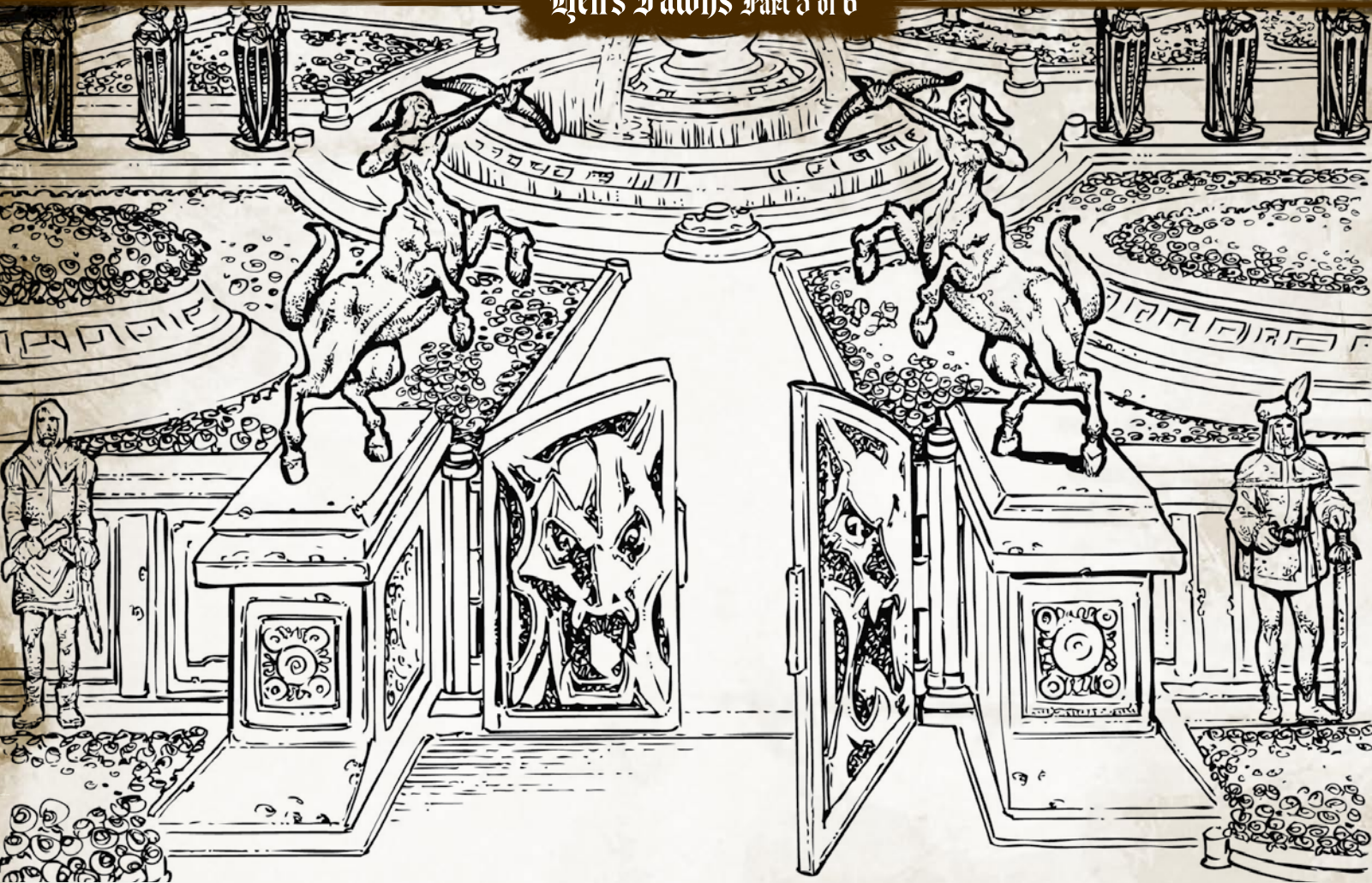


## Hell's Pawns Part 5 of 6



# Blackrose Gardens

**W**e cross Throne Square and pass beneath the enormous bronze statue of Queen Abrogail I ascending to her throne on a stairway of prostrate men and devils.

