

The Vampire 1041

Chapter 1041: Eleanor's Crisis of Faith (Part One)

Time passed with agonizing slowness in Eleanor's cell. In the morning, the day after Percivus burned her robes, the Inquisitor sent one of his acolytes to ask if Eleanor intended to give Percivus the names he required. When she refused, the acolyte dragged her off the simple cot so he could carry away the thin straw mattress and other bedding, leaving her with nothing but the rough wool blanket that was barely large enough to cover her body.

She thought his name was Samlet or Samlin, but too much of her attention the day before had been focused on Percivus and what was happening to her to be sure. The message he brought with him, however, was abundantly clear, delivered with the casual cruelty of a man who was clearly working hard to imitate his mentor as he barely acknowledged her existence when he took away the mattress. Once he'd moved her out of his way, he acted like she wasn't even in the room as he quickly folded up the bedding and whisked it away, leaving her alone once more.

Her meal, when it was delivered, contained another small indignity. The bread was rock hard and from the look of it, it had been baked at the same time as yesterday's loaf before being left out to sit all day. The cup of water, however, was even worse. Along with the bread, it had been left out overnight, in the cold winter air somewhere outside, and a thick layer of ice had formed on top of the cup.

She wanted to gulp down the water, to finally quench the thirst that haunted her since late in the night. Instead, she could only take occasional sips from the cup as the ice slowly melted, and even then, the bar between her wrists made drinking incredibly cumbersome. She nearly broke down in tears when she fumbled with the cup, spilling precious drops of water on her thin shift, but she forced back the tears along with the sobs that threatened to spill from her tight throat.

This was what Percivus wanted from her. He wanted her suffering. He wanted her desperation. He wanted her to be willing to do anything in order to make it stop... because he wanted her to name names in his twisted quest to unearth a conspiracy that didn't exist. And so, because he wanted those things, she refused to give them to him.

Instead, she curled up on the rickety cot, clutching the blanket tightly around her frail body, and confronted the question that haunted her ever since she'd seen Percivus summon Holy Fire to burn her robes.

Everything she knew, everything she had been taught by the Church, said that it shouldn't be possible for both of them to call upon the blessings of the Holy Lord of Light when they stood in such stark opposition to each other. If he was right that she had strayed from the path of her faith, then she shouldn't be able to call upon even a minor miracle of Light, and yet she had. But if she was still a Confessor, still one of the Holy Lord of Light's servants in this world, then Percivus shouldn't have been able to burn her robes and cast her out.

"But, what if he was the one who had given himself over to the demons?" she wondered. What if his flames weren't truly Holy Fire, but some other manifestation of dark, demonic power masquerading as Holy Flames?

It seemed impossible, and yet... When she compared Percivus to Diarmuid, the difference between the two men couldn't be more clear. One of them was deeply principled, committed to finding the truth, even when the truth led him to uncomfortable places. He was willing to stand up for victims, to speak on behalf of the dead who had been wronged, even when the men who were responsible for those crimes sheltered behind their titles, wealth, and the privileges the world afforded to those born into positions of privilege.

Percivus, on the other hand, was a fanatic, consumed by a desire to mete out punishment. While he claimed to hunt the guilty, and he seemed to be every bit as driven as Diarmuid was to oppose men of power and privilege, there were clear cracks in his devotion.

Percivus bowed down to Marquis Bors. He submitted to worldly authority, turning himself into the loyal bloodhound of the Lothian ruler. And in so doing, he gained the freedom to sink his fangs into anyone of lesser stature than the most powerful man in the whole of Lothian March, though whether that extended to others in the Church remained to be seen.

Diarmuid spoke on behalf of the victims, but Percivus used victims as a weapon in his hunt to drag down the powerful. He didn't care who died along the way. People were either conspirators and sinners who were part of the plot, or they were useful innocents whose death could be laid at the feet of the 'truly guilty' party.

Percivus was a madman, a rabid dog who would bite his own master if he wasn't kept on a tight leash, but Marquis Bors seemed to have let go of the leash entirely... If there had ever been a leash to begin with.

The more Eleanor tried to solve the puzzle of Percivus's flames, the more she came to an uncomfortable conclusion. If she could see his madness, surely his superiors in the Inquisition could see it as well. Which meant that either they accepted it, or that they too shared the cracks in their devotion that allowed Percivus to run wild now that he had received the Marquis' blessing to hunt members of the aristocracy in the name of rooting out a non-existent conspiracy.

"The whole abbey in Maeril may be like this," she realized. But... was it really just the abbey? She'd seen men like Percivus before, zealots who burned with a desire to punish even minor transgressions against the faith as though they were heresy.

She'd even seen it within her own order... Confessors who had no mercy left in their hearts for the lost men and women they had sworn to guide back to the light. Women who felt that only great suffering could absolve the wicked of their misdeeds and took delight in the screams of the penitent who submitted to the cruel ministrations of a merciless Confessor in the hopes of finding salvation.

"It can't be that the whole Church is like this," she whispered as her body began to tremble in a way that had nothing to do with the cold. "But... how much of it is?"

Chapter 1042: Eleanor's Crisis of Faith (Part Two)

"The Church isn't what I want it to be," she forced herself to admit. The Church wasn't pure or perfect. The people wielding its power were just as deeply flawed as ordinary men, but those flaws didn't seem to matter to the Holy Lord of Light.

"As long as a person believes," she realized. "The Holy Lord of Light will answer their prayers. The power itself is a test... a part of their struggle. He doesn't stop men like Percivus from misusing it, but He will surely judge him for what he's done as he heads toward the next life..."

It was a profound, horrifying revelation, and one that flew in the face of everything the Church had taught her so far, but as she examined everything that had happened so far, Eleanor couldn't think of any other answer that made sense.

After all, the alternative was that Percivus had been influenced by demons and was using their power in the middle of the Church, for years, decades even, without ever being caught.

It would be convenient if that were true. If she could blame all the failings of man on demons, and all the wickedness that infected the Church as the result of some dark influence... But as she sat in the cold of her cell, resting on a bed that had been stripped of its bedding by a young acolyte who was behaving as violently and maliciously as the man who was teaching him, she had to admit that it was unlikely that demons were responsible for his viciousness. Instead, it was simple, ordinary human cruelty, passed on from teacher to student, in a cycle that would never end until someone found a way to break it.

"Someone... but not me," she said as she clutched the scrap of gold and red fabric that she'd hidden beneath her shift.

Slowly, in the cold and dark of her cell, Eleanor was piecing back together the pieces of herself that Percivus attempted to shatter. At the same time, she was examining each and every part of herself and discarding the ones that were too badly damaged by uncomfortable truths to hold on to.

