

Wrath of the Righteous



The steal

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Letter received by Venture-Captain Zhanneal of Razmiran,
6 Sarenith

Two Solar Lantern guardians blocked the doorway to Ylyda Ssyn's laboratory.

"You must let me pass, my friends," I told them, "to protect your mistress from a mistake she will long regret."

I could only hope that the reputation I had gained with them, by dint of the coin and goods you provided to keep their fortress afloat, would now allow me to sway them against their leader's orders. Under ordinary circumstances, only a fool urges a crusader to insubordination. But Ylyda Ssyn had sorely tested their loyalty since Sir Byre's death, with her withdrawal into mourning and failure to appoint his successor. Vitta had spread the word that their back

pay depended on us—on me. To say any of these things to them would arouse their sense of honor, force them back into Ylyda Ssyn's corner. But if they took them into consideration as things unsaid, I might gain entry.

The taller of the two sentinels took the bait. "What sort of mistake?"

"What is your name, my friend?"

"Harsal."

"Harsal, she has taken one of us to... punish. As she did Uldii." Here I took a greater risk—did they secretly hate what Ylyda Ssyn had done to their erstwhile comrade, grafting her with demon flesh? Or did they, fanatics to the bone, believe that she had been dishonored just deserts? "But he did not break the vow of celibacy that we all must obey here. I have obeyed her edict. As I'm sure you have."

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Doubt raced across their faces.

“What will your fellows think, if word gets out that anyone can be placed upon her surgery table? First it’s my friend Calliard. Then it might be me. Then you.” I could see them wavering, Harsal most of all. So I spoke only to him. “She is not herself. Grief has blinded her. Do you want to tell your fellows that you could have stopped her, and did not?”

Harsal closed his fist at me. “If you’re lying to me, outlander...”

“Take me in, and see for yourself.”

He left his partner on guard and escorted me inside. There stood two more guards, along with Gad and Vitta. The door to the inner surgery room swayed open. Inside, Calliard squirmed against the leather straps binding him to an operating slab. In a far corner stood a cage large enough to hold a misshapen figure, once a man, now bristling with hairy insectlike appendages. This had to have been the crusader Uldii was caught with. Like her, he had been subjected to Ylyda Svyn’s ghastly experiments. With a sidelong glance, I saw Harsal’s shock at this sight. As I suspected, the rank-and-file might know of this project, but had been shielded from its results.

Harsal called out to his comrades. “I’m told that this one has been taken, even though he did not break the commandment.”

Ylyda Svyn wheeled on him. “Who gave you permission to enter here?”

He shrank from her reproaches like a scolded dog. “Is it true?”

She marched toward him. “Don’t you want to get out of this godsforsaken place?”

“Of course, milady.”

Already it was clear that Harsal’s usefulness had ended. He couldn’t stand up to her.

She turned the masked side of her face toward him. “I make a moral sacrifice today. As we have all sacrificed, exposing ourselves to the madness of this place. Yet I am sure that inside this wanderer’s veins lies the final secret, the one that will allow us to cleanse this land. If I’m wrong, it’s my soul I risk, and no one else’s. All you need to do is stand aside. Do you understand me, Harsal?”

He stared at the toes of his boots. “Yes, milady.”

She plucked a scalpel from a drawer. Gad and Vitta lunged to stop her; guards restrained them. Not wanting to push Harsal any further, I resisted the urge to do the same.

“Don’t do this,” Gad said.

The alchemist ignored him, instead moving over to the slab to slice apart Calliard’s tunic, exposing his chest and upper arms. Through the pale skin over his heart, a strange network of black veins could be seen—surely a symptom of prolonged demon blood abuse.

“You will forgive me for this, my son,” Ylyda Svyn told Gad, “once you see the results.”

Gad strained in his captor’s bear hug. “Can’t you see you’ve gone over the edge? You have no reason to think this will even work!”

She tapped herself on the temple. “Years of study plus a flash of insight—that’s all one needs to change the world! Have you read Janung’s *Greater Collecteana*—the section on the bodily humors?”

“Can’t say I have.”

“The Worldwound is poisoned with the bile of the Abyss, of which this” she said, pointing to the crystal, “is the elemental template. Your friend here...” She traced the tip of the scalpel, digging into, but not yet piercing, the flesh, “is poisoned with the blood of demons. Bile cancels blood, blood cancels bile. It’s right there in the text!”

