

WRATH OF THE
RIGHTEOUS

The Clinch

PATHFINDER'S JOURNAL: SWEET ICHOR 4 OF 6

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

The precariousness of our position at Ylyda Slyn's redoubt—which she calls Fort Clearwater, never mind that there are no clean water sources here, and her clerics must divinely purify every drop we drink or cook with—increased by the day, until the arrival of the caravan bearing your gold and gifts.

Before then, we found ourselves all but prisoners here, permitted to move about only under escort. We shared with the crusaders their meager meals: hardtack, salt pork, and soups made from a powder of desiccated vegetables.

In an attempt to open myself to contact with the soldiers, I adopted an ostentatious training regimen in

the sparring yard inside the outer walls. A few crusaders engaged me, but through a wall of polite reserve. Regarding their mistress I heard only expressions of fealty—some personally to her, but most to the hope she represented, that through her researches, the Worldwound could be cleansed of demonic influence. In this they struck me not as mad, but as sane men and women who had chosen to accept the fanatical as the ordinary. I could not decide whether this made them less dangerous, or more.

Aside from this unsuccessful attempt to make connections, I left the primary mission to Gad and his confederates, as our enlisted expert in the arts of deception. I did not try to direct their efforts, but rather let them seek the Bile of Abraxas and work out how to steal it as they saw fit.

The Clinch

In Vitta I saw a keen observer at work, imperceptibly cataloging the people, their equipment, what magics they carried, and their areas of responsibility at the fortress. Most of all she studied the installation. Whenever crusaders ushered us into an unfamiliar room, I saw her mentally measure its walls and commit to memory the placement of its major fixtures.

Whatever confidence I gained from her subtle competence, Calliard took from me in double measure. He kept mostly to our rooms, an absence our hosts clearly noticed. When crusaders did approach me, it was to ask about him.

Is he really a demonblood fiend? How did I come to fall in with such an untrustworthy traveling companion? What symptoms does he show? Is it contagious? Demonblood can't turn you into a demon, can it? What if a demon offers him its blood in exchange for ours?

I fear that I mustered less than full assurance in answering these questions, as these doubts were also my own.

On several occasions I caught Calliard with a wineskin nearby and the black blood of demonkind on his lips. As the days blurred together, his wineskins diminished one by one.

One morning I woke to see Gad and Vitta snoring on their respective bunks—him quietly, she cacophonously—and Calliard's bed empty. Minutes became hours, and he did not come back. If the crusaders found him prowling without an escort, the game might be up. At best we could hope to be expelled from the fortress. Ultimately I could not restrain myself from shaking Gad awake.

"Calliard's gone," I told him.

He pulled the blanket over his head and rolled over. "Don't worry about him."

An hour later, when Gad chose to stir, the poet had still not returned.

"Has he fled?" I asked.

Gad yawned. "He'll be back."

"How can you be so sure?" I said. "He came with us but reluctantly."

"But we're here now, and we're safer with him than without him, so he won't let us down."

I admit that here I let my anxieties gain temporary purchase. These three were clearly well accustomed to entering the homes of their marks, making themselves at home, and waiting for the perfect moment to strike. Though well established as a man of courage, I could not claim the same serenity. "Don't you see he's a liability now?" I gripped Gad's arm, receiving a withering look that shamed me to the marrow. I let go, but the damage was done.

"Him I know," Gad said. "You're just the finder."

My chagrin showed itself as indignation. "If we do earn our way into their trust, it will be through the shipment my patron sends!"

"Save the self-congratulations till it happens, Racid."

My gut roiled as the double instability of my situation came home to me. Naively, I had forgotten that I still needed to prove myself to Gad, just as much as we needed to prove ourselves to the crusaders. More hinged on your shipment than I had allowed myself to apprehend. My best option for the removal of foot from mouth lay in a swift change of subject. "What if they catch him?"

"They won't," Gad said, with a finality I dared not ignore.

And indeed he was right: less than two hours later, Calliard slipped back into the room, black-stained wineskins bulging once again, face blazing with the pride of the kill.

During this period, Gad earned a daily summons from Ylyda Svyn. Though short at first, the appointments lengthened over time. I feared to quiz him on the matter, but fortunately Vitta had no such hesitations, and questioned him closely on each advance of his so-called gaffle.

"What did she want?" Vitta asked, the first time he came back.

"She's not sure yet," Gad answered.

"I could tell her what she wants."

"What did you talk about?"

"Him, mostly." Gad meant Calliard. "Whether he can be trusted."

If the comment perturbed Calliard, he made no sign of it.

"She didn't ask about you?" Vitta said.

