

Ch 1 — Appetence

It's not the first time Arav has visited the Chantry dungeons, and if the craving behind his eyes is any indication, it won't be the last. Every time his stock of Source runs low, he seems to find himself in these grim halls, doing his best to tune out the sobs and screams. He doesn't think he'll ever truly get used to it.

The guard leading him along the rows of cells seems to have no such issue.

"Got a fresh batch of dissidents in from southern Tiranezj," she says with the air of one discussing wares at a market. "They all came branded, though, so nothing for you to do there."

Arav doesn't respond, focusing his efforts on trying not to gag as the light from the guard's lantern falls on a grasping arm covered in infected lacerations. It reaches out from behind the bars of a cell as though begging, no doubt attached to some poor, hideous wreck of a bastard. The guard kicks the plaintive hand aside as she passes.

"We've something better for you today, sior," she continues in the same tone. "Not just a murderer, but an assassin! He resisted the other truthwitch we hired, but he'll be no match for Arav Seht, I'm sure."

Arav smiles, or at least tries to. It comes out queasy. The smell of blood and fear that pervades these lightless reaches is starting to sicken him. Or maybe that's his appetite for Source curdling his stomach.

It's a long, uncomfortable walk down the row of cells, then a sharp turn past a number of empty rooms before they end up in front of what looks like a circular vault door. The guard hums as she turns a great cog at the center, aligning it with several symbols arranged at intervals around it. At length, the door clanks and groans. The circular portion rumbles as it slides into the floor, leaving a round portal through which the guard shines her lantern.

The beam of light falls on the bars of another cell and flashes briefly over the outline of a man huddled within. Arav doesn't get a good look before the guard shifts the lantern aside and starts fumbling with a set of keys.

"Hello there, butcher," the guard greets the cell's occupant as she fits a key in the lock. "Got a treat for you today." Pushing the door open, she flicks the hood of the lantern up.

The prisoner cries out in pain as the pitch-black cell is flooded with light. Arav, too, is forced to squint at the brightness, the craving behind his eyes worsening in response.

As the guard steps inside the cell, Arav's nose wrinkles in disgust. The smell is far worse here, as though no one has bothered to clean this place since the chantry was built. The prisoner himself is hunched on his knees, the heels of his hands pressed over his eyes as he tries to shield himself from the lantern.

He's shirtless and barefoot, his only clothing a pair of pants that are tattered and filthy from wear. His lack of dress and pale skin show off the many angry wounds down his body, no doubt the chantry's "preparation" for a truthwitch's services. A broken mind is far easier to pull secrets from, after all. Not for the first time, Arav's stomach twists with guilt as he wishes the chantry wouldn't bother. Torture is almost never effective unless performed in the presence of a truthwitch—and as much as Arav likes an easy job, he's not keen to add more fuel to his nightmares.

Instead, he remains silent as he observes the prisoner. This man is dark-haired and pale-skinned, marking him as a native to Kaedeni or one of the adjacent city-states. His build

beneath the dirt and injuries is thin but still well-muscled; a practiced combatant if Arav had to guess, and probably well-fed before the chantry got to him. As it stands now, Arav can see the outline of his ribs.

“How long has he been here?” Arav asks the guard, trying to keep his voice neutral.

“Oh, ‘round about two weeks,” the guard says easily. She grabs the prisoner’s arms and wrenches them behind his back. “We nabbed him just after the Red Day Feast and have been trying to weasel a confession out of him ever since. The Praecentor wants this business over with as soon as possible. Went nigh on apoplectic when the other truthwitch didn’t get anything from him.”

Arav gives a slow nod. Two weeks in a lightless cell with only tormentors for company would be enough to break just about anyone. He shouldn’t have any trouble, despite the raging appetite wreaking havoc with his body and powers. “And the crime?”

For the first time, a modicum of tension enters the guard’s posture. She scowls beneath her helmet. “He was found trying to escape chantry grounds, acting all secret-like. One of the guards stopped him, and it was around then that an acolyte found Chancellor Dahra dead in the adytum. Throat cut down to bone.”

Arav’s eyebrows raise a fraction of an inch higher. He’d only met the Chancellor once, but knew his reputation for an iron will and shrewd mind. A speck of sanity within the Praecentor’s storm. The extra security and brutal treatment of the prisoner begin to make sense.

He crouches down between the prisoner and the lantern, providing some measure of relief from the light. The prisoner raises his head, eyes squinted.

His face is a mess of bruises, but Arav is surprised by his expression—an intense, almost regal glare.

Arav meets his gaze, curious. Not broken. Not in the slightest. Still, the man doesn’t resist as Arav lays a light hand on his shoulder.

“What’s your name?” Arav asks him. He wants to get a feel for how difficult this will be before he starts the interrogation proper.

The man tightens his jaw and says nothing.

Arav pulls power from beneath his own skin, ignoring the sharp flare of protest behind his eyes. He reaches for the man’s mind and coaxes, soft as mist over water. “What’s your name?”

“*Jin*.” The prisoner’s voice is barely more than a rasp in his throat. A flicker of fear enters his eyes. He shudders beneath Arav’s hand, trying to pull away.

Arav doesn’t let him. “Jin? Very well, Jin. I’m Arav. I’m—”

“Know what you are,” Jin gets out before he can finish. “*Khet-lau*. Witch.” There’s a tightness to his features now, anger and fear and something else, something dark and ugly. His use of the Suarani word for truthwitch trips Arav up; with a name like Jin, he would have expected the man to speak Kaedenese.

Arav sighs. “I’m not here to hurt you, Jin. All I want from you is the truth. Why did you kill Chancellor Dahra?”

His power coils irresistibly around Jin’s mind, tugging the truth to the forefront. Jin’s lips part, but no sound comes out. Arav frowns.

“Maybe that’s the wrong question, then. *Did* you kill Chancellor Dahra?”

He can feel Jin resisting him, trying to shield himself. Arav is mildly impressed; defying a truthwitch’s power is like trying to fight smoke.

“Nnn...” Jin grits his teeth. A tendon strains in his neck. “N-no.”

He falls slack in the guard’s grip, a shaky breath escaping him.

Arav lets his power wane for a moment. He recognizes Jin’s answer for what it is, and his estimation of the man rises. “You have a strong will,” he tells him. “Not many people can lie in my presence.”

Jin’s head sinks. “I didn’t do it,” he whispers, and the words hum with truth in Arav’s ears.

Arav leans forward, intrigued. “So you killed him, but you didn’t do it? How is that possible?”

Jin glares at him and says nothing.

Arav takes a moment to consider before calling his power again. “Tell me about that day,” he says. “What really happened?”

Jin’s eyes slide closed. His jaw clenches and a vein throbs in his forehead. He remains silent.

Arav can’t remember the last time someone was able to withstand him, although he also can’t remember the last time he was this appetent. “What do you remember?”

