

Wrath of the Righteous



The Turn

PATHFINDER'S JOURNAL: SWEET ICHOR 5 OF 6

Letter received by Venture-Captain Zhanneal of Razmiran,
24 Desnus

I understand now that I will never be a swindler. To conduct a gaffle requires the ability to predict what others will do in the future, when we mortals are governed more by sudden emotion than careful thought. You think you understand a person, that his interests are clear to you, and that he will therefore reliably act upon them. Yet this letter finds me discovering, Zhanneal, a fact that you, as a man of longer experience, surely build into your every plan: a sudden flare of impulse can shatter the most cautiously constructed scheme, throwing all to the wind.

The disaster coincided with the arrival of the next caravan, and with it, your latest and most necessary

shipment. Before that, events here at Fort Clearwater proceeded as uneventfully as one might hope, given that we had taken up residence in the Worldwound. The sky turned green for several days, and then seemed to drip with blood. Insect demons buzzed overhead one afternoon, dropping sacs of acrid liquid that burned all they touched, slaying a pair of unlucky crusaders who could not reach cover in time. A week later, small sinkholes appeared in the courtyard, in a pattern I could not help but perceive as a pair of glaring eyes and a gaping mouth. Sentinels rushed to fill them, arresting their growth. "This happens from time to time," one of them shrugged, as he reached for his shovel.

In my last letter I described the arrival of a previous caravan. What I did not quite note at the time was the

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festering resentment it occasioned in the men and women of the Solar Lantern. The warriors here lead an austere existence, embracing the fortress's absence of material comforts. Yet they still expect to be paid—or rather, they expect payments to be issued to their families from the Solar Lantern headquarters in Kenabres. They may regard their mad mission with unstinting loyalty, but their dependents rely on these stipends. The last batch of letters from home, which the caravan leader was kind enough to take charge of while passing through Mendev, revealed that said dependents have not been paid for some time. With Svyn and Byre absent so long in the Worldwound, and mere caretakers left behind, fickle donors have gone elsewhere. That is what Svyn tells them. Certain of the crusaders, led by the ballista operator Eilin, suspect that the agent Byre left behind has been cheating them. They demanded a token payment, to be brought directly to them at the fort, to prove that the order's finances have not been absconded with.

The dissension rattled both Ylyda Svyn and Byre, clearly unused to discontent within the ranks. Byre assembled them for a scolding, worsening the rift. After coaching from Gad, Ylyda Svyn addressed them, promising not only full payment of the arrears, but a swift conclusion to the mission. She shared with them as never before the details of her plan: once ready, her alchemical product, derived from the bile of a demon lord, will act as an antidote for a poisoned land. They will inject it into a nearby geyser, where the separation between our own Golarion and the demon plane is thin. It will spread from there throughout the wounded land, healing it, severing entirely the connection to the Abyss. This moment, she promised, is not years away, nor months, but weeks.

From the success of this speech, using words Gad had supplied, sprang the catastrophe of which I must tell you. Byre bristled to see Gad's honey succeed where his stern exhortations had failed. He came to me to complain, but what could I say? If only I had received his dudgeon more seriously, perhaps I could have helped to contain his rage.

Spurred by her promises to the warriors, Svyn accelerated her efforts to perfect the bile infusion, even though your shipment of needed ingredients was still many days off.

She again pressed us about Calliard, whose addictions had for a time been tacitly set aside. How long had he been addicted? Was it true that his habit differed from the norm, having been inculcated directly by a demon? Was it always blood he drank, or sometimes bile?

One day she demanded that we bring him to her laboratory. When he entered the room, her alchemical apparatus trembled as if shaken by an unseen hand. The condensation she gathered turned to a choking vapor, sending us all rushing from the room. Whatever reaction

his proximity caused, it was not a positive one. Calliard returned to our bunkroom, as both Gad and I impressed this upon her. We judged the matter dropped.

When next we saw Calliard, he said, "It'll never work."

"What?" Gad asked.

"Her formula. She can't turn the ichor of a demon lord against the Worldwound. The experiment will fail. If she's lucky."

"Expand on that thought," Gad said.