"A little," Gad replied.

The next time: "What excuse did she give for this interview?"

"There were questions still unresolved from our last talk," Gad said.

"About Calliard?"

"Ostensibly. But now she wants to hear my story."

"And how does she explain that curiosity?"

"She senses something deeper in me, that might be brought out through close moral instruction."

Vitta snorted. "So that's what she calls it."

"She had a son, who was killed. She imagines he would have looked like me, if he'd lived."

"Let me guess. Demons took him."

Gad nodded. "At a tender age."

"She's scarcely older than you are."

"The mark who fools herself does half the job for you," Gad said.

Vitta removed a lock from her kit and, to keep her fingers in nimble form, commenced to disassemble it. "That wasn't a complaint."

When he came back the next time, she asked: "Has she adopted you yet?"

"She did wonder if I'd considered the benefits of joining a holy order."

"You stalled?"

WRATH OF THE RIGHTEOUS

"The rules of playing hard to get remain the same, even in a spiritual seduction."

Vitta laughed. "Just don't be surprised when she rips her smock off."

A rueful expression came over Gad. "That won't happen."

"You're not starting to feel sorry for her, are you?"

"It's all part of the magic," he said.

"She's still not letting you wander unaccompanied," Calliard interjected.

"Not yet."

And the next time, Vitta asked: "So?"

"All smocks remained on," Gad said.

"And no word of the artifact?"

"She asked me about Sir Byre. He's been warning her off of me. She seems dissatisfied with him."

"Not worshipful enough?"

"She kept veiling the issue, so I'm not sure what's going on between them. He has qualms about the experimentation, maybe?"

"That would make him less of a maniac than her," Vitta mused.

"Or a man who permits what he knows to be wrong," Gad said.

"You want to dislike him, because he's in our way."

Gad whetted his dagger. "She was asking about the three of you. Wanted to be sure you were following her celibacy edict."

"In other words," said Vitta, "she's imagining us under her knife."

I shuddered, and prayed that night to the goddess for the rapid arrival of your shipment, which would establish us as more useful alive and intact.

The next morning the supply wagons came through the gate, with nearly the full amount of goods and coin I'd asked of you. These exerted near-immediate benefits: when he returned from that afternoon's session with Ylyda Ssyn, Gad told us that we were now free to roam the grounds.

I took advantage of my hard-won freedom by assisting the crusaders in stowing their new gear. The ballista crew greeted with particular gratitude the barrel of alchemical coatings I asked you to send. They had used magical oils on their bolts before, but had never had it supplied to them in such generous profusion. One of the crusaders, Eilin by name, voiced her misgivings—once in the past they'd been gulled, and purchased a supply that did nothing against their foes—but I promised her that my friends back home would have performed the necessary checks, and would not have been saddled with a wrong or counterfeit formulation. When my word proved less than reassuring, I prompted them to try it out, at which point they were amazed to find their shots more accurate, and piercing the wooden target with more force than the unoiled bolts. With their fears thus allayed, the crusaders happily allowed me to join them in applying the coating to every ballista bolt we could find.

It took little time for your gift to prove its worth against actual foes. The very next night, Calliard shot up in his bunk, waking the rest of us. "They're coming," he said, already clambering into his armor.

Dulled by slumber, I said, "Who?"

Distant shrieks filled the air. Moments later, alarms gonged throughout the fortress. The others had already half-equipped themselves; I rushed to catch up. We bolted into the corridor, into a press of crusaders all rushing toward the exit. Shadowy hands burst through the wooden outer wall to seize a soldier. Calliard threw a



"Sir Byre is far from happy with the way Gad's insinuated himself."

The Clinch

dart, piercing the demonic arm; with a howl, it withdrew. Crusaders arrayed themselves in formation around the shattered wood. Calliard and Gad kept on down the stairs. I'd already lost track of Vitta, who as a halfling stood shorter than the others. Though tempted to stay and fight at this breach, I followed Gad instead. Without him, our plan for the artifact would fail. The crusaders would fight for their fortress; I would protect the man on whom our greater aim depended.

We burst through the doorway and into an ill-lit battle. Flying demons had landed inside the outer wall to tear at the fortress's defenders. Around us, crusader sentinels touched torches to bonfires. These burst to life, allowing us to see our foes nearly as well as they, with their unearthly senses, could see us.

Disorder reigned as a crush of defenders built up around the fortress's threshold. Demons hemmed us in, and I feared for a moment that we would die trampling one another before even reaching our enemies. I bulled my way through the crowd to leap at the nearest demon, slashing with my scimitar at its flapping wings. Blood sprayed me as my blade met resistance, then pushed through. I ducked a clawed, swiping hand; it struck the crusader behind me a glancing blow. Together those of us in the front rank pushed at the demons, either shoving them back or forcing them into flight.