Jin continues to fight him, battling back the compulsion Arav lays on him. Arav laments that he let his supply run so low; this should be easy and yet it’s like trying to drag a mule through knee-deep mud. The more power he uses, the deeper his craving grows until he feels faint with lack.

“I...remember...” Jin gets out. “*Vehde!* Remember...blood. My hands. Knife...my knife.”

Arav’s muscles tighten as stars dance in front of his eyes. The craving thrums through his head, his heart, his limbs, gnawing at his Source-starved body. But he’s so close. “You killed him with your knife?”

Jin flinches, twisting in the guard’s grip. His teeth are bared, his eyes blazing. “My...knife. My hand. Not me.”

Trying to make sense of that, Arav tightens his hold on Jin’s mind.

He pushes too far. His appetite roars inside his head, through his body, consuming every last drop of Source it can find until the spell snaps like a cut thread.

The cell and his sight of Jin’s burning eyes fade out. Distantly, Arav hears the guard shout his name.

The stone floor is cold against his cheek. When had he fallen? He doesn’t remember it. He can’t remember much of anything with this whole-body feeling of emptiness sapping his thoughts.

A pair of gauntleted hands haul him up off the floor. Arav stumbles to his feet, braced by the guard.

“Can you walk, sior?” she asks. “We should leave this cell.”

Arav blinks the spots from his vision. Jin is slumped by the wall, clutching his stomach and wheezing in pain. Arav thinks he vaguely recalls the guard kicking him there. Arav’s eyes linger on him as the guard steers him out of the cell and locks up behind them.

“Did he hurt you, sior?”

Arav should answer that. “No,” he gets out. “I’ll be alright.” At the guard’s doubtful look, he adds, “I’m a truthwitch, remember?” He takes a step away from the guard’s support and tests his balance. He seems fine, if a bit shaky. Behind him, the guard hits something that causes the great vault door to rumble shut.

Arav doesn't remember much of the return journey. All he recalls is sinking down with his back to a wall somewhere quiet, where no one but the guard can see how badly his hands are trembling as he brings out a small pouch tucked within his sash. He dumps the pouch's contents into his palm—a pair of blue-green crystals and a crumpled scarlet feather. He closes his eyes to better feel the Source inside the items as they thrum with potency. The void of his appetite reaches out, eager to drink in the sustenance he craves.

The color of the items fades until they're bleached grey. The crystals fracture and crumble like crushed sugar. The feather turns to powder-soft ash. At the same time, Arav's appetite softens and settles. Sated, for now. The headache remains, the price of letting himself get this bad.

Carefully, he funnels the grains and dust back into the pouch, which he tucks once more into his sash. He can sell the draff for some pittance at the next moongrower he passes.

"Better now, sior?"

Arav raises his eyes to the guard standing over him and gives a weary nod. "I'm sorry to cut things so short. Give me a day to recover, and I can try again with your assassin."

"Very good, sior. You've already gotten more out of him than the last truthwitch. The Praecentor should be pleased with the progress." The guard hesitates, then adds, "I'm sure that given your past records with us, the Praecentor would be comfortable paying a portion of your fee upfront. If you're in need of Source, that is."

Arav thinks about the handful of dried moonflowers stashed back at his caravan, the pitiful remains of his supply. Then he thinks of what happens to witches indebted to the chantry, and shakes his head. He rises to his feet, forcing a smile. "I wouldn't want to impose on the Praecentor's hospitality any more than necessary. This should see me through the job."

He can only hope he's right.

Arav spends the night in one of the guest rooms at the Chantry. While the bed is comfortable and his body is exhausted from his overuse of Source, he has trouble falling asleep. He often does after a visit to the Chantry dungeons, but tonight in particular he's haunted by the memory of Jin's abused body and blazing eyes.

Trying to console himself that Jin is a murderer and assassin does no good; Arav knows there's more to the story.

Eventually, he gives up on trying to sleep. Instead, he finds his sandals and slips out into the hallway.

A lifetime ago, Arav's mother had called him a restless spirit given flesh. She wasn't far off the mark, if Arav's travels and tendency to go roaming at night are anything to judge by. Arav's never seen the point of staying still when his feet itch to go wandering. Perhaps it's because of his truth magic that he feels compelled to act on his nature, whether in word or deed.

Whatever the case, there's a certain meditative quality to wandering at night. Shadow and moonlight play softly over the familiar lavish halls of the Chantry. Arav passes statues to the gods carved from marble and gilded with gold leaf, exotic plants flourishing in stately stone basins, and ornate wooden doors and archways that must be over two hundred years old.

His wandering eventually brings him to the entrance of the adytum, a sanctum normally reserved for chantrymen. The doors are exquisitely carved and inlaid with semiprecious stones,

though Arav's never seen them open before. Tonight, they stand ajar with light pouring out of them.

Overcome with curiosity, Arav peers inside.

The room is smaller than he expected, no more than thirty feet on a side. It's less richly decorated than the rest of the Chantry, the only ornamentation being a circular fountain with a statue of the All-Singer at its center. Nearby, a ceramic incense burner smokes gently, wafting the smell of myrrh and sandalwood out into the hallway. A brazier casts light over the lone human figure inside, a man in elaborate robes kneeling on a cushion in front of the fountain.

The figure rises, slow and deliberate, but not slow enough for Arav to slink away without acting suspicious. Given that a man was recently murdered here, Arav elects to stay put.

"My, is that Arav Seht?" The priest's voice is soft, deepened by age, and familiar. Even with the man's face cast in shadow from the brazier behind him, Arav knows him.

Ignoring the thrill of anxiety that races up his spine, Arav crosses his arms over his chest and bows. "Good evening, Your Eminence. I hope I didn't disturb you."

"Bah. You've merely saved me from the troubles of my own thoughts." The Praecentor raises a hand and beckons him closer. "Come, child. Say a prayer with me."

Arav eyes the threshold of the adytum, hesitant. In the end, he decides that obeying the Chantry's god-king is probably more important than adhering to custom. He steps inside the room.

The Praecentor kneels again before the statue of the All-Singer, gesturing for Arav to do the same. Arav sends a quick mental prayer to Kosoye asking forgiveness for worshiping at another god's idol, but he doesn't worry. The Goddess of Grey Areas is an inherently flexible patron.

He kneels and bows his head as the Praecentor does.

"All-Singer," the Praecentor intones. His voice seems to swell with power, though his words are no louder than before. "Hallowed maker. We your children beg favor. May we find your peace in our hearts and your storm in our hands. May we know the wicked for their blackened souls and find the courage to strike them down. May justice weigh fairly upon this land. O light of creation, honor us with your most holy retribution in these troubled times. Aete."

"Aete," Arav echoes. He wonders if his jackrabbit heart is audible in the quiet of the sanctuary.

The Praecentor is quiet for a long moment. Arav sneaks a glance at him to see his head still bowed in prayer. At last, he turns toward Arav, his weathered face neutral.

"Tell me, what do you make of our assassin?"

