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RIGHTEOUS

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PATHFINDER'S JOURNAL: SWEET ICHOR 3 OF 6

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

The woods of the southern Worldwound keened and sibilated. Bloating insects hung from corpse-white trees, drinking their putrid sap. The air smelled coppery and burned in the back of my throat. Splotches broke out on my arms. The sky turned red or purple by day, black or dimly green by night. One morning I woke with my bedroll filled with maggots.

Calliard wore his reluctance like a cloak. Me he scarcely acknowledged. But his old friends, Gad and Vitta, he would not abandon. Whenever we turned south, the demons hunting for him intercepted us, driving us further into the demonlands. Mostly we encountered

demonic foot soldiers: crawling, hopping, flying, no two of them seeming to display the same anatomy. We clashed with enormous insects with humanoid features, fiery goat-headed demons, armored leeches, scorpionlike monstrosities with screaming human faces looking out from between their claws, shambling corpses with enormous worms protruding from their necks. Disparate in form, yet interchangeable in purpose—the drooling, snarling flotsam of the Abyss. And as we fought, Calliard named them: verMLEKS and brimoraks, kithangians and derakni. Ugly words for ugly things.

They charged at him with special hate, as if sensing his predation upon their kind. I would tell you that we fought not to slay them, but to evade, except that on occasion Calliard did finish off a straggler, then drag its corpse

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off into the greasy underbrush. Gad and Vitta turned away; under no such compunction, I watched as Calliard drained them of blood, drank his fill, and stored the rest in wineskins.

Though I have heard it described as an intoxicant, the demonblood exerted only a weak effect on Calliard. His attitude became frenetic after a swig, slowly tapering into a dulled lassitude, at which point he would partake again, renewing the cycle. From this I concluded that whatever it might have done for him at first, the drug now gave him at best fleeting pleasure, and was needed simply to maintain his state of being. Most of those unfortunate enough to succumb to the demonblood's lure needed the substance prepared via precise alchemical methods before it became a true narcotic—while Calliard seemed to have entered a new phase of addiction in which he could consume the stuff raw, perhaps the blood still wasn't as potent for him in its unaltered state.

None of us slept soundly in the Worldwound, Calliard least of all. He showed keen alertness to the different degrees of demonic presence all around us, able to discern the merely horrifying groan of a carnivorous briar from the signs of a demonic ambush. Yet in all other matters he remained steadfastly distraught, ignoring most of all Vitta's efforts to draw him into talk of old days and better times. My hopes that I might overhear clues to the whereabouts of the magical sextant Gad stole from you did not avail.

We acted on unspoken agreement. Perhaps because it offered hope, they set aside their skepticism, accepting my story of Ylyda Ssyn and her fortress impervious to demons. We took a zigzagging route through smoking hills and cancerous fens—Calliard leading us away from trouble, I by increments pulling us toward the fortress.

After several days of travel, we came upon a trio of demons feasting on a prone, screaming victim. Calliard planted a dart in the third eye of a fanged and fetal demon, Vitta bludgeoned a fluttering mass of tumorous growths, and I struck off the head of one of the flaming goat things. When we dragged the corpses away for Calliard's use, I at first took their victim for another demon—a succubus, perhaps. Beneath the filth and blood that drenched her, a damaged beauty could still be discerned. Jet-black hair clung to an elegantly sculpted face; her ice-blue eyes communicated a wordless terror. Yet from the neck down her humanity ceased. Pulsing suckers covered her exposed torso, which had twisted into a barrel shape interrupted by hairy ridges. Her thighs hewed to a roughly humanoid configuration, but from the knees down her legs resembled those of a boar or goat. I was ready to strike her head off when Gad stayed my hand.

He knelt over her, cleaning her face with a cloth, and offering her water. This she finally accepted, though she would not take any food. For near to half an hour she could

form nothing but whimpers. With confident words Gad calmed her. Only once did he misjudge her, saying:

"We'll get you out of here, I promise."

At this his work was undone, and the woman writhed and grabbed for his knife. "No, no, don't don't don't," she repeated.

At length he restored her shattered calm and got her to speak her name: Uldii.

"Uldii," he said, "I hate to admit it, but we're in a bit of a fix ourselves. You could help by telling us what happened to you. If you can manage it."