"If she's not, her attempt to seal shut the Worldwound will merely open it wider. Say goodbye to Mendev, to Numeria, maybe to Ustalav and beyond."

"You're certain of this?"

Calliard shrugged.

Vitta folded her arms. "Then we'd better get the crystal out of here before she tries it."

Knowing that a magical lock secured the door leading from Ylyda Svyn's apartments to the laboratory containing her apparatus, we had to send Vitta, as the lockbreaker, to attempt the theft. Then came the issue of who would go with her as lookout. The laboratory and Calliard did not mix. And if we were caught, Gad just might be able to disown us without losing the alchemist's favor. That left me as the expendable man.

The next day, Ylyda Svyn gave us our chance, inviting Gad to join her as she left the fort to test her latest distillation. Vitta and I watched her and Gad, in a party led by Byre, leave the complex. Few crusaders walked the corridors during the day, and so we made our way to Svyn's door undetected. The latch on the door to her personal chambers fell quickly to Vitta's expertise. We slipped inside the room. I took a position near the door, listening for approaching boots. Vitta knelt before the laboratory door, unrolling a leather kit bristling with assorted picks, levers, brushes, and devices whose use I could not divine. She probed the lock with a curved wand, withdrawing it after several careful minutes. Then she held the wand between her hands, crinkling her brow in concentration.

"That's a good lock," she said.

"Can you get past it?"

"Yes, but it's trapped with a magical alarm. It has to be opened with a magical key."

"I saw her use it," I said.

"I might be able to dull the magic with grindstone powder. But it has to be carefully applied to the entire tumbler mechanism, and there's a tricky bit at the back, obstructed by a gear."

"Meaning?"

"There's a chance I'll miss some of it, in which case the magic will still activate. Something will happen with Ylyda Svyn's key. It will glow, or heat up."

"How big a chance you'll miss it?"

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“One in five, maybe one in four.” She packed up her toolkit.

“We’re going to give up?”

“Even if I unlocked the door, there’s the matter of the crystal, that if you touch it, it will eat your mind.” Vitta plainly thought me an idiot. “This is just the rehearsal.”

We returned to the bunkroom well before Gad. When he got back, he recounted what he had seen. The crusaders took him past the ring of protective menhirs installed about a quarter mile away from the fortress. Ylyda Ssyn explained that she had attuned these makeshift versions of the wardstones that protect the border with Mendev to the Bile of Abraxas. They repelled most, though by no means all, demons, who were as loath as any other creature to approach one of their lords unbidden. A few still got through to attack the fort—these were the heedless, the senseless, and those already inclined toward Abraxas, who had no reason to shrink from his aura. Without the wards, the attacks would surely have increased tenfold.

Gad lay in his bunk, hands behind his head. “Byre said they lost dozens of crusaders simply putting the menhirs in place. No wonder they don’t see how far into madness they’ve plunged—they can’t come to their senses and leave, because that would mean their comrades died for nothing.”

The next morning a crusader rapped on our door. We were to join the rendezvous party, which would go to meet your caravan. Sir Byre had requested that all four of us accompany him, which we had not done before. Barded horses, provided for our use, waited with the rest of the group in the courtyard.

“What’s this about, Byre?” Gad asked.

“Milady observes that the bond between us is not what it could be. If you four are to join us as members of the order, you must integrate with us. What better occasion for camaraderie, than to collect the goods your patron sends us?”

The rest of us looked to Gad, who heaved himself into the saddle.

As we rode out, a clacking sound echoed through the forest. I could not help but perceive it as the working of Abraxas’s great beak, as if the demon lord itself waited for us out in the twisted wood.

In my uneasy reverie, it took me a while to note a curious undercurrent among the crusaders. One of them bit his lip. Another fidgeted with his horse’s reins. Their unease seemed more than the jumpiness one might expect venturing into demon-infested territory. Not just apprehension, but gloom verging on remorse.

Silence descended. Vitta’s hand had drifted to the haft of her mace. Likewise Calliard and his sword.

Byre wheeled his horse and rushed at Gad, sword outstretched. Gad ducked the blow and speeded his horse. Byre whistled; the horse obeyed this command and stopped, pitching Gad to the dirt.

“What are you doing?” I cried.

