

Hell's Pawns Part 6 of 6



The Scions Academy

I stare at the devil Orxines in his secret chapel, and I feel the prickling smile of Asmodeus on my back.

The face of the thing we first met as the headmaster of the Scions Academy is still fair with the kind of sharp little beard made famous by high priests and scoundrels, but now that he's torn the flesh from his naked torso, we see what lies beneath. Ropy tendrils spill out of a ragged maw in his belly. He shrugs off more of the mortal cloak, and what seemed arms and legs twist in inhuman angles. His legs stretch wide to expose a pair of thick appendages like bloated fishers' hooks. His chest peels open, and bloody ribs snap back to transform into chitinous legs. His arms shuffle off their flaccid sleeves and stretch into twin tails of soft anemone tendrils. Only the head remains human, but it rises up on its bloody spinal column like the stinger of some enormous scorpion.

The boss and I rush toward the stairs leading up to the gymnasium, but there is the ghostly figure of Korva, Matron of the Academy. I remember the mist I saw seeping into the room above, and I know how she got here.

"Stand aside, hellspawn," says the devil to me, without irony. "Your life may yet be spared."

I can't come up with a witty retort. "Oh, yeah?" I say. "Why's that?"

Orxines' ungainly body teeters sideways, but I don't trust the feint. I also haven't forgotten about Korva, who is still chanting in a low voice nearby.

"Because he expects Egorian will soon be ruled by devils," says the boss. He steps behind me, and I know my cue. I pretend to step away from him, a little farther from Orxines, a little closer to Korva.

Orxines takes the bait. "My sons can make use of hell-blooded servants openly once they come into their legacies." He skitters again to the side.

"But then you panicked and murdered Einmarch Henderthane," says the boss.

"The old fool would have divided his holdings!" says Orxines, once more circling me for a shot at Jeggare. "There was no choice but to restore his will to name Morvus sole heir, and then to ensure he could never change it again."

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“And yet by doing so, you drew attention to a plot that had remained secret for years,” says Jeggare. He clucks his disapproval.

“Do not tempt my ire, half-elf,” snarls Orxines. “The only law is the law of Hell, and Lord Asmodeus has taught us all its subtleties. Now mine is the pen that draws the contract.” He takes a few steps toward the boss, still testing my loyalty. Jeggare retreats behind me, but this time he steps past and throws himself to the floor. I twist and dive backward, roll on my shoulder, and jump up to punch Korva in the throat just before she can complete her spell. She chokes and collapses to the floor.

Instead of coming after me, as I’d calculated, Orxines follows Jeggare, who rolls away as the devil’s massive forelimbs smash the floor. Flecks of shattered granite rise like sea spray as Orxines demolishes stone kneelers just inches behind the boss.

I leap at Orxines. He’s moving fast, and I barely get my arms around his tail-like neck. I want to smash his head against the floor with my full weight, but his neck is as strong as a carriage spring. The tendrils that were his human arms whip up to grip me. They burn like acid, and I smell the fabric of my favorite jacket melt away.

“I could... do this all day,” I try to sound brave, but my voice is the yelp of a wounded dog. Still, it’s the words that matter, and the boss knows the code. He scrambles up and runs toward Korva, who is only just back on her feet. He bowls her over like a dockside bouncer, an image that would amuse me a lot more if Orxines’ tails weren’t searing into my flesh. When I see Jeggare disappear up the stairs, I concentrate on my predicament.

Orxines’ tails hold me tight, and I can’t dig a foot into his back for leverage. Still, I have his neck. It’s too strong to bend, but I shift my grip and pull hand-over-hand, climbing up to that smug human face. Just before I can dig my thumbs into his widening eyes, I feel a powerful grip on my legs. His tentacles—I need to think of them as tentacles—entwine my legs and pull hard in either direction. My grip slides, but if I let go, he’s going to snap me like a wishbone. I hate it, but I make one desperate pull and do the thing I hate most.

I bite him.

After the first time I bit someone in a street fight, I explained by way of apology that it hurt me as much as it hurt him. Of course, that didn’t address the matter of his missing fingers. The infection spread throughout his hand a few days later and he had to pay a Cheapside barber to amputate it. I would have offered to pay half, but my jaw was still black and tender from popping out of joint. Besides, he’d started it.

My teeth sink into the devil’s flesh, and my head snaps back as if I’d bitten a bolt of lightning. Orxines’ blood steams in my mouth, the pain so sharp that I barely feel

the impact as my body hits and leaves my outline in the plaster. The heat feels like acid surging through all my veins until it reaches my heart, which explodes in a pain so big and white that it flies briefly over the peak of ecstasy before falling back into an abyss of torment.

