

The Vampire 1031

Chapter 1031: An Inescapable Calamity

Isabell had no intention of donning the mantle of the Engineer of Destruction once again. She'd seen where that road ended, and she had no desire to reach that destination in the vision or in real life. But there were other ways to prevent an army from claiming the lives of the people she needed to protect, and so she set to work as soon as the vision of Ashlynn faded away.

She began at the edges of the valley, planting a row of Hemlock trees that stretched as far as the eye could see, wrapping all the way around the perimeter of the valley. Each tree sent its roots deep into the earth, drawing on the strength of the land to grow faster than anyone would have imagined.

For each day that passed, the trees experienced an entire year of growth, reaching heights of two hundred feet or more within a single year. But Isabell went further than making them grow. After the first year, she transformed them once again, making their bark as hard as iron, and weaving their branches together until they formed a stronger, more impenetrable wall than any that had ever been built by human masons.

Still, this wasn't enough. Isabell turned away from the people within the river valley, leaving them to enjoy the paradise she'd created for them as she nurtured a forest along the easiest approaches to the valley, transforming them from chaotic wilderness into an intricately arranged maze that would lead people to exit the forest far from the few remaining entrances to the river valley.

"I thought it would be enough," Isabell told the real Ashlynn as she recounted her story. "My people had never done anything to start feuds that couldn't be resolved. They were happy to trade and share their abundance with anyone who approached them fairly. But it didn't matter to the Church or the lords behind them who always wanted something more and believed that they had a mandate from the Holy Lord of Light to take back their 'Sacred Valley,'" she said bitterly.

"So what happened?" Ashlynn asked, curious at how the vision would have presented the forces of the Church to Isabell. "When the Church finally came to claim the results of your hard work for themselves, what did they do?"

"The first armies couldn't get past the mazes," Isabell said in a moment of pride that quickly deflated. "But everything changed when the Inquisition started calling down fire from the heavens. It was like the sun itself had fallen on my forest, and even though it resisted the Holy Flames for a time... nothing could resist that conflagration forever.

The people cried out for their Hemlock Witch to save them, to fight back and smite the invaders who sought to destroy their peaceful homes. It was then that she realized that her people had come to depend on her completely to provide for them. She was the reason their lives were peaceful and prosperous, but she was also the reason the invaders had come to take away their homes. In the minds of some of Isabell's people, that meant she was responsible for slaying their enemies.

"I can't slay your enemies," Isabell protested. "I'm just an engineer. I can help you fortify your homes, I can build stout walls for you to shelter behind, but... if you want to slay your enemy, you'll have to take up arms yourself to repel the invaders."

"But we don't know how," the people protested.

"We aren't powerful the way you are!"

"You didn't prepare us for this!"

"Fine," Isabell said, raising a hand as their words pierced her heart like arrows fired from a bow. "I still can't fight your enemies for you. If you truly treasure this place, then you have to help fight to defend it... But, I can at least teach you the ways of war," she said as she began to sketch the plans for a simple catapult. "This will let you throw stones into the ranks of the enemy's soldiers..."

She hated doing it, but what choice did she have? But still, she couldn't make herself take part in the brutal clash of armies. Once she'd taught her people the ways of war and slaughter, their existence as a refuge from the ugliness of the world had come to an end.

Either they would succumb to the forces of the invaders, perishing to the last man as the Church took possession of the fruits of her labor, or they would baptize themselves in the blood and fires of war, killing so many of their enemies that they would retreat to lick their wounds.

Then, the cries for retribution would begin. One war would lead to another in an endless cycle of violence that would last for centuries until no one remembered the 'Sacred Valley' as anything but a fairy tale, and the people who lived there had buried so many of their kinsmen that the rows of headstones outnumbered the rows of cabbages.

"In the vision, I had the power to shape things to my will, and it was incredibly easy to do so," Isabell explained to Ashlynn. "I know that real witchcraft isn't as simple as what I did in the vision, and I doubt that even you could create such a mighty wall of trees in just a year's time without paying some kind of terrible price," she acknowledged.