It's not the sort of shortcut I like, since it puts Count Jeggare's conspicuous red carriage right in the thick of society gossips in Egorian, but the driver is anxious that we fetch the boss on time, and I kept the halfling waiting during my rendezvous with Pavanna. He takes out his frustration on the horses, slapping the reins with a powerful crack that makes me reevaluate his strength. I decide to buy him a pint later, both to soothe his feelings and because he managed to shake off the Paralicor's goons before picking me up in Bridgeside.

The slip angles north for a few streets before slowing for the turn toward House Henderthane, but instead of taking it he drives past. Before I can ask what he's doing, he opens the panel and jerks his head to right. I peer through the window to glimpse a pair of Hellknights standing at the gate to House Henderthane.

Elliendo must be shutting off every lead he knows we've been chasing in the Henderthane case. I hope the boss had time to slip out before the Order of the Scourge arrived.

"Where to?" asks the driver.

The boss didn't name a backup location, but nearby there's one we've used before. "Blackrose Gardens," I say. The driver cracks the reins again.

Sometimes the boss gets nostalgic about the days before the Thrunes signed the Infernal Compact. That was before my time, of course. It was before my grandparents' time, and Jeggare himself was still a young scion of Cheliox, notorious as the bastard child of Countess Pontia Jeggare. After a few of his fancy cordials, he sometimes muses about the days when the surrounding fields were full of roses, both the red, which had always grown in the region, and the white, which the god Aroden created upon his arrival in Egorian. When Aroden died, however, all the white roses of Egorian turned black, and builders ever since have favored red-veined black marble in new constructions. The architects call this color scheme part of their "Egorian



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School,” but everyone knows they stole it from the flowers of Blackrose Gardens.

The driver detours around the streets surrounding House Henderthane before passing through the rose-twined gates of the oldest public garden in the city. Inside is a labyrinth of topiaries, fountains, pavilions, and beds of flowers imported from all over Golarion. Everywhere among the thousand features of the garden are the black and red roses, married in twines to form high walls and arches.

Here’s where I came to escape when I was a kid no older than Gruck, the Goatherds’ latest recruit. A few hours wandering the shaded lanes of Blackrose could cool me off after a scuffle with one of the other gutter rats or one of the endless indignities Zandros used to toughen us up. It was here that I first caught sight of the boss as he followed a winding bluestone path among the statues of Chelish nobles whose names have long since been erased by the rain. Later, that promenade became a regular rendezvous when we split up to follow separate leads on a case.

The slip drives slowly past the southernmost statues, a pair of stout lords holding rods and scales for justice and commerce. Beyond them, a muffled figure emerges from behind the armless statue of a centaur. Jeggare hurries to the carriage, where he shrugs off the oversized footman’s coat and throws it inside as I open the door. Rather than entering, he nods toward a triangular reflecting pool among the statues, and I follow him there.

He doesn’t speak at first, instead pacing the gravel perimeter of the pool. A cool breeze ripples the lead-gray water, rocking the lily pads. I shadow him for a complete circuit and two more sides before I can’t stand it anymore.

“I caught up with Pavanna Henderthane.”

“Yes,” he says in that tone that tells me he already figured that out. I pinch up a fold of my shirt and sniff. It still smells of that Andoren perfume the boss noticed after I first met her. “What did you learn from your encounter?”

I tell him the story about her gambling. When I get to the part where Zandros the Fair bought up her debts and forced her to alter legal contracts with her magical calligraphy, Jeggare turns to face me. He can tell by my expression that I know how serious her crime is. In Egorian, killers go to the salt mines. Forgers go to Hell.

“What did you find at the house?” I say, hoping to nudge him back to the original question: Who killed Pavanna’s father?

“Much more than I expected for a short visit,” he says. “When I arrived, the butler was receiving news from Rusilla, the nurse we saw escorting him from the Scion’s Academy. When I enquired about her association with House Henderthane, I learned that she was originally employed as Morvus Henderthane’s wetnurse.”

That was unusual, as most wet nurses remained only until a child was weaned. “So why did she stay on?”