“Go ahead,” said Gad, “bleed him. You don’t have to kill him.”

The scalpel quivered in her hand. “You don’t see. I must comprehend how the veins connect to the muscle, as the Abyssal infections connect to stone and sand, the flesh of the land.”

She turned to me, as if noticing my presence for the first time. “How about you, Ba-El? Do you also doubt me?”

“I did, milady,” I stammered, “but I know nothing of humors and alchemy...”

“I thought Gad understood,” she said, “but maybe it’s you Iomedae has sent to aid me, as she sent Calliard to this alchemical altar. Will you?”

I wondered why she didn’t ask Harsal, then realized he had to stand ready to cut me down if I tried anything. “I, too,” I told her, “would do anything to destroy this accursed place.”

“Not destroy, Ba-El. Restore.” Step by step, she instructed me to set up a device, consisting of a rack, a bottle-like glass contrivance with a funnel on top, and an articulated copper tube, sealed with wax at the joints, terminating in a sharp, hollow point, which she called a trocar. I pieced it together next to Calliard’s slab. Its purpose was all too easily divined: the trocar would be jabbed into Calliard, the better to drain his blood through a valve or allow fluid poured into the bottle to flow into his veins.

“What are you doing, Racid?” Gad demanded.

“Showing loyalty! She treated you like a son, and when she needs you, you doubt her?”

Ylyda Svyn patted me on the back. “Now listen carefully. This must be carefully timed. To touch the crystal, I must prepare a mixture. It evaporates quickly. As soon as I pour it on the crystal, you will take it and place it in the transfer bottle. Understood?”

I nodded, scarcely believing my luck. She was about to give me possession of the crystal, while Gad and the others were restrained. To escape with it, I would only have to get past Harsal, and then the guardian at the door. A blow to the throat with my elbow would remove Harsal from the

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equation. A surprise stab at the door guard would follow. Then it was a matter of running for the gate...

The gate. It would be closed, and by then there would be pursuit. How would I get around that?

From a low cupboard Ylyda Svyn removed a pair of stoppered bottles. One contained a clear liquid, the other a powder resembling white sand. She measured about an inch of the liquid into a mixing cup, and scooped up a quantity of the powder. These she carried over to the apparatus containing the crystal, and mixed them together into a spouted jar.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Gad and Vitta duck down, Gad wresting himself free of his guardian's arms. By instinct I did the same.

A billow of smoke erupted from the mixing jar. It rose to fill the room, leaving a layer of breathable air at about the four-foot mark. Ylyda Svyn, Harsal, and the other guards choked and convulsed, clutching their throats. Vitta, who barely had to hunch to stay below the smoke, rushed to Calliard's slab and undid his straps. Rolling to avoid the smoke, the bard dove to the floor and slid along it in awkward snakewise fashion.

Ylyda Svyn thudded to the ground. Harsal and his comrades passed out soon after.

Gad, meanwhile, crawled to the cupboard of alchemical supplies, withdrew a smaller bottle of clear liquid, and took a scoop of the white powder Ylyda Svyn had used. An empty vessel under his arm, he knee-walked to the apparatus. He mixed the two substances together, held his breath, and stood to pour the resulting liquid onto the crystal. Once it was covered, he snatched it out of the apparatus and into a pouch at his belt.

I remembered what he had said when I lay poisoned in their camp outside Aaramor:

I know a little about alchemy.

He had either found the alternate substance he needed here in the lab, or added it to the list of ingredients you bought and paid for. A list that was made after he learned about the need to treat the crystal before handling it.

I recalled how Ylyda Svyn assigned the two of us to stow those ingredients. That must have been when he made the switch, replacing the agent that created the smoke with the one Ylyda Svyn had meant to use.

The guard at the door, hearing the falling bodies, came in, and was herself felled by the smoke.

As we crawled for the door, I wondered if the vapor would expand to fill the building. But only tendrils of it escaped the laboratory threshold. Taking my cue from the others, I rose to my feet to stride with calm purpose through the

corridor and out into the courtyard. We crossed hastily to the gateway, Vitta hailing their sentinels as Gad detoured to the stable.