"But it didn't seem to matter," she said with a defeated sigh. "Even with all that power, the more successful I was, the harder it became to prevent things from ending in catastrophe. I started to feel like nothing I did would ever be good enough to last, or that I could only allow one or two generations of people to enjoy peace and prosperity by extracting a terrible price from their children or grandchildren."

"I see why you call it a warning," Ashlynn said, nodding in understanding as she imagined the toll Isabell's trial must have taken on her. "How did you solve it? When you completed your trial, what was the final solution that you accepted?"

Privately, Ashlynn thought Isabell was still being too passive. She held herself back when she could have gone on the offensive. She refused to participate in the wars directly while she focused on building defenses and a place of safety for her people.

The inwardly twisted root on Isabell's thigh made more and more sense the more Isabell explained. She'd tried building peace by encouraging her people to trade with outsiders. She tried keeping her valley secret from the outside world, but since she refused to keep her people prisoner in the valley, word always got out about the mystic valley where people could lead lives free from the struggles that the Church claimed were an essential part of life.

Eventually, Isabell had to have found a way forward or she never would have completed her trial... but just what was it that she'd discovered to solve the problem?

Chapter 1032: Engineering An Accumulation of Small Successes

"I limited my efforts," Isabell confessed as she sipped a cup of warm, mulled wine, taking comfort in the familiar blend of spices that tickled her nose every bit as much as she luxuriated in the feeling of warmth that filled her belly. "And I spread them around beyond the village I'd been told to help."

She hadn't come to the conclusion instantly after the second failure. It had taken her at least six more attempts at finding different ways to handle the outside world, but even if she avoided the avarice of the Church, her increasingly draconian methods quickly poisoned the paradise she'd crafted, turning the hidden valley into a gilded cage that her people longed to escape.

Finally, after what felt like a thousand years of watching everything she'd built crumble and burn, she turned her back on the village after giving them a single dam to stop the worst of the floods and teaching them how to build waterwheel powered mills to ensure they got the most out of each of their harvests. She irrigated a few fields to show them how the work could be done, but that was it. After a single year, she left, never to return to the river valley again.

It had become an exercise in ruthless discipline to hold back her best solutions, giving people only enough to prevent disaster instead of leading them into true prosperity. Where once she'd worn fine robes and a silver-trimmed witch hat that her adoring people had given to her in gratitude, she now donned simple gray robes and a tattered traveling hat as she moved from place to place, taking up the life of a rootless wanderer.

In village after village, Isabell found ways to leave behind small 'blessings', whether it was in the form of homes that could withstand winter snows or summer heat, sewers that handled a growing city's waste, or even leaving behind book shelves in an academy that would prevent the rot and decay of books placed on the shelves, she found little ways to help before she moved on to the next place, the next group of people, and the next challenge she could solve to prevent calamities, even if it fell far short of the challenge's decree that she help people find a way to thrive.

"In the end, the Hemlock seed showed me the accumulation of my efforts," Isabell explained with a smile that contained a mixture of regret and pride. "Thousands of people who would have died as children instead lived to start families of their own. Scholars who learned from books that would have been lost to rot and decay, along with the problems they went on to solve. It showed me plagues that never spread through cities that had been drowning in their own squalor, and people who found their own ways to thrive, never knowing that I'd been there to help them avoid disaster."

"I had tremendous power at my fingertips and I always felt like I could have done more," Isabell said as she looked directly into Ashlynn's emerald eyes, and in doing so, Ashlynn finally understood why the word 'polished' best described Isabell's new, silvery look. Her friend hadn't just become brighter by chance; she'd been purified in the crucible of her vision, and tempered herself with an ironclad will that stopped her from intervening, even when she had the best of intentions.

"But the more I did," Isabell concluded. "The greater the burden it placed on me to keep it all going and the worse the catastrophe was when it finally arrived. After a while, I started to gain a feeling for when something might be excessive, so, no matter how much it hurt to turn my back on people in need, I made myself do it in order to avoid a new calamity."

"So, as long as you accepted the smaller victories, then you could keep the gains of your efforts," Ashlynn said, feeling suddenly lost as Isabell's warning swept away many of her plans like waves erasing words written in the wet sand of the shore.