“My very question. When I asked, she became agitated at the sight of someone behind me. I turned to look, but the door had just closed. Before I could investigate, Morvus appeared, and propriety demanded I greet him. After Rusilla withdrew, I remarked upon her obvious distress, and Morvus seemed sincerely mystified as to its cause. His concern was such that he summoned the butler to send a maid to inquire after her health.”

“You keep all the exciting jobs for yourself.”

He doesn’t smile at my jibe. “Within minutes, a chambermaid’s scream summoned us all to an upstairs guest chamber. We found her body just inside, partially blocking the door. Can you guess how she died?”

I nodded, realizing he had lost his sense of humor for good reason. “Hell coal.”

“Just so,” says. “Young Morvus kept his wits about him. He ordered an immediate search of the house, with guards at every door. No sooner were the gates sealed, however, than Paralictor Elliendo arrived to demand entrance.”

“I take it that’s when you slipped away.”

“Naturally I begged permission of my host to depart by way of the servants’ entrance.”

“He didn’t mind?”

“No,” says Jeggare. “In fact, he seemed thrilled to be party to an intrigue. I pray he will not regret the courtesy. In any event, I hoped your keen eyes would mark the presence of the Paralictor’s men and seek me here. Well done.”

I can’t stop thinking of the danger Pavanna has put herself in by hiring us to look into her father’s murder. No matter whether or not we solve that mystery, she’s still on the hook for forgery, and Zandros holds the line.

“What do we do now?” I ask.

“We drop the inquiry,” says Jeggare. “That is assuming you have already told Miss Henderthane that she must flee the city. Her welfare is your chief concern, is it not?”

“Well, yeah,” I say, surprised that the boss would give up so easily. Either he’s gotten bored or there’s something he’s not telling me. “I just can’t imagine your letting it drop just like that, especially with Elliendo treading on your heels. Don’t you want to put a thumb in his eye?”

Jeggare sighs. “Do not imagine some romantic rivalry between me and the Paralictor. I’ve told you, he is more dangerous than you credit him.”

“But maybe he’s behind Henderthane’s death. You could expose him.”

Jeggare sighs, impatient with me. “If Henderthane had offended Elliendo, it would have been far easier for the Paralictor to root out some legitimate offense for which he could punish the man. Henderthane would have died on the scaffold or been sent to rot in prison. Elliendo employs law as his weapon. He is a cruel but entirely just man.”

Before I can object, the boss raises a hand for silence. He’s looking past my shoulder. I turn to see a pair of



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heavily armored men holding the bridles of the horses attached to the red carriage. The driver stands beside them, mournfully gazing at the cap clutched in his hands.

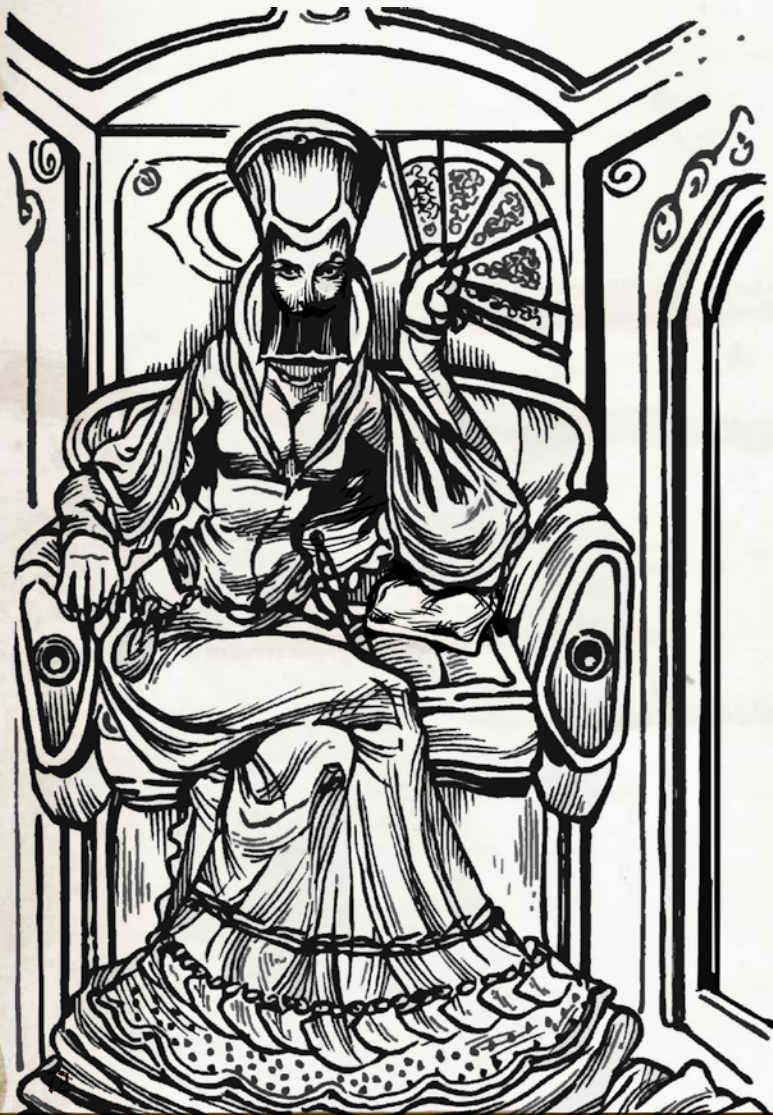
From between statues on either side of the winding path emerge more men, their hands on the hilts of their swords. There are more than enough to prevent an escape. When I meet the gaze of one, he gestures north.