“What I should have done the day you arrived!” he shouted, and charged Gad, intending to ride him down.

Slapping reins, I kept by his side. “Your lady commands this?”

With the point of his sword, he kept me at bay. “She will be saddened to learn of your deaths. But demon ambushes are so common here.”

I drew and swung my scimitar. “Betrayer!”

He continued his charge at Gad, who spun to the side, then used Byre’s leg to climb up onto him, punching him in the face. The two struggled atop a spooked and wheeling horse.

Either could easily break his neck. Gad deserved this, but not yet, so I rode toward them, wondering how to pull him off without getting either of us killed.

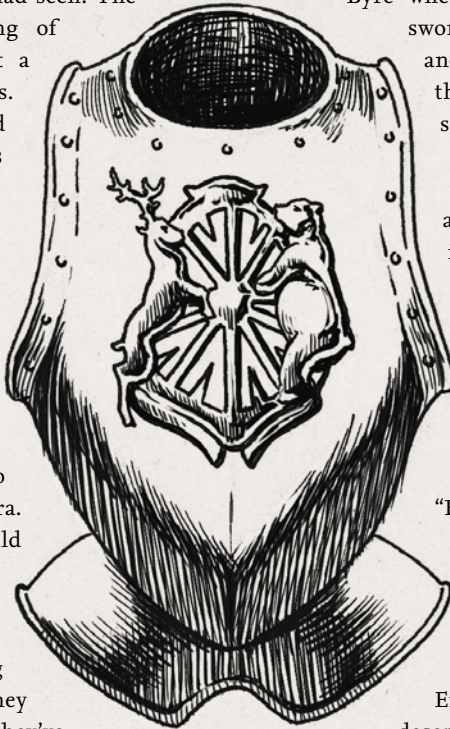
A crusader blocked me, aiming his flail at my head. As a son of the Bekyar, my horsemanship outshone his, even on

an unfamiliar mount. I spurred my steed toward his; it reared in panic. My opponent grasped his horse’s neck, dropping his weapon. I slashed at his arm, loosing his grip on his steed. With one foot still caught in a stirrup, he slid from the horse, and was trampled by its hooves.

I caught flashes of the battle around me: Gad had knocked Byre to the ground; they grappled in ungainly fashion. The situation no longer called for my immediate intervention.

Chased by crusaders, Calliard and Vitta rode toward a thick stand of trees, then dismounted. Unable to continue into dense forest, their pursuers also unhorsed themselves, to resume the chase on foot, losing their advantage over opponents who could not hope to beat them fighting from the saddle.

Then another crusader rode to engage me, lance outthrust. I wheeled, forcing him to alter his trajectory,



“It seems even the Order of the Solar Lantern is not above petty rivalries.”

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and deflected the blow with my shield. Though jarred to the roots of my teeth, I remained on my steed. Our horses turned, ready for another pass. Between us I spotted a boulder projecting from the ground. Gambling that my enemy had not, I plotted my sally against him to place it in his horse's path. Crusader and mount thundered toward me; then hoof caught rock and the horse went tumbling. I winced as the horse's front leg shattered.

My foe lay pinned under his steed. I leapt down, ready to place my scimitar at his throat and demand surrender. But he wriggled free and came at me, hitting my chest with his shoulder. Knocked on my heels, I whiffed my retaliatory blow. This gave him time to draw his sword and come on again, fury redoubled. He screamed at me, his helmet muffling his shouts. I could only suppose that he, like most northerners, harbored undue sentiment for his horse. I taunted him with it, that rage might further blunt his judgment. "Who shall I put out of his misery first? You, or your nag?"

He barreled heedlessly at me, allowing me an easy parry, followed by a solid blow to his chest. For every blow he struck, I landed two. He endured mightily, and our bout left me gasping and winded. Finally he staggered from me, giving me the opening for a perfect strike at the side of his head. He collapsed, and I stepped back, lest he fall into me. At my feet he breathed his last.

I looked for my next opponent, but there were none to be seen. Byre, his breastplate torn from him, a dagger lodged to the crossguard below his clavicle, crawled on his back, away from Gad, who panted on all fours, blood dripping from his mouth.

"If you have any decency," Byre groaned, "you will take this as your victory, and leave my lady be."