Orxines spins, his forelimbs unable to clutch his bleeding neck. He whirls in frustration, yellow ichor flying from his wound to spatter on the surrounding pillars. Beyond him, Korva opens her palms toward me, revealing a swelling orange blossom of flame. The roar of a furnace washes over me.

Despite the ringing in my head, the fire feels like the sun on my skin after a river swim. Even the pain in my jaw subsides, and I push myself up to my feet again. I almost trip, feeling something unexpected on my knees. Sharp bone spikes jut out of my kneecaps. Sharp bones arc out of knuckles, and I feel more at my heels. My elbow spurs have grown long as knives, forcing me to hold my arms out to keep their points away from my ribs. The devil’s blood or the fire—something is changing me.

“Catch Jeggare!” Orxines screams at Korva. His voice fragments; he sounds like triplet brothers talking over each other. “I’ll deal with this one.”

Something more wicked than me uncoils in my belly and sends up a chuckle. “Let’s get to it,” I say, beckoning him toward me. I’m ready for a fight, and I feel the big grin opening up on my face. Now I’ll have his throat in my teeth. Let’s see what it does to me a second time.

Before I see him move, my back hits the floor, and this time it’s my brain that feels like it’s exploded. Fireworks pop behind my closed eyelids. When I open them, I’m staring up at that writhing mass of tendrils between Orxines’ hooked claws. One rises up and smashes me, battering down my raised arms as if there were no strength in them. He hits me again, and this time I can’t even make a show of defending myself. I feel a couple of ribs go.

I kick up at the devil’s belly, but those soft-looking tails catch my legs and turn to iron. Orxines lifts me off the floor and holds me there, turning for one last look at my face.

“You were born to serve, tiefling,” he says, raising his massive forelimbs for a killing blow. “And those who do not serve my new order must die.”

“There will be no new order, hellspawn,” commands a voice from behind me. It’s excruciating to twist my neck, but I turn just far enough to see the inverted figures of Hellknights at the base of the stairs. I recognize the slim figure of Ivo Elliendo among them, flanked on either side by a red-garbed signifer. Behind them all stands the boss, panting as he leans against the wall.

“Elliendo!” says Orxines. “Your son will sit at my council. The compact will be rewritten, and you will be among the first servants of—”

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"Kill that thing," says Elliendo. His signifers raise their arms and intone arcane words. I wriggle to slip free, but Orxines holds me fast.

Wait, I try to shout, but it comes out a spray of bloody spit.

"Don't!" cries Orxines, lifting me up like a shield.

"Kill them both," says Elliendo.

From the hands of the signifers, the light of a hundred thunderstorms falls upon us. For an instant, it feels like every bone in my body has shattered, and then it feels like nothing at all.

I wake up about a thousand years later, my head filled with a buzzing red haze. Someone has cut away my ruined

shirt and jacket, leaving me only the stinking remnants of my boots and leather breeches. When I sit up, I feel the weight of cold iron on my wrists and ankles. The chains scrape across a hard wooden table to which I'm bound. I'm in a small, unlighted room, but my hellborn eyes perceive the outlines of a vertical rack on the far wall. Beside it hang implements like those I've seen on the Judgment Day scaffold.

My hands and arms still prickle, but the skin looks completely healed, and any broken bones have set back into place. That affliction of spiky growths has faded, but I can feel my elbow spurs scrape the table. That the Hellknights went to the trouble of healing me must mean they want to start from scratch, and the thought makes my guts turn to ice. I hold my breath to keep the panic in and try to think. Most of my gear was in my missing sleeves, but if I can just reach the cuff of my left boot—

Before I can turn the thought into action, I hear hob-nailed boots on stone stairs outside the room. My pulse throbs at my temples. The terror comes out all at once, and I shake the chains as I bend my knees and stretch my hands toward the cuffs of my boots. I can almost reach them when the door opens. The light briefly blinds me.

Silhouetted in the torchlight of a rough stone hallway are two torturers, their scarlet leather hoods tooled to resemble infernal faces. One looks down at me and scratches his neck, like a butcher considering where to cut first. The other pushes past and reaches for the manacles at my feet. Behind them I see a priest of Asmodeus standing in the hallway, his black-and-red vestments immaculate despite the sooty dungeon walls.

