

Piety

a work in process
by Marcus Avenier

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Verian was raw and tender, but not in the same awful way as he had been after Charlie's beatings. Delmi had smacked and paddled him for three nights in a row, from upturned ass to the backs of thighs and calves. Delmi had departed afterward each time, and Alex came in his wake with cream to rub into Verian's inflamed skin. Verian had been so upset the last time that he'd snatched the jar away and chased the boy off with hissing words and heated eyes.

Now he was sitting and waiting. He hated waiting. Waiting made him anxious. It gave him too much time to think. To feel, and to contemplate his feelings.

Already he'd paced the length and width of the expansive room. Fifty-two times in each direction. He'd stared through the window and into the sunny courtyard below, admiring the flowers that bloomed in clusters on the edges of neatly trimmed paths. His view of the front gardens included the drive, the pale dirt and stone glaring in the bright afternoon light.

Why he had been summoned to the lavishly appointed room to sit and wait had not been explained to Verian. It was after the midday meal, and he should have been out on the hill. He should have felt the sun baking into his shoulders and back. He might have practiced in the room, despite the lack of sun, but instead he paced. Instead he stared.

A carriage rounded the base of one gently sloping hill, pulling briefly into Verian's sight and out again. It was several minutes before he spotted the thing ambling along in the distance. Its approach was reprehensibly slow, but the arrival was inevitable. The carriage would have turned along another path when Verian first spotted it were it destined elsewhere. As it was, it drew steadily larger, steadily nearer, until at last it was clattering to a halt in the courtyard far below.

A young man in a posh uniform hopped down from the bench alongside the driver and drew open the carriage door. Jaquen montclair stepped out, a hand raising to shield his eyes as he peered up at the main building. His arms rose, hands balling to fists, and he lifted onto his toes with an arch of spine and slow, back and forth twisting of his hips. The carriage door closed behind the man, and the horses were urged on as Jaquen mounted the wide, shallow steps that led to the grand doors that

Verian could not see, but knew were present. It was there that Verian lost sight of the man.

Despite Jaquen's arrival, Verian was made to wait. He returned to pacing when it became apparent that the man was not going to arrive any time soon. When pacing lost its nostalgic appeal, Verian returned to staring out at the serene landscape. Slope after slope of rolling green hill promised freedom, and he was locked away behind a pane of thick glass. His throat went dry for his yearning, and he curled his toes against the parquet as he imagined the soft soil giving way beneath them.

It was as Verian was fighting the bitter taste at the back of his mouth that the door finally opened. He turned to watch Jaquen step in, the servant in the hall drawing the door shut behind him. A bundle of rich woody brown and olive green fabric sat atop Jaquen's upturned palms. His smile was subdued, but even so hinted toward a smirk.

"A gift," Jaquen purred. "You may only wear them here, and you must tell no one."

Verian set his hands to the top of the bundle. His fingers curled into the soft cotton tunic and he drew it up to stare at it for a long moment. The frustration that had been building within him was made to halt for the confusing conflict of emotion so intense that he might have thought he felt nothing at all.

He fed one arm, then the other, slowly through the soft green sleeves of the tunic. The trousers were given a shake, and put on just as slowly, just as carefully. The lacing at the top of them was drawn tight, and he tied it off with a deft twist of fingers and long, deliberate exhale. He hadn't even realized he'd been holding his breath.

"There," Jaquen rumbled approvingly.

It felt strange to be wearing clothing after so long. It was plain enough that the fit was loose without being billowy, but he was too aware of how the cotton and wool brushed and shifted for every move he made. Even breathing caused the material to brush against him in ways that were not entirely pleasant. Still, Verian would not have given it up for the world. He turned away from Jaquen and stared through the window, one arm lifting to draw across his face.

“My thanks,” Verian croaked with as much dignity as he could muster. Jaquen’s touch was light, but confident as he cupped his hands over Verian’s shoulders.

“No need,” Jaquen murmured in dismissal. “I will be staying here for a month. You will share this room with me while I am here. There is only one bed, but I would not have you sleeping on the floor like a dog.” Jaquen’s fingers grasped in a gentle squeeze. “After breakfast, you will go to Delmi for your lessons, and return to me at midday.”

Verian nodded. His chest was tight, his eyes burning. He said nothing for some time, too afraid that his voice would break. That he might cry again. He yearned for his wit, for his ability to converse as he should and not as a petulant child. His shoulders dipped back, and as he twisted, Jaquen drew his hands up from Verian’s shoulders.