The Church was one of the things she forced herself to put aside. She was still a Confessor. Nothing, not even Percivus and Holy Flames large enough to consume the entire manor, could strip that away from her. But she didn't need to remain within the confining, cracked, and corrupted walls of the Church to continue her service as a confessor.

Instead, she thought of the days she'd spent with Lady Jocelynn... If ever there had been a lost and broken woman in need of a Confessor's help to find her way back to the light, then surely the woman who had betrayed her own sister out of petty jealousy was the one.

Over the past several months, Eleanor had watched Jocelynn transforming herself from a naive woman who would give anything to win the affections of an unworthy suitor into a woman who was fighting back against the very darkness that seemed to consume so many people in positions of power.

And so, rather than cling to a hope that she could return to the safety of the Church when this all ended, Eleanor began to nurture an entirely different hope... a hope that she could leave the Church behind to remain at Lady Jocelynn's side. Not quite as a Confessor, but not as a simple Lady-in-waiting either.

But if she could continue to support and guide Lady Jocelynn in the days and years to come... she was certain that, whatever they chose to call her position, it would be one worth dedicating the remainder of her life to.

She just had to hold on long enough to find a way out of the trap she was in, and then, both she and Lady Jocelynn could find their new ways forward. Or so she'd hoped. But by the time the fourth, or fifth day of her agonizing confinement rolled around, she had begun to despair that no matter how strong her faith was, nor how fierce her determination had become, her body would no longer be able to endure the strain of Percivus's treatment.

"You gain nothing from refusing to eat, Eleanor," Percivus said, glaring at the stubborn noblewoman and the untouched, moldy crust of bread sitting next to her on the bare wooden cot. "Just like you gain nothing from holding back the names I need. There's still time, you know. This could all be over soon..."

"Th-there is n-nothing for y-you to g-gain from my w-words, B-brother P-p-percivus," Eleanor said through chattering teeth as she struggled just to sit up straight with some semblance of dignity in the presence of the Inquisitor who no longer seemed content to wait for simple neglect and the occasional attention of his lackeys to break her will.

"I wouldn't say that, Eleanor," Percivus said with an empty smile on his lips that never reached his hardened hazel eyes. "Today, I came to give you news," he said as his acolytes set out his chair and small wooden table.

"Sir Gilander visited the Summer Villa recently to check on your cousin, Lady Ashlynn. It seems that your demon allies have become even more bold this winter," he said calmly as he took his seat and began unpacking a meal so fresh from the kitchens that it was still piping hot, releasing a cloud of fragrant steam into the small dungeon cell.

"Y-you k-know I have n-nothing to d-do with d-demons," Eleanor insisted, more to reaffirm the fact in her own mind than to argue with the Inquisitor. After all, she knew it was pointless to deny his accusations, but she was afraid that if she let him repeat them without denying them, then one day, she might start to believe the lies he constantly repeated were true.

"I doubt that, Eleanor," Percivus said, shaking his head in disappointment. "I just came to see how you would react when you learned that the demons took your cousin, along with all the servants of the Villa. Tell me, Eleanor," he said as he leaned forward to watch her every motion. "Are you relieved that they've rescued your cousin? Or worried that she's become caught up in your schemes?"

"The d-demons t-took the s-s-servants?" Eleanor repeated, staring at Percivus in disbelief. She'd spent a number of months at the Villa with Jocelynn over the summer. It wasn't a large manor, but it still possessed stout walls with a knight and dozens of soldiers to defend it. It should have been impossible for the small demon raids they'd seen so far to breach the defenses of the Villa.

"What, what about S-s-sir C-cathal?" Eleanor asked, remembering the kindly old knight who had insisted on guarding the Villa even after Lady Jocelynn returned to Lothian City. Of course, Cathal wasn't aware that the 'Lady Ashlynn' in the Villa was only a servant from Lothian Manor who resembled Eleanor's cousin, but Eleanor had always expected that, even if he knew, Cathal would have treated Samira with the same respect that he paid to 'Lady Ashlynn.'

Cathal was a good, honorable man, one of the best among the knights who served Bors Lothian and one of the few who would stand up to Owain when the young lord let his temper and arrogance run wild. If the Villa had fallen...

"Now that is interesting," Percivus said, leaning back in his chair to pick up a bowl of thick, hearty, cream stew and stirring it idly as he watched Eleanor's expression shift from confusion to worry. "You Blackwell women don't seem to care for Lady Ashlynn very much, do you? I tell you that the Villa is fallen and your cousin is captured by demons, the very same cousin who should be giving birth to Lord Owain's child in just a few week's time... But the first name on your lips is Sir Cathal?"

"Jocelynn was the same you know," Percivus added as he fished a morsel of roasted turkey out of the soup, poking at the stew until the thick broth yielded a pair of peas and a bit of carrot to go with the turkey. "She didn't ask about Lady Ashlynn either. Tell me, who is 'Samira'? And why do you care so much more about Sir Cathal than your own cousin?" Percivus asked, making a show of blowing on the spoonful of hot stew before savoring his first bite as he waited for Eleanor's answer.

Suddenly, Eleanor froze in panic as she realized her mistake. She was too tired, too hungry, too weak... and she'd forgotten to pretend. Percivus didn't know. Bors hadn't told him, and the Church hadn't told him either. For all that he was a bloodhound who had slipped his leash, he was still unaware of the deception taking place at the Summer Villa... He didn't know that Owain had murdered Ashlynn the night of their wedding, or anything that had happened since.

But now, she realized, he had become even more dangerous. There had never been a conspiracy against Marquis Bors. Jocelynn had done her best to care for him, and Eleanor had accompanied her as her chaperone, but that was the extent of their involvement with Bors recently. The Summer Villa was a different matter entirely. The conspiracy there involved the fragile alliance between two powerful noble families, the death of a noblewoman, accusations of witchcraft and many, many more secrets.

The rabid bloodhound had finally caught the scent of something real.

"L-lady J-jocelynn," Eleanor said, seizing on something else that Percivus had said, hoping he would give her a scrap of information, a fragment of hope she could cling to while she fought her dull, clouded mind to figure out how she should handle a rabid dog who had found something to sink his teeth into. "H-how is my lady? H-has she re-recovered f-f-from her w-wound?"

"Oh? So you can manifest some concern for Jocelynn, but not for Lady Ashlynn?" Percivus said, setting his meal aside long enough to pick up a quill pen to take notes. "That's interesting. But you shouldn't concern yourself with her," he added as his pen scratched against the parchment. "She's been receiving at least one cup of hot porridge every morning, and if she works hard each day, she receives a loaf of bread, fresh from the ovens," he said with a pointed look at the moldy crust of bread sitting beside Eleanor.

"Of course, I haven't had any meat to offer her in several days," he added as he returned to his own meal. "She was so happy to trade away her jewels for the few scraps of tongue that I offered her, but meat has been in short supply since then," he said as he picked up his spoon to take a bite of the rich, creamy stew, carefully chewing on the succulent piece of turkey as he watched Eleanor's eyes tracking his every movement.

