd do that," said Calliard, and swung his sword into its jaw.

"Your weak magic cannot stand against me!" the demon crowed. Yet even I could tell that the effort of dispatching the had cost it greatly. "I've destroyed your little toy."

"So?" said Calliard, slashing the creature's calf.

The demon, which still had not bothered to rise to a standing position, yowled in glee. "So this!"

The room plunged into utter blackness.

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The demon grunted in pain.

"I can see in the dark," said Calliard, amused.

Robbed of sight, I heard a series of grunts and shuffles. Abruptly the darkness dissipated. Calliard, bruised and panting, stood over the demon's limp form.

"Brother, you have saved me!" I exclaimed.

The poet ignored me, instead yanking a dagger from his belt. He plunged it into the demon's neck. Ichor spouted from the wound. Where a moment before, confronting the demon, Calliard had held himself with a terrifying dignity, he now dropped to all fours like a hungry dog. He placed his lips to the blood gouting from the demon's neck and sucked it into his mouth. Only after several minutes did he stop.

"Please, my friend," I said, "release me from my bonds."

"Yes," he said. "Those will do." None too gently, he unwrapped the cords that held me to the chair. Then, instead of inspecting my injuries or inquiring as to my condition, he stumbled to the dead demon and tied its ankles together. Outside, the clatter and clamor of the border fortress-city continued as always, unaffected by any notice of our little scene. He rummaged through his pack, found a grapple, and tied it to the other end of the rope. He threw the hook up onto a rafter, tested its strength, then hauled on it, until the demon hung suspended like so much venison. Blood now rushed again from the opening in its throat. Calliard held a wineskin to catch it as it drained.

I tried to rise but could only slump in the chair. "I see you wield many great and efficacious magics. Might any of them heal me?"

He paid this no mind.

A chill washed through me, followed by nausea. "Please, sir, can that wait?"

He shook his head.

The room spun. "I had a couple of restorative draughts on my person when I came here. If you have no healing you can spare a stranger, please find mine and administer it. I am badly hurt."

"In fact, you're dead, when that poison finishes its work."

Even as he said it, I could feel the truth of his claim coursing through my veins, burning like the damnable brandy. I grimaced. "So healing me would be a waste of magic—is that what you mean?"

His first wineskin bulged full; he switched it for another, losing precious little demon blood between the two.

"You're hooked on that, aren't you?" I asked. "As other men are to drink, or pesh." Given no reply, I continued. "I thought demon blood had to be distilled into something else—something called *mesz*—before it intoxicates. Never have I heard of a man lapping from a demon's throat, like some kind of vampire."

The flow of blood from the demon's neck reduced to a trickle. Calliard reached into his pack for a butcher's knife

and set about flaying the creature's corpse. Each chunk of hard, fleshless skin he squeezed like a rag, freeing droplets of blood, which fell into a copper bowl. When he had finished, he poured the contents of this bowl, the rim of which was equipped with a spout-like protrusion, into another wineskin. He licked his hands, then the bowl.

I could no longer feel my fingers; to move them required effort. Life ebbed from me, and with it, the luxury of careful chess moves. To live, I would have to intrigue this Calliard, who in his addiction showed himself a much more callous man than I had been given reason to expect. I had to make of myself a question in need of an answer. And so I said, "That is not quite true."

This I thought would pique his curiosity, but it did not. And so I went on: "I have heard of one man who does this. The poet Calliard, who runs with a pack of thieves led by a scoundrel named Gad. You are he, aren't you? The one the demons call the hunter."

He didn't even look at me. "What of it?"

"I have come here to find you."

"Then my wish not to be located intensifies."

He lowered what remained of the demon to the floor, reclaiming his grappling hook but leaving behind the rope. Without acknowledging me any further, he departed the room, leaving me to die.