There at the opposite end of the promenade stands the Royal Carriage, its golden panels turning orange in the sunset. At either side of its broad central doors stands a footman in the livery of House Thrune.

The footmen open the carriage doors. The sweep of their hands makes the invitation obvious.

I don't expect the Queen herself, but my throat pinches closed when I see the woman who awaits us in the carriage.

**"If you ever think Thrune has promised you something, you're mistaken."**



Most of her is red velvet on deep golden silk, all of it beaded with gold on black lacquer. If the boss quizzes me later on the details, I'll be at a loss, because all I can see once my stare rises above the edge of her veil are those eyes, black abysses shaded by lashes thick as horse hairs. Her eyelids are faintly purple as if bruised by the sights they have witnessed.

Inside the carriage, the boss makes one of those awkward sitting bows look elegant. He says, "Your grace."

"I have no title," says a husky voice from behind the veil. "I am but an emissary. And you shall have no need to refer to me by any name, as you will never speak of this meeting."

Jeggare nods his understanding. When those eyes turn to me, I nod also.

"Tell me everything you have learned about the Henderthane matter."

The boss never shares the details of one of his investigations, but this time he doesn't even hesitate before reciting a concise summary of the case so far. I'm grateful that he omits certain details, like Pavanna's obligation to Zandros.

"Where will your investigation turn next?" says the veiled woman.

"In truth," says Jeggare, "I had just decided to drop the investigation altogether."

"Oh, do not allow my interest to deter you."

"My decision was made before I became aware of your interest," says Jeggare.

"Perhaps you are concerned about the Paralictor?"

Jeggare inclines his head, acknowledging the point.

"It is certain that in all inquiries concerning the Henderthane murder, wherever they shall lead, the throne shall hold you blameless."

"You' meaning both of us?" I say.

The boss shoots me a warning glance, but the emissary's eyes smile, and she inclines her head slightly.

"You said wherever the inquiries shall lead," says Jeggare. "Would that include trespassing on ground dedicated to the Prince of Law?"

"You refer to the Scions Academy?"

Jeggare nods. While the place is a school, it is also officially a temple to Asmodeus, and offenses against its teachers are punished as harshly as those against priests.

"If you were to find some evidence of criminal activity within the Academy, I imagine it unlikely you should be liable for trespass."

"Unlikely?" I say.

"Highly unlikely," says the emissary. "And yet also I imagine it likely that one who revealed wrongdoing within those halls would enjoy a certain amount of favor from the throne."

"I don't suppose we could have that in writing."

Ignoring me and sensing the interview is concluded, Jeggare makes another of those sitting bows. I bob my



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head and open the door for him. Outside, the footmen close it behind us before leaping up to their posts on the back of the carriage. The rider slaps the reins, and a team of thirteen horses pulls away. The royal guards form ranks and follow at a trot.