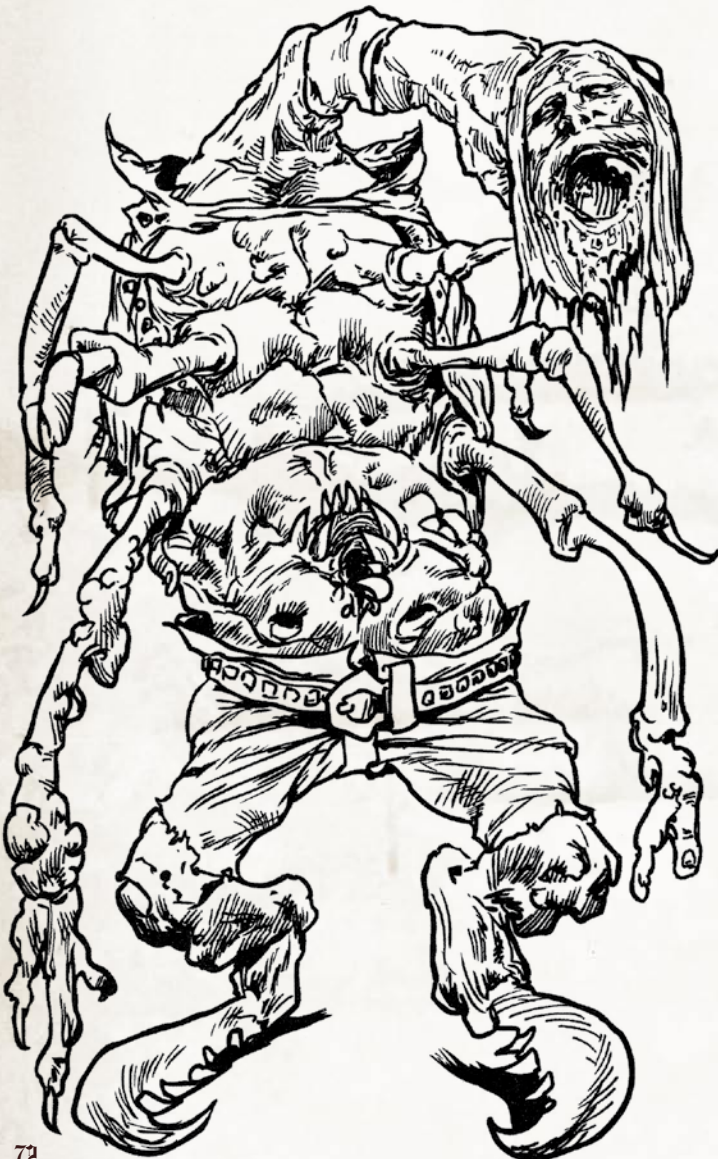
The torturer unlocks my manacles, but before I can fix the courage to kick him and make a break for it, he pulls me to my feet. He and his buddy grip my arms. Without a word, the priest leads the way up a narrow spiral stairway, and we follow. We pass two more floors of cells before emerging at a guard station, where a turnkey opens a gate to let us pass. We pass a clerk who stares hard at me as the priest signs his ledger and accepts a receipt. The torturers pass me to a pair of Hellknights, both of whom loom a full head above me.

The knights drag me to a door and pull me out onto steps, where the cold morning air slaps my face as I blink in the silver morning light. One of the Hellknights punches me hard in the gut, dropping me to my knees.

"That's to remember you were here," says the hollow voice inside the helm. His companion pulls me up by the hair, but the priest steps in.

"Enough," he says in a cultured tone that is as much a mask as the Hellknights' visors. "Return to your master," he says before gliding away. I hear the knights clank their way back inside their headquarters.

"I think I liked him better the other way."



The Scions Academy

The red carriage waits near the base of the stairs, the slip driver standing nervously beside the cab door. I crawl most of the way down the stairs before the door slams behind me and the halfling scurries over to support me the rest of the way.

A month later, I'm standing on the Bunyip Dock as the crew of the *Saffron Nymph* prepares to cast off. Gruck looks at me from the ship's deck, a question in his eyes. Beside him, the captain—a gray-bearded Vudran whose patience, while heroic, is not unlimited—waits for me to make up my mind. I'm holding two fat purses in my hands, feeling their weight. They feel about the same, so I weigh them against the past few weeks.

By the time I got to Greensteeples, the boss was waiting for me in the library. I'd been almost two days in jail, and he'd spent most of that time under interrogation by Elliendo's men. As a count of Cheliax, however, he'd enjoyed the relative comfort of his own home.

