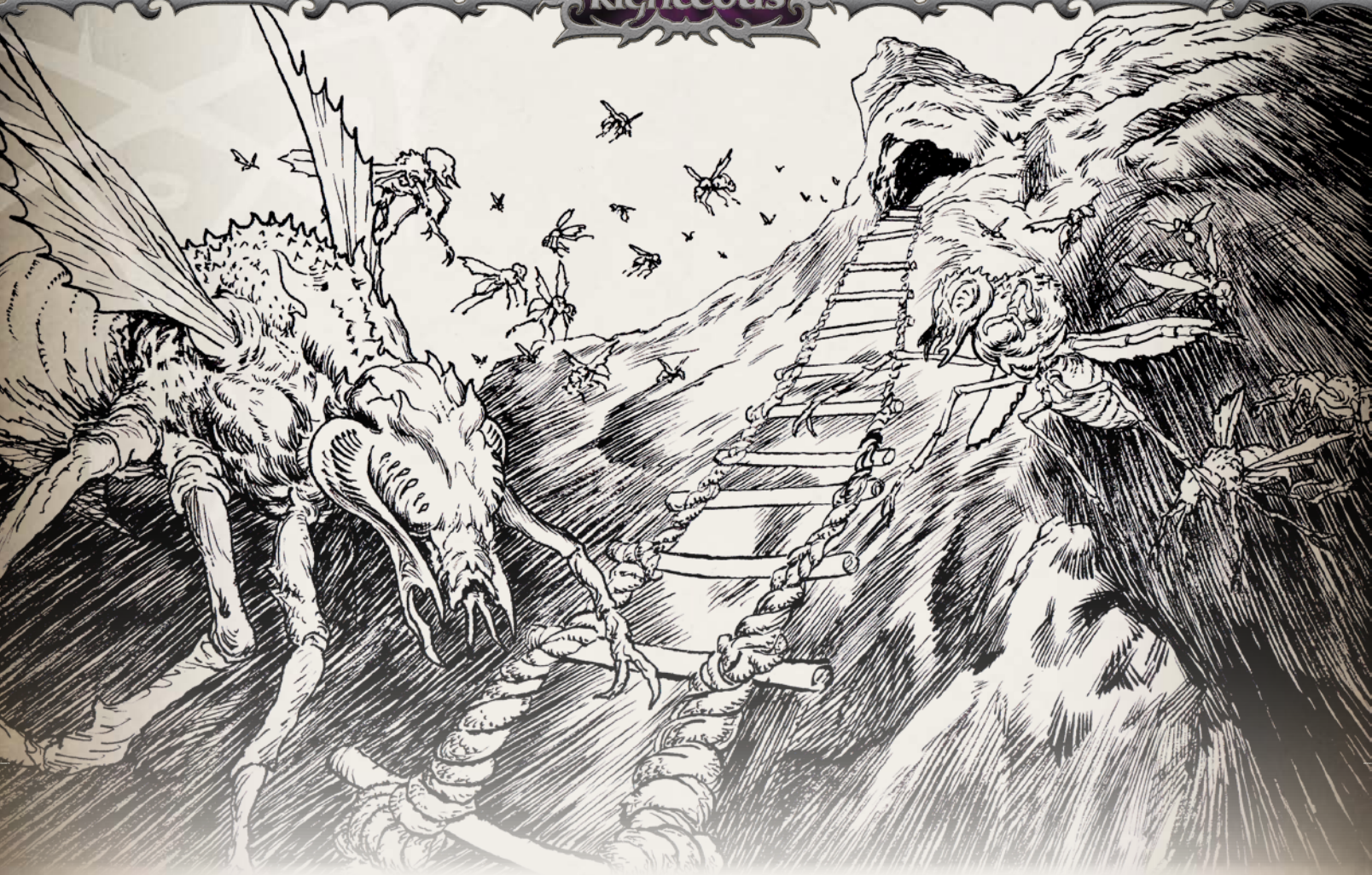


WRATH OF THE RIGHTEOUS



The Prize

PATHFINDER'S JOURNAL: SWEET ICHOR 2 OF 6

Letter received by Venture-Captain Zhanneal of Razmiran,
5 Gozran

My Dearest Lord Zhanneal,

Much has transpired since last I folded a missive into the copper claws of my raven token Foreflyer. Lest I hold you in suspense, let me tell you that our plan has progressed precisely as you envisioned it—with a modicum of improvisation on my part, naturally, to take into account destiny's random whims.