Already I'd lost track of Gad, and scanned the chaotic scene for him. Calliard I could see, so I followed him in the hope that he would seek Gad. Instead he ran for the blockhouse, where the ballista crews fired their bolts into the darkness.

As Calliard sprinted, the demons in the courtyard turned as one in his direction. The force allowing blood-addled Calliard to sense their approach evidently worked both ways. Whether by instinct or foreknowledge, the demons understood that he was their hunter. A cry went up in their scorching tongue, and they bounded toward him in an ill-advised rush. By turning from their present foes, they gave them free shots at their backs and flanks. Crusaders seized on the blunder, slashing with abandon.

An obscene demon-cherub, lofted on undersized wings, buzzed at Calliard's head. I swatted it with the side of my scimitar, sending it looping into a bonfire. Calliard reached the blockhouse steps. I turned my back to his, to guard it, swiping wildly at any demons who came near him. Realizing that their rash concentration on one target made them easier prey for the crusaders, they broke formation, leaving only a beetle-like thing to clack at me with razored mandibles. I kept my back to Calliard's as he climbed the stairs, forcing the demon back with a series of wild swipes. When we were halfway up, I let the thing get close, thinking it had slipped past my guard, then kicked out and sent it bouncing backward

Digging Deeper

Interested in learning more about the setting for this story? Fort Clearwater also appears in *Pathfinder Campaign Setting: The Worldwound*, a 64-page supplement detailing the entirety of the demon-plagued Worldwound and the people—fiendish and otherwise—who live there. You can also learn more about the demon lord Abraxas and his cults in *Pathfinder Campaign Setting: Lords of Chaos*, or embark on further adventures in the Worldwound in *Pathfinder Tales: King of Chaos*.

down the stairs. It landed on its back, where a trio of crusaders combined efforts to crack open its outer insect shell and pulp the guts inside.

Once inside the blockhouse we saw the lay of it. Rings of demons hopped and writhed around the outer wall, trying to scale the ramparts or waiting for the winged ones to open a gate or drop them inside the killing ground.

Eilin, on the ballista, fired a bolt uselessly into the distance. "Stand aside!" Calliard barked. Eilin stood her ground; he shouldered her aside. She drew a sword to fight him; I interposed myself between them. "Trust him," I heard myself shouting, to my surprise.

"Load this thing!" Calliard called.

Still Eilin protested. "Do you even know how to—"

"No, and it doesn't matter. Load it!"

Snarling in understandable fury, she waved to her crew to comply.

Calliard clumsily aimed the ballista, muttering under his breath. The bolt, coated with its magical oils, disappeared into the inky sky. A groan thundered out, so loud that it shook the blockhouse floor. In the distant gloom, an enormous demon fell to the ground, pierced by the bolt. The blockhouse crew readied bows and rained arrows on it.

"I can tell where the worst ones are," Calliard said. "Load me!"

Another bolt went into the mechanism. Calliard closed his eyes, hummed in concentration, and fired. The bolt curved and vanished. Then came another thundering scream, and another great bat-winged demon plummeted from the darkness.

Claws appeared on the blockhouse ledge. I slammed my scimitar down, nearly severing them. They vanished, followed by a thud.

A gibbering passed through the demon horde. I would describe it as terror, but I know you, as a learned Pathfinder, would scoff at the notion that demons could feel such an emotion. It was certainly confusion, and perhaps a collective understanding that the tide of battle had reversed itself upon them. Whatever the contents of

WRATH OF THE RIGHTEOUS

their discordant bleatings, the demons came to a decision, and lumbered, hopped, or flapped into the night.

Of the demons left in the courtyard, most were winged, and flew away to join their brethren. Those few who remained now skittered, trapped and outnumbered, in a doomed attempt to evade the crusaders. One, a writhing mass of hooked, wormlike appendages, hung in a net. Vitta stood near it, her cocky posture suggesting that she'd been the one to ensnare it.

Gad stood among a small knot of crusaders who'd gathered to protect Ylyda Svyn. At his feet lay Sir Byre, the paladin's cuirass torn apart. I bounded down the blockhouse steps for a closer look. A jagged chunk of organic matter jutted from his wound. Whether this fragment had come from a demon's claw, spear, or tooth, I couldn't say.

Though concerned for Gad's condition, I had the wit to address the question to Ylyda Svyn: "How fare you?"

"Sir Byre owes your friend his life," the alchemist said.