"T-tongue?" Eleanor said, blinking in confusion. A shortage of meat? What was he blathering on about? It couldn't be about the shortage of beef after the demon raids on the Dunn's ranches. Lothian City would barely notice the loss from a single barony among ten, and Lothian Manor certainly wouldn't have felt the sting of any shortage. So why would he lack for meat, even if he'd decided to feed something as tough and unappetizing as tongue to Lady Jocelynn?

"It's important to never be wasteful," Percivus said. "Once they'd confessed, Master Hess and Master Baden had no more need of their tongues, and it wouldn't do to have them attempting to recant their confessions from the gallows once the crowd had gathered," he explained, as though it were only common sense.

"Y-you f-fed L-lady Jocelynn th-the tongues of th-the men you k-k-killed?" Eleanor said in shock, staring wide-eyed at the monster, no, the demon wearing human skin in front of her. She knew he was cruel, but what he'd just admitted to was... unspeakable. Or it should have been. It should have been unthinkable! Yet he had actually done it.

"Jocelynn needs to learn the common sense that every farmer's wife knows," Percivus said simply. "She needs to learn how to do honest work with her hands. She needs to learn how to make do without the luxuries of a noblewoman's life. And she needs to learn to take what is given to her, to be grateful for it, and to do. As. She. Is. Told," he said firmly, drawing out the final words and emphasizing each one of them.

"Just like you do," he added as he leaned forward, staring intently at the shivering, gaunt, raven-haired woman who seemed to be on the edge of collapse as he finally found the handle he needed to bend her to his will.

"It would have been easier, days ago, if you'd just given me names," he said. "Now, I have many more questions for you. And if you do not answer them for me, then perhaps I'll have to get Lady Jocelynn to ask you questions for me... I'm sure that I can arrange for another bucket of water to douse her with... After another night spent soaking wet in a cell with a window, I think she'll be willing to beg you for answers. And if she isn't, I can always replace her meals with yours..."

"So, let's begin again," Percivus said, his hazel eyes glittering in the dim light of the cell. "Why was Sir Cathal's name the first one that came to your lips? And why are you more worried about him than your cousin, Ashlynn?"

Chapter 1044: Threats - Real & Imagined (Part Two)

"S-sir C-cathal is a g-g-good man," Eleanor said through chattering teeth. "H-he c-cared for L-lady Jo-jocelynn and me. He would n-not f-f-f-fall to demons easily," she said, speaking pure truth. She didn't have it in her to lie, not now, not after days of cold and hunger. She could hold back her words, but she couldn't invent new ones, so she supplied him with pieces of truth in the hopes that it would be enough.

"Sir Cathal's body was found lying in the mud," Percivus said. "A claw demon of incredible strength tore through his armor, but he may have been dead already by the time it did. His flesh had been burned by witchcraft unlike any I've ever heard of. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you, Eleanor?"

Percivus couldn't bring himself to use the words that Sir Gilander had included in his report. That it looked like an Inquisitor had unleashed Holy Flames on Sir Cathal before he died. Perhaps the aging knight had meant it as a simple comparison, but the implication behind his words was plain as day and it had planted a seed of suspicion in Bors' mind that Percivus had to remove before it could take root.

He'd promised Bors that he would deliver results, but as the days slipped by, Percivus had been thwarted at every turn. Sir Elgon Prowel and Captain Albyn, both close confidants of Lady Jocelynn, had been missing ever since the night the Inquisitor moved against Jocelynn and Eleanor.

Yesterday, he'd finally managed to track down the missing Captain Devlin, in a brothel where he'd evidently been ever since Bors sent Owain to Hurel village. For a man who wanted to become one of Owain's knights, Delvin was the most useless soldier Percivus had ever seen, falling immediately to indulge in his vices of wine and women as soon as the lord who was supposed to be training him was away on other urgent matters.

The string of failures left Bors doubting whether or not Percivus could root out this conspiracy, and Sir Gilander's casual comparison had only inflamed matters. Now, if Percivus couldn't restore a sense of order to his investigation soon, he might find himself in a cell next to Eleanor's!

"I know n-n-nothing about f-f-flames f-f-for witchcraft," Eleanor said. She'd learned more about witchcraft during her brief time helping Inquisitor Diarmuid than she'd learned in years as a Confessor, but most of what she'd learned pertained to herbs, plants, witch's concoctions and their strange rituals in the wilderness.

The question that Diarmuid had asked her to answer was if Lady Ashlynn had ever done anything in her childhood that implied that she was a witch. Over the course of the summer, Eleanor heard several stories from Jocelynn that were enough to raise suspicion. Things like keeping a private garden in Blackwell Manor or sneaking out in the early morning hours to climb a cliff overlooking the vast harbor in Blackwell City were enough to make anyone looking for a witch suspicious.

But Jocelynn made it very clear that the only things her older sister ever grew were fruits and vegetables, with herbs used for cooking. As for sneaking out... It was the simple harmless fun of young women who wanted to watch the sunrise and see the ships setting sail on the morning tide. There was nothing nefarious to suggest that Lady Ashlynn was a witch, despite the mark on her hip that Owain Lothian had murdered her for, and so the Inquisition had concluded that Ashlynn was an innocent woman when she died.

The only thing keeping Owain Lothian from standing trial for Magnicide was his use to the Church as a slayer of demons... but Percivus wasn't aware of any of that, and Eleanor didn't dare to tell him because she had no idea what a rabid bloodhound like him would do with such a tangled, bloody mess of lies and schemes to sink his teeth into.

"So you know nothing about the flames that burned Sir Cathal, but you're more worried about him than your cousin, Lady Ashlynn," Percivus said with a frown. "In that case, let's play a game. After all, I've already had a chance to hear Jocelynn's answers," he said as he produced two small wooden bowls, setting each one on the table in front of him, along with the pot of remaining stew.

"Since you dislike the bread so much, how about a bit of stew," he said as he carefully spooned a bit of the thick, hot, creamy broth into one of the bowls, making sure to include a single pea as he did. "I want to know about this person named 'Samira' that Lady Jocelynn was so worried about," Percivus said.

"If your answer matches hers, then I'll put a bit of stew in each of these bowls. One for you, and one for Jocelynn, since you still seem to care for her. I'll give you a chance to help her have a nice, hot meal," he explained as he added another, similar spoonful to the second bowl, this time including a bit of carrot with the creamy broth.

As she watched, Eleanor found herself unconsciously licking her lips as her stomach growled in hunger. The scent of the stew was already an agonizing torture after so many days subsisting on what little edible bread she was given and cups of water that she could only drink a few sips at a time.