“You said you would take me away.”

“And I shall,” Jaquen reassured. His palm was cool against the heat of Verian’s cheek. “These things take time, Verian. You must be patient.”

“I have been.”

“Yes, and you must continue to be so.”

“For how long?” Verian demanded.

“For however long it takes.” Jaquen returned his hands to Verian’s shoulders for a tight grasp.

Verian lapsed again to silence. His tongue pushed hard at his teeth, and his jaw clenched tight. He gave a grunt of noise through the roof of his mouth and tore away to stare again through the window.

“Did you tell Delmi to hit me?” Verian asked quietly, his breath ghosting against the glass.

“What?”

“Delmi. He didn’t used to hit me. He said that it was for you.”

Jaquen’s hands settled again to Verian’s shoulders, and the man pressed himself up close from behind. “I did not tell him to harm you in any way. I would not do such a thing, Verian.”

“So he lies?”

“Or you have misunderstood.”

“Why would he lie to me?”

Jaquen's fingers kneaded reassuringly. "Why would I? I realize that it is taking longer than you like to free you of this place, but have I not always treated you well? Have I not always treated you kindly, and with respect?"

Verian's mouth drew taut.

"Delmi is the vicar's puppet as much as any of the others, Verian," Jaquen murmured, near enough now that Verian could feel breath at the back of his ear. "An exotic pet doing his bidding and little more. Do not think for a moment that you can trust anyone in this place."

"Not even you?" Verian asked in tease.

A chuckle rumbled up from Jaquen's chest. "I am glad that you have not lost all of your fire. Won't you sit with me? Supper will be along soon, and you may tell me of the spells you've been learning."

The tension bled from Verian's shoulders, and then his back. He sighed as he slumped, then turned with a brush of shoulder to tip into Jaquen. The tunic tickled the hairs on Verian's freckled arms as he wound them about the man for a brief, appreciative embrace.

"I would kill to eat at the table and with proper silverware."

"I'd rather you not," Jaquen rumbled with a gesture to the settee and chair before the hearth. "I am quite fond of living."

Verian fell weightily into the chair. He draped his arms along the padded upholstery, slumped back in the deep seat, and sprawled his legs out before him. A long, pleased sigh parted his lips. How long since he had been allowed to revel in such a simple pleasure?

One dark brow perked toward Jaquen's hairline as he watched. His wide mouth tugged into an amused grin.

"I do not believe I have ever seen anyone enjoy a chair quite so much."

Verian grinned widely up at Jaquen. "Then you should try sharing one with a lady some time," he quipped.

Jaquen's laughter was low and rolling, brushing up against Verian's spirits like a balm. Verian settled into place with a cementing of his smile and turned a pleased look to the hearth. He was feeling more himself by the moment.

Chapter 16

"Good boy," Delmi praised.

Verian rocked to his heels, his hands returning to his sides. He sucked briefly on his teeth.

"This is dull."

Jaquen had only been present for two days, but already he found himself impatient with Delmi. He wanted to go back to the vast room in the main building and eat duck, to read the books that lined the shelves and lounge while Jaquen petted his hair. He wanted to be treated like a person rather than a thing. Instead he was stuck out on the hill, his skin slowly burning, and repeating spells he'd learned weeks ago.

"Is it?" Delmi tipped his head to the side, a shrewd look leveled on Verian.

"Yes." Verian gave pause, then spoke on with less imperiousness. "Can we not learn something new?"

"It is like building muscle, boy. You must repeat and repeat until you are strong enough for more."

"I am strong enough now," Verian insisted.

"We will see," Delmi said quietly as he eyed Verian. "But that is for tomorrow."

"Are we to do this for the next hour then?"

"No; we are finished."

"What?"

"Finished. Go back to Lord Montclair. I do not teach those 'oo lack respect."

Had he really grown so unruly in so short a period of time? Verian squinted, backed a step, and then took it forward again.

"I apologize," he mumbled to his toes.

"Good. You go now. We start better tomorrow."

The nod was as easy to deliver as the slumping of his shoulders was to affect. Verian backed again, then turned. He trotted down the hill, eager to be away from the tedium, away from Delmi's praise over childish tricks. How long now had he been doing the same thing? Over and over every

day. At least with Jaquen he had new material to practice. At least with Jaquen he had a name.