"The Hemlock is a very patient, very long-lived tree," Ashlynn added as she tried to imagine seeing things from the perspective of a tree that could live as long as Nyrielle had and even longer. "It's willing to accept the accumulation of thousands of tiny victories over decades or centuries... That's a very farsighted definition of helping people to thrive."

"Does that change anything about what you're intending to do in order to help people recover after you topple the Lothians?" Isabell asked gently. "I know that you could create tremendous abundance if you wanted to. You could be a savior to the common people and they would worship you as a Saintess for transforming their lives if you used your full power to help them..."

"But as soon as I do that," Ashlynn said with grim acceptance. "The Church will never allow my kingdom to stand. They could never tolerate an alternative to their path of struggle, and if the people revere me the way they revere the Holy Lord of Light, then it becomes a heresy they cannot allow to stand. They'll send their armies with their Exemplars and their Saints, and the war that follows won't end until one of us is destroyed utterly."

"That's the warning from the Hemlock seed, isn't it?" Ashlynn asked. "It's a warning not to disturb the balance so much that chaos follows."

"And it's a lesson," Isabell added, nodding in agreement. "That sometimes, we'll have the power and the knowledge to do more, but we need to restrain ourselves from doing too much."

"Who decides how much is too much?" Ashlynn asked rhetorically. "How far is too far, and how do we know when we've crossed a line that we shouldn't?"

"I don't know, Ashlynn," Isabell admitted. "I don't know if we can know until after we've done something. I just know that, if we're not carefully in building the brighter future we want to create, then we'll create something so brilliant that it can never last... and for you and Lady Nyrielle, who will live far longer than anyone else, it's even more important to find a way to build something that can endure, even if it means you accept a less than ideal outcome."

"Because if you attempt to do too much," Isabell warned. "It will all come crashing down. And if the tragedy that follows is too great, then you won't escape the calamity that you provoke."

Chapter 1033: What Percivus Wants (Part One)

While Ashlynn and her coven gathered over a pot of nourishing fish soup to discuss the details of Isabell's trial and what they could learn from it, a very different conversation was unfolding in the dungeons of Lothian Manor.

Eleanor had been Inquisitor Percivus's prisoner for nearly a week now, though it felt like far longer. The days had begun to blur together in the perpetual gloom of the dungeon, marked only by the irregular visits from her captor and the slow, relentless deterioration of her body as it failed to recover from the miracle she'd performed to save Jocelynn's life.

On this particular day, the fourth or maybe fifth since Marquis Bors had ordered her arrest, it was difficult to be certain, Eleanor sat shivering on the bare frame of the wood and leather cot in her cell. Heavy chains bound her wrists and feet, while an iron bar secured between her wrists prevented her from clasping her hands in prayer. She'd been stripped of her confessor's robes and left with nothing but a thin shift to protect her from the chill of the dungeons, the light-weight material clinging to her slender frame and making her look even more fragile than she already was.

The raven-haired confessor had yet to recover from the price she'd paid to heal Jocelynn, and the days she spent confined in the dungeon had made it increasingly unlikely that she ever would.

Her face looked gaunt and pale, her entire body seeming to have shriveled like a grape left on the vine, as if she'd gone for weeks without proper meals instead of just a span of several days.

But the physical deterioration paled in comparison to what she had learned about Inquisitor Percivus in those days, and now, she had all but given up hope that she would ever see the light of day again.

"You gain nothing from refusing to eat, Eleanor," Inquisitor Percivus said as he glowered at the stubborn Confessor who sat on the bare frame of the wood and leather cot in the dungeon cell. What respect he might have once held for a sister of the faith had long been worn away by her stubborn intransigence, and he'd long ago ceased using titles or honorifics when he addressed his prisoner.

She was no longer Confessor Eleanor in his eyes; instead, he'd come to think of her by the name she had renounced when she donned the robes of an acolyte. She was Eleanor Blackwell, a woman of noble birth who had attempted to escape the filth and corruption that plagued her kind by hiding herself away within the confines of a convent.

But the past several days had made her true loyalties abundantly clear as she chose kinsmen over clergymen, time and time again, despite his every generous offer to reduce her suffering and allow her a death that would preserve her ability to reach the Heavenly Shores at the end of this life or in the next.