Now, he wasn't just offering her real, hot food... he was offering to give it to Lady Jocelynn as well. For days, Eleanor had been haunted by thoughts of how Percivus had been tormenting her cousin, and now she knew, or at least, knew a little bit. If Percivus held true to his word, and she could help Lady Jocelynn, then maybe they both really could get through this together.

If Percivus was telling the truth. If he would keep his word. Those two 'ifs' were like a bucket of cold water, dousing her hopes, but part of her refused to give up the hope offered by the contents of those two wooden bowls.

"But if you tell me enough about 'Samira' to expose one of Jocelynn's lies," Percivus added as he dipped his spoon into the pot again, this time spooning a bit of meat into the cup along with the broth. "Then I might be moved to be more generous to you for being so helpful...."

Chapter 1045: The Breaking Of Eleanor (Part One)

At first, Eleanor thought that she could handle Percivus and his questions. After spending months with Jocelynn, accompanying her nearly every day since they left Blackwell County, she thought she understood her cousin well enough to know what Jocelynn would and wouldn't have said.

Even though her mind was hazy with fatigue and her stomach gnawed at her with hunger, she felt confident that she wouldn't betray her cousin and that she could find a way to win a small victory for both of them.

So long as Percivus kept to his promise about the food, that was. If he was lying to her, then nothing she did would matter, but she chose to believe there was a scrap of honor buried within the Inquisitor's black heart somewhere that would still bind him to his promises... Or, perhaps he would keep to his promises out of a twisted desire to 'win' using the rules of his own game.

The game was a trap to begin with, and Eleanor knew it... But refusing to play would only result in more punishments, and she didn't know how much longer her body could endure. At least this way, she would have a chance.

"S-samira is one of the s-servants sent to the Summer V-villa," Eleanor started, keeping her eyes on Percivus's face and hoping for the slightest twitch of his mustache or shift of his eyes to indicate how he responded to the answer she gave him. Unfortunately, the flame-haired Inquisitor remained passive, with one hand holding his quill pen, ready to take notes if she said anything of worth and patiently waiting for details as if he had all the time in the world.

"L-lady Jocelynn t-took a l-liking to her while we w-were there," Eleanor added, exposing a bit of harmless truth in the hopes that she could explain why Jocelynn would have been concerned for the young woman at the villa. "She, she t-tutored her in r-reading a-and other th-things, t-to p-p-pass the t-time."

"That's curious," Percivus said, punctuating his statement with scratching sounds as he made careful notes. "I would think that Jocelynn would spend most of her time with her sister. What was it about this servant that made her worthy of tutoring? Was she special in some way?"

"It, it isn't p-possible for L-lady Jocelynn to be c-close t-to her s-sister r-right now," Eleanor said, momentarily grateful for the shivers that wracked her body and helped cover for her need to choose her words with exceptional care. "I, I shouldn't s-say," Eleanor added, appearing to pause before revealing something secretive.

"B-but L-lady Jocelynn was v-very j-j-jealous of her s-sister," Eleanor continued, revealing something that was true but would certainly be misunderstood by the Inquisitor. "She, she re-resented L-lady Ashlynn f-

for her wed-ding to L-lord Owain. C-count Rhys a-always s-s-said he w-wanted to w-wed Jocelynn t-to a G-guild M-master and n-not a l-lord. S-so y-you can un-understand why a y-young w-woman would s-struggle to b-be with her s-sister a-after the w-wedding."

"S-samira, she resembles L-lady Ashlynn a b-bit," Eleanor added when she saw Percivus furrowing his brow at her statement. "S-so s-she f-felt c-comfortable with her w-when she c-couldn't be with L-lady Ashlynn."

Speaking so much after days with so little to drink strained Eleanor far more than she'd realized it would, taking far more effort to get the words out than she imagined and leaving her body spasming with feeble coughs as her throat protested the abuse, but she hoped that Percivus would believe what she'd told him, and misinterpret the rift that separated the sisters as one of petty jealousy instead of the gulf between life and death.

The question was, how much had Jocelynn told him about Samira? Surely Jocelynn would have admitted to the woman's identity as a servant, perhaps even mentioning that she'd been tutoring her. After all, it would give Jocelynn a believable reason to be concerned for an ordinary servant. But would she have said more? Would she have invented a fiction that she was considering taking Samira on as a lady-in-waiting?

Jocelynn had been trained by her father to negotiate with merchants and prey on people's self-interests. She was good at saying the right thing to nudge a person's thoughts in the right direction, but she rarely abandoned the truth to do so... If she'd done so now, however, if she'd told Percivus some lie that she thought the other man would find believable, then Eleanor might have just doomed the woman she was trying to help.

"That's interesting," Percivus said, shaking his head in disappointment at Jocelynn's behavior. "I'll have to remember to teach Jocelynn a lesson about treasuring her family before this is all over. You never know how suddenly you can find yourself bereft of parents, or siblings, when tragedy strikes," he said, pursing his lips together as he forced down memories of the tragedy that claimed the lives of his parents when he was still just a boy.

If it hadn't been for the care and protection of his older brother, he never would have survived those first few years as an orphan. In the end, however, when he saw how much his brother was struggling to care for both of them, he ran away to Maeril in the hopes of joining the Inquisition and finding a way to pay his brother back for all he'd done for him.

At the time, Percivus had been too young to join Bors' army for the War of Inches, but he was old enough to be an acolyte in the temple, and the coming war was exactly the opportunity he needed to reinvent himself from orphan stable-boy into something greater...

But he'd never forgotten where he came from. He never let himself forget how much his parents had struggled to provide for their children, or how much his brother had struggled to care for him when it felt like it was the two of them against the world.

He would have thought that, as two strangers to Lothian March, Jocelynn would have clung to her sister to help Lady Ashlynn face the struggles of becoming a mother in a strange new land, but clearly he'd overestimated the love that noblewomen could feel for each other.

Instead, it seemed like they were too busy feuding among themselves for status and husbands to leech off of to show any real affection for each other. It was shameful, and it was something he would have to find a way to correct before he was done with the young woman in the cell at the opposite end of the dungeon...

Chapter 1046: The Breaking Of Eleanor (Part Two)

"No wonder Jocelynn never asked about her missing sister," Percivus said with a sour expression on his face. "Perhaps I was wrong to think that she would do anything to help her struggling cousin," he said, frowning at Eleanor as he picked up the spoon to place a single spoonful of stew into Jocelynn's bowl before adding three spoonfuls to Eleanor's.

"I pity you, Eleanor," Percivus said as he looked down at the trembling woman. "Samlet, fetch a blanket for Eleanor. Her cousin won't do anything to earn comfort for her, so we should see that she's taken care of instead."

"Here," Percivus said, getting up from his chair to bring the steaming cup of stew with a few meager spoonfuls of broth and a single piece of meat in it over to Eleanor. "You're too cold to speak, and I have many more questions for you. Eat," he said as he took one of her cold, frail hands and wrapped it around the warm, wooden bowl.