First I spent a time recuperating from the injuries sustained in my encounter with the demon brandy-seller of Aaramor. The burns from its acidic touch yielded themselves to potent healing draughts. Gad and Vitta insisted on my compensating them for replacement

potions. Though churlish on its face, this requirement suggests that we have achieved the necessary trust to proceed. Were thieves of such reputation to offer expensive philters for nothing, I would know that they intend to lure me into a trap.

The toxic brew I quaffed at the demon's shop, however, took a greater toll on me. Gad and Vitta went together into Aaramor to find an apothecary. "I know a little about alchemy," said Gad, "but not enough to formulate antidotes." From their expressions as they returned, I assumed that they had cozened said apothecary out of one. It is regrettable that a third party should be harmed by them, but we cannot allow ourselves to bear the blame for that. When we deliver the comeuppance you have planned, the potion-maker will be avenged, even if he does not know it.

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During my recovery, Gad and Vitta asked me again and again for the story behind the Bile of Abraxas. One must thank the goddess, then, that this part of the tale is essentially true, and thus easy to remember and keep consistent from one telling to the next. To give you a flavor of these many exchanges I shall telescope them into one. Gad sat always close by the fire as he listened, still and intent. Embers flew around him but never seemed to alight. Instead, they landed on my cloak, no matter where I chose to settle. Vitta paced behind him, her mind clicking like a lock's tumblers beneath her elaborately arranged and piled hair. This she kept in place with a curlicued copper structure. To call it a tiara would convey a delicacy unknown to this clumsy device, which she must have fashioned herself. Vitta asked the bulk of the questions, with Gad interrupting only to seize upon, worry, and defeat any out-of-place thread I might happen to weave into my story.

"So who is it who has this great artifact?" Vitta asked.

"The name is hard to say and, I grant, harder to remember. Ylyda Svyn."

"And she is an alchemist, you say, and a crusader against demons?"

"The first she puts in the service of the second."

"And as a crusader, she headquarters herself in the Worldwound?"

"Where better to strike at them than deep within their territory?"

The halfling furrowed her brow at me. "You expect us to believe that she built a fortress there?"

"What you believe is of course your prerogative, but I am assured that it is true."

"Assured by who?"

(Here I shall not bore you with a list of your own informants. Be assured that I revealed only what was necessary to stoke Gad's interest.)

Vitta paced an ever-tighter circle. "How is it that a fortress inside the Worldwound isn't overwhelmed by demons? Was not, in fact, overwhelmed the instant they started to build it?"

"Through some mighty discovery, one that arouses much hope among her fellow crusaders."

"Connected to this thing you'd have us steal?"

"Possibly."

"Yet," said Gad, "for some reason she hasn't shared it with them."

"Or cannot," I said. "The matter is not clear."

"And your plan for getting the Bile of Abraxas away from Ylyda Svyn?" he asked.

I bit into an apple. "I don't have one."

He flashed an unhappy smile at me.

"The plan," I said, "falls to you. That's why I sought you out. We'll get there, gain a welcome, you'll see which way the wind blows, and you'll figure it out."

"I will, will I?"

"In exchange for half the proceeds. Still a considerable sum, even when split three ways."

"Half for you, and half for the three of us?"

"That is what I propose." I chewed the last chunk of apple flesh and threw the core into the woods, where it bounced against the trunk of a pine tree.