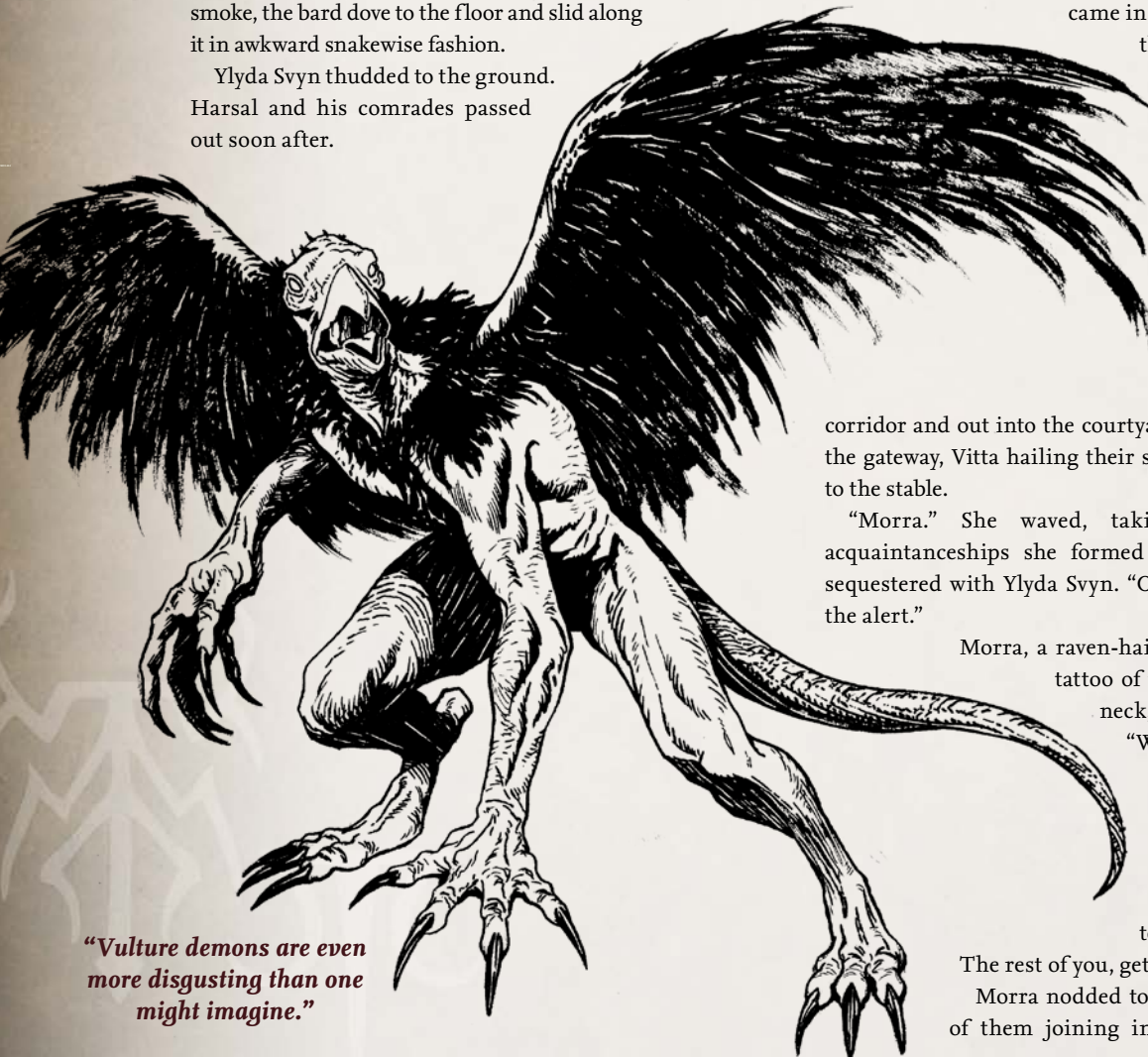
"Morra." She waved, taking advantage of the acquaintanceships she formed while Gad and I were sequestered with Ylyda Svyn. "Open the gate, and sound the alert."

Morra, a raven-haired crusader who bore a tattoo of the Solar Lantern on her neck, reached for her sword. "What is it?"