Eleanor had to fight her body to prevent it from shaking so badly that she spilled the few precious spoonfuls of food. The chains around her wrists made it cumbersome to eat, and Percivus hadn't bothered to give her a spoon, so she could only raise the bowl to her lips, tilting it back and eagerly gulping at the warm, hearty, creamy stew.

She was so cold that the stew felt almost scalding when it hit her tongue, even though it wasn't actually that hot. Still, she didn't care as her parched lips and tongue worked to lick up every drop of the savory delight before she began chewing on the succulent, tender turkey that all but fell apart in her mouth as soon as she began to chew.

It was embarrassingly undignified, and for a moment, she realized how much she must resemble the lost and starving beggars she'd helped guide back to the light as a Confessor. For many of them, a warm meal and a safe place to spend the night were the first steps in a journey of a thousand steps to return to the Light.

A person who was hungry and cold would do almost anything to survive so long as they still had the will to do so, even if that meant turning to wickedness they would never normally consider, and Eleanor knew very well that the first thing she needed to do to help such people was to care for the needs of their bodies before she could tend to the wounds in their hearts. She'd never imagined, however, that she would find herself sitting in the very same position she'd helped so many of them find their way out of.

"I'll get you some water too," Percivus added as he returned to his small table and pulled a small waterskin out of his leather case along with a small cup that he made a show of filling with clean, clear water. "You've already told me something your cousin would never have revealed, and there's so much more I want to know..."

He was interrupted by the return of Samlet as the acolyte strode into the room carrying a thin blanket that he draped around Eleanor's shoulders with surprising gentleness for a man who had so roughly taken away her bedding just days before.

The blanket itself felt warm and comforting despite being so thin, as if it had been sitting near a fire or... Or had recently been wrapped around someone else, Eleanor realized as she caught a familiar scent on the blanket that reminded her of Lady Jocelynn.

"Don't worry, Eleanor," Percivus said with a smile that was supposed to look comforting but only looked more disturbing coming from a man with such a chilling gaze. "If your cousin won't do anything to help you, we'll teach her how to share her fortune with others. And you can still show her that you're the better woman," he said as he returned to her side, taking away the empty bowl and pressing the cup of water into her hands instead.

"I'm sure that you know many more things," he said confidently. "And so long as the things you tell me match up to the things she's told me, I'll keep adding to her bowl," he promised. "She might not have done anything to relieve your suffering, but that doesn't mean you can't still help her.. Right, Eleanor?"

"So tell me something else," he said as he returned to his seat. "Recently, Jocelynn has spent a great deal of time with Sir Elgon and Captain Albyn, but I can't find either of them to learn what they talked about. How much do you know about their conversations?" Percivus asked innocently. "Or, perhaps you can tell me where the two men have disappeared to?"

Sitting on the rough cot, draped in a blanket that was still warm with the heat of Jocelynn's body, Eleanor's hands trembled in a way that had nothing to do with the cold.

Warm. She was finally beginning to feel warm after days of bone-chilling cold. She could still feel the warmth of the stew spreading from her throat, chest, and stomach, and that had only been a few spoonfuls. Her mouth watered at the thought of more even as one of her hands clutched at the blanket, greedy for its warmth.

But the hand holding the cup of water could barely keep from spilling the precious liquid as she realized the cruel truth of Percivus's twisted game. With her answer to a single question, she'd received food, water, and warmth... and the Inquisitor had stripped that warmth away from Jocelynn to give it to her.

Eleanor knew all too well the kinds of wickedness a person could resort to when they were cold and starving... That was why caring for them was so important to help them find their way out of the darkness. But now, Percivus was using those very same methods to lead her into betraying Jocelynn, and he was changing the rules of the 'game' whenever he saw fit.

He'd never said anything about taking away Jocelynn's blanket... But he'd done it in order to 'reward' her, and to punish Jocelynn for withholding information from him. The 'game' had suddenly become much, much more dangerous to play. The most righteous thing she could do at this point would be to refuse to play and keep silent as she'd done for several days when the Inquisitor had simply been asking for names.

It would be the best thing, but... it also wouldn't save her life, or let her help Lady Jocelynn.

Slowly, moving carefully to make sure she didn't spill any of the precious liquid, Eleanor raised the cup to her lips and took a careful sip as she tried to think of an answer to Percivus's question that wouldn't risk too much and that would match up with what Jocelynn would likely say.

"I, I don't know where they are," Eleanor said carefully after rolling the sweet, clean-tasting water around in her mouth to wet her tongue and licking her parched lips. "But I know what they were helping Lady Jocelynn with before... before they went missing..."

Chapter 1047: Betrayal's Rewards

An hour later, Eleanor lay alone in the darkness of her cell. For the first time in several days, she was warm and the thin mattress that had been returned to her felt like the finest, most luxurious feather bed underneath her stiff, aching body.

The oil heater had been returned to the room, and she could no longer see her breath in the air of the dungeon cell. Her belly was full of warm, creamy stew that contained plenty of meat, carrots and peas. Compared to how she'd been living for the past few days, it was paradise.

Iron shackles still bound her wrists with a bar between them to prevent her from clasping her hands in prayer. Percivus had looked almost apologetic when he informed her that it wasn't time to remove them yet.

He still had more questions and he would be returning the next day to ask more, though he'd told her that he didn't need any names from her yet, unless she decided that there were names she wanted to share, of course.

The entire time he'd peppered her with questions, she'd struggled to provide either information she knew he could obtain elsewhere or things that wouldn't hurt anyone for him to discover. But Percivus's keen mind picked up on gaps in her story far too easily and he prodded anything that seemed to be a contradiction until Eleanor revealed something more, even if it was only a tiny bit of extra information.

"You said that Captain Albyn and Sir Elgon were helping Ashlynn to assess the tithes submitted by the barons, and that they were on an errand to the warehouses the day they went missing," Percivus said with a frown as he flipped through his pages of neat, meticulous notes.

"But I have the statement of two shopkeepers here that they came to purchase goods," he said, raising an eyebrow at Eleanor. "Iron pots, pans, roasting spits, and the supports to use them over camp fires," he said, reading from a list that Samlet had provided him with. "And this one said they were looking for tents for traveling. From the size and quantity, it is enough to sleep fifteen to twenty men. Why would they be doing that when they're running errands for Jocelynn?"

It was a question that was all but impossible for Eleanor to answer without exposing their plans to escape from Lothian March and she'd been forced to think quickly to provide an answer that would stop the flame-haired Inquisitor from asking any more.