Once they are out of sight, I say, "I've come around to your way of thinking on this. I'll find Pavanna and tell her to leave town tonight. We can go, too. You've always wanted to go back and visit all the Pathfinder high mucky-mucks in Absalom, haven't you?"

"Oh, it's far too late to run," says the boss. "Besides, this inquiry finally became truly interesting."

"No, boss, it's suicide."

"Possibly," he says. A faint smile of determination forms on his long face. "But unlikely."

I sigh, knowing I can't change his mind. So I can tell him I told him so later, I say, "Aren't those the words this emissary used?"

The big front doors of the Scions Academy stand at an intersection graced with four bright lamps. Little street traffic circulates at this hour, but I spot a few late-night strollers in every direction, and at least one is bound to see me if I fiddle with the locks in such a conspicuous spot. The servants' entrance from the back looks promising until I notice a pair of dottari strolling up the alley. I touch my chin in greeting as I pass them, and they return the courtesy with a snarl reserved for half-breeds and villains. Being both, I can't complain.

I waste a good ten minutes taking the long way around for an approach at the third possible entrance. A small courtyard abuts Verduran Avenue, but its high iron fence bristles with razor thorns, and the lock has one of those dwarven trap-covers that snapped my best picks a few months back. This time I have something better than a pick. From a sleeve pocket I remove the keys I took from Korva's office and select the one that looks the right size. It snaps the cover aside and fits snugly into the keyhole. I turn it as gently as I can, but it still makes a terrific clack. The silver lining is that the boss needs no further signal to hurry across the street and join me inside the fence.

We creep along the hedges and into the deeper shadows. There are two doors in the courtyard, and I try the one without a bright lamp beside it first. None of Korva's keys fit, so I move back toward the lighted door, listening for any sound of the dottari. I hear nothing but the distant clop of hooves from the direction of Thrune Square.

The second key fits, so we slip inside, close the door, and stand there a few seconds to let our eyes adjust to the gloom. One thing the boss and I have in common is keen vision, thanks to our mixed heritage. In a few seconds, we can see well enough to leave the antechamber and enter a cloakroom full of boy-sized capes and hats hanging above rain boots

stacked atop neat ranks of footlockers. We walk out into a corridor and follow it to an apparently central intersection.

To our left is the windowed hall we saw upon our first visit, with classrooms on each side and the administrators' offices at the end. I see moonlight glimmering on windows to the right and figure there are more classrooms. The corridor ahead leads west to the center of the Academy. We follow it and find a pair of opposing doors, one of them decorated with carvings of the famous scene known as "The Triumph of Hell over Chaos," the battle in which Asmodeus threw a legion of demons back into the Abyss from a vantage atop the cage of Rovagug.

Beyond the unlocked door we find pews for about a hundred occupants arrayed before a bronze of Asmodeus raising a triumphant hand, from which hangs an open scroll. It is the most common depiction of the Prince of Darkness in Cheliah, the scroll representing the Infernal Compact that binds the nation to his worship and the legions of Hell to the command of the monarch of Cheliah. As we're giving the place the once-over, I notice the boss sniffing the way he does to savor a fine brandy.

What? I sign to him.

He inhales deeply and gestures for me to do the same.

I take a deep breath but smell only the lingering ghost of incense lurking beneath the fresh scent of the fir pews.

The place shouldn't smell this fresh if it sees daily use. It's only for show.

The boss points me toward the door, letting me lead the way. Once out of the brazier light from the chapel, we let our eyes adjust again. None of Korva's keys fit the opposite door, so I go to work. Drawing the picks from a sleeve pocket, I spend a few minutes probing the lock before we hear the click. Inside we find a gymnasium with a two-story ceiling topped with skylights. We make a circuit of the chamber, peeking into a few dressing and storage rooms. The boss gestures back to the hallway.

I use Korva's key to open the door to her office and step inside. The boss follows, closing the door behind and gesturing to the windows. Once I've closed the curtains, he ignites a palm lamp and shines the light across the shelves and desk. I flip back the rug to show him the trap door I discovered earlier. He nods while collecting ledgers to lay open upon Korva's desk. While he skims their contents, I try Korva's keys in the lock on the trap door. The third one does the trick.