"Fine words from a backstabber," Gad coughed.

"When you find a snake in your bed, chop off its head," Byre managed. He wrapped his fingers around the hilt of the dagger stuck in him. "Which demon cult do you serve?"

Gad made it to his knees. "You've got us wrong, Byre."

Byre tried to pull the dagger out but lacked the strength. "Then why do you rob me of my place? You've beguiled a holy woman, pulled her from the path of righteousness..."

We let him catch his breath.

"I warned her against you, but it only..." Byre took his own dagger from the sheath at his hip, but it tumbled from his trembling hand. "You can't have done all this just to steal from us."

Gad stood. "You need a healing draught."

"I won't take it," Byre said.

"You're dying," Gad said.

Byre's muscles went slack, leaving him lying awkwardly on his back, legs folded under him. "Then let me die," he wheezed. "I'll not go back to her in shame."

The Order of the Solar Lantern

Mendev is home to numerous crusader orders, ranging from small bands that amount to little more than adventuring parties to organizations large enough to own entire chapter houses and launch multiple missions up and down the border with the Worldwound. Similarly, these orders vary in their beliefs and ideals, from true-believing paladins fighting for the glory of their gods and the salvation of the Inner Sea region, to those rough-mannered mercenaries hoping to make some quick gold by looting fallen settlements and selling their swords to Mendev's military.

The Order of the Solar Lantern falls somewhere in between. Though originally a devout Iomedaeen mounted company with a reputation for bravery, the Kenabres-based group has expanded of late to include less pious mercenaries in order to help the mysterious miracle-worker Ylyda Svyn establish Fort Clearwater, a daring military outpost positioned just inside the Worldwound border. Simultaneously lauded and pitied for what many saw as a suicide mission, the Solar Lantern crusaders surprised everyone by continuing to maintain their foothold in the demon lands. With every month they remain in the combat zone, however, the odds of them ever returning diminish—a fact that weighs heavily on their families and creditors. Many merchants already refuse to extend loans to soldiers considered as good as dead, and with **Chief Bursar Ablis Karlan** (N male human fighter 2/rogue 3) unable to pay for much-needed supplies out of an empty (or so he claims) treasury, it seems like only a matter of time before the order is forced to take down its pennants and sell its chapter house to another order. In the meantime, many crusaders and their families murmur that the order never had problems before it "threw in with that Svyn witch."

Gad stumbled to his horse, reaching into a saddlebag. "She'll forgive you." He pulled out a potion bottle and thumbed loose the wax sealing its cork in place.

Byre wept. "My goddess does not forgive. And neither should milady."

Gad knelt over him. "What's a little betrayal between friends?"

Byre fumbled uselessly for his knife. "It's not that. It's the failure."

Gad poured healing philtre onto his lips. Byre kept them clamped shut.

"Don't waste that," I told Gad.

Gad nodded, and drank the rest himself. Cuts on his face and hands sealed shut; the bruises below his eyes withdrew.

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Demon Blood Addiction

In this story, Calliard is addicted to demon blood. While rare, demon blood addiction is sadly an affliction that plagues more than just this demon-hunting bard. For most of the fallen crusaders, demon binders, and depraved cultists who voluntarily ingest this substance, demon blood is a powerful magical drug that nauseates its users even as it grants them greater powers and resistances against demons.

In most instances, the narcotic called “demon blood” is actually a specially treated combination of demon blood and various alchemical substances, particularly a mysterious component known as *mesz*. Because of the furtive and taboo nature of the addiction, however—and the tendency for addicts to be slain by their demonic providers—the long-term effects of demon blood addiction have yet to be studied. In certain cases (such as Calliard’s), extensive use appears to further attune the addicts to demonkind, allowing them to gain benefits from drinking fresh, untreated demon blood (perhaps due to alchemical saturation of their systems).

Byre spat up blood and lapsed into unconsciousness, then death.

“The others,” Gad said.

I hastened to the edge of the wood, where the abandoned horses milled. Scimitar ready, I stumbled in. My shoulder brushed a purulent tree and burned from its sap.

Following the sounds of snapping twigs, I came upon Vitta and Calliard—she, shaken; he, drenched in gore. Were it mostly his, he would not be walking, even at his leaden pace. He had neither cleaned nor sheathed his sword.