The suckers on her torso stilled as she visibly fought for composure. "Punished... punished."

"By demons?"

She shook her head furiously.

"Here in the Worldwound?"

She nodded, gasping.

"Who else but demons would do ill to you here?"

"Yuh yuh yuh..."

Gad petted her forehead. "Take your time, Uldii. Take your time."

(From here I will render Uldii's halting speech without her many moans and stutterings.)

"A crusader. I came here to work for her, as a guard, but she accused me of sin, and did this to me."

"This crusader wouldn't be Ylyda Ssyn?"

"That is her name."

"For what crime were you punished?"

"All who serve her must vow celibacy, so that demons cannot exploit our carnal urges to pierce the bubble of her fortress. It..."

"It's warded against demons, even here in the Worldwound. We've heard of it."

"I made no such promise, nor knew of the requirement when I signed on back in Nerosyan. Once here, she surprised us by forcing the vow on us. I agreed, but then..."

"You had feelings for someone," Gad suggested.

"Yes."

"And she found out."

Uldii threw her head back and closed her fists tight. "It was a moment's lapse, Endran and me. We begged for understanding, but she would not yield. She's hungry for more subjects."

"Subjects?"

"For this." She gestured to her ruined body. "Her experiments."

"What she has done to you—what purpose can it serve?"

Yellow tears pooled in her eyes and slid down her cheeks. "She says she will understand the secrets of demons."

"By infecting people with demonic traits? Why?"

"Something about bodily humors. It was all madness to me."

"You made the mistake of saying so?" Gad asked.

"I got away, but Endran did not."

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Gad caressed her brow.

"If you go there," she said, "do not waste time with her delusions. Help the others leave. Away from this place, their senses might return."

He asked her more of Ylyda Svyn's intentions, but she knew little more, and soon lapsed into unconsciousness. With Calliard off in the bush drinking demonblood, the three of us conferred.

"We should get her out of here," Gad said.

Although this would be contrary to our aims, Zhanneal, I did not wish to say it and lose whatever tenuous esteem Gad had acquired for me. Fortunately, Vitta took our part, though of course unknowingly:

"She won't make it half a mile. She can't even walk."

"We can't leave her here to die."

"Then we can stand vigil with her, while she does."

Uldii cried out in pain; Gad's head snapped toward her. "Isn't there something we can do for her?"

"A healing draught would only prolong her agony," said Vitta.

Gad turned on me. "I thought you said this Ylyda Svyn was a crusader."

"So I understood. I had no idea she'd lost her bearings."

"She came here, didn't she?" Vitta adjusted her wire-lattice hairpiece, frowning as it refused to stay in place. "Are you complaining, Gad? Don't you prefer to gaffle the loathsome?"

"There is that." Gad bit down on his lower lip in concentration. "But I hate to work a crazy mark."

"Why?" I dared ask.

"Any good gaffle exploits its target's self-interest. Which the unhinged tend to lose track of."

Calliard knelt over Uldii, listening to her speak. Gad spotted it and bolted in their direction. By the time he reached them, Calliard was rising, and the woman lay dead at his feet, her neck askew. Gad grabbed Calliard by the tunic, sending both men toppling over into a patch of rotting vegetation. Vitta pulled Gad off; I did the same with Calliard, surprised by the power of his slender limbs.

"It was her request," Calliard said. Once away from Gad he ceased to struggle, so I let him go.

Gad brushed slimy leaves from his leggings. "That didn't mean you had to do it."

Calliard stood. "Maybe someday I'll ask you to do the same for me."

"Not a helpful statement, Cal."

Vitta patted his sleeve. "It was a mercy, Gad."

"That's not for us to say," Gad replied, heading off in a random direction. I pointed him to the likeliest path. The fortress had to be close at hand. From the look of her legs, Uldii would not have gotten far before the demons downed her.

For a time, the silence between us pressed on us more heavily than did the Worldwound's pervasive wrongness. Careful not to expose ourselves, we skirted a clearing. We heard the bellows of a pained beast, and saw a milk-white, two-headed snake, easily six feet in diameter and perhaps forty feet long, fight itself to the death. This animal should not exist, but here the illogical principles of the Abyss pertained, in defiance of earthly law. With one of its heads, the creature ripped out the throat of the other, then shuddered in shock as blood rushed from the wound. Its death shrieks pierced our ears, deafening us to the sounds of an approaching patrol.