"Th-there is n-nothing for y-you to g-gain from my w-words, B-brother P-p-percivus," Eleanor said with great difficulty as she struggled just to sit up straight with some semblance of dignity after spending so long in the dungeons.

The first day she'd spent in the dungeons, the flame-haired Inquisitor hadn't even bothered with her beyond ordering her chained in the cell. She had been provided with simple bedding, a small oil heater to ward off the dungeon's chill, and even a prisoner's ration of bread and water. It was meager fare, to be sure, but she'd subsisted on a similar diet of bread and water whenever she fasted to purify herself after receiving a particularly vile confession, so she chose to take the simple meal as a comfort rather than a punishment.

At the time, Eleanor had allowed herself to hope. She'd worked alongside Inquisitors before, good men like Diarmuid who sought truth above all else. Men who understood that the Church's purpose was to protect the innocent and punish the wicked, not to persecute the helpless or manufacture crimes where none existed.

She was under no illusions that the Church was perfect. After all, the Church had declared Lady Ashlynn to be innocent of witchcraft at the end of Diarmuid's investigation, but it declined to bring charges against her murderer, preferring to use him as a weapon against the demons rather than exposing his crimes and seeing justice done. Only the Holy Lord of Light was perfect and pure, and many of His servants failed to meet their struggles to live up to His ideals, but on that first day in the dungeons, she'd allowed herself to hope that Percivus would be one of the better ones.

She knew Lady Jocelynn was innocent of any conspiracy to harm the marquis. Her cousin was guilty of many things: jealousy, betrayal, and a foolish infatuation with Owain Lothian that she was only now freeing herself from, but not of plotting against Marquis Bors. Eleanor had borne witness to everything that transpired.

There had been no conspiracy, no demonic transformation, no plot to poison the Marquis. Only a sick old man's fevered delusions and a young woman's attempt to care for him. The most that someone could say against her cousin was that Jocelynn had taken advantage of Bors' delusions to ask him what he thought of her, or to advance some of her own plans to improve Lothian March, but these were hardly high crimes or acts of heresy...

They were ordinary human failings and lapses of judgment that a young noblewoman should be chastised for, but they hardly rose to the level of wrongdoing that warranted imprisonment in the dungeons.

Surely, Eleanor had reasoned, once Percivus questioned her properly and heard the truth, he would see the situation for what it was. The Church valued truth. The Church sought justice. The Church would not condemn the innocent. When she lay her head down on the cramped bed in the cold cell on the first night, she went to sleep believing that she and Lady Jocelynn would suffer a few days of indignity before they could resume their plans to escape Lothian March by fleeing north to the territory of Marquis Crew.

That had all changed on the second day when Percivus finally found the time to address the captive confessor.

Chapter 1034: What Percivus Wants (Part Two)

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting," Percivus said when he strode into Eleanor's cell with a pair of acolytes who quickly set up a chair and small table for the Inquisitor to sit at. "Public executions are time-consuming spectacles, and this one required... Special arrangements," he said, choosing his words with care as he opened the top of his leather case and began meticulously setting the small table in front of him with a plate and utensils for a meal.

"Execution?" Eleanor said as her eyes widened in surprise. "Who...?" Eleanor asked, leaving the question at a single word as she was unable to make herself fully form the question that was trapped by the formation of a lump in her throat. Please, she prayed, not Jocelynn.

She was the daughter of a count... it was impossible to move against her lady so quickly, even if there had been abundant evidence of crimes, which Eleanor knew there wasn't. And yet, as soon as Percivus mentioned executions, the very first thought that flashed through her mind was an image of Lady Jocelynn, bound and chained while a headsman sharpened his axe.

Her heart hammered in her chest, and her throat grew so tight that it was hard to draw breath until her rational mind caught up with her irrational fears, but when it did, it only brought more questions.

The Inquisitor had been in Lothian City for less than two days; how could he have found someone whose crimes were so obvious and easily proven that they merited public execution already? Or had he skipped over the investigation entirely, moving directly from accusation to execution?

"No one of importance," Percivus said as he carefully filled his plate with slices of roasted beef, a simple salad of thinly sliced carrots and parsnips, and a plain roll of crusty bread. "The Master of the Kitchens was more than willing to confess to the crime of adding poison to Marquis Bors Lothian's meals."