"The three of us," Gad echoed, "being me, Vitta, and Calliard."

"You'll do the clever talking and the thinking. If I understand your reputation correctly, that's your forte. Surely there will be locks and defenses to overcome, so that'll be Vitta's sphere of influence. And as for Calliard, if we're to plunge into the Worldwound, which crawls with demons from the depths of its valleys to the peaks of its hills, we'll need a man well able to combat them. A quality he possesses in near-alarming measure."

"And why do we need you?"

"For the muscle. When have you ever stolen anything without a scrap or two along the way?"

"You can fight?" Vitta asked. "That demon in the brandy shop made short work of you."

"That, halfling, was no fight."

"One more question." Gad rose. "Why don't we take your tip, recruit our own arm man, and go to the fortress of Ylyda Svyn without you?"

"Do you know where it is?"

"Fair enough. And you'll give us the time we need with the Bile, to use it to cure Calliard?"

"Within reason, yes. If he wishes the treatment, that is. Honesty compels me to say it: your friend did not strike me as having wearied of his vice."

Gad's features hardened. "If this artifact of yours does cure the demonblood curse, he'll take it whether he likes it or not."

The antidote spared me pain but left me dizzy and unable to stand for more than a few minutes at a time. This sudden loss of my body's hard-won power infected me with a dangerous despair. Though neither Gad nor Vitta could be mistaken for a healing priestess of Sarenrae, in my helpless state I clung to what scant ministrations they did offer. To be truthful, I needed only time, food, drink, and protection against the elements and beasts of the Numerian wild. Those they gave me—Vitta brusquely, Gad with a jaunty assurance. By showing strength when I was weak, they bound me to them, creating a dependence I could but partially resist. I reminded myself of the mission, of the ultimate loyalty I owe to you, of the end we have scheduled for him. I feared myself ill equipped for the mental gyrations required of a true mountebank. To win their trust, I had to seem to trust them. Yet by increments my opinion of these criminals slipped into genuine

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affection and gratitude. On the one hand, this aided me in constructing the illusion so crucial to our aim. On the other, I will have to be wary, and harden myself against them, so I can, when the time arrives, deliver without flinch or hesitation their just comeuppances. When I awakened in darkest night, sweating in my bedroll, I could not dismiss the thought that my dizziness was not just one of my physical frame, but of the spirit.

During this period, Gad or Vitta would sometimes disappear from the camp. Though they felt no duty to inform me of their comings and goings, I presumed that they were acquiring provisions, and perhaps seeking Calliard. Would they speak to others of the Bile of Abraxas,

or of Ylyda Sryn's fortress? I had to rely on the discretion of thieves.

On the morning of the fourth day I judged myself well, and told them so. Together the three of us journeyed the short distance back to Aaramor. They had not, I gathered, progressed far in their hunt for Calliard. As the fortress loomed, I dared broach the subject of their friend, and why they had lost him. "If you don't mind me asking—"

"That phrase never precedes a question I want to hear," Vitta said.

Undeterred, I pressed on. "You've been asking after Calliard, have you not?"

Although I asked the question of Gad, it was Vitta who replied. "What of it?"

"If he wanted to, wouldn't he would find you?"

"If he wanted to be found, we wouldn't be looking for him. So that's less a question than a statement of the obvious." Vitta pulled her cloak tighter around her shoulders. A chill, reeking gust bore down from the north, where the demons dwelt.

"Don't mistake me. I'm happy you seek him."

"It suits your aims, you mean."

"Yes, yes." I took leather gloves from my pack and put them on. "It does suit my aims. It also suits me, if we are to embark on a quest together, to understand the history between the three of you. My life may come to depend on it."

Gad had moved several paces ahead of us. "Fair enough," he decreed.

"Why, then, do you seek a man who does not wish to be found, and to cure him when he does not wish to be cured?"

Vitta sighed. "He was cured of his malady, then caught it again, for us. On a previous gaffle, in the Worldwound."