Arav swallows, his thoughts of Jin springing back to the forefront of his mind. "He seems like a proud man, Your Eminence. Strong-willed."

"Ah. I heard of your difficulties with him today." There's neither sympathy nor judgement in the Praecentor's expression.

Arav lowers his eyes. "I apologize, Your Eminence. I was incautious with my rationing, and believed I could finish the job before consuming additional Source."

"Will you have trouble with him again? Or will your sated appetite solve this little problem?"

Arav keeps his eyes lowered. He thinks about dragging more answers out of Jin, no doubt burning through Source unreasonably fast. He could certainly do it—and be back to cravings within days. He works his phrasing back and forth in his mind for a moment, then says,

“I believe he’s been trained to resist torture, Your Eminence. For some men, pain can actually strengthen their defenses to truth magic. They use it as a shield of sorts.”

The tiniest shift occurs in the Praecentor’s expression as the corners of his mouth twitch downward. “Are you saying that the treatment he’s received here has made him stronger?”

“In...in a manner of speaking, yes,” Arav admits. “Your Eminence,” he hastily adds.

The Praecentor seems to consider this for a moment. “Then what strategy would you employ?”

“Sometimes going in the opposite direction can help,” Arav says. “Comfort or pleasure can soften the mind, make it more susceptible to influence.”

This statement is met with a low chuckle. “Shall we throw him a feast, then? Perhaps hire a courtesan?”

Arav bites back a smile. “Uh, there’s probably no need to go that far. But treating his wounds and changing the setting might help.”

Again, the Praecentor is silent for a long moment. When he speaks, his voice carries all the weight and authority of his position. “Because of your past service to this Chantry, I will trust you in this.”

Arav tries not to sigh in relief. He straightens his spine. “Thank you, Your Eminence.”

“However. I expect to see results soon. A full confession of guilt by week’s end, and the names of everyone in his conspiracy.”

A tiny furrow forms in Arav’s brow. “What if he’s innocent?”

“He is not,” the Praecentor dismisses. His tone darkens. “That man was found attempting to escape Chantry grounds drenched in the blood of my dear friend. He will answer for what he has done.”

It’s spoken like a command, and Arav is quick to bow his head again. “Of course, Your Eminence. I’m sorry for your loss.”

The Praecentor sighs, posture shifting back to that of a tired old man. “Return to your chambers, child. You’ll need your rest, I imagine.”

He stands, and so Arav does as well. Arav casts one last glance around the adytum, trying to picture Jin cutting someone’s throat in this room. He can’t see it.

With a last bow and a murmured goodnight, Arav makes his way out of the adytum and into the shadowed hallways once more. On the walk back to his room, he thinks about Jin’s seemingly contradictory statements and the effort it took to drag even those small clues out of him. But now Arav’s back to...if not full strength, then at least functional strength. And the changes he recommended to the Praecentor should help. If those changes also see Jin placed in more humane conditions, well, that’s really just an extraneous benefit.

When Arav returns to his bed, sleep finds him easily.

Ch 2 — Caesura

Yaharaghi Jin likes to consider himself a practical man. Immune to the lure of luxury. Disdainful of excessive comforts.

But as he lies curled on the bare stone floor of his lightless cell, he begins to bargain with whatever gods might be listening for just one small reprieve.

Five years off my life for a real bed, he thinks. *Three for a cot or a bedroll. One for a blanket.*

He draws his arms closer to his chest as a violent shudder wracks his aching body. He's mostly been too tired to shiver, so it comes as an unpleasant surprise. He winces at the pain in his ribs.

Maybe two for a blanket.

He knows this is a game without victory. Eventually, his harsh reality will wear down his demands to the barest minimum. All of his days for an end to the pain. But he hasn't reached that point yet, and as long as he keeps wishing for something better than death, he can find a reason to live.

Tsira would tell him to end it now, especially since there's a semi-competent truthwitch involved. By staying alive, Jin is risking the safety of others for the sake of preserving his own, miserable life. But he's not willing to roll over and die just yet, not after everything he's been through.

Tsira once called that 'survival out of spite'. Jin told her that she should live forever, then. She broke his arm and refused to heal it for three days.

The ghost of a smile flits across Jin's face. Fond memories.

His reminiscing is interrupted by the grating noise of the vault door being unlocked. Jin rises slowly and painfully to his feet, flinching as he puts weight on the whipped soles. He braces against the back wall with one hand and shields his eyes with the other. The utter darkness of his cell is shattered with a lance of light that still blinds him despite his precautions. That's fine. Jin can manage without sight.

The heavy breath of the guard becomes audible as the rumbling of the vault door ceases. Only one today. No truthwitch?

Maybe he died of appetite, Jin thinks with a savage thrill. Tsira claimed that if one was perfectly centered, one could starve a witch in minutes. No one has ever accused Jin of being perfectly anything, but he can hope.

He hears the guard's key in the lock of his cell. No stupid comments, no idle whistling. That eliminates the possibility of the guard Jin has privately named Sunshine. This must be Milkbreath, then.

Sure enough, as the guard steps forward into the cell, Jin catches a whiff of spoiled dairy. He shifts his stance slightly, waiting until he hears the clink of chainmail almost directly in front of him.

He kicks off the wall, faking left before dodging right. The motions of Water Over Stone come as easy as breath as he swirls around the guard and slams a kick to the back of his knees.

The guard goes down with a shout of surprise, armor clattering on the stone floor. Jin fumbles blindly for a knife, a keyring, anything, wasting one second too many. A shoulder rams into his gut, knocking him off-balance. He crashes to the floor, breath torn from his lungs.

There's a brief scuffle as Jin tries once more to twist free, but he's breathless and weak from hunger. Milkbreath is on top of him in seconds.

Still, Jin is satisfied with his progress. It's been days since he last tried to escape. Good to know he's still fast enough to catch them off-guard.

Milkbreath doesn't share his enjoyment of the exercise.

“Festering son of a whore,” he snarls. He wrenches Jin’s arm behind his back so severely that Jin gasps in pain. The brutal pin takes him viscerally back to his training, and he chokes out his surrender in Suarani. “*Vehn! Si aht vhen!*”

“Speak Chantian or don’t speak!” Milkbreath barks.

Jin grits his teeth as the guard fastens a pair of manacles to his wrists, chaining his arms behind his back. As if adding insult to injury, a dark cloth sack is then forced over his head. When the guard hauls him upright, Jin expects to be turned around and marched right back to his cell.

Instead, he feels Milkbreath start pushing him forward. Jin is too surprised to fight as he’s led through the prison, the hood blocking all vision but a thin sliver at the bottom. He counts his steps instead. Sixteen. A left turn. Twenty-nine.

Milkbreath pauses, keeping one hand tight on Jin’s upper arm. There’s a rattle, then a clank.

And Jin is pulled into the light.

He stumbles, dazzled by the sliver of radiance at the bottom of the sack, as Milkbreath shoves him up a flight of stairs. Jin is then half-dragged down corridors and up more stairs, the route quickly becoming dizzying as he tries to measure it out.