"Milady's apparatus has gone berserk," Vitta said. "It warns of a giant swarm of demons, headed this way. We're to fortify the wardstones.

The rest of you, get ready."

Morra nodded to her companion, the two of them joining in hauling on the pulley



"Vulture demons are even more disgusting than one might imagine."

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mechanism, lifting the gate. Gad led four horses over. We clambered onto them and spurred the horses to a gallop.

Needing answers, I rode alongside Gad's horse. "The smoke—it killed them?"

"They'll wake up any minute," Gad said.

"Then why did you rally them to action? They'll come at us all the faster!"

No one deigned to answer me. A rage bubbled within me. They'd had a plan—if not all along, then at least for long enough to have told me about it. The timing had to have been opportunistic, waiting for the inevitable moment when Ylyda Svyn would succumb to the urge to vivisect Calliard. But that was all the more reason for them to warn me, so that I might properly play my part. What if I had been less persuasive with Harsal?

Or, worse yet—what if I had failed to spot them as they ducked? Why, I'd have been lying on that laboratory floor at that very moment, out cold and waiting to come to with Ylyda Svyn and the rest of them. And then what would have become of me, a conspirator left behind? I'd have been lucky if they gutted me quickly, instead of consigning me to demonic transformation on the alchemist's slab.

A full betrayal, Zhanneal, would have been less of a humiliation. They were as happy to see me doomed as fleeing with them. Ba-El Racid was an extraneous factor, a detail not worth planning for.

Behind us pounded the hoofbeats of pursuit. I turned back to see a dozen crusaders riding after us. In the Worldwound's uncertain terrain, our head start couldn't be depended on. We were out of missile range, but only just. Any obstacle would sink us.

We rode past Ylyda Svyn's makeshift wardstones. Black smoke rose from them. Fissures broke across their crumbling surfaces.

Vitta bore the smug expression of someone proven right.

I pointed at the menhirs, gabbling unintelligibly.

"The wards circle the fort exactly." Vitta illustrated her point with a circular gesture. "They work only when the crystal sits dead center."

"How did you...?"

"Just a hunch," said Vitta. "I had to take apart the wards for a place called the Turquoise Garden once as part of a job, and they worked on the same principle. It was the geometry that tipped it."

I remembered her plotting that map of the fortress. She'd been measuring the distance between fort and menhirs.

The ground shook. It took all my horsemanship to stay in the saddle. Our steeds made unearthly shrieks, of which I had never heard the like—more like crying babies than horses. The sky darkened and throbbed. Globes of a foul substance rained across the landscape. One of them struck my shield; it smelled like vomit and discolored the metal.

"We've got to get out of here," Calliard said.

"What's happening?"

"It's like I thought," he said. "They can sense it."

It took all my will not to draw my scimitar and lop of his head. "Who can sense *what*?"

"Them," he said, and pointed at the sky.

A demonic host emerged from the thickening clouds—flapping, screeching, clicking, cawing. The demons coagulated into a flock, aimed at the fortress behind us. Of us they took no apparent notice. Their shadow passed over us like an eclipse.

"They've hated Clearwater ever since it was built," said Calliard. "Now they feel it—any of them can get through now."

The oncoming hooves of our pursuers' mounts receded. Turning in the saddle, I saw that they'd reversed direction. They were riding back to warn the others, to defend the fort. Their bravery stirred me; were I in their place, you wouldn't find me racing to the same destination as that demon cloud.

Perhaps connecting the crusaders to the complex they hated so much, demons dipped from the air to attack the riders. They pulled horses into the air and dropped them. Two bat-winged specimens grabbed a crusader by the arms and legs and pulled him in two.

Without realizing it, I'd reined my horse to a halt and turned around to watch the carnage. Gad and the others had left me without so much as a warning cry. Cursing, I wheeled around and kicked my horse, racing to catch up to them. They had the Bile of Abraxas. And a mortal cannot survive in the Worldwound alone, even when most of the demons in the immediate area appear to be otherwise occupied.

Ahead, their three horses approached a forest's edge. I spurred my steed harder, provoking a whinny of protest, and plunged after them. By the time I reached the trees, they were nowhere in sight. My horse balked, refusing to enter the woods. The stinking rain gained force.