"Master Isabell recently visited Lady Jocelynn," Eleanor said carefully. "Then, she left to spend several days searching for suitable lands to establish a village near the mouth of the Vale of Mists," she said, offering up a few pieces of truth that had nothing to do with their escape plans. "Perhaps Lady Jocelynn intended to join her and Master Tiernan?"

"I, I wasn't able to hear what Master Isabell discussed with Lady Jocelynn," she added hesitantly, as if she was reluctant to admit she couldn't share the details of the conversation. "But I know that Lady prays for Master Isabell's safety and her success."

"But according to the Marquis," Percivus said, leaning forward in his chair. "Jocelynn was proposing that the Guild Masters should receive lands from the Dunns. She wanted the Dunns to consolidate their larger hamlets into new villages for the Guild Masters to administer, and to cede that land to the Lothian family until the Lothians succeed in becoming a Duchy during the upcoming Holy War."

"So why would Jocelynn want to visit Master Isabell near the mouth of the Vale if she has other plans for the Masters from Blackwell," Percivus asked, refusing to let go of the seeming contradiction.

Through the fog and haze of hunger, cold, and fatigue that haunted Eleanor, her mind failed to offer up anything she could say that wouldn't betray things she had to hold secret, and for several moments, she sat there with an increasingly troubled expression on her face.

"It may be that she wanted to visit with Master Isabell near the mouth of the Vale of Mists," Percivus said as he leaned back in his chair, adding a few spoonfuls of the hearty stew to Eleanor's bowl. "But now the Guild Masters have gone missing, along with Sir Hugo Hanrahan and Sir Rain Aleese, at the same time as the demon attacks began."

"So was Jocelynn intending to join the Guild Masters in meeting with her demon masters?" Percivus asked. "Or was she going to play at searching for her lost friends from Blackwell City? It's fine if you're not ready to tell me yet," he added when he saw Eleanor continuing to hesitate. "You've already given me several pieces of useful information," he said with a faint smile that seemed almost genuine.

"I'll have a great deal more to talk about the next time I speak with Jocelynn," he said as his quill pen scratched additional notes onto the parchment in front of him. "For now, I have other questions," he said, before moving on to another topic entirely, taking Eleanor off guard with his line of questioning.

He worked like this for a full hour, and as the hour went by, he found additional opportunities to 'reward' Eleanor for the information she provided. Her bedding was returned to her, along with a soft, goose down pillow that had come from her own bed-chamber, rather than the thin, threadbare one that would have been offered to an ordinary prisoner.

Percivus never pressed too hard when he ran into topics that Eleanor clearly knew more about, yet refused to divulge additional information. He could have turned violent at those points, applying the stick and the carrot in equal measure, but he didn't. Instead, he left those 'gaps' in Eleanor's information for later, or reminded her that he would ask Jocelynn to fill the gap since Eleanor seemed reluctant to.

It wasn't until afterward, with a warm bed and a full belly, that Eleanor's clouded mind cleared enough to fully understand what he'd been doing. She'd become compliant, and he didn't want to do anything that would risk breaking that compliance while he held it. The instant he turned violent again, her defenses would go right back up. Pain would clear her mind in an instant, but it had taken hours for her mind to clear in the comfort she'd been given.

"He's treating me like a skittish horse," Eleanor said, shaking her head as she realized how thoroughly he'd succeeded in breaking down her defenses. "And it's working..." she sighed, clenching her hands into fists and slamming one of her tiny fists into her own thigh in a combination of frustration and self inflicted punishment for what she had done.

"If he comes back tomorrow," she whispered to herself. "Can I resist now?" She'd regained a good amount of strength in just a few hours of time, but that was only compared to where she'd been before, teetering on the brink of death from cold and hunger. The strength she found now wasn't anything like a full recovery, it was just a few steps away from the brink, and she was still far too weak to resist for long if she returned to the intransigent silence she'd used when Percivus wanted a list of names from her.

"No," she admitted, reaching under her shift with one hand and retrieving the small scrap of her Confessor's robes, clutching tightly to the reminder of who she really was... and the kind of man that Percivus was as well.

She had to be honest, at least with herself. If she allowed herself to sink into delusions and convenient self deceptions, then the Confessor in her would truly be broken and lost, and as strong as she was, Eleanor Blackwell alone couldn't resist the ephemeral promise of survival that Percivus dangled in front of her for much longer.

Today, she might not have given Percivus anything of great value, but tomorrow, and tomorrow's tomorrow... She could still hold out for a little while, but she'd seen proof today that her days of defiance were coming to an end.

And because she'd been weak today, eager to fill her belly and huddle in the warmth of the blanket that Samlet stole from Lady Jocelynn, she wouldn't die before she could give up the secrets she held. Percivus had managed to pull her back from the edge of death, keeping her alive long enough to turn into the kind of traitor that Jocelynn had been when she exposed Lady Ashlynn's birthmark and caused her sister's death.

"But it doesn't have to be that way," she said as she clutched the scrap of fabric tightly. Percivus might have broken her body and even her will to resist, but he'd failed to break her faith. As long as that was true, she still had one last, final option left to her. A last act of defiance before the end...

Chapter 1048: A Final Act Of Defiance

Eleanor moved slowly as she stood up from her comfortable, luxurious feeling cot, placing her bare feet on the cold stone floor of the dungeon cell before she could lose the strength of her conviction. Her body still ached, and her joints protested as she took a few steps away from the cot and the comfort of her goose-down pillow to stand in the middle of the dungeon cell, but to Eleanor, the minor aches and pains were a balm on her wounded heart.

She deserved to suffer, here at the end, for betraying Jocelynn's confidence, and though it hardly felt like enough, she would make up the balance in the end. Slowly, moving carefully so that she didn't fall and arouse the attention of any guards posted in the dungeon with the noise of her chains, Eleanor brought her knees to the cold stones of the dungeon cell, before stretching herself into the same position of complete supplication that she'd used to invoke a minor miracle of Holy Light in her cell just a few days ago.

"Thank you, Brother Percivus," she said with a faint smile on her lips as she offered up genuine thanks to the Inquisitor for giving her the strength at the end to do what she must. The shivering, chattering, half-dead Eleanor she'd been when he entered her cell would never have had the strength or clarity of mind to do what she had decided to do with her final moments.

As perverse as it was, she was truly grateful that she could reclaim the gifts of nourishment and comfort that he'd used to tempt her for a far nobler purpose.

The ritual she was preparing for was as old as the Sisterhood of Confession itself, and it had been forbidden for almost as long. In her convent, only the Mother Superior herself knew the formal words of the prayer that had been passed down for generations, but every Confessor who donned the Crimson Hood was aware of the lengths to which the founders of their order would go in order to protect people whose struggle to regain the Light was more important than a single Confessor's life.

Jocelynn certainly wasn't someone that the Church would have chosen to lavish such protection on. She wasn't a prince, or king, or heir to any throne. She wasn't a pillar of the church, or one of the wealthy merchants who paved their path to the Heavenly Shores with offerings of gold and jewels to the temples, or a champion fighting against demons on the front lines of a Holy War.