"Why didn't they torture you?" I asked. "Or cast a compulsion?"

He lifted a glass of amber-colored wine, his hand trembling. He looked away as he took a sip. Without looking at me, he said, "They would have done more, but they were awaiting approval from the throne."

Another privilege of the noble class. "So the emissary is making good on her promise of a favor."

"So it would seem," he said, returning the glass to a small table beside his chair. He missed, and the crystal shattered on the floor. One of his halfling servants moved in without a sound and knelt to gather the fragments.

"What else?" I said. "What aren't you telling me?"

He said nothing for the time it took the servant to finish clearing away the spill. When she left the room and closed the library door behind her, Jeggare put his face in his hands, still turned away from me.

"What is it, boss?"

He sighed and lifted his head from his hands. "I am sorry, Radovan. I know you cared for her, but it was necessary that I tell the inquisitors everything."

"You told them about Pavanna's debt to Zandros?"

"It was... unavoidable," he said. "If I had obstructed their investigation in any way—"

"But you didn't tell them about the royal emissary, did you?"

"No, of course not. One does not disobey a message from the throne."

I thought about it for a moment. "It's all right, boss. You don't know where she is. She'll hear that the Hellknights are looking for her and find a way out of the city."

Jeggare still would not turn to face me.

"What is it, boss?"

"They already have her, Radovan."

The Infernal Compact

It's common knowledge in Cheliax that, in their rise to power, the diabolical nobles of House Thrune signed a contract with Asmodeus himself, binding his minions to their service in exchange for the worship of all Cheliax (and, some whisper, even more insidious prices).

Among other things, the Infernal Compact stipulates that the House of Thrune and its associated noble families shall receive Asmodeus's aid to the end of their bloodlines. While Orxines' insertion of his own fiendish taint into those family trees might be viewed as breaking the contract if conducted with Asmodeus's knowledge, if all known heirs to the ruling families were tieflings, the result would be either a nation that served Hell rather than bargaining with it, or else an acknowledged end to the bloodlines in question—either of which might void the contract and allow Asmodeus to alter the deal as he sees fit. And while the Prince of Lies is rarely pleased with rogue agents and third parties meddling with his work, if Orxines succeeded, he could likely look forward to a princely reward—or a nation loyal to him alone.

He might as well have slapped me. "How?" I said. When he didn't answer, I shouted, "You led them to her!"

"I did not," he said. Even through the thickness of drink, his voice oozed resentment. "How despicable do you think me?"

"Then how?"

He hesitated again, still refusing to look me in the eye. "They followed you from the Palace of Jubilations."

"Impossible," I said. "I shook them off."

"Radovan," he said with the impatience of a parent lecturing a stupid child. "There was a signifer with them."

I opened my mouth, but I had nothing to say. What an idiot I had been! The Hellknights' pet wizards could find a stolen coin anywhere in the city, if they cared to expend the precious magical energy. I had always been beneath their notice, or at least I thought I was. Jeggare had warned me more than once not to provoke the Paralictor. I stared at him, daring him to say he had told me so, but he gazed toward the windows, and I saw rain clouds reflected in his eyes.

"The emissary promised us a favor," I said. "Use it to get her out!"

At last Jeggare turned to me. "Our favors are spent," he said. "You and I are free of the Hellknights, and there will be no further inquiry as to our involvement."

All the pain of my past few days washed over me then, and I felt as drunk as Jeggare looked. I stood and walked unsteadily out the door. Jeggare said nothing as I left. I figured if he needed me, he'd call for me.

Outside I walked away from Greensteeples without looking back. I had no destination in mind, but somehow, after threading the blank-faced crowds of

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Bilgetown and Dice End, I ended up at my flat and collapsed on my mattress.

I didn't want to know, but there was no avoiding the word on the street once I emerged from my room. The Scions Academy had closed, and after a tragic fire on a pleasure barge took the lives of nearly two score young scions of the nobility, the other families of boys from the Scions Academy quietly announced that their sons had departed on tours to distant lands, gone away to wait on the pleasure of country relatives, or had contracted sudden incurable illnesses. I didn't need Jeggare's high-society contacts to know those children were quietly murdered by the fathers who learned that their sons were the bastards of an ambitious devil planning to supplant the nobility of Cheliox with his own offspring.

I wanted more information, but I didn't want to ask the boss for it. He'd call if he needed anything.