Verian slowed when he reached the courtyard. He skirted wide past the pergola at the intersection of paths, choosing instead to tiptoe through the flowers and across the grass. He slid in through the gap where one massive wooden door had been propped for the fresh warm air, and stole like a ghost along the spacious halls.

A younger gentleman in velvet and silk was descending the steps even as Verian hurried up them. The man was so pale as to seem sickly. His eyes were watery and gray, set beneath unremarkable brows. His nose was too small and too sharp for his features, and his thin little lips twisted in a grimace when his eyes met with Verian's.

"Did no one ever teach you any manners, boy?"

A sneer loomed before Verian, and he worked to fight a grimace.

"My mother taught me not to pull faces when I was a babe, *sir*," Verian replied with a surprising amount of respect in his delivery, if not in content.

One veiny hand lashed out for Verian's chest, and he found himself pushed back against the wall. The speed and force of the maneuver left Verian grunting in surprise.

"If you were not Jaquen's boy," the reedy voice snarled, "I would pitch you down the steps for such insolence." The man brought his nose just shy of Verian's, fingers digging hard enough to bruise. "As it is, I am tempted to demand your tongue."

"That's enough, Gorch," Jaquen interrupted from the upper landing.

Gorch's eyes narrowed venomously at Verian, but his fingers eased in their dig against pale flesh. His arm retracted a moment later, and Gorch turned to give Jaquen a lofty bow. He then spun about on the side of his foot and carried on down the steps.

Jaquen adjusted the dressing robe that hung loosely from his shoulders, the dark panels of fabric framing the center of his chest and belly. He drew his fingers through his mussed hair, raised a brow at Verian, then turned to pad barefooted along the hall.

"You're early," Jaquen observed as Verian trotted up from behind.

"Yes."

"See that it does not happen again."

"Delmi sent me; I cannot very well say no!"

Jaquen turned in place, his fingertips caught on the handle of the door, one dark brow arched high. "And why did Delmi send you before the agreed upon time?"

Verian pinched his tongue lightly between his teeth.

Jaquen hummed as he pressed open the door. "I am making every effort to see to your release, Verian. If you are not going to cooperate fully, I would appreciate your telling me now. I do not care to waste my time."

Verian's frown deepened as he stepped into the room. It was warm and humid with the musk of sweat and sex. His mouth pursed tight with discontent.

"I will do better tomorrow," Verian muttered.

"See that you do," Jaquen said crisply.

Verian crossed the room to a wide, squat chest of drawers. He drew open the topmost and pulled free his clothes. Every action was careful and precise, as though he could mask his upset behind a veil of control.

"Who was that man?" Verian asked in brittle tones as he dressed.

"A friend."

"Well I would not assume he was your enemy."

"That is because you are intelligent, Verian. Just as you are intelligent enough to recognize an evasive response."

Verian was frowning outright by the time he had his trousers cinched and tied. He ran his hands over the baggy tunic that draped from his shoulders. Still careful. Still precise. The material refused to be orderly.

"Come now. Did you think that I would not have friends, Verian?"

Verian turned to eye Jaquen. The man was lounging in the bed, propped by a stack of pillows. His eyes were lidded and limbs loose. Jaquen had shed his robe and was reclined with a large book braced to the slope of his belly. He hadn't even looked up from it to speak.

"Of course you have friends," Verian finally answered. "No doubt you have a great many friends. Do you mind if I crack the window?"

"I do," Jaquen answered without looking up.

"It reeks."

"I rather enjoy the smell."

"Well I don't."

Well you're early," Jaquen countered in mild mockery of Verian's petulant inflection.

Frustration welled up within Verian's chest, and though familiar, was far from comforting. It tamped down his tongue and set his hands to trembling. He wanted to throttle Jaquen then as surely as he wanted to throttle Delmi.

Jaquen's hand slipped from the side of the book to settle over the page. He looked up to Verian, a sigh parting his lips, his dark eyes mild in their regard. Then the hand rose, and he beckoned Verian near.

"Let's not bicker, Verian. There is no reason to be angry."

Still frowning, Verian drifted to the bed. It smelled worse there, and he could well imagine Gorch's pale body convulsing every rumple into the bedding at Jaquen's side. He ignored the twisting of his gut and crawled up to nestle along Jaquen's side. The man's outstretched arm draped down along Verian's back. Verian settled and sighed past the wisps of dark hair that made Jaquen's chest seem all the more white.

"What are you reading?" Verian asked quietly.

"The Song of Ramishta."

"How dull."