At some point, the stone beneath his feet is replaced by polished wood.

“If I had any say, you’d have been tossed on the pyre long ago,” Milkbreath grumbles around that time. “Sorry son of a bitch like you ought to get nothing more than a slow death in a cleansing fire.”

Jin makes no response, though his gut clenches.

“You can thank your new friend for all of this,” the guard continues. “Soft-handed outlander. Whatever he hopes to accomplish, it’s beyond me.”

They come to a stop, and there’s a soft clunk of a wooden door opening.

“Behave,” Milkbreath orders.

The hood is snatched off, leaving Jin blinking spots from his eyes as he’s shoved into another room, Milkbreath close behind.

The floor here is stone again, though instead of rough-hewn dungeon cobble it’s even, aesthetic flags. The walls are patterned with blue and green tiles. And in the center of the small room is a circular pool thick with foam.

Jin takes a deep breath, inhaling the scent of rosemary and mint and...is that Laudrian’s Leaf?

He eyes the pool with caution as the guard gives him one last push towards it. Surely this is some kind of trick. Maybe it’s really acid or poison or...

When he gets close enough, he dips the toes of his left foot into the water. Hot, but not scalding. As he withdraws, he feels a faint, familiar tingle on his damp skin. Laudrian’s Leaf, and a lot of it. For a moment, he closes his eyes and tries to figure out what game the chantry is playing by giving him the opportunity to soak in a medicated bath.

“Well?” Milkbreath demands. “I could always force you, if you prefer.”

In the end, Jin decides intentions don’t matter. Here’s a chance to be warm, clean, and *painless*. He might be an idiot playing right into their hands, but at least he’ll be a warm, clean, and painless idiot.

He glances down at the filthy pants he still wears and tugs at the cuffs restraining his arms. He sighs, then steps into the pool.

The injuries on his feet flare with pain at the heat, but the numbing effect sets in quickly. He sinks to his knees at the center of the pool with a groan.

"Vehde..."

As warm relief washes over his abused skin, he vaguely wonders how many years of his life this would be worth. Maybe he can skip town before his payment comes due.

He ends up lounging at the edge of the pool, head tipped back against the stone floor as he soaks. Milkbreath stands near the door and watches him, arms crossed, but he doesn't seem inclined to try and drown him, so Jin keeps him in view but ignores him.

The water laps gently at the edges of the basin. Foam collects along the underside of his jaw. Wrapped in warmth and blissful numbness, Jin feels his eyes start to grow heavy. For the first time since his capture, he thinks he could genuinely sleep, not just doze fitfully.

Maybe this is worth all of his life. Maybe they'll kill him now and he'll die a happy man.

At that moment, as if in answer to the thought, the door swings open again.

Jin tenses, turning to face the intruder. His heart sinks as he takes in the man's long, dark hair and overabundance of cheap jewelry. It's the truthwitch from yesterday.

"Ah, hells," Jin mutters. "Was hoping you'd died."

The witch's eyebrows raise a notch. "And good morning to you, too."

Even surrounded by hot water, Jin shivers at his smooth voice with its clipped-vowel Tiraneshi accent. He remembers that voice full of power, dragging thoughts from his head.

The door locks behind the witch as he steps fully into the room. Jin watches him with narrowed eyes.

"I could kill you," he says without thinking.

The witch's expression doesn't change much, but Jin thinks he sees a glimmer of grudging respect.

"Interesting. So you really are an assassin, then? I don't know of many other people who could kill someone with their hands bound behind them."

And there's the danger of truthwitches. Even idle threats tell them too much.

"I don't think you will, though," the witch continues, gesturing towards Milkbreath. "Because then this gentleman would get upset, and you'd have to leave your lovely bath."

Jin sinks down further in the water, sulking. He does not want to leave the lovely bath, it's true. Instead, he keeps an eye on the witch as he makes his way to a standing set of shelves in the corner. Jin's not sure what to expect—surely this is preparation for some new horror—as the witch picks up a glass jar of something white and moves to stand behind Jin.

Jin drops his head back on the edge of the basin again, glaring up at him. He knows he should be moving, constantly keeping this threat in front of him, but the warmth and numbness seem to be sapping his strength.

"You drugging me?" The question comes out softer than intended, sharp edges smoothed by the lethargy overtaking him.

The witch kneels down. "There's Laudrian's mixed in," he says, as if that could have escaped Jin's notice, "and that's been known to cause drowsiness."

Shit. Jin should have remembered that. He'll just have to fight through it.

Before he can muster enough willpower to move away from where the witch is leaning over him, he feels fingers threading through his matted hair and catches the scent of mellow, expensive soap.

He stiffens. “*Hey*,” he says, reaching for anger but only managing annoyance. “Don’t touch me.” He tries to pull free, but stops when Milkbreath takes a menacing step towards him.

Jin sets his jaw, silently fuming. Is this their play? Humiliation? It seems like an odd choice given everything they’ve already done to him. But as the witch continues to work the soap into his scalp, Jin finds it...not as terrible as it could be. The witch’s hands are careful, but impersonal. Business-like, almost. That’s good. Jin doesn’t think he could bear a truly gentle touch right now.

He closes his eyes to shut out Milkbreath’s disdainful expression and tries to just enjoy not being in pain.

The first question catches him by surprise.

“I have to say, I’m curious. Why don’t you want to tell me what happened in the adytum?”

“You’d burn me for it,” Jin murmurs. His eyes snap open, horror coiling in his gut. He hadn’t even felt the witch’s power. “You...you’re a bastard,” he growls.

“Now that’s the truth if I’ve ever heard it,” the witch says. Before Jin can respond, he adds, “The Praeceptor is already convinced of your guilt. But I know there’s more to the story. It’s genuinely in your best interest to explain what happened.”

Jin blinks. That’s not a question. And coming from a truthwitch, it’s not a lie, either. “You...think I’m innocent?”

“No,” the witch says with a hint of a smile in his voice, “but I don’t believe you did it. Now, if you can explain to me what the hell that means, I might be able to spare you from the pyre.”

Still no question. Jin’s eyes wander the surface of the water as he thinks. Finally, he looks up at Milkbreath and tips his head towards him. “I want him to leave. Then I’ll tell you what happened in the adytum.”

“Say that you won’t harm me first.”

Jin sighs. “I have no intention of hurting you in the next thirty minutes.”

“Very well.”

Jin sees the witch’s hand make a gesture towards Milkbreath. Milkbreath scowls.

“I’m under orders not to leave the prisoner alone,” he says, crossing his arms. “Especially not with an outlander like you.”

“The Praeceptor gave me leave to conduct this interrogation as I see fit.” An edge enters the witch’s voice. “If you think you know better, feel free to take it up with him.”

Milkbreath scoffs, but he does head for the door. As it closes behind him, Jin catches a faint mutter from the witch.

“*Prick*.”

The corner of Jin’s mouth lifts in the tiniest smirk.