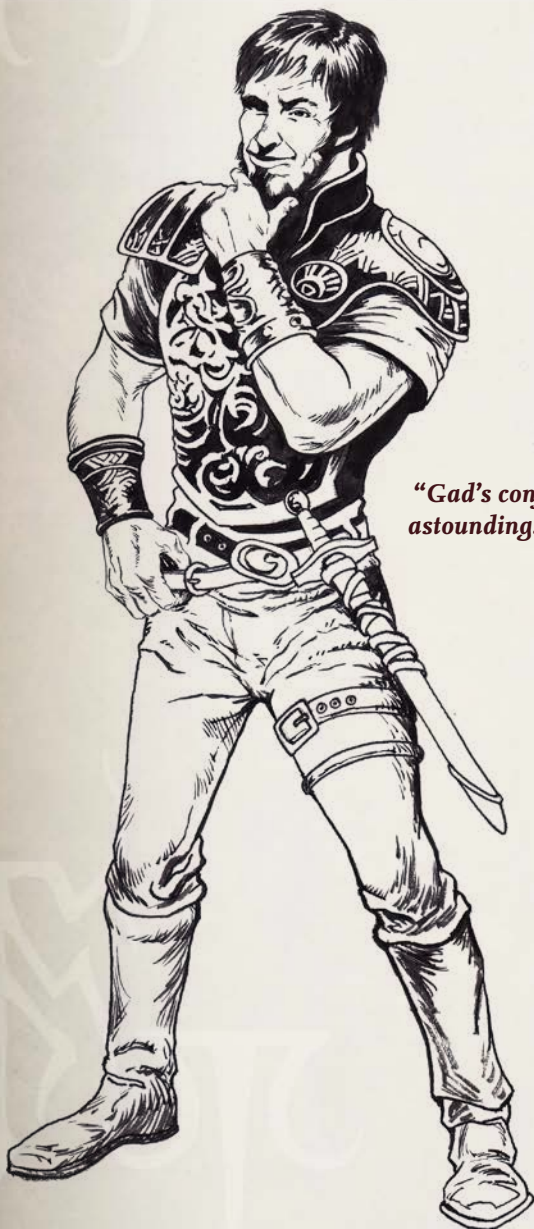
"Who did you find to swindle in the land of demons?"

She waved the question away. "Never mind that part of it. Just know that you, and everyone in that city there," she pointed to Aaramor, "and everyone in Numeria, and Mendev, and Ustalav and beyond—everyone who doesn't have a demon currently snacking on his soul—owes Calliard a debt. He let himself sup on demonblood, direct from a shadow demon's veins, because that's what the job required. So it's not just us who owe him a debt. It's half the Inner Sea."

"And you're the ones who know that," I ventured.

"We're his friends," said Gad, and a note of finality distinctly rung.

By this time we were within a quarter mile of the city's gates. On a plain outside the walls, a crowd had gathered around a curious contraption standing near to fifteen feet high. A globe of riveted bronze, big enough to encircle a horse, sat atop a quartet of spear-like, articulated legs. Atop the globe, like a learned man's cap, perched a turret festooned with glowing glass bubbles. Several feet away from it stood a woman of lissome elven proportions, clad



"Gad's confidence is astounding."

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in a leather smock worn over unflattering workman's garb. Similarly attired men and women of various races stood in a ring around her, watching her manipulate a steel wand. By casting it through the air, or twisting and extending the rod, she commanded the object to move. First it rose higher, the globe spinning slowly as the turret moved at a different rate and in the opposite direction. Then the legs activated, so that the globe stalked across the graveled ground, its gait awkward and unbalanced. Within moments the thing toppled over, sending the spectators racing away from it. The globe hit the ground with a crash of broken glass and shredded metal. It came apart, spraying metal components in all directions.

A gear rolled into our path. Vitta, a cloth already in hand, ducked down to pick it up. She inspected it briefly as it cooled in her hand, then stuffed it in her pack.