"It is," Jaquen agreed, obviously amused. "A trunk of my own books is due to arrive this afternoon. I daresay that they will be something of a relief."

"Will you spend all of our time reading, then?" Verian asked as he propped himself up on one elbow.

"You'll not get out of lessons that easily," Jaquen replied ruefully, though his attention was back on the book.

"Good."

Silence fell upon them both. Jaquen read, and Verian attempted to match the cadence of his breathing to the rise and fall of the chest beneath his head. Jaquen did not smell as he usually did, and Verian disliked that despite his grudging acceptance of the stink of the bed.

Verian twisted in place, unpinning his arm to push himself up with a brace of palm and splay of fingers. He leaned in past Jaquen's book to set his mouth against the man's. It was not a kind, gentle kiss, but instead crashed hard and demanding onto Jaquen's unresponsive mouth. When the moment for surprise had passed and Jaquen had neither hissed in return nor pushed him away, Verian drew back. He stared down at the man's lean features, at the vague frown set above the narrow stripping of precisely maintained beard. Jaquen's dark eyes remained locked on Verian for a long moment, then dipped back to the book.

The tide came welling up in Verian's chest again. It made it difficult to breathe. It set his teeth to gritting. He slid his hand along Jaquen's belly, fingertips grazing the well of Jaquen's navel on their way to his waistband.

"Verian," Jaquen growled warningly.

Verian froze, scowling. "Are we not friends?"

"Stop."

"Do not desire me? Delmi says you do, and I have seen you looking."

"That does not matter."

"I can make you feel good," Verian insisted.

His fingertips dipped into the heat beneath Jaquen's waistband, though froze when Jaquen caught his wrist. The book snapped shut as their eyes locked.

"You do not know what you are doing," Jaquen insisted.

"I do," Verian whispered, leaning to smear a kiss to Jaquen's cheek.

Jaquen caught Verian's shoulder to still him.

"You do not. One day you may, but this is not that day. That day will not come so long as you are here in this place."

Verian's fingers were twitching again. He drew back slowly, yielding to the steady press of Jaquen's hand. Verian's eyes stung, and his chest had gone from swollen to sinking. He sat quickly and turned away.

"You are wrong," Verian whispered. He scarcely recognized his own voice.

"Perhaps," Jaquen allowed. "But this is how it will be."

Verian's fingers worked over the wool covering his knees. He breathed

deeply and drew his arm across his eyes as he stood. A knock at the door announced the arrival of Jaquen's meal.

"Fetch that, will you?" Jaquen asked.

Verian moved numbly to do just that. The servant with the food-heavy tray eyed Verian dubiously, but Verian ignored the look in favor of shutting the door in the poor man's face. Rather than chide him, Jaquen was chuckling as Verian slid the tray onto the table.

"Eat with me," Jaquen invited as he abandoned the bed. "Then we will practice and you will feel better, hm?"

Verian nodded. He was grateful for the invitation, for the sense of normalcy that came with it. He threw himself into it headlong, and dropped promptly into one of the chairs at the table. Verian draped himself in such a way as to occupy as much space as possible. His space. His meal. His practice. These would continue despite the rejection of other things.

"What will we practice today?" Verian asked, his fingers pinched about a fat purple grape.

The look Jaquen gave Verian was a sly one, his eyes slits above a grin that was wide and full of teeth.

"You'll see."

"What is that?" Verian asked incredulously.

"A thelkin," came Jaquen's blithe reply.

"Well I can see that, but what is it doing here?"

Verian had stripped to go after a flagon of wine for Jaquen, and was hastily drawing his clothes back on. He did not care to face a thelkin in the nude, even if it was contained by a barrier of glowing white runes.

"I felt it more appropriate than practicing on a person," Jaquen purred. "At least," he paused for effect, "at this point."

The thelkin rolled its cloudy gray eyes about. It was testing the runic barrier with thick gray appendages that were a bizarre cross of octopus

tentacle and arm. It was no more than two feet high, but its size did not diminish its fury. It was frothing past protruding, pointed teeth, and its gelatinous body was excreting a foul-smelling sludge.

“What do you mean to do with it?” Verian asked as he brought his arm up to cover his nose and mouth.

“Nothing,” said Jaquen, his smirk reflected in his tone. “But you are.”

“I am?”

“Yes. Today you will learn to steal magic.”

“Is that even possible??” Verian’s incredulity had not left his voice.