We rejoined Gad as he swigged from a second healing vial. Vitta helped herself to one from her own pack. I eavesdropped on her as she spoke into Gad’s ear: “You should have seen it. It’s not him anymore.”

If this were the case, I for one felt secret gratitude. Despite the murderous intent of Byre’s men, I would not have liked to be the one who had to slay them. Though glad to be alive, I could not claim we did not deserve the punishment they meant to mete.

“What do we tell the others?” Calliard asked.

“The truth raises questions we don’t want to be asked,” Gad said. “We use their cover story—that we were ambushed by demons.”

Vitta pulled her mangled hair-lattice from her head and tossed it aside. “Does it stretch credibility that all of them died and all of us lived?”

Gad surveyed the bodies, which we would leave for carrion beasts. “They died as crusaders. Taking lead position in battle. They arrayed themselves to protect us, and bore the brunt of the attack.”

We marched on to meet the caravan. Its Solar Lantern guardians, spattered with demon ichor from a recent fight, wearily accepted our tale. A complement of them had come to reinforce the fortress, while others turned back with the horses and carts after receiving a packet of letters and communiques.

Ylyda Svyn received the news of Byre’s death, conveyed to her in the courtyard, with martial restraint. But in her apartments afterward, she reached for Gad’s arm to steady her.

With Byre gone, I expected to be excluded from her regular meetings with Gad, as I had joined them only on his insistence. Yet she never barred me. At first, I thought guilt kept me at her side, as a chaperoning stand-in for Byre, a veiled admission that in her attachment to Gad lay something unseemly. As the days went on, however, I realized that it was simpler than that. Like Gad, I was an outsider, to whom she could show weakness without compromising fortress morale. She seemed to age overnight, in both gait and countenance.

“My last words to him were rebukes,” she said. Presumably, their last argument concerned Gad’s role as her confidant. We certainly did not press her to unburden. Luckily, her sorrow didn’t extend to a reconsideration of Byre’s demands. Svyn retreated to her meager bedchamber, to which we were admitted for the first time. Hunched under a fur blanket, dim candlelight reflecting on her mask, she had never looked so grotesque, or so pathetic. She asked us to read to her, from the great battle poems of the Iomedaeen canon.

The key to the laboratory became a thing of frustrating elusiveness. Ylyda Svyn wore it around her neck, on a thin silver chain. Often she would doze in our presence, lulled by the velvet depths of Gad’s reading voice. But whenever he would reach over to snatch it from her neck, she stirred, as if excited by his proximity. I watched on tenterhooks at least half a dozen times as he tried for it, only to pull back.

One morning she regained her old industry, and urged us to join her in the laboratory. She set us to unpacking the load of ingredients you sent us, which until then had languished. In frantic bursts she commanded us to unpack this box or decant that bottle. She started an inventory, with me as her scribe, then abandoned it, then started it all over. Assisted by Gad, she fell into a frenzy of mixing and powdering and note-taking. “We’re nearly there,” she said. “His sacrifice will not have been in vain.” Though she never said the name, plainly she meant Sir Byre.

The next day, she fell into a funk and would not leave her bed. Gad read to her, as before, and again tried and failed to remove the key.

“You were so close to getting it,” I said to him, when we departed her chamber for the night.

“Even if we do, there’s a problem of opportunity. She never fully dozes, and now never leaves her apartments.”

"You're starting to feel sorry for her!" I immediately regretted my vehemence. But after all this, we could not afford to have our chief swindler go soft on us.

"I prefer to despise my marks," Gad said. "This one's near-mad with grief."

I turned and stood before him, blocking his progress through the hall. "There's still a second laboratory behind the one she shows us. Where she takes followers who've broken her prudish rules and grafts them with demon flesh. Remember that woman, Uldii, out in the forest?"

He recoiled from my words, as if he had forgotten.

"Don't let that hangdog piety fool you, Gad. She's mad all right, and was before we got here."

"You're right," said Gad.

"When you make a mark fall in love with you, you don't return the favor, do you?"

He pushed past me. "You've made your point."