“So, the assassination,” the witch—Arav, Jin remembers suddenly—prompts. “What happened there? Any detail could be important.”

Jin automatically clenches his jaw, but the question doesn’t seem to carry any compulsion. He hesitates, thinking through his answer. It’s surprisingly difficult with this heavy, sleepy feeling clouding his mind and the witch’s hands still combing through his hair in a suggestion of comfort.

“Came to meet with the Chancellor, not kill him,” Jin says at last. He closes his eyes, remembering.

Jin wasn't born an assassin, nor does he intend to die as one.

As far as he can tell, only a handful of people have ever left the Black Suns except in a shroud. But then, Jin's always thought of himself as something of an outlier.

Taking on a job from the Chancellor of Erilas seems like as good a bet as any. The Praecentor might be the divine ruler, but the Chancellor is the one who sees to all the chantry's material affairs. A full pardon and new identity will be no more than a pittance to him. One last job, and Jin will be lost from the Suns' sight for good.

Discussing terms in-person is a must if Jin is to circumvent the Suns' spies, and since the Chancellor doesn't want to be seen doing anything suspicious off High Chantry grounds, Jin travels there to meet him. The message he receives lists a time and place where they won't be disturbed.

And so Jin finds himself stealing through a back entrance to a storeroom on the night of the Red Day Feast, when most of the chantry's residents and staff are busy in the great halls.

The corridors are dark as Jin slips through the chantry's underbelly. Silence meets his ears every time he pauses to listen. Still, with the potential threats of both the chantry and the Suns breathing down his neck, it's hard to shake the feeling of being watched.

Things seem to be going well even as he moves into the more populated parts of the building. Jin's dressed like the other servants and knows how to keep his gaze forward and his steps purposeful. He only passes three people, and none of them spare him so much as a second glance.

He leaves the servant's quarters through the main stairway up to the central wing of the building above. At the top of the stairs is a small but ornate door that marks the gateway from the underbelly to the High Chantry proper. Jin reaches for the large brass handle—

—and finds himself at the bottom of the stairs again.

His brow furrows for just a moment before he continues up. His nerves must be getting to him. He's never been one to experience re-remembrance.

Through the door at the top of the stairs, he only needs to make one left turn and one right turn before he arrives at the entrance to the adytum. He makes a quick sweep up and down the empty foyer before slipping inside the well-lit room and easing the doors closed behind him.

"Finally."

Jin turns toward the voice to find a well-dressed man with iron-grey hair leaning against the wall. His face is lined with age, but his eyes are sharp as they take in Jin's appearance.

"You're not exactly what I expected."

A strange sense of foreboding falls over Jin. "Chancellor Dahra, I take it?"

"The very same," the old man says. He steps forward, mouth opening to say something else.

The confirmation is like a wave of icy water. Jin knows suddenly and with stark clarity what must be done. Chancellor Dahra needs to die. Jin must cut his throat, or something unspeakable will happen. It seems obvious, like how fire is hot and dragonwolves are dangerous.

His hand goes for his knife. As his fingers close around the hilt, there's the oddest sensation of a war being fought behind his eyes. Even as his knife pulls free of its hidden sheath, there's a nagging unease at the back of Jin's mind that something isn't right.

The Chancellor's eyes go wide. He starts to stumble back, and Jin's hesitance vanishes. *He's trying to escape!*

The knife flashes in a deadly silver arc. The Chancellor's back strikes the wall.

Jin watches as though in a trance as the Chancellor's hands come up to try and stem the flow of blood from his throat. His throat? That's not right. Jin's trained in a thousand ways to kill someone, and the throat is too messy. Too much blood, too much evidence.

The Chancellor slides down the wall until he's slumped against it. His hands fall away as the crimson tide ebbs. His eyes are glassy, lifeless.

Jin continues to stare at the corpse for a long time. Something is wrong. He wanted something from the Chancellor. Did he already get it? Is that why he killed him?

Pat, pat, pat. The blood on the front of Jin's shirt drips down to join the pool of red at his feet, somehow louder than the fountain burbling nearby. The tang of copper begins to overwhelm the room's natural smell of incense. Something wrong, something wrong, something...

Jin's eyes widen.

Everything comes crashing back. His goals, his hopes, his careful plans—he'd thrown it all away in a moment of complete and utter madness. Not only has he murdered a civilian, he's murdered *the fucking Chancellor of Erilas*. If the Suns don't kill him, the chantry certainly will. A plan, he needs a plan, but the inside of his head feels like it's been stuffed with cotton. His thoughts are slow and unstructured as though he's exhausted from a long day of training.

Escape. Yes, he needs to escape.

The knife clatters to the floor. Stumbling like a drunkard, he yanks open the doors of the adytum. He flees.

"Kept feeling out of sorts until the guards hit me over the head and I woke up in that cell," Jin finishes. "Remembering it, it's like something from a dream. Makes no sense."

Behind him, Arav is perfectly still. Jin's not even sure if he's breathing.

"On the stairs..." the witch says at last. "When you were suddenly back at the bottom, are you certain it was only your imagination?"

Jin turns around to lean against the edge of the pool, frowning at Arav. "Must have been, right? Some weird mental tic. But you said any detail, so..."

Arav doesn't look so sure. His eyes drift as if he's lost in thought or memory.

"What?" Jin demands. "You know something about this?"

"Did you hear a voice?" Arav asks slowly. "When you were on the stairs. Maybe a man's voice asking—I don't know, anything like that?"

"No," Jin says, irritation growing. "What the hells is going on?"

Arav stands abruptly. "I...need to think about some things. I'm not—I can't be sure, but..." His lips press together as if trying to prevent any words from escaping. He starts for the door with quick, agitated strides.

"Hey," Jin snaps. "What does any of this mean?"

Pausing by the door, Arav turns to meet his eyes. Jin is surprised by the determination in his expression.

"It means you're innocent."

Ch 3 – Spiral

By the time Arav finishes relaying Jin's story, the Praecentor's expression is more severely lined than usual.

"And you say he returned to his senses, but conveniently *after* killing the Chancellor?"

Arav draws a steadying breath. "He was telling the truth when he described it, Your Eminence. I believe he was somehow magically compelled."

The Praecentor steeples his hands on the broad mahogany desk between them, a frown deepening the creases of his face. "Magic that takes control of another's actions? Have you ever encountered such a thing?"

Arav hesitates. This is dangerous territory. "I have heard it discussed. There was one story that contained a similar detail to what Jin described, a sort of mental tic."

The Praecentor makes a doubtful hum. "If you're right, that would be a power more dangerous than perhaps any other known to us. Would we not have already learned of such a thing were it real?"

"New types of magic are always being discovered," Arav offers. "In my great-grandfather's time, few believed in truthwitches either."

The Praecentor traces a hand over the heavy silver pendant of his station. He considers Arav for a long, silent moment, expression inscrutable. "Madness would be easier to believe," he says at last. He stands from the desk and paces towards a bookshelf, hands clasped behind his back. "The fact remains that the man killed the Chancellor of this chantry. He has additionally admitted to being an assassin for hire; given the chance, he would no doubt kill again."