But that didn't matter to Eleanor any more than her lack of a formal ritual mattered to her. Jocelynn mattered. She'd suffered greatly for her wrongs, and she was working hard to find her way back to the Light. She loved her sister, loved her family, and she was learning to fight for the things that were important in her own life. As far as Eleanor was concerned, that was more than enough to make her worthy, even if they hadn't been kinsmen.

Eleanor had already learned that she didn't need the formal words of the Church's prayers in order to create a miracle. A simple sailor's shanty had been enough to summon Holy Light in her darkest hour of need. So, whether she knew the words of the Church's prayer or not, she had faith that her words would reach the Holy Lord of Light's ears, and that he would bestow on her one last, final miracle for the woman who had come to mean more to her than her own life.

"Holy Lord of Light, my time has come at last.

This body breaks, but my spirit still burns bright..."

She knew that this was the end, and she accepted that fact. Perhaps, if she were lucky, she could linger on for a few more days, but she'd placed herself on a path that was difficult to return from the day she offered so much of her own strength to the Holy Lord of Light to save Jocelynn's life from Bors' delusional assault.

Now, she would bring her life to a close on her own terms, providing what aid to Jocelynn she could without depending on Percivus to honor his twisted words.

"I offer up the last flickering flames of life I hold,

That they may illuminate the way for the one I choose to guide..."

Jocelynn's path from here would still be long, dark, and filled with danger. She needed strength to persevere, and a light to show the way, and Eleanor was willing to give all of her strength in order to become that light.

Slowly, in the darkness of the dungeon cell, a soft, golden light began to radiate from Eleanor's body, as if the Holy Lord of Light had descended into the darkness of her cell to listen to her final prayer.

"By the oaths that Confessors know and keep,

I have heard her confession, her guilt, and her remorse.

Though she is young and has strayed far from the path of the Light,

She sees clearly now, and has struggled all the harder to do what's right..."

Eleanor was proud of Jocelynn. She had come so far from the woman she had been when she left Blackwell County, and she had much, much further still to go. Some might think that she had begun a journey toward greatness, but Eleanor didn't care whether Jocelynn found greatness, fame or wealth.

The Church might wish for a person receiving such a blessing to dedicate the rest of their lives to a good and godly cause, but for Jocelynn, all Eleanor wished to see in her cousin's future was the simple happiness of finding a place where she could be loved. If she could struggle long enough to find someone who would love her and return the love and devotion that Jocelynn had demonstrated her heart could give, then that would be miracle enough.

"I bind my spirit's final flames to her heart,

And pledge all that remains of my life to her.

Where she is weak, add my strength to hers.

Where she has fallen, let my faith lift high.

Where darkness seeks to claim her wandering steps,

Let my Light illuminate her path, to show her the way..."

By now, the faint golden light that covered Eleanor's body wreathed her like a fiery nimbus of golden flames, radiant and pure, enveloping her body as if she lay on a funeral pyre. In her hand, she clutched tightly at the remnants of her Confessor's robe, feeling the soft, comforting fabric for one last time before she let it go, and with it, all of the pain, the cold, and the heartache that haunted her every moment in this dungeon.

"Jocelynn," Eleanor whispered softly. "Please receive this gift from me. May it see you safely through the night, until you can stand once more in the Light..."

Chapter 1049: Jocelynn's Struggle (Part One)

Jocelynn lay quietly on the rough wood and leather frame of the cot in her dungeon cell, her body curled into a tight ball in a futile attempt to preserve warmth. The thin, coarse peasant's dress they'd given her, made from rough-spun wool that scratched at her skin with every movement, was better than the sodden dress she'd traded for it after her first night in the dungeon cell, but it was still too little to protect her from the bitter cold that poured through the cell's single window.

The window itself was barely taller than her hand and only slightly wider than the distance between her shoulders, set high in the wall and fitted with iron bars that reminded her escape was impossible, even for a woman as slender as she was.

The window let in the faint light of stars and a sliver of silvery moon, but it also let in the winter wind that cut through the narrow opening like a knife, turning her cell into a frigid torture chamber every night.

Iron manacles bound her wrists, connected by a short length of chain that greatly limited her movements and made even ordinary tasks awkward. Another manacle circled her left ankle, attached to a longer chain that ran to an iron ring set into the stone wall. The chain gave her enough length to reach her cot, the workbench, and the corner of the cell where they left the chamber pot, but not enough to reach the door or the window.

The manacles themselves had rubbed her wrists and ankle raw over the past week, the constant friction of iron against skin wearing away the flesh until angry red sores had formed in several places on her formerly flawless, pale skin.

The left wrist was the worst; the inside of her wrist, where the manacle rested, had developed an open wound that wept clear fluid and stung whenever she moved her hands. Her ankle fared little better; the skin there was cracked and bruised from the weight of the iron and the repetitive motion of walking the few steps her chain allowed.

Beside her cot, a workbench held yard after yard of pristine white fabric that she dared not use as a blanket to replace the one that Acolyte Samlet had taken from her. For the past several days, in part as a 'punishment' for touching the embroidery hoop that belonged to Bors' late wife, Percivus had forced Jocelynn to embroider altar cloths for the Inquisition.

Her skills were horribly inadequate for the task. She'd only ever learned enough embroidery to make a few simple flowers on handkerchief squares when she gathered with other young noblewomen for tea, and she did it mostly to keep her hands busy during the long, rambling conversations, not because she had any interest in acquiring the skill.

The crimson and gold suns that Percivus demanded she add to the altar cloth in neat, precise rows, combined with more complex symbols of the Holy Lord of Light and the Inquisition, were far beyond anything she'd ever attempted.

Now, her fingers bore dozens of pinprick wounds from mishaps with the tiny needles. Some of the punctures had become infected, turning into small, angry red bumps that throbbed with pain whenever she had to grip the needle.

Jocelynn had learned the hard way how painful Percivus's hand-picked lackeys would make her life if she allowed even a single drop of blood to stain the pristine white fabric, or if any of her fumbling attempts at embroidery failed to meet the high standards of the Church for such a sacred item.

The men arrived twice a day with her meals, a pot of thin porridge, and a small loaf of bread with a single cup of water. But every time they found a mistake in one of the crimson and gold suns she'd been commanded to embroider, they removed a spoonful of porridge, a slice of bread, and a sip of water from her daily ration.

At first, she'd barely been able to manage enough food to keep herself going. Her slender, delicate fingers, now stiff from the cold and clumsy from the hunger that ravaged her belly, had made mistake after mistake.

Some days, she'd been left with only a few spoonfuls of porridge and a corner of bread, barely enough to quiet the gnawing in her belly for an hour before the hunger returned to gnaw at her like a starving dog gnawing at a bone.