“It is, and I suspect you will find it remarkably easy.” Jaquen flipped open the trunk that had also arrived in Verian’s absence, and drew out a small scroll. He passed it negligently to Verian. “One day you will not need these crutches, but they can make learning easier in the meantime. Read this to yourself, and then aloud with intent. Mind your pronunciation.”

“I always do,” Verian commented as he drew the scroll open.

“It bears repeating.”

Jaquen settled to sip his wine and watch.

At casual glance, the words on the scroll seemed to dither and dance. It took Verian a good deal of focus and two passes to pin them down. He read them twice to himself, then turned toward the noxious creature. One hand rose toward the contained thelim, and Verian spoke the words on the scroll. He enunciated each syllable with mindful precision, and at the end of the incantation he curled his fingers as if in beckon.

Nothing happened.

The thelim rolled its eyes about independently of one another and thrashed itself against the boundaries of its containment. Jaquen hummed musingly behind Verian.

“I don’t believe it means to cooperate,” Jaquen observed.

“What good is a spell that requires permission from your victim?”

“Indeed.”

Verian rolled his weight up through the balls of his feet. Oh but Jaquen frustrated him! At least with Delmi things were clear and defined. What was expected of him was laid out step by step. Ah, but did Jaquen not give

him more room to think? To breathe and be himself? It was a difficult thing to go from dutifully minding every little instruction to dipping into the tides of complex thoughts.

“Ah.” It was an approving sound of realization, quiet from Jaquen’s lips.

The shadows in the shrouded room had angled slightly off, grown more defined where they should be soft, and more blurred where they should be crisp. Verian was pulling at them, gathering a little pool of darkness that lapped at his toes like inky water.

Verian focused intently on the frothing thelim. An instant later, with neither sound nor gesture, a dark lash struck across its mottled gray back. Another followed suit, striking as the thelim raised a pained, angry bellow and series of snotty snarls.

“I daresay you’ve improved with that,” Jaquen purred.

Still Verian was lashing the thing. He did not stop until the thelim had drawn in on itself, its thick appendages tucked into its slimy coating. Verian drew a deep breath and read the scroll in one fluid stream of words.

There was no fancy show of light such as that from the runic barrier. There was no plying of shadow, though the pool of darkness lingered at Verian’s feet. Oh, but Verian could feel it. The effect was subtle at first, like a hint of cool current into the warm shallows of a sun-baked lake. But then it grew more pronounced, a creeping sensation rippling along Verian’s outstretched fingers. The ghostly brush of it crept along his hand, over his wrist, and steeped its way into his flesh as it slid along his arm. The feeling spread quickly, and Verian nearly panicked as it crept across his shoulder and over his neck. But then it was dispersing, sinking in so strongly, so quickly, that Verian felt himself growing giddy. The more he pulled, the more he could pull, and the more he wanted to do so. Verian’s cackle mixed with the thelim’s wretched grunts and howls, forming a wild cacophony of sound.

When the steady siphoning stopped, it was like the sudden snapping of a taut rope. Verian gasped for the sudden give. He was eager for more, euphoric for how he’d gluttoned himself on the creature’s magic, but when he managed to focus his eyes there was nothing within the boundary of

runes save a half formed puddle of goo. The runes themselves were dormant.

“What?” Verian asked in confusion. He was reeling too much to ask a coherent question, let alone think clearly.

“Thelim are magical entities, Verian,” Jaquen answered, his breath brushing along Verian’s temples for how he’d stolen near. “You pulled in its very essence.” Long, spindly fingers took perch upon Verian’s shoulders, grasping there in familiar fashion.

“I did not know it could— I never imagined,” Verian trailed, the words nearly groaned.

“There is still much, much more,” Jaquen promised, lips grazing the back of Verian’s ear. “But first, you’ll do this again.”

Jaquen parted from Verian after another lingering squeeze. Jaquen approached the fetid mess within the runic boundary, drawing a smokey glass sphere from his pocket as he did so. His fingers fanned outward, releasing the ball to fall the short distance and land with a wet squelch. An instant later, the thelim sprang up like a rapidly inflated balloon. The runes sprang brightly to life, and Jaquen gestured to the struggling thelim as he stepped away.

“Carry on.”

Verian licked his lips in delighted anticipation. The pool at his feet grew deeper, spread wider.

“Gladly,” Verian breathed in reply.

The thelim’s howling was soon filling the room once again, mixed with Verian’s exultations of delight. This he would gladly repeat and repeat until he was strong enough for more.