When we turned around, they had encircled us: a dozen men and women, heavily armored and better armed, shields and tunics bearing the heraldry of a crusader order. A bear and stag supported an escutcheon featuring a lantern, from which beams of white light coursed. Each held a readied crossbow. As the biggest man among our party, I had the usual pleasure of being

"Sometimes death is the greater mercy."



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targeted by more than my share of them. I held my hands up, and the others followed suit—Vitta first, Calliard a moment later, and then Gad.

A slim warrior, who unlike the others wore a flowing green plume on his helmet and held no weapon, raised his visor, revealing a long-bridged nose and widely separated, arched brows. “Identify yourselves,” he called, as if making an effort to deepen a naturally nasal voice.

“We could ask the same of you,” said Gad, “unless the Order of the Solar Lantern now grants fiefs in the Worldwound, and we trespass on your lord’s domain.”

“That you have heard of our order gives us no particular assurance,” said the knight.

“I am Gad of Mendev. My comrades Calliard and Vitta, and our business associate Ba-El Racid, who comes to us from far-off Garund.”

“You may address me as Sir Byre,” said the knight, “and indeed these lands are under our protection. None of you bear crusader arms.”

“We do not,” said Gad.

“Then I cannot but wonder what honest business brings you to this pit of demonkind.”

“We came here fleeing demons.”

“Then you fled to the wrong place.”

“We reached the same conclusion. One might suspect that the demons who drove us here bore us ill will.”

“What sort of demons?”

“They’re all the same to me,” said Gad. “Calliard?”

The poet’s lips twitched in annoyance. “Quite the variety. Most recently, we came upon a brimorak and a gibrieth, and some sort of fetal thing I’m not sure has a name.”

The knight eyed Calliard suspiciously. “An expert on demons, are we?”

“He is a close student of their ways,” said Gad.

Calliard stifled a wince.

Byre removed his helmet, revealing a shaven skull of slightly narrow proportions. “You were driven here, you say?”

“They’re massing on the border,” Gad replied. “We keep trying to find a way back that isn’t clogged with the things, so far to no avail. If you don’t want us here, that’s a sentiment we echo.”

“You be quiet,” Byre said, turning to address Calliard. “Your expertise in demonology. The smart-mouth hints at something unsavory about it.”

“No need for rudeness,” Gad muttered.

“All we want is to leave,” said Calliard. “We harbor neither intention nor capacity to interfere with your affairs.”

I could barely contain my bafflement. Our perfect chance to seek entry to Ylyda Svyn’s sanctum, and they were resisting it!

Byre placed himself nose to nose with Calliard. “You left my question unanswered.”

“My friend suffers from undue modesty,” said Gad. “Demons dislike him because he hunts them too effectively. A personal grudge, you might call it. Makes him a dangerous man to rub elbows with.”

“Your crusade is not ours, knight,” said Calliard. “Let us be.”

“You’re coming with us.” Sir Byre replaced his helmet and dropped his visor. His people arrayed themselves behind us, crossbows at our backs.

“This is a mistake,” Calliard said.

The crusader’s voice echoed inside his helmet. “My lady will want to speak with you. If you are the demon hunter you claim—”

“I make no claims whatsoever—”

“And with a demon army forming on the border, we may require your services. Whether you lend them voluntarily or not.”

As they marched us through across a smoking clearing, I realized what Gad and Calliard had done. Had they portrayed themselves as seeking entry to the fortress, they would have aroused suspicion and perhaps been refused. By vexing Byre and then making a show of their wish to leave, they’d finagled him into the invitation we needed. What’s more, they had fallen into the stratagem without prior discussion, each picking up the other’s cues. They’d even used the genuine tensions between them to lend their deception a touch of reality.

I resolved to find a way to use this insight against them, when the time comes.

The fortress rose from a patch of blackened earth in the middle of a brown and gnarled heath.

“Not what you expected?” Gad asked.