Byre grimaced, an expression that required no explanation beyond the pain of his wound. But I couldn't help but perceive that owing anything to Gad, much less his life, injured him more cruelly than any demon could.

The next day, thanks to the potent healing prayers of crusader priests, no trace lingered of the wound that had nearly killed Byre. He spotted me in the blockhouse, where I salved the bruised pride of the ballista crew Calliard had so brusquely outshone. As their lieutenant climbed the stairs, the crew fell into a posture of casual submission. He acknowledged them, told them to be at ease, then asked me for a private talk. We walked down the stairs together and toward a corner of the courtyard.

He addressed me with a stiff formality. "They tell me that it was you who secured the additional goods and weapons that so aided us in last night's attack."

"Each of us contributes what he can," I answered.

"What I mean to say is that it was you in particular who did this, and not the others."

"I am but the agent of a liberal patron. He has heard of your order, and your scheme to revive the Worldwound. Though he despises all manifestations of evil, he reserves a special hatred for demonkind."

Byre squinted at me. "You'll excuse me if I seek tedious distinctions. I am a military man, used to simple words. The patron is yours specifically, and not Gad's?"

"As I said, we are a team, each of us bringing what we can."

"Calliard brings a sense for demons, one that gives with one hand and takes with another. Vitta I gather is an expert in the laying of traps, which she showed by capturing that demon last night. You connect us to a key patron. But Gad—I am left to wonder what purpose he serves. What contribution he makes to your team, I mean."

"Ah. Well. He is noted for his diplomacy, I suppose. His ability to persuade and communicate." An ability I found myself sadly lacking, groping for an innocent description of Gad's talents.

Byre tried to smile but couldn't quite manage it. "And what use is diplomacy in the battle against demonkind? You can't charm a derakni, or gull a gibrileth."

"Last night, Ylyda Svyn said he saved your life."

Byre shuddered. "If he had not, a brother of the Solar Lantern would have stepped in to do the same."

"I would certainly hope so." Sweat pooled in my palms. I still had no idea what he was driving at. "You'll forgive my lack of wit. Has something untoward passed between the two of you?"

"You are a good man, Ba-El Racid. And trusting, like your patron. But don't you find it odd that this man would arrive from nowhere, and within days cozy himself to our lady like some long-lost son? She is wise to the secrets of alchemy, and the relentless corruption of the demon horde. But as to the more venial flaws of ordinary men... Do you not think that a person of virtue would respect the existing arrangement in a place he visits, and not worm his way into matters that are none of his business?"

Finally it dawned—Gad's attentions to Ylyda Svyn had so accelerated that Byre feared displacement. Byre's unease showed the progress of our scheme, and at the same time threatened it. Yet he too was in a bind. He wanted to rid the fortress of Gad without cutting off your patronage, Zhanneal.

"If Gad has treated you with disrespect, I'll teach him his manners. For what offenses should I seek his apology?"

"Don't worry about my position, my friend. Worry about your own. You're the leader of this expedition, are you not?"

Unable to see the smart response, I stalled: "We are not pledged to a chain of command, as you are."

Byre pointed a finger at my chest. "Then let me explain something. He who controls the purse strings issues the orders. Has this Gad usurped your authority, as he now attempts to disrupt that of the Solar Lantern?"

"I hadn't considered it that way." He sought my allegiance, I realized. And I should pretend to give it. It's what Gad would do. "Perhaps he does wrong me. What do you suggest, my friend?"

"Let me take care of that," he said, and stalked away.

"What did you say to Sir Byre?" Gad demanded. The two of us walked from the bunkroom and down the stairs. We had both been summoned by a sentinel to attend Ylyda Svyn. He had been handed a note, which he brandished at me without letting me read its contents.

In damnably halting fashion, surprised by his anger, I recounted the conversation of the previous day, explaining

that Byre had backed me into a corner, and that courting his offer of alliance seemed the cleverest choice.

"That's fine then." The heat left Gad's face. "Maybe we can use that."

For the first time, I entered Ylyda Ssyn's private apartment in the fortress, following Gad. Sir Byre glowered in a corner, on a high-backed oaken chair. Ssyn sat beside a long table, gesturing for us to take seats at her elbow. A charge of resentment hung in the air.

As the meeting progressed, I pieced together what had happened. Byre had demanded that Ylyda Ssyn cease her one-on-ones with Gad. Anything she could say to him, she should say in his presence, as her loyal lieutenant, and mine, as leader of our party. He had made himself her chaperone, and enlisted me as cover. I imagined him reminding her that as leader of the order she was bound not only to propriety, but to the utmost appearance of same. She looked at him like she wanted to cut his throat.