"Try the Headmaster's office," whispers the boss. I leave him to his browsing and slip out into the hall. As I could have guessed, Korva's keys are no use on Orxines' door, and after a good fifteen minutes of futile probing with my lock picks, I return to Korva's office.

Jeggare has been making stacks of ledgers, one tall and another consisting of only two books. I wait while he finishes his division, skimming the last few volumes



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before adding them to the tall stack. He takes the short stack and leaves the rest.

"Do we have what we need?"

Jeggare frowns. "No, only more tantalizing clues. As we suspected, the Academy students were all born within about a month of each other."

"Which means what?"

He strokes the bridge of his nose for a moment before speaking. "Some sort of magical connection," he says. He looks as though he's about to say something else, but then he opens one of the ledgers and points to an annotated list divided by headings of "Commerce," "Law," "Military," "Clergy," "Arcane," and a dozen other categories. "It appears the Headmistress has particular expectations of her students. Virtually every facet of Chelish power is represented by the boys' families and their expected future endeavors."

"That's not exactly a surprise," I say.

"No," says Jeggare. "Yet it does seem odd to have it all scheduled here in the headmistress' office. It is as though Korva somehow expects to orchestrate something. The boys' futures, perhaps."

"Isn't that what the Academy is for?"

"Certainly not," says Jeggare. "The noble houses entrust the Academy with their sons' educations, not their destinies."

"But with Einmarch Henderthane's death, suddenly Father—that is, *Headmaster*—Orxines becomes 'Uncle' Orxines, the most influential man in the young man's life."

Jeggare tilts his head as he looks at me. "That is an interesting point, but to eliminate so many parents is unfeasible. Even a small number of untimely deaths would draw too much attention."

"To what, exactly?"

"That I still cannot deduce," he says.

A clamor of hooves and carriage wheels makes us both freeze in place. Drunken laughter breaks over the cobblestones as the driver cracks the whip and turns north, toward the Triumph District.

I part the curtains with a finger and peer outside. The street looks empty. "We shouldn't linger," I say.

Jeggare nods. "We can take these with us. Let us see what lies beneath the classrooms."

"I can't get into the headmaster's office," I say. "It doesn't seem like a hard lock, but nothing gives."

"I would be surprised if it were not magically warded," says Jeggare. "But perhaps not so from beneath." He nods at the trap door.

I think about the sorts of things I've found in Egorian basements and take a deep breath. Beneath the trap door is a steep, narrow stairway. The boss hands me his palm lamp, and I lead the way.

The stairs spiral fifteen feet down to a curving hallway that joins another from the direction of the Headmaster's office. Together they intersect a larger hallway running

north, this one lined in mosaic tiles forming images similar to those of the Triumph of Hell, but with a crucial difference: Rather than the hordes of the Abyss, mortal armies are the foes trampled beneath the hooves of Asmodeus. Hurling mortal monarchs into cages resembling the prison of Rovagug are human generals resplendent in gold and black armor, all bearing not the Chelish arms but simply the symbol of Asmodeus.

Jeggare gives me a look that tells me he's thinking the same thing I am about the downstairs decorator. Whoever it is doesn't place much stock in the Infernal Compact that allies Hell's Legions with the Empire of Cheliox.

From the passage leading to the space beneath Orxines' office comes a rotting odor. The boss pulls a scented handkerchief from his sleeve and holds it over his nose and mouth, waving me forward with the palm lamp.

This door is different from the others, heavier and with a big lock built into the iron frame. It's the sort of thing you'd expect to see on a warehouse. Fortunately, I've had lots of practice picking warehouse doors, and within a minute I open it. The boss shines his lamp inside, and the charnel stench snaps my guts like a whip.

On the floor of the pentagonal room is a summoning circle formed of a deep red waxy substance, mounded here and there at the stump of an old candle. Within the circle lies a profusion of lines, pentagram on hexagon beneath trapezoids and shapes I don't have words for. I feel sick just looking at it, but that beats looking at the flaccid hunks of human flesh that hang from iron thorns along the walls and the domed ceiling, all strung together with viscera and a twine of human hair. In the center, hanging from the ceiling on a thick stalk, is a wet leathery sac that slowly pulses.