Indeed it was not. Our talks, Zhanneal, had led me to imagine a grand structure, all turrets and buttresses towering in marble glory over the corruption of the demonlands. Instead it recalled the fortifications of a primitive era. An outer wall of pine logs encircled the installation, including a corral and parade ground. A pair of blockhouses interrupted the wall at opposite points of the circle. Their outward faces lay open, allowing helmeted guardians within to swivel ballistae toward flying targets. Inside the wall squatted a boxlike construction, three stories high, topped by another guard station behind a crenelated wall. As if built on an unsound foundation, this main structure tilted noticeably toward the west. Scorch marks and the occasional gouge marred the wooden surfaces of the wall, blockhouses, and central fortress. I noted no particular signs of magical warding, but that absence surprised me less than the general poverty of the place that has for so many months dominated our

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aspirations. The Bile of Abraxas's effect would likely become apparent, if visible at all, only when activated by demonic attack.

A portcullis-style gate beside the southerly blockhouse controlled entry through the outer wall. Seeing Sir Byre and his patrollers approach, watchmen above signaled to men below to heave it up. Inside the wall a handful of smaller outbuildings provided fortress inhabitants with meager necessities. A covered stable stood next to an open pen, where piglets nosed the teats of a malnourished sow. Soot-colored pigeons trilled from an ill-made coop, beside a series of sheds that might have been armories or storehouses. Ladders inside the wall led up to additional fighting platforms, allowing defense from all directions.

I watched Gad and the others size up the place, perhaps wondering why their expertise would be needed to snatch a treasure from such a hardscrabble outpost. But its guardians were many, alert, and uniformly well armed. The crusaders of the Solar Lantern regarded us with undisguised wariness. Were we not with Sir Byre, I am sure they would have set upon us with the same ferocity with which they greeted demonic assaults.

A half-orc warrior, her armor not so constricting as to conceal her generous frame, bared tusks at us as we passed.

Gad leaned over to Vitta. "Remember, there's a vow of celibacy here."

The halfling answered him with a mock snort. "You know soldier girls aren't my type."

Byre escorted us into what you might call a reception hall, were it not stacked with bags of grain and racks of spears. It led toward a staircase to a second-floor hallway. We waited, as he instructed. My weary legs pulled at me, but with only crates to sit on I remained upright. I would not be caught by the lady of the fortress in a shameful lollygag.

We did not have to wait long before a human woman in a stained linen smock and shapeless dark leggings appeared at the top of the staircase. Her left shoulder tipped down; her steps down the stairs betrayed a barely perceptible limp. She wore her hair in a sloppy brown tangle. These defects of appearance, however, paled in comparison to a tin mask that concealed the left side of her jaw, all the way up to her ear. A dirty leather strap held it in place. You might have taken her for some drudge, brought on by the people of the fortress out of pity for her pitiful condition, if not for Byre's obvious reverence for her. He kept a step behind her, as if ready to catch her should she stumble.

Right away, she made for Gad. "Sir Byre says you come to us as an expert in demonkind."

Never had I heard so deferential a throat-clearing as Byre made to warn her off. In a less dicey situation I might have laughed. "Not that one, milady," he said, in an all-too-audible whisper. With a twitch of his shoulder, he indicated Calliard. "This is the hunter."

Ylyda Svyn broke from Gad to regard the poet. She shrank back from him. "Byre, can't you see? Get him out of here."

Byre jolted as if struck. "What, milady?"

"He's blood-addled! An addict!"

Gad stepped between Ylyda Svyn and Calliard. "Hold on a moment. None of us begged to come here."

"He presented himself as a capable demon fighter." Byre put a hand on Ylyda Svyn's good shoulder; she pulled away.

Gad ignored him, focusing only on the masked woman. "In fact, we were invited here with crossbows. So if you're going to insist on us coming here and then act like we're dogs not fit to darken your doors, well, I'm going to ask you to make up your minds."

As if Gad had pulled some hidden lever in her, Ylyda Svyn's demeanor abruptly altered, from command to apology. "Perhaps you should tell me again who you are."

"I am Gad of Mendev, and these are my associates, Calliard, Vitta, and Ba-El Racid. We were driven here in flight from demons, which gather on the Numerian border. If you crusaders really are the demon-fighters you claim to be, maybe you should do that, instead of delaying the escape of innocent refugees from this godsforsaken pest-hole."