Yet die I did not. After what felt like an eternity, I lapsed into semiconsciousness, my thoughts going toward the River of Souls and my soul's impending trek to the Boneyard for judgment, an experience that I will admit filled me with some regret. In what I took for the beginning steps of that journey, I felt myself lifted, suffused with balm, leaving my final throes behind. My awareness became but a glimmer. I was conveyed through a tunnel of light, down a wall of darkness, and into a green realm, bathed in a cool, pine-scented wind. The orange appearance of dawn I took for the swell of the goddess's kiss.

Only after awaking from slumber hours later did I fumble to a true understanding of these perceptions. I had been rescued by mortals and remained upon this living plane. The tunnel of light was naught but the lantern-lit streets of Aaramor. The well of darkness was but ordinary night. And the green realm revealed itself as a wooded spot not far outside the fortress, where my saviors encamped.

They fed me healing draughts, bitter and leafy, then broth. They left me for a good while before the questions began. Why was I in that place? Had I seen a man named Calliard? Did he speak of his business in Aaramor, or where else he might be headed?

My questioners numbered two. At first, a female halfling, wide-hipped, her round features interrupted by the lines and creases of middle age, did most of the talking. At a remove hovered a slim human, projecting even from a



distance a reassuring poise. When he came closer, I saw what you so perfectly encapsulate as a damnably symmetrical. From the stubble of studied perfection dotting his jaw to the easy tumble of words from his throat, he was every inch the paragon of artifice you made him out to be. Were I unprepared, I too might have felt the urge to follow him, to believe whatever he told me, to stumble blindly into any chasms he might point me toward. In short, it did not take me an introduction to realize that I had been borne from the border fortress by the trickster Gad, beacon of falsehood and repeat despoiler of Pathfinder Society vaults. That meant the halfling had to be Vitta, seducer of locks and dismantler of traps, and one of the few confederates to survive unscathed a long association with him.

The quickest way to earn a swindler's trust is to make oneself appear to be a gull and a mark. So I affected a variation on the moony idiocy I had previously adopted against the demon Spelin, and spoke with a near honesty, withholding only your involvement and my awareness of his identity.

"I did see Calliard," I told them, laying out in believably scattered fashion a version of the events recounted above. I let them find connections and conclusions—pretending, for example, that I did not understand the reasons behind Calliard's yen for demon blood. "Does he sell it as a spell component?"

The facts I most needed them to swallow, I made them dig for. "You were seeking Calliard, though?" Vitta asked.

"Yes, yes, for I had heard that he was a hunter of demons beyond equal, and that he might thus be motivated to assist me on a quest."

"A quest?"

"I am a merchant—a broker, you might say—specializing in the acquisition and resale of enchanted objects. No run-of-the-mill gewgaws suit my clients' tastes. Of all the artifacts hidden within Golarion's bosom, they must have only the finest."

Gad leaned forward. "And you know where such an item might be found?"

"Know is a strong word. Let us say 'strongly suspect.'"

"And it's connected to demons?"

"Connected most intimately. But I should explain this only to Calliard. You are his acquaintances, yes?"

"We're looking for him, but he's avoiding us. Maybe if your story is good enough, he'll talk to us for more than a few minutes."

I had him. I could see it in the way he held his shoulders. "Still, I should explain this only to him."

To make a long exchange short, I parted with the tale by dribs and drabs, my feigned reluctance whetting their greed for details. Even then, he got me to the key point sooner than I'd planned. "I seek a crystal, containing a fluid of surpassing magical import. The Bile of Abraxas."

Vitta shifted uneasily. "As in, the demon lord Abraxas? The poison-fanged god of forbidden lore?"

"Yes, Abraxas. In eons past he gifted his servants with a quantity of his vilest ichor. If used to further his schemes, it is a deadly weapon against humanity. But turned against demonkind, it allows us to control and master them."