Arav opens his mouth to argue, but his sense of self-preservation prevents him from interrupting.

"We will hold the execution tomorrow," the Praecentor continues. He leans forward to examine the bookshelf, then selects a thick ledger tome. "The citizens are anxious for an assurance of order. The Chancellor's death is felt even in the lowest of streets. A whisper of fear." He flips the tome open as he returns to the desk and seats himself across from Arav. "This is a regretful state of affairs, but one which shall soon be corrected."

An old anger coils tight in Arav's gut. "You would burn a man alive for a crime he didn't willingly commit? For the sake of maintaining an *appearance*?"

"Watch your tone, witch." The Praecentor's eyes are hard and harsh, his posture rigid. Arav's anger is tempered suddenly by fear as the old priest leans forward, jaw set. "You know nothing of which you speak."

Arav bows his head in his best approximation of contrition. "My humblest apologies, Your Eminence. I spoke out of turn." He carefully structures his next words. "It's in my nature to pursue the truth wherever it's to be found. To that end, I beg of you, grant me leave and Source enough for one more interview with the prisoner. I may be able to shed light on a few loose threads. At the very least, I could ask him to name others in his organization."

The Praecentor flicks through the pages of his tome, eyes still chilly with anger. “Conduct your interview,” he dismisses, “but you’ll receive payment only after you recite the condemned’s crimes before the witnessing crowds at his pyre.”

That handful of moonflowers is nowhere near enough Source for the type of interview Arav intends. He tries to keep the frustration from his tone as he bows and murmurs, “As you will, Your Eminence. I’ll do my best with the resources I have on hand.”

It feels like a dismissal, so Arav turns to leave. He’s stopped by the Praecentor’s voice once more.

“One last thing. As of this morning, I have appointed a new Chancellor. You will report your findings to him from now on. I believe you are familiar with Essir Kihova?”

A flash of surprise straightens Arav’s spine as he returns his gaze to the Praecentor. “Essir’s in the city? I had no idea. That’s quite the promotion, isn’t it?”

“Not so great as you might think. You have missed much in your time abroad.”

Arav’s brow furrows briefly. “Apparently,” he murmurs. Dipping his head, he adds, “Thank you, Your Eminence. I’ll update him on the situation at once.”

The Chantry, however large and lavish, is starting to wear on Arav’s nerves. To his great relief, Essir agrees to venture into the city with him. Their path is a familiar one, winding down from the Chantry’s gates and following the flow of the crowd to a sunlit plaza. A fountain with a statue of the Moon-Mother patters brightly at its center, while all around it, people in elegant clothing mingle and chatter.

Arav lets his attention skip from conversation to conversation as Essir leads him to the patio of a small eatery. The snippets of dialogue he catches are relaxed and light, with a bare handful snagging in his ears as the usual lies people tell one another: *I’ve been quite well, I’m starving, I’m dying to see the show*. Effortless exaggerations and niceties, both puzzling and amusing to a truthwitch capable of neither.

More than once, he catches curious glances thrown his way, lingering on his loose, distinctly Tiraneshi clothing and the glimmer of gold in his ears and hands. Hardly anyone notices Essir with his tawny skin and Chantry robes, other than to move aside with a respectful nod.

Essir finds them a table in the shade, which Arav is grateful for. Erilesian summers run nearly as hot as those in Tiranezj, and Arav’s body still anticipates the cooler Kaedeni climate from his recent travels.

After ordering drinks, Essir tips his head toward Arav with a knowing smile. “It rather goes without saying, but I’ll be more than happy to cover this meal.”

Arav lets a small sigh escape him, both resigned and embarrassed. “Is it that obvious?”

Essir waves a hand. “Not to anyone who doesn’t know you. But you only take jobs for the Chantry when you’re...less than flush with options. Did Kaedeni not treat you well?”

“It did,” Arav admits. “It was my decision to head west that drained me. Did you know that the price of Sourced items has nearly doubled since I last visited Chantry lands? I certainly didn’t, until I was well past Suaran.”

Essir gives a sympathetic wince. “Ah. That would no doubt be due to recent legislation. The High Chanters have been rattling and wailing about unregulated magic again. There’s been talk of criminalizing unlicensed use of Source.”

“That’s—!” Arav’s lips move without sound for a moment, and he makes a frustrated gesture at the aborted exaggeration. “That’s a *very reactionary* approach to a complex issue. Will they also criminalize unlicensed use of bread and water? What about...” He rubs his temples, suddenly reminded of the ghostly remnants of his appetite. “I’d half-hoped that the Acts of Radiance were the worst this country had to offer. Well,” he sighs again, “the Praecentor has made at least *one* reasonable decision recently.” He smiles and gestures across the table. “My congratulations on your new title, Chancellor.”

Essir gives a half laugh and absently tugs the pendant around his neck. “I know how much false modesty annoys you, so...I’ll say instead that I am relieved he chose me over some of the other carrion feeders on the Council. A shame about the circumstances, of course,” he adds with a frown. “Dahra was a valuable voice of reason, and he was damn good at a difficult job. Speaking of which...”

Arav feels the weight of his own task settle over him once again. His mouth twists in distaste. “You know the details already, I am led to believe.”

Essir nods, his demeanor squaring up as though in preparation. “I’m told that our, ah, guest downstairs finally confessed.”

Biting his lip against the first retort that springs to his tongue, Arav tips his head from side to side. “It’s more complicated than that.” He glances around the plaza, each stranger suddenly coming into sharper focus. If his words find the wrong set of ears...

As though guessing his thoughts, Essir leans in closer. “What did he tell you?”

Arav lowers his voice as well. “He said he never intended to kill Dahra at all, that a strange compulsion overcame him. And there’s more: He mentioned a moment of re-remembrance—sounds familiar, doesn’t it?”

Essir’s serious expression folds into a concerned frown. “Arav, you’re not thinking this has something to do with your father, are you?”

“It could,” Arav insists. “The same location, the same mental tic—and if Jin was compelled, my father could have been as well. There’s something...” He lifts his head a degree, turning to look back at the spires of the Chantry. “There’s *something* happening here, just the same as it happened fifteen years ago.”

He shivers as the words leave his mouth. It’s the first time he’s expressed the thought—and to be able to express it at all, he must truly believe in it. “This could be proof.”

The concern hasn’t budged from Essir’s face. “Proof of what, exactly? Ranjan—” He presses a hand over Arav’s, and Arav flinches.

“Don’t use that name,” he says quietly. “Not here.”

“Arav, then. Your father...” Essir hesitates, then continues, gently, as though worried Arav might crumble beneath his words. “He killed that man. You watched it happen with your own eyes.”