"Technic League," she explained. "You never know what their stuff might do." She snorted. "And neither do they, for that matter."

As we neared the gates, I watched Gad, to a purpose I could not fathom, transform his posture. Confidence drained away from it, replaced by a fidgeting anxiety. He looked right and left, as if afraid of apprehension, but in a way that only drew attention. Seeing him approach the guards with all-too-evident shiftiness, I could scarcely credit him as the vaunted sharper you described to me, Zhanneal. Had his setback with his friend Calliard broken him?

I tensed as the sentinels at the gate, who had earlier admitted me without a second look, took notice of his rattled condition. One broke away from the others to bar our way. Vitta and I stood several steps back, just out of earshot, as the guard braced him. The guard puffed himself to his full height and pointed to Gad's pack, demanding to inspect it. Over the course of the exchange, the body language of the two men altered. Gad palmed something into the guard's hand. Coins? A small gemstone? The sentinel returned the pack, the rest of its contents unexamined. He dropped his shoulders, becoming the supplicant to Gad's patron. They exchanged further words. The guard pointed into the depths of the city, giving directions. Gad waved for us to follow him. In parting, the sentinel gave him a happy mock salute. The other guards regarded their comrade with grumbling disdain.

Once we were well clear of them and down one of Aaramor's narrower laneways, I asked, "What was that all about?"

Gad rewarded himself with a grin. "You want to know what's up in a city, find a bent sentinel."

"That's why you looked suspicious. To attract whichever of them was most avid for a bribe."

He nodded.

"What if you'd instead called yourself to the attention of a hard case?"

"Then I'd have nothing to hide."

"Which," said Vitta, "in this case, we do not."

The Worldwound Gambit

While Ba-El Racid may never have met Gad, Vitta, and Calliard before, this is not their first appearance on Golarion's stage. In the Pathfinder Tales novel *The Worldwound Gambit*, also by Robin D. Laws, the three scoundrels team up with even more criminals and con artists to pull the daring heist of a lifetime—stealing a dangerous artifact from a new demonic fortress in the Worldwound known as the Tower of Yath!

I marveled at the ease of the interchange. Gad had taken a bet on a stranger's disposition and been proven right. Life, it dawned on me, could be perceived as a simple series of tricks. A layer of true, unspoken rules undergirding the regulations binding ordinary folk. The master of them takes short cuts through the barriers of society, to always place himself two steps ahead. Barriers we consent to, yet might set aside, if only we allowed ourselves the boldness. That is what separates honest men like us from the professional deceivers. In Gad's casual manipulation of the guard lay a temptation far more intoxicating than demon blood—a world in which others are nothing but obstacles for the overcoming.

"He gave you information?" I moved to avoid collision with a distracted man wearing a strange metal sleeve. Like the woman with the contraption outside the city, bits of it glowed and beeped.

"I asked where a chancer, new in town, might find persons of like-minded disposition," Gad said.

"Calliard might have taken up lodgings in the city, but more likely has holed himself up nearby," Vitta explained. "Either way, he found someone to help him with his practical needs, to minimize his exposure doing whatever it is he's doing."

"Hunting demons," I offered.

"As I said, whatever. So who would he trust?"

I ducked to avoid the contents of a chamber pot being flung out a second-story window into the reeking alley. "One he already knows?"

"Folks move from place to place in our line of work," Vitta said. "Go to the right tavern, and you'll spot a familiar face or two."

Thus Vitta laid out the folly behind my attempt to shadow Calliard directly. Better to find a weaker link, and tug on it. Not that I would be able to tell a friend of the poet's from a foe, or even guess at which tavern served an underworld clientele.