When we arrived in the bunkroom, Vitta was waiting for us. "There's trouble," she said.

"What?"

With little to do while we consoled Ylyda Ssyn, she'd befriended Eilin and her ballista crew. "Fanatics or not, this fortress is one provocation shy of mutiny. Remember the problem with the remittances, which was supposed to be all sorted out? Well, along with those ingredients for milady's lab came a raft of letters from home. And while the families might have been paid in the meantime, as of last writing, not one family's seen a copper. Since Ssyn never leaves her compound, I imagine her derelict agents back in Mendev have little fear of reprisal."

"And it sure doesn't help that there's no one here to complain to. Before, the sergeants caught an earful and went to Byre—"

"Who made it worse," said Gad.

"Who went to Ylyda Ssyn," Vitta continued, "who with your advice was able to cool the pot." The halfling returned to a task in progress. She'd sketched a map of the fortress, and now measured a circle with a pin in the middle and a length of string. "It's been a week and no peep as to who replaces Byre as second-in-command."

"Maybe a revolt works in our favor," Calliard said.

"How so?" asked Gad.

"The crusaders desert, go off to join another order. Who's to guard the prize if they leave?"

Gad rubbed at his chin stubble. "It's a pay dispute. They'll loot the place before they go."

"So, in the confusion, we steal the crystal."

"Too much chaos. We don't control the timing."

"And," added Vitta, "if one of a hundred soldiers gets the crystal, who do we chase to retrieve it?"

"We're so close to having that key and doing it the easy way," said Gad. "I just have to lift it, and then get her out of there long enough to get into the lab unnoticed. For that we have to stabilize the situation. They know she's been getting shipments from Racid's patron, right?"

"Sure," said Vitta.

"Spread the word that our patron understands the problem and will start sending out remittances as soon as we can get a message to him."

"They've heard that before. They want money in hand this time."

So indeed, Zhanneal, consider this my request for a shipment in coin, to the fortress. I have attached the amounts in an accompanying document. We have invested so much already, in terms of both your gold and my own time and risk. To lose it all to a mutiny, when we are so close, would be insupportable.

Forgive the unsteady hand, Zhanneal. I rush to write so that I might return to an urgent matter. Ylyda Ssyn took Calliard. Gad and Vitta have already left to save him. I would hold until the situation clarifies itself, but we need to quell her restless ranks and restore this place to order. Thus I send this now, so that you may immediately equip your own caravan to get us the troop payments we need—by magic if at all possible, as I know not how much time we have left.

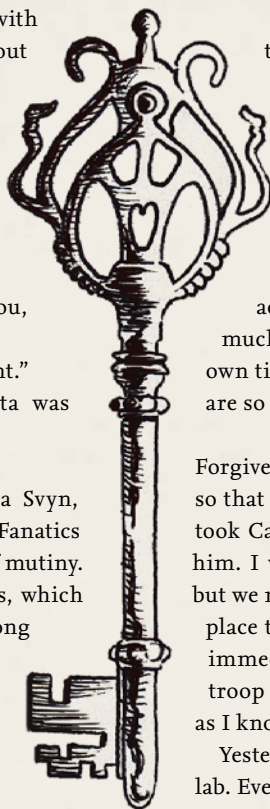
Yesterday Ylyda Ssyn had another restless day in the lab. Every reaction she attempted failed. The apparatus stopped working. The condensation that forms her distillation slowed, then ceased. Then she remembered how the Bile reacted when Calliard was in the room. We tried to

steer her from these thoughts but she would not budge from them. She called for her sentinels and had him brought to her. The substance bubbled and returned to life. We thought the matter ended, hearing the wildness in her voice only when it was too late. She ordered her men to seize Calliard and bear him to her surgery. Through its door I glimpsed a slab, stained with blood.

Gad pleaded with her—if his friendship meant anything to her, she would not hurt his friend.

"It's my fault we lost Byre," she said. "My contemptible hesitation. The breakthrough has been under my nose the whole time. It's him, the demon blood addict. I must open him up, and find his secret."

I slipped out, before her guards could point their swords at me. Gad is still in there. I will place this in the claws of my magic raven, send it to you, and get Vitta.



"Ssyn's key remains so close, yet also so far."