“Yes, *and*,” Arav emphasizes, pulling away from Essir’s touch, “does it not seem strange to you that immediately after I experienced a very uncommon mental phenomenon, my father stabbed the most powerful man in the Realms with a steak knife? In front of witnesses; in front of his twelve-year-old son?”

“While I agree that it was exceptionally out of character, I have to remind you that your father was under a great deal of stress at the time—”

Arav fixes Essir with a flat stare, folding his arms. “Do you truly believe my father, a lifelong diplomat, would do such a thing of his own volition? You were friends; you know how he abhorred violence.”

Essir lifts his hands in what’s no doubt supposed to be a pacifying gesture. “Arav—”
“*Do you believe it?*”

A resigned expression flickers over Essir’s lined face, and for the first time Arav notices just how tired he looks.

“...No. I don’t believe he did it of his own volition. And if his actions hadn’t plunged us into war, perhaps the truth of the matter would have come to light.” Essir draws back, sighing. “As it stands, Arav, I doubt even you could solve the mystery fifteen years later.” His lips purse, and he rubs a hand across his weathered brow. “I am sorry,” he says at length. “Fate has been exceptionally unkind to your family. But I worry about you, Arav. I’ve worried about you since that night, and I’ve worried doubly as much since you started revisiting Chantry lands.”

“The war is over,” Arav says stiffly. “Even if my old name and parentage did come to light, I have as much a right to be here as any other Tiraneshi refugee.”

“There are some who might not see it the same way,” Essir reminds him. His brows pinch with concern again. “Please, Arav. I care about you. Whatever you think you’ve found with this assassin...just don’t do something rash. I can’t protect you from everything.”

Something rash. Arav doesn’t speak, doesn’t want to be caught out by his own magic if he attempts to promise Essir anything. Jin, his father, the murders—all of it has been cycling through his mind since this morning, an endlessly infuriating puzzle. After fifteen years of dead ends and empty theories, Arav feels, not for the first time, that something rash might just be appropriate.

An idea starts to form, driving a spike of adrenaline through his body.

“Did you know,” he starts cautiously, “that there’s an old truthwitch trick that can help amnesiacs remember their past?”

Essir takes a sharp breath. “I already don’t like the sound of this.”

“It’s not d—” Arav’s mouth twists in annoyance. “It isn’t *very* dangerous. Think of it like this: Sometimes, for whatever reason, we forget things. We can’t recall a certain event, or a particular word, or where we set our house key down. But frequently, we’ll remember it later, without being prompted. Those memories don’t just vanish and reappear—they were there all along, it’s just that our conscious mind lost the path to where the memories were unconsciously stored. Sometimes that path is rediscovered by accident—but it can be forced, too.”

He sits back in his seat, folding his hands on the table. “If I asked you to remember my mother’s name, you very likely could, even if you hadn’t thought of it in years.”

Essir quirks an eyebrow, then smiles and inclines his head to indicate Arav’s point.

“Truth magic,” Arav continues, “can do the same, only stronger. It can drag truths out of a person that they weren’t even aware they knew. I’ve done it before, actually—there was a man who was struck by a rockfruit on his wedding day...”

There’s a long pause that Arav’s quite familiar with. It’s the hesitation of someone who sincerely doubts what’s being said—right up until they remember they’re speaking to a truthwitch.

“Incredible,” Essir murmurs, tapping the table in thought. He gives Arav a raised eyebrow and adds, “And this would help with your investigation...how, exactly?”

Arav leans forward, a smile creeping across his face. “What if those moments of re-remembrance were *literally* moments of remembering something that already happened? Jin said that he remembers climbing the stairs twice—maybe he did. Which nearly begs the question...”

“...of how he ended up back at the bottom?” Essir ventures.

Arav inclines his head. “Precisely. In his conscious recollection, it happened in an instant. But what if it didn’t? What if he somehow *forgot* the period of time that happened in between?”

Essir inhales sharply. “Well, you certainly have my attention. And if you’re right, you could simply ask him about it, yes? And he’d be forced to remember?”

Arav’s shoulders sink, along with his stomach. The thrill of a fresh idea leeches from his body with the reminder of reality. “...No. Bringing back memories—it’s an involved process. I’d need to get him into a highly suggestible state first, which means expensive herbs. Then, I’d need to use a *lot* more power than I have on hand at the moment, which means expensive Sourced items. And if he fights it...” He grimaces, remembering the strength of Jin’s mental defenses. “I’m not even positive it would work.” He takes a deep breath, lifting his eyes to Essir.

Essir stirs uncomfortably in his seat. He pushes a hand through his greying hair, lips pressed tight. Arav’s hope begins to fade even before Essir opens his mouth.

“...I can’t do that,” he says at last, then when Arav frowns, he quickly corrects himself. “I’m not *willing* to do that. The Praecentor has already decreed that you’re to receive no additional resources from us. He’ll only see you paid after the execution—”

“But if you were to press him,” Arav interjects. “You’re the Chancellor now; he’ll listen to you!”

Essir slowly shakes his head. “I’m new to the role, and he knows we’re friends. You can see how it might look—”

“Oh, of course,” Arav snaps, pulling away. “My apologies; I wasn’t aware that your political ambitions were more important than ensuring the correct man is burned at the stake.”

Essir flinches. “I know it’s not the answer you hoped for—”

“Stop dancing around the truth. Just say that it doesn’t matter to you.”

“Arav, I’m sorry—”

The words grate against Arav’s ears. Essir seems to realize at the exact same moment.

“I didn’t mean—”

Arav stands from the table, pushing back his chair with unnecessary force. “I’m leaving,” he says coolly. “Your voice sounds awful when you lie.”

He barely registers the additional eyes on them, the way surrounding conversations fall quiet. He walks away, and he doesn’t look back.

“Arav, wait!”

He can hear Essir hurrying after him, breath heavy as the exertion reveals his age. For a moment, he considers breaking into a run. After a moment’s thought, he begrudgingly slows his pace. Friend or not, Essir is still the Chancellor of Erilas, and pissing off the two most powerful men in the country—perhaps the world—in a single afternoon does not bode well for Arav’s long-term health.

"I *am* sorry," Essir repeats as he draws near, and this time, it's the truth. He places a hand on Arav's shoulder, and it takes a good deal of Arav's willpower not to shrug it off. "I'm sorry that this is causing you so much distress, and I'm sorry that I'm playing a part in that."

Arav wishes that, for just this one moment, he was physically capable of sarcasm. He remains silent instead.

Essir sighs, withdrawing his hand. They pass through the late afternoon crowds, making it all the way out of the plaza before Essir speaks again. "If you must know, there's another reason I must—another reason I don't want to aid you in this endeavor. Whatever the truth of the incident involving your father—it got him killed, and, between you and I, I think we can be reasonably sure it's what killed your mother as well."

Arav's jaw tightens. "You don't know that."

Essir raises his hands in a defensive gesture. "Perhaps not the best time to bring it up, but—my point stands. I don't want you getting hurt."