We made our way to a drinking hole improbably named the Broken Axle. On the outside it looked as one with the rest of stoic, battle-hardened Aaramor. Inside, it presented the same dingy familiarity as any dive. I watched as Gad, and to

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a lesser degree Vitta, again altered their postures, damping down their natural notability by minimizing gestures, moving neither slowly nor quickly and looking away from the center of the room. Without visible consultation they selected the same out-of-the-way table and within moments had descended on it. I was caught out, the gazes of slouched and sozzled patrons all upon me. I looked to Gad for a cue; with a taut head twitch he directed me to an opposite exit. By the time I reached it, they were already in motion again, zeroing in on a table occupied by two scarred dwarves and a gawky, shovel-faced human.

The human, seeing them coming, turned and bolted, tripping over his chair and falling to the grimy floor. He pulled at his hip for a knife, unsheathing it in time for Gad to kick it out of his hand. Gad let his victim get to his feet, and the man used the opportunity to run for the exit I barred. I grabbed him and pulled him through the doorway, into a narrow service corridor stacked with trash and empty barrels. He struggled for freedom; I clasped him tightly until he wore himself out.

Gad eased himself through the door, followed by Vitta. She posted herself by the threshold, in case the man had friends who might come through to defend him.

"Hello, Teson," Gad said.

Teson commenced a second round of fruitless wriggling as Gad came close. "My debt to you is canceled," he sputtered.

"How so?" Gad moved closer, pinning him between us.

"I've been helping Calliard, I swear it, and he said—"

"You informed on both of us, Teson. What you do for him erases nothing for me."

Tears ran down Teson's face. "Please, that was so long ago, and I tell you, I'm helping Calliard."

Gad pushed his face right up to Teson's. "You'll excuse me if I don't take your word for it."

"He'll tell you, he'll tell you, I swear."

"Then you'd better tell me where he is."

We stood at the grassy lip of a sand cliff. Prior scouting from the opposite direction had revealed the mouth of a man-made cave dug into the cliff side, which from our present angle we could not see. We spotted two wooden pegs driven into the dirt, from which hung a rope ladder.

"I'd better go first." Vitta withdrew from her pack the gear she'd scavenged earlier in the day. With a deftness surprising for her shape, she arranged herself on the rope ladder and shimmied out of sight.

A loud clashing sound rang across the valley. I started in alarm, but Gad placed a calming hand on my forearm. He got onto the ladder and disappeared, leaving me no choice but to follow.

I watched as he ducked into the sand cave's mouth. On reaching the end of the rope ladder, I swung on it until the momentum took me inside, then let go. A net covered with

rocks and bits of scrap metal lay across the inner surface of the cavern. After a moment's confusion, I identified it as the remains of a trap, which Vitta had sprung before entering. She picked up the gear, which I imagined she had thrown to trigger the drop trap.

Calliard crouched at the back of the cavern, lantern light casting his sharp-planed features into a sinister mask. He swigged from a wineskin, leaving a trail of black demon blood running down his chin. "You aren't welcome here," he said.

Gad took a step his way. "I don't have to hold my hands up, do I?"

Calliard wouldn't look at him. "No. But leave me be."

"We need your help."

Calliard pointed the wineskin at me. "Who's this?"

Gad ran hands over his close-cropped hair. "You don't recognize him?"

Calliard took a step my way. "Should I? Let him speak for himself."

Words lodged in my throat. Finally I managed, "When we met, you were distracted."

He peered at me. "Oh, yes. The demon had you."

Here, I admit, I allowed anger to veer me from my purpose. "You left me to die."

Dark squiggles swam in the whites of Calliard's eyes. "But you didn't. And now you're here. Your predicament at the brandy shop, then—it was no coincidence. You sought its proprietor because you were following me." Suddenly he held a thin dagger in his hand, its tip pointed at my neck. I angled myself toward Gad, as if to ask if he meant to intervene. Evidently, he did not. I would be required to prove myself.

"Yes, I came here looking for you. Don't think I'll let you stick me with that thing."

The blade didn't waver. The rest of him shook, but not the knife hand. "Shall we see who's faster?"