Jeggare turns away from the gruesome chamber, kerchief tight against his mouth. I look just long enough to be sure there are no other exits from the room, then shut the door quietly, hoping we haven't awakened whatever is inside.

"What did they summon?" I whisper, backing slowly away from the summoning chamber.

"I cannot be certain without consulting my library," says Jeggare, following, "but I would guess it is a great begetter."

"What, an incubus?" It's hard to imagine that a demonic cult could hide within an Asmodean order.

"Not exactly," says Jeggare. "Both demonic and diabolic fiends have seducers among their ranks. Succubi are the most popularly known, and the demonic incubus is the male counterpart, but of course it does not require one of the seducers to produce half-fiendish offspring. The most infamous of such half-breeds were first documented in—"

"I know we're in a school, boss, but is this really the time?"

"Of course," he says. "The resulting offspring would be the first generation of what we know as, well..." He gestures an apology toward me.

"Tieflings," I say for him. "Hellspawn."



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He nods.

“But all of the boys look perfectly human.”

Jeggare keeps nodding. “Not all tieflings have discernibly infernal features.”

“But that’s rare, isn’t it?”

“Correct. To cause an entire cohort to appear human would require a great coincidence, or some other commanding force.”

“Like a specialized tiefling-making devil?”

He nods again.

“Boss, I think it’s time to get out of here.”

“Yes,” he says. “But let us first take a look beyond that hallway. If my estimate is correct, it should lead to a chamber directly below the unused chapel we saw upstairs.”

“Considering what we just saw—”

“Just a quick look,” he says, gesturing once more with the palm lamp as he tucks the handkerchief back into his sleeve.

Past the hall of infernal triumph is a pillared chamber similar to the upstairs chapel, only twice the size and with a pair of wide doors on the left wall. Rather than pews, rows of pebbled kneeling stones are arrayed before another statue of Asmodeus, this one gilt and fitted with rubies at the eyes. In its muscular arms it holds out what looks at first to be another copy of the Infernal Compact, this one covered with a thick layer of parchment signed many times at the bottom in dark brown ink. Among the signatures we spot several familiar names, the sort you’d expect to see on engraved social invitations: Wintrish, Krupt, Henderthane, Elliendo... even one Gellius Jeggare. The boss senses my curiosity and whispers, “Second cousin.”

“Can we go now?”

Jeggare nods. “Just let me take this,” he says. As he carefully peels the parchment away from its panel, I check out the other exit. The doors lead up to a wide stairway that I follow to a trap door beneath the gymnasium bleachers. Just before I return to the hidden chapel, I notice a fine mist rolling in beneath the gymnasium door. I’m no wizard, but I have a good idea what that means.

I hurry down the steps and say, “We’ve got company.”

The boss tucks the parchment beneath his doublet, but before we can escape, a nude and glistening man emerges from the hallway.

It takes a second to recognize him as Headmaster Orxines. I don’t care who you are, when a naked person surprises you, the face isn’t the first thing you see. I’m briefly envious of more than his neat yellow beard.

Orxines catches the look on my face, and for the first time in our acquaintance, he smiles. “Much simpler this way, no?”

It occurs to me that he’s wet, and I realize it was Orxines who was sleeping in that horrible pod.

“No more intrigue,” he says. “Down to business.”

“So you’re ready to give yourself up?” I try. Sometimes I just can’t help myself.

Orxines smiles, scratching at a spot just below his left nipple. He presses hard enough to break the skin, and a trickle of blood runs down his side.

“I think the Headmaster means he appreciates the opportunity to express his plan to an appreciative audience.”

“My dear Count,” Orxines laughs, “has that ploy ever worked?” His bloody fingers dig into his skin, and he tears a long arc down his ribs and across his lower belly. Beneath the flesh, where a man should keep his guts, a mass of dark limbs unfolds. “No,” Orxines says. “I meant it is a great relief to take off this damned costume.”

**“Shrines to Asmodeus are everywhere in Cheliox—so why does this one make me so nervous?”**