Arav takes a long, slow breath, suddenly glad once more that they're having this discussion beneath an open sky, instead of the incensed cloisters of the Chantry. "I'm not twelve anymore, Essir."

"No," Essir allows, "but it might surprise you how little that matters. Especially..." He raises his gaze to the spires in the distance, jutting knife-like from behind well-kept shops and houses. "...There's a lot of death going around lately," he says wearily. "Too much."

Arav thinks of Jin, trusting him with the truth in a desperate bid to avoid the pyre. "On that, we can agree."

Another plan begins to form. Arav's steps falter for a moment at the enormity of it, and he wonders, madly, if there's such a thing as a mind-reading witch. If ever someone was to be killed for an idea...

A glance at Essir shows no change in his expression, no suspicion in his eyes. Arav swallows down the sudden dryness in his throat.

"When we reach the Chantry," he says, and thank Kosoye herself his voice is steady, "would you mind lending me a sheet of parchment? Jin isn't dead yet, and I want to use the resources I have to their fullest extent."

Essir offers a tentative smile at the perceived olive branch of compromise. "I'd be happy— Er, I wouldn't mind that."

You will, Arav thinks. His mind feels fuzzy with adrenaline as it races to fill in the necessary pieces. Is this how Essir had felt fifteen years ago, just before he smuggled a young, grieving Arav away from the Chantry? Had his limbs felt faint and far away; had his skin crawled with the fear of being watched?

Arav almost wants to ask. He doesn't.

Something rash, indeed.

By the time Arav's written out what he needs on the parchment and made a few other, minor preparations, he's beginning to doubt himself. Forget rashness, he's practically throwing himself on the pyre. But every time he feels like abandoning this admittedly ridiculous pursuit, he thinks about witnessing another chantry execution and feels a surge of nausea.

It's not Jin's face he sees in the flames.

He stops by his caravan, sheltered in the coach house just off the chantry stables. In the privacy of his own home, surrounded by the familiar smell of teak wood and copal, he makes a silent prayer to Kosoye. After that, it's a simple matter of hitching Solstice and Storm and maneuvering the caravan somewhere accessible but inconspicuous.

Less than ten minutes later, Arav finds himself standing before the door to Jin's temporary cell in the chantry's underbelly. The guard on duty is the one who always sneers and calls Arav *outlander*, which makes Arav feel slightly better about what's coming.

The guard's eyes narrow when he sees Arav. "Here for another interrogation?"

Arav's voice is steady as he speaks. Over the years, he's become quite adept at navigating the curse of being unable to lie, and at times like this, it feels more like a blessing. After all, no one expects to be swindled by a truthwitch. "The Praecentor allowed for one last interview. Additionally, the Chancellor gave me this."

He holds out the sheet of parchment that had passed from Essir's hand to his. Scrawled across it is a simple order to transport the prisoner back to his original cell in the Chantry dungeons.

The guard frowns at the missive for a moment. "The Chancellor really trusted an outlander like you with something like this?"

Arav draws himself up, relying on past lessons in noble comportment. *Thank you, Mother.* "The Chancellor and I happen to be good friends. We go back years."

There's another of those disbelieving pauses before the guard's eyes tick down to the truthwitch's pendant that hangs over Arav's heart. Just as sweat begins to gather along Arav's hairline, the guard nods grunts in acknowledgement. "Fine. Is he to be moved before or after your interview?"

"Before," Arav says, feeling weightless with relief. "You'll no doubt want some extra security for what's coming next."

"Fine," the guard mutters again, moving to unlock the door to what was very recently a storeroom. Inside, Arav catches a glimpse of bare walls and a narrow cot before the guard ducks in and returns with Jin.

Despite the shackles holding his arms behind his back again, Jin looks leagues better than the first time Arav laid eyes on him. He's fully dressed with a few bandages showing beneath the sleeves and collar of his simple white shirt, and he carries himself with far less obvious pain than Arav would have expected. His dark eyes are wary as his gaze sweeps over Arav, flicking instantly to the knife now sheathed in his sash. Arav can only hope he doesn't try anything stupid.

Then Jin's too-interested expression is covered as the guard pulls a black hood over his head.

"This way," the guard says shortly. He starts pushing Jin forward through the halls, Arav following behind.

"Heard you got this one to confess," the guard says as they walk. "He headed for the pyre next?"

Arav's eyes linger on Jin before he responds. "That's the Praecentor's inclination, yes."

Jin stiffens. The guard shoves him forward without a hitch in his stride as he says, "Good. He's been nothing but trouble since we nabbed him. We all worried for a while he'd be a long-term resident."

“That definitely won’t be a concern,” Arav says.

“*Nir nasra vehde, khet*,” Jin spits.

The guard cuffs him hard on the back of the head. “Quiet, you. We can still make your last few hours a living hell.”

Arav remains silent as the small procession continues. He pays attention to the doors and branching halls they pass, counting. He watches servants come and go, many of them hurrying out of the way with wide eyes and whispers. Still, they must recognize the guard, because no one stops them.

“Does it pay well?” the guard asks abruptly. “Being a truthwitch. I’ve a bet going with Nasana.”

“Sometimes,” Arav says.

“What about this job? What’s the Praecentor going to give you for nailing this mongrel?”

Arav draws a deep breath. The hallway is empty now. His fingers find the hilt of the knife at his waist and slip it free of its sheath.

“Nothing,” he says, stepping up directly behind the guard. Before the man can react, Arav has the blade against his throat.

“Wha—?”

They stumble to a stop, Arav pinning the guard to his chest. “Nice and quiet, now,” he murmurs. “I’d prefer not to make this messy.”

The guard draws a deep breath, and Arav is quick to apply more pressure on the knife, just enough to draw blood. The guard goes still, his breath shuddering out in a silent exhale instead of a shout.

With his free hand, Arav works the keyring off the guard’s belt and leans forward to press it into Jin’s hands. The guard trembles, and though Arav can’t see his expression he can guess at the rage on his face.

Jin’s shackles clatter to the floor as he yanks off the hood. He whirls to face Arav, eyes wide. In the split second it takes for him to register the scene, he’s moving again, body twisting as he slams a kick into the side of the guard’s head. The attack is faster than Arav can follow, perfectly controlled and perfectly brutal. The guard falls slack in Arav’s arms, neck hanging at a horrifying angle.

Arav stumbles from the sudden weight, easing the body down as quietly as he can to the floor. His eyes remain fixed on Jin as he struggles to form words past the fist of fear in his throat.

Jin takes a step towards him, hands raised and ready. Arav scrambles back, tripping over himself in his efforts to stand. The knife comes to hover between the two of them as though that slender bit of steel will protect Arav from the man whose every motion and expression screams *predator*.

“N-no, no!” Arav gets out. “I’m trying to help you!”

Jin grunts, unimpressed. “Thanks, I guess. Awfully stupid of you.”

“*Wait—!*”

Jin surges forward, his hands a blur. Pain cracks through Arav’s head, turning everything blindingly white for a split instant.

Then darkness.