Against all hope, I combed the Cheapside districts for word of Pavanna. Maybe Jeggare was wrong, I told myself. Or more likely the Hellknights had lied to him. That would be just like Elliendo, to make us writhe with a lie. I tried the gambling dens, the flophouses, the taprooms, the cathouses, every filthy little safe room I had ever known. Nowhere could I find someone who had seen Pavanna arrested. Eventually I had to admit to myself that Elliendo was capable of any cruelty, but a lie was beneath his dignity.

Still no word from Jeggare.

I tried to put it out of my mind, but it wouldn't go away. I checked on my caches throughout Dice End, put my saved money in three big purses and carried them with me. On the docks I watched the merchant vessels come and go. Just one of my purses would get me passage to a distant city and keep me there for months, but I'd never been outside Egorian. Were the people of Korvosa and Riddleport more human than those in Egorian? Or were we all damned no matter where we lived?

As the sleepy days passed, the sky pulled the sheets over its head, and the sun turned into a tiny silver coin. I stayed restless, but I stayed out of trouble. Every once in a while I'd spot one of the Goatherds on the street, but they turned away instead of shooting me the Tines. Whatever they heard about the Henderthane business, they didn't want any of it to rub off on them.

Going to the Palace and demanding to talk to the emissary was a crazy idea, but it kept me up at night,

and there was no one to talk me out of it. Once I went to stand outside the Palace, and the guards—brutes bigger than Hellknights—came for me before I was within a hundred feet of the gates. I did not wait to explain myself.

The thought of approaching Elliendo to beg for Pavanna's life was even more forbidding, but then I realized what had to happen, when my one chance would come. Just knowing that gave me the courage to stay in Egorian a little longer. I spent the days walking the city, eating when I was hungry, going back to sleep when I was tired. The count sent no word to me. Nothing could change until Judgment Day.

There was still frost on the streets by the time the spectators gathered. All the pretty dresses of the previous month had turned to cloaks and coats the color of loam and manure.

Their diminished nobles left barren patches in the stands, giving it the aspect of a harvested cornfield. There was no such dearth among the groundlings, who never mind a cold day at the scaffold if it means a few hours away from their labor.

The Sarini Fool appeared in harvest theme, with bone-white gloves and a long scythe. He joked about the bountiful harvest, for there were many hooded victims that day. I pushed to the edge of the scaffold and searched for a familiar figure. Then I spied those curves I had caressed for only an hour in what seemed like a distant memory.

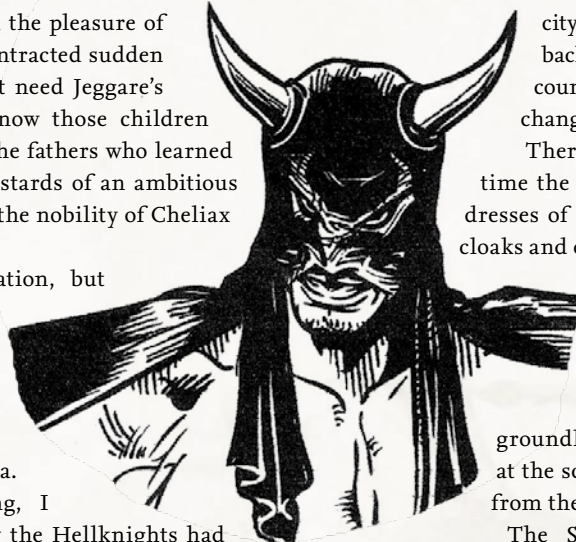
"Pavanna!" I called. The hooded head moved, and I knew I had found her. She called my name, but I didn't know what else to say. I had come with no plan except to find her. And then what? Save her? There was no way. Or was there?

I searched the crowd for Elliendo. He was not mingling among the stands as was his custom, basking in the appreciation of the law-abiding citizens he protected from villains like me. I pushed through the groundlings and didn't hesitate to use my elbows when they were slow to make way.

"Elliendo!" I shouted. "Where are you?"

I couldn't see him anywhere, but I pressed through. A heavy hand fell on my shoulder, and when I whipped around to see a big guard standing over me, the butt of his companion's halberd caught me in the stomach. They dragged me out of the crowd as I tried to catch my breath. Just as I did so, Ivo Elliendo stood before me. He did not wear his uniform. Instead he was dressed from sole to crown in mourning black, and his steel gray hair showed more flecks of white than I remembered.

"Mercy is rarely an asset for executioners."



"If you dare disrupt the solemnity of today's proceedings," he began.