To the extent she could, she straightened her spine. "I'll have you know, Gad of Mendev, that this 'pest-hole,' as you call it, is soon to be scourged, cleansed, and rendered whole again. And that is a goal that justifies the dragooning of any number of travelers, should they prove their worth to us."

Gad cast a mocking gaze about the room. "You mean to remake the Worldwound, from this place? You'll be lucky if it lasts another week."

Her transfixed expression, face turned heavenward, would have resembled a painting of a saint or prophet, were it not for the mask. "Flimsy though these walls seem, what we'll achieve here will prove the mockers wrong—a thousand times over. You might remain here to see it. But jokes are always told out of cowardice, aren't they?"

"You lost me on that last turn," said Gad.

She swept over to Calliard. "Show me your tongue."

"Why?" asked the poet.

"Humor her," said Gad, "so we can go."

Calliard opened his mouth, but did not quite stick his tongue out.

The walls rattled, buffeted by the wind. "A storm comes," said Ylyda Svyn. "Demons often follow. You're safer in here, until it passes." She turned to Sir Byre, who moved with speed to her side. "Order bunks made up for these four in one of the storage chambers."

"Milady?" He regarded her with a fanatic zeal which, in a way I could not exactly pinpoint, reminded me of Calliard's expression when he flayed the demon back in Numeria. Other crusaders had gathered on the landing above, exuding the wary professionalism of the well-honed soldier.

“Should they prove worthy, we’ll induct them, as probationaries,” Ylyda Svyn told him. “If not, they will go on their way, when it is safer.”

“Yes, milady.”

She redirected her attention to us. “We do not expect visitors to follow the oaths of our order in their entirety, but for the length of your stay, there is one promise we must exact, for the safety of all. Hold yourself pure from carnal temptation. Wards of my own devising bulwark this fortress against demonic incursion. Should you feel the pull of animal lusts, know that these are the workings of demons. If you give in to them and defile your bodies, you create a crack in the protective sphere, which they can pry open to get at us. You may think this foolish but I assure you of its absolute necessity. Am I understood?”

“I think it’s safe to say,” Gad pronounced, “that none of us took this for that kind of house.”

She glowered at him. “It is no joking matter.”

“Understood, milady,” Gad said.

“Now I must return to my researches.” She exited through a door to some other first-floor room.

Vitta, I could tell, was already making a mental map of the building.

Byre and his subordinates left to fulfill their mistress’s orders.

Vitta raised an eyebrow at Gad. “She likes you.”

“Part of the job,” Gad said.

“The broken ones always do,” Vitta said. An uncomfortable silence hung, referring, I inferred, to a history I did not share with them.

Shortly thereafter, rank-and-file crusaders arrived to settle us into a drafty room.

When they had gone, Calliard said, “She wants us to break her rules. To feel justified, when she decides to do to us what she did to that poor woman.”

“She’ll come to love us,” said Gad.

An envy seethed in me, for the ease with which he drew others to him, the way he stirred them and twisted them around.

As the storm crested, we heard shouts from outside, and what might have been the twang of firing ballistae. If it was a battle we heard, it was a perfunctory one, and nothing came of it.

Since then our residency at the fortress has been a tenuous one. We have played the roles Gad cast us in—initially reluctant, but increasingly open to joining their order. They—Byre especially, but also his mistress—remain wary of us. She finds reasons to visit Gad, but he arouses a nervousness in her, giving him scant opportunity to create the bond he seeks.

They do, however, run short of supplies, from alchemical compounds to further her researches to everyday staples. To this purpose I gained knowledge of their supply train.

Appended to this message you’ll find a list of items they require, and the contacts through which you can arrange for goods, equipment, and a sum of coins to be conveyed to them. As difficult as you may find it to loose the cash on short notice, I urge you to do it. Fanatic as they may be, the crusaders of the Solar Lantern understand the practicalities of their position. I see no faster or firmer way to make ourselves indispensable to them than with a shipment of goods. When considered against the value of the Bile of Abraxas, it represents a shrewd investment. It will earn us the trust we so desperately need to achieve our ends. This in turn ought to protect us from the greatest danger we now face, greater still than the demons outside the walls—the prospect of winding up on Ylyda Svyn’s surgery slab.



“Something in Ylyda is damaged—and not just her face.”