A clot of the falling filth hit my mount on the haunches, sending it rearing once again. This time I fell from the saddle, into a muck-filled depression. Soaked to the skin, I rose, my hands out to calm the horse. It kicked at me, rolled its eyes, and shuddered. Its front legs gave way, then those behind. It tipped over and twitched, then went still. I crawled over and placed my hand on its neck, but no pulse beat. The beast had fallen stone dead, and I could have sworn that it willed itself so, so that it would not have to enter the demon wood.

I stood and listened, hoping to pick out some sign of the others in the unearthly downpour. After an eternity or two, I heard an inhuman cry, like a cross between a baboon and an eagle. One voice became a chorus, accompanied by the sounds of battle. I had found my supposed companions—if they lived long enough for me to rescue them. I left my already stiffening steed and charged into the wood on foot.

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Resentment clouded my estimation of the swindlers' abilities. By the time I arrived, they had already dispatched two of four vulture-headed demons. I slid into the fray, sinking my scimitar deep into a scaly haunch. The fight resolved into a wet, half-blind slog, impeded as much by the slimy rain falling from leaves overhead as by the power of these creatures—ridiculous in death, but terrifying when snapping and jabbing at you.

When they were all slain, we surveyed our injuries, and as one came to a daunting realization. Our flight from the fortress had left us without packs or supplies—no healing draughts, no water, no edible food. We had the weapons we carried and other minor effects, and miles to go before we left the Worldwound. Without these basics, we were as doomed as the poor souls left to defend Fort Clearwater—though our deaths would likely be slower than theirs.

"You won't want to watch this," Calliard said, and drew his dagger.

We turned our backs, and listened to him plunge it into one of the vulture demons, then slurp its blood straight from the source. He moved back into view, wiping ichor from his lips with the back of his hand. "I can sense when demons are near. Steer us clear of them, as much as that's possible here."

"My client's caravan," I said. "It will be on its way here. If we could meet up with them, we could refresh our supplies..."

"We know their route," said Vitta.

"But we have no map," I shot back.

"I have one up here." She pointed to her head. "They might get waylaid, or sent off course to flee from demons. So might we. But a slim likelihood is better than none."

And so we trudged toward the border according to the planned route of your supply mission. By the end of the second day, Gad, Vitta and I were beside ourselves with thirst. Calliard, having refreshed himself with the blood of vulture demons, showed scant signs of dehydration. He led our way through blackened wood and jagged hill, paralleling the course of a cracked and ancient road. When Calliard sensed demons approaching, he took us farther from it. When they had passed—sometimes when he had ambushed one and slaked himself on its ichor—we returned to the caravan route.

On the third day, we heard a commotion ahead. Bloodcurdling screams mixed with shouts in the Hallit tongue. With our last reserves of strength, we rushed on to join this unseen battle. Turning a curve in the road, we came upon the caravan crew in a desperate fight against a mob of amorphous demons that seemed to have cattle skulls for heads. Calliard took point; at his approach, the demons mewled in confusion, falling into disarray. I crashed blindly into them, hewing left and right. They sprayed me with a noxious, freezing slime, but I kept on

swinging. After a few moments of struggle, we reduced some of the creatures to puddles of tissue, and the rest to flight.

We drank greedily from the caravan's dwindling water supply, and made full use of the healing philtres they carried. With our prearranged pass-phrases, I identified myself as your agent, and informed them of the fortress's doom. I took custody of your gifts to its crusaders, disbursing what pay the caravan guards were owed, plus a bonus. Vitta suggested that we should travel out of the Worldwound with them as reinforcements. Though I welcomed the safety in numbers, this would complicate my final task, so I groped for a counterargument. "It's too much to ask of them," I said. "Those demons appeared to recognize Calliard. Others will come for him, now. Should they be expected to lay down their lives to defend him?"

So we went on our way, as before, but no longer by the road. Calliard pushed us deep into the corrupted wilds, navigating around concentrations of demons. We encountered but a few stray fiends along the way, and two days later camped for the night within striking distance of the Numerian border.

I took over watch from Vitta and waited for her now-familiar snoring.