"Please," I interrupted him. "Let her go."

He looked back at me, uncomprehending.

"You don't want Pavanna," I said. "You asked me to leave Jeggare, and I will. I'll be your informer, your spy, whipping boy, whatever you say. Just let her go."

Elliendo stared back with a look of cold astonishment.

"I'm begging you," I said, surprised to find that I'd dropped to my knees voluntarily. I reached and almost touched his leg before I stopped myself.

He looked down with the cool indifference of a man who watches a centipede crawl across his boot. He leaned over and hissed in my face, "How closely did you observe the condemned?"

I had looked only for Pavanna, forgetting who else might have been condemned to death this Judgment Day. I recalled that many of the condemned were rather short and slender, the size of boys the age of Elliendo's son.

"I—" was all I could spit out before he slapped my face hard.

"Be silent and watch," he said. "I will not be the only one to suffer." With a gesture he ordered the guards to drag me back toward the scaffold's edge. There they held me as the Fool took his bow and the executioners began their work.

"Radovan!" cried Pavanna. I called back to her, but I couldn't think of anything to say but her name.

"Stay with me," she called. All my blood turned to cold water, and I couldn't have moved even if the guards had released my arms. "Are you there? Radovan?"

"I'm here," I croaked, but my words were drowned by the roar of the crowd. Another noose dropped, another neck snapped, another cheer erupted from the crowd, and Pavanna was a step closer to death. "I'm here!" I shouted, and something hot slid down my face. "I won't leave you."

We called out to each other that way for the time it took to hang and draw fourteen men and boys. Then it was her turn, and she called out one last time, "Don't leave me!"

"I won't!" I called as the platform dropped out beneath her.

Gruck was waiting for me outside the Plaza of Flowers. He had watched it all, and I saw the paths where tears had cleaned his dirty face. He didn't need to explain. I knew he must have scarpered as soon as he saw the Hellknights coming for him and Pavanna, and I didn't blame him.

He murmured, "I'm sorry." I pulled him away from the jabbering onlookers, all dispersing to their daily work after the spectacle. He followed me all the way to the Bunyip Dock, where I made a deal with the first ship captain who was leaving port. "Passage for the boy," I

To Be Continued...?

"The Scions Academy" marks the final episode in the "Hell's Pawns" storyline. Starting with *Pathfinder Adventure Path* volume #31, the *Pathfinder's Journal* will be presenting a brand new six-episode story arc to accompany the *Kingmaker Adventure Path*. Titled "Prodigal Sons," the new serial novella boasts a team of fan-favorite authors working together to chronicle the exploits of Ollix and Phargas, two exiled ne'er-do-wells intent on finding fame and fortune in the River Kingdoms—but without all the work normally associated with heroism.

Yet this doesn't mean that you've seen the last of Radovan. On the contrary, Radovan's adventures will be continued in a big way with next year's launch of the new *Pathfinder Fiction* line. In one of the line's first novels, tentatively titled *Prince of Wolves*, Radovan's journeys take him out of Chelifax and into the mist-shrouded realm of Ustalav, where he discovers secrets about his own heritage, fraternizes with mysterious women and dangerous shapeshifters, and bites off more than even he can chew.

But will Radovan's relationship with Varian survive the events of "Hell's Pawns"? Will he in fact set sail with Gruck, or choose the path of the red carriage? Only time—and a new novel—will tell.

told him. I watched his face as he considered my request. "Unmolested passage," I said, looking at his crew of rough men and half-breeds.

If I'd offended him, the money smoothed it over. We clasped hands, and it was a bargain. Gruck was frightened, but I slipped him the purse from which I'd paid the captain, and he was clever enough to make it disappear before any of the sailors saw it. There was enough there for him to live for a couple of years, if he was frugal; enough to buy an apprenticeship, if he was smart. I told him as much.

"I'm afraid," he said. "Can't you come with me?"

And now I'm thinking about it. There's enough money to get us started in any kind of plain, decent life, if we keep our noses out of the gutter. There's no reason for either of us to stay in this city sworn to Hell, this city full of hypocrites who hate bastards more than they hate their own sins. Nothing here loves us, and nothing here needs us.

The red carriage pulls up at the end of the dock, and I hear the slip driver whistle to me. The carriage door is closed, but the curtain moves and I see a pale finger holding it open for a peek.

Behind me, the sailors are casting off, and the captain wants an answer. I throw him the pouch of money I promised for Gruck's passage.

I weigh the other one in my hand.