"Or, at least he was willing once I explained to him that his cooperation would protect his family from sharing his guilt," Percivus explained, as though he was giving a lesson to a junior acolyte. "Even the most vile of heretics may still hold some love and affection for the pure and good people in their lives."

"A man who was willing to forsake the Light for worldly wealth may be motivated by a genuine desire to provide for his wife and children," Percivus said simply, in the same tones a person would use to speak of a man caring for his livestock. "Saving them from the hangman's noose is enticement enough to secure a confession from simple men who have done vile things when they buckle under the strain of the struggle the Holy Lord of Light has given them in this life," he concluded, as though he hadn't just admitted to threatening to hand a man's entire family in order to secure the confession he wanted.

Eleanor's mind reeled as she listened to Percivus's calm, detached voice describing the Master of Kitchens as though he were some kind of dangerous heretic. Master Baden might not be a kind man; his tongue was as sharp as a knife when he spoke to his staff, and his hand flew freely when someone failed to meet his high standards, but he was a loyal, dedicated servant of the Lothian family who had spent decades rising through the ranks of the kitchens to reach his current position.

"That's... that's not possible," Eleanor stammered. "Master Baden was only preparing the meals that the physician ordered for the Marquis. Light foods, easy to digest, nothing that would aggravate his cough or..."

"The physician confessed as well," Percivus interrupted smoothly, beginning to slice his roast into small, bite-sized pieces. He worked methodically, cutting each piece into smaller bite-sized morsels that were nearly identical in size before setting down the knife.

"Master Hess admitted to concocting the poison that caused Bors' illness," he said as he took his first bite of the roast. The flavor was simple and pure, lacking any of the expensive spices or fussy techniques that Master Baden would have used to cook for someone as important as an Inquisitor.

The new Master of the Kitchens, an army cook named Turin whom Bors trusted from the War of Inches, wasn't a man who knew how to make refined dishes, but Percivus preferred food this way. It was honest, pure, with nothing to season it beyond salt and basting in its own juices as it spun on the spit. It was already a luxury to be a piece of fine beef that wasn't tough and full of sinew, and the common farmer would still envy the meal on Percivus's plate.

Anything more than this would have been an insult to the people who did the real work of taming the frontier and bringing prosperity to Lothian March, and Percivus was glad to see the Marquis' kitchen turning out such ordinary dishes now that the heretical Baden had been dealt with.

"Master Hess was quite forthcoming once I assured him that his daughter would be spared if he took full responsibility," Percivus explained, using a handkerchief to delicately dab away the meat juices that had become trapped in his neatly trimmed beard and mustache.

"The poor thing was beside herself with tears when she saw her father swinging from the neck, but I'm as good as my word. She'll be given a place at the temple in Maeril. Perhaps one day she'll join you in the ranks of the Confessors to atone for her father's sins," he suggested.

Across the tiny cell from him, Eleanor's hands had trembled in their chains. She remembered Master Hess as a dedicated healer who'd spent hours at Bors' bedside, trying every remedy he knew to restore his strength and ease the coughing.

More than anything, she remembered the man's exhaustion, his frustration at his inability to cure his lord, and his genuine anguish at Bors' deteriorating condition. He kept his lips tightly sealed about his lord's prognosis, but Eleanor had seen more than enough healers over the years to recognize the look of a man who was rapidly losing hope for his patient.

Both Masters were loyal, dedicated servants of the Lothian family who any lord would be lucky to count among their retainers... But within mere days of Percivus's arrival, both men had been hanged for conspiring against the lord they so diligently served.

And the Inquisitor was only just beginning.

Chapter 1035: What Percivus Wants (Part Three)

"They were innocent," Eleanor said, and she could hear the desperation creeping into her own voice when she spoke, but she forced herself to continue as calmly as she could in the hopes that the Inquisitor would listen. "Brother Percivus, those men were trying to help the Marquis, not harm him. If you would only listen to what actually happened..."

"Such men are insignificant pawns," Percivus had said, finally looking up from his plate to meet her eyes. His hazel gaze had been hard, pitiless. "Easily sacrificed in the opening moves of the game in order to expose the vulnerabilities of the masters