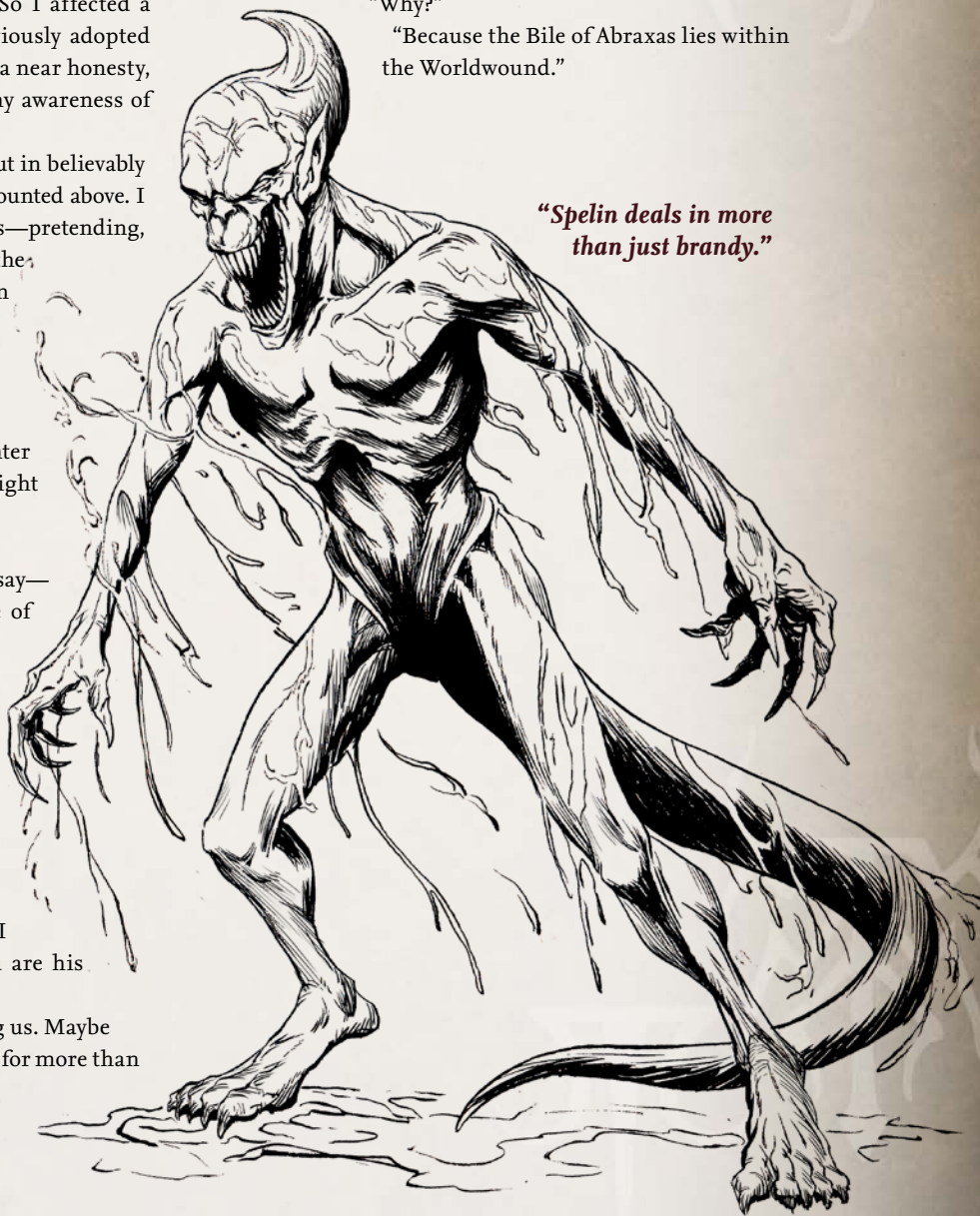
"Could it cure him, do you think?" Vitta asked Gad.

Gad fixed me in the command of his gaze. "And where do you think it is, Ba-El Racid?"

"Ah," I said. "That's why I need a demon hunter."

"Why?"

"Because the Bile of Abraxas lies within the Worldwound."



*"Spelin deals in more than just brandy."*