Thus I received a doubtful elevation. It put me in a position to report to you directly on Ylyda Ssyn and Gad's progress with her, yet it also placed the plan in jeopardy, as I am neither the silver-tongue he is, nor the fastest thinker when presented with the chess moves of others. As if reading my thoughts, Gad flashed me a warning glance. It said, *Shut up and follow my lead.*

Ylyda Ssyn folded her hands together and addressed me. "Your comrade and I have spent many happy hours together, contemplating the might of Iomedae and her plan for her servants here on Golarion. I am more convinced than ever that we stand within striking distance of the great cleansing. Tell me, Ba-El Racid, have you considered giving yourself to her and joining a warrior order?"

Words caught in my throat. "I am but a glorified messenger, milady. Hardly useful to your cause."

She clasped a maternal hand over my wrist. I tried not to look at her mask, or the reddened tissue around it. "Do not underestimate the importance of messages. For there is a request we would have you make of your patron." She rose to her feet. "I must show you something."

Gad's expression told me nothing. Byre's features twitched in indignant surprise. She ushered us toward another room. Byre went to her side, to whisper in her ear, but she held him at bay. With a gesture she caused a door to unlock; in her hand I glimpsed what must have been an enchanted key.

We stood in her laboratory—or one of them, at any rate, as this room presented no sign of surgical experimentation. A complicated lattice of alchemical tubes and glasses filled most of the cramped space. At its approximate center hung an object familiar from the diagrams you showed me—the crystal containing the Bile of Abraxas. And indeed, a blinding green liquid, which hurt the eyes to look upon, coursed and bubbled inside it. A plate above the crystal collected condensation of a calmer green hue, which then diffused and collected through the rest of the apparatus. Ylyda Ssyn was synthesizing more bile, or at least some variant of it.

Unbidden, my hand shot out to grasp the crystal. My head reverberated with alien intention. I felt myself impelled to seize it, to take it away.

Gad interposed himself between me and the apparatus. Startled, I recovered my senses.

He smiled. "Don't worry. It tried to do that to me, too."

Ylyda Ssyn scurried up to check that the connections between crystal and apparatus had not been disturbed. "The bile wishes to free itself, to wreak havoc in the world. Fortunately, it exerts only a weak influence."

"It's aware?"

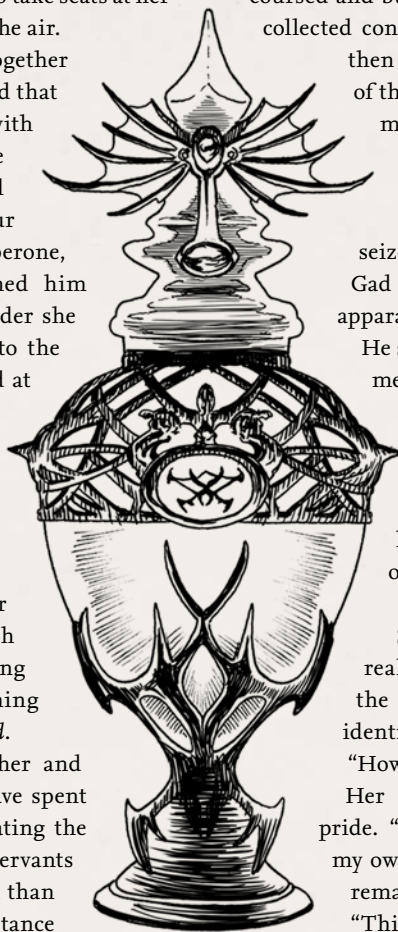
She squinted at a glass join. "Not in any real sense. But if one touches it, it can sear the will and conscience, destroying your identity. Permanently."

"How did you get it into the device, then?"

Her ruined face twitched with suppressed pride. "By application of a special tincture, of my own formulation." Satisfied that the crystal remained safely in place, she turned to me. "This is what will heal the Worldwound. But we need your help."

Meaning, Zhanneal, that she needs your help. Attached to this missive is a list of ingredients. Before you let the prices stop you short, consider this: with these simple purchases, Ylyda Ssyn can finally complete her work. Think of the treasures that might be harvested from a demon-free Worldwound! A single salvage mission—with myself at its head, naturally—would repay your costs a hundredfold. Better yet, when this is done, she'll have no further use of the crystal, and in gratitude will transfer it willingly to your care. With no need to steal it, Gad becomes dispensable.

In short, by sending us these ingredients, you hasten your vengeance against him. With Byre's assistance, I will be only too pleased to carry it out.



"What madness does this demonic ichor hold?"