But the acolytes had other methods to make her work even more difficult. Acolyte Niklas seemed to take particular pleasure in "accidentally" knocking over her spool of crimson thread, letting it unwind and tangle across the floor. She'd have to spend precious time winding it back up, her raw wrists screaming in protest as she bent to retrieve the thread from the cold stone floor, all while knowing that the time spent fixing the mess meant she'd complete fewer suns, forcing her to rush, which inevitably led to more mistakes and less food.

Acolyte Samlet had his own preferred torment. He'd wait until she was halfway through a flaming sun, her stitches finally beginning to look acceptable as she became fully focused on the task, and then he'd "inspect" her work.

He'd hold the fabric up to the window, squinting at it in the dim light, and inevitably find some flaw, whether it was a stitch slightly too long, the angle of a ray minutely off-center, or the spacing between the sun and its rays looking not quite even; he'd always find something wrong.

Then he'd make her unpick all her work, watching with barely concealed satisfaction as she used the blunt end of the needle to painstakingly remove hours of careful stitching, unraveling everything back to the beginning.

"The Holy Lord of Light deserves perfection, Jocelynn," he'd say, emulating Inquisitor Percivus in his refusal to use her title or address her with any of the respect due her station. "Surely you wouldn't want to offer Him anything less than your very best work?"

The unpicking was almost worse than the original embroidery. Her fingertips had become raw and tender from the constant friction of thread and needle, and the fine motor control required to tease out stitches without damaging the delicate fabric was nearly impossible with hands that shook from hunger and cold.

More than once, she'd accidentally torn the fabric while unpicking, which the acolytes counted as an even worse offense than a simple mistake. The one time it had happened, it had cost her an entire meal so that she would learn that 'a good woman never wastes anything...'

Chapter 1050: Jocelynn's Struggle (Part Two)

Slowly, painfully, her fingers had grown steadier despite the weight of iron dragging at her wrists and the pain of hunger gnawing at her belly. She'd learned to work with aching slowness, checking and rechecking every stitch before moving on to the next. She'd learned to hold her breath when threading the needle, to brace her arms against the work bench to minimize shaking, to position herself so the chain connecting her wrists didn't pull at the worst of her raw wounds.

Lately, she'd even done well enough that they'd left an oil heater in her room overnight, though it sickened her to realize how much desperate joy she'd felt hearing their praise at her fumbling efforts.

The warmth from that single night with the heater had been almost intoxicating, and she'd actually slept for nearly the entire night, the first sleep she'd had in days that wasn't fitful and interrupted by intense shivering any time the winds outside the window picked up, tearing through the dungeon cell like the claws of a frost demon.

When they'd taken the heater away the next morning, she'd barely managed to hold herself back from falling to her knees and begging that they give her a chance to earn it back for the whole day.

For a time, she'd begun to wonder if Percivus had forgotten about her. It wasn't until he returned to her cell, demanding answers to a slew of questions before revealing that the Summer Villa had fallen to demons, that she realized he'd simply been too busy to bother with her.

Her answers, sparse and evasive, only seemed to annoy him, and after a short hour of questioning, he'd left, telling her that she wasn't the only person who could tell him what he needed to know, and that for her sake, she had better hope that Eleanor's answers matched the ones she'd given. Not long after, one of his acolytes entered her cell, snatched away her blanket without a word of explanation, and then locked her away again.

"Eleanor," she'd whispered, staring at the locked door in horror as she tried to imagine what was happening in the cell where they'd taken her closest companion.

For days, Jocelynn clung to the belief that Eleanor must have been receiving better treatment than she was. The Inquisition had worked closely with Confessors for centuries, and there was always a certain amount of mutual respect between the two. Percivus and his men wouldn't inflict the kind of suffering on one of their own that they'd inflicted on her.

Besides, Bors Lothian was clearly pulling strings in the background. He might not be able to tug on all of Percivus's strings, but the Marquis's touch was so heavy-handed that it was impossible to miss. Since Bors clearly despised Jocelynn, she expected that half of the hardships she was currently facing flowed from him.

But Bors had no reason to loathe Eleanor, so her treatment must be better than all the petty slights that had been inflicted on her. Or at least, that's what she kept telling herself. But then, why had the acolyte come to snatch away her blanket after they went to speak with Eleanor? What had she said to them that would make them come to punish her?

Yet not long after, when the Inquisitor returned to her cell with a steaming bowl, half-filled with a creamy, turkey stew, she'd learned how wrong she'd been.

It was the first real food she'd seen in nearly a week. The aroma alone, rich and savory, with hints of herbs and the unmistakable scent of actual meat, made her mouth water so intensely it was almost painful.

Her hands shook as she took the bowl from him, and not entirely from cold or weakness. The stew had cooled slightly since Percivus spooned it into the shallow, wooden bowl, but it was still warmer than anything else in the damp dungeon cell. For a moment, she just sat there on her rough wooden cot, inhaling the fragrance and the warmth of the steam rising from the bowl.

The moment of joy was shattered when she was struck by a horrifying thought, but the meat in the cream stew was real, tender turkey. It didn't look remotely like the tough, gristly bits of tongue they'd forced on her that first morning, back when she'd still had the strength to vomit it back up in horror after Percivus revealed the source of the 'meat' she'd traded away her rings and jewelry to obtain.

Quickly, before the stew could cool any more in the frigid dungeon cell, she started to eat with her fingers. Percivus might have had a spoon to offer her, but she was unwilling to pay whatever sick, twisted price he would doubtless extract from her for the simple dignity of a utensil. Instead, she carefully fished out pieces of turkey and vegetables from the thick, creamy broth so she could savor each one individually, despite the way her pin-pricked fingers throbbed with each movement.

Eating like this was slow, awkward, and lacked all the dignity and manners that had been trained into her from a young age, but Jocelynn didn't care. The food was warm, gloriously warm, and for the first time in days, the hollow ache in her belly began to ease. She licked her fingers clean between each bite, not wanting to waste a single drop of the precious broth.

"Your cousin is truly impressive," Percivus said, stroking his neatly trimmed beard as he towered over Jocelynn, watching her carefully spooning the stew into her mouth with fingers that still ached from countless pinpricks.

"She's already half-dead from the Holy Lord of Light's punishment for healing you, but she doesn't blame you for her suffering at all," he said, shaking his head as though he was greatly disappointed by the Confessor.

"She even gave up half her meal, the first one she's had in days, just so you could have a bit more to eat," he said, heaping false praise on Eleanor. "At this rate, if she keeps offering up a share of her meals to keep you in comfort, she'll be dead within a week," he said, speaking with the confidence of a magistrate pronouncing a death sentence.

"She must truly love you to suffer so much just to protect your secrets, Jocelynn."