At last, it was time to complete my mission. Yet with the moment now at hand, qualms assailed me. To steal the crystal meant nothing, but the final, necessary steps now bedeviled my conscience. Despite the treacheries you so vividly recounted to me, I owed my life to Gad, and in my own way had fallen prey to his charisma. Weak as it made me, I wanted him to like me. Thus I resolved to depart slightly from your instructions, and to kill him with a single blow while he still slept, without telling him who had sent me, and why he had to die. If all went as hoped, I would not have to hurt Vitta or Calliard at all. Against them you have no quarrel.

I crept over to Gad and began to silently remove the crystal from his pack.

"So," he said, eyes snapping open easily. "You went through with it after all."

And so, in the end, I was left with no choice. I shouted your name as I cleaved my scimitar through his throat, that he might know my hand was but an extension of your own. The others awoke with cries of dismay and came to his defense even as he knelt and clutched at his neck, choking on his own blood. With tear-blurred eyes, I watched as my blade finished Gad, then his two companions. The battle left me exhausted and sobbing, and the three of them murdered, lying on the muck-carpeted forest floor.

To undo the wounds they did me in defending their lives, I drank a healing potion, its syrupy sweetness a lie on my tongue. Though dawn would not come for hours, I could not bear to behold their lifeless bodies any longer,

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and began my trudge back to civilization, the prize of my victory weighing heavily in my pack.

And that is how I, Ba-El Racid, your loyal servant, stole the Bile of Abraxas from the thief you most hate, who in turn stole it from Ylyda Svyn, who like her Solar Lantern crusaders has now been surely extirpated from this existence by the demon horde.

Expect my arrival, and with it the priceless crystal, within a fortnight.

[Archivist's note: the remainder of the document is written in another hand.]

Vitta says it's spiteful to carry on the ruse so far. Gratuitous, she says. Me, I think it would be spiteful not to. When you start a story, it's your duty to finish it. So long as you start and finish with the truth, what's a little fancy in the middle?

And speaking of truth: the truth of the matter is that I grew so used to writing in Ba-El's manner that I'm sorry to let him go. Thinking and composing as him all these weeks, I've come to feel for the poor bastard.

Yes, Zhanneal, that dropping feeling you're getting in the pit of your stomach is absolutely correct. This is Gad. Ba-El and I each have confessions to make.

Ba-El's confession is that he is dead, and no doubt sorry to disappoint you. He yielded to the toxin the demon fed him back in the bottle shop in Numeria. We did find him, and take him to our camp. We even tried to find an antidote, but it was no use. He left behind an unfinished letter to you, which he penned even as the demon poison dissolved his guts.

The last paragraph he ever wrote described us, his rescuers. The bit where he leaves off and I begin is:

The quickest way to earn a swindler's trust is to make oneself appear to be a gull and a mark.

He lived only slightly longer than that—long enough to tell us about the Bile of Abraxas, and Fort Clearwater, and Ylyda Svyn, and the rest of it.

Thankfully, Vitta managed to attune herself to that useful messenger raven device of his, or none of this would have worked. When we searched his things after his death, we found his journal of past exploits—enough of him left in ink for me to revive him, on the page at least. The handwriting took a while to get the knack of, and I had to throw away a few spoiled pages. But his personality—boastful and insecure, anxious to please, a man of muscle who yearned to be a man of letters—that came right away.

Racid meant to do me dirty, it's true, but what "he" said back in his last letter about me and Ylyda Svyn? It's nearly right. You do have to fall for the marks a little, to let them fall for you. So for Ba-El, I did him

the best honor as I could, seeing things as he would have, describing what he might have done.

Since you Pathfinders are perpetually chronicling everything, even your own failures and embarrassments, you can file this account, and all the details regarding the Worldwound, as true. Only the elements with Ba-El in them are fabrications.

Oh, and the requests for all the goods you shipped us: Some of them we made fine use of, as described. But yes, we pocketed most of it, including the last caravan shipment intercepted on our way out.

And that, then, is my confession. As I don't need to tell you, you won't be seeing the Bile of Abraxas, soon or ever. We've lined up another buyer.

As to Calliard, and whether by pointing us to the Bile of Abraxas, you gave us the means to cure him of his affliction? Well, on that front, I don't suppose you care.

And even if you do, well, that part's none of your business.



"Ba-El Racid isn't quite the man he seems."