"Perhaps you'd rather have your questions answered."

"My question is: why shouldn't I stab you?"

"A cure. I have a cure for you."

"What makes you think I want it?"

Vitta folded her arms in disgust. "Surely you don't want this. Calliard, have you looked in a mirror lately?"

"It's up to him," Gad interrupted, "to take Ba-El's offer. Or not."

Calliard lowered the dagger—from my throat to my kidneys. "Offer?"

In bursts, I told him the story I'd laid out for Gad and Vitta—the Bile of Abraxas, Ylyda Svyn, her fortress, the prospect that it might reverse his blood habit. Of course, I explained the profit in it for me, and for his friends.

He sheathed his dagger and addressed Gad. "And you want to do this?"

"It's my responsibility. I led that mission. I made the plan. I got you into this."

He downed another swig. "The Calliard you want to save is gone. I can't imagine becoming that man again. I'm a hunter now. My veins tremble with the song of the Abyss."

"That doesn't sound good," Vitta said.

The poet nearly smiled. "It's my fate. What I did, I did willingly. And it was worth the price. I absolve you, my friends. Now go."

A trickle of sand fell from the cavern roof above his head.

Vitta came toward him. "If you were in our shoes—"

With a gesture, Calliard silenced her. The shower of sand grew thicker. Beneath us, the cavern floor shifted. Calliard reached behind him to grab his magical dart, the one he had used to such effect against the leathery demon at the brandy shop. Gad drew his sword; Vitta, a warhammer scaled to her halfling frame. Scimitar ready, I ducked to avoid a cascade of falling sand.

From the cavern roof and up through its floor surged monstrous shapes. A humanoid demon unfolded batlike wings. Its pinprick eyes flashed, tearing at my soul. Misshapen, insect-faced figures clacked at us with pincer claws. A pair of snapping jaws, winged and disembodied, swooped toward me. I slashed at it, sending its shattered teeth spraying through the collapsing cave. The others, already well into a fighting retreat, stood behind me. The bat-winged demon raked me with its claws, then sank rows of razor teeth into my neck. I hacked at it, opening the cordlike vein running up its shoulder to its throat. Black blood gushed down its scaly torso.

"Ignore the others!" Calliard shouted, his rapier pointed at my opponent. "That one's the danger!" Vitta bulled past the ineffectual swipe of another insectile thing to engage my foe from its right flank. Calliard came in from the left, allowing Gad to circle behind it. He drove his blade between the distracted creature's wings as its malformed allies nipped and snapped at us. It divided its slashes and bites between us as we landed synchronized blows. Finally it reared to the side, and we fled, fighting off the minor demons on the way.

Vitta, the first to reach the cavern mouth, reached for the rope ladder. It jerked and shimmied; she looked up and saw a wasp demon sawing at it with its mandibles. She pushed herself over the lip to free-climb down, creating handholds by driving her fingers into the hard-packed sand. The flying jaw demon harried her, until Calliard drew his bow and peppered it with arrows. When it was my turn to climb, I tumbled from the cliff, but the sand heaped below broke my fall, leaving me conscious, if rattled to the bone.

Two natural exits led from the valley, one to the south, the other to the north and west. A crawling carpet of demons filled the first of these, leaving only one direction for our flight.

"We don't want to go that way," Vitta said.

"No choice," said Calliard.

"Does this happen to you often?" Gad asked him.

"If I stay in one place too long." Calliard watched the demon horde advance. "They're indifferent hunters. I can outwit them."

He turned and led us through the valley, to the north and west. Fewer members of the demon horde waited there. Ill-coordinated, they offered feckless resistance to our charge. When they barred our way, we cut them down or drove them off.

We climbed through a bramble, and over the top of a rise. Demons scuttled behind us, barking and chortling. They had herded us where they wanted us. Ahead, a disturbingly animate mist rose through the twilight gloom. We followed Calliard into the Worldwound.



"No one can deny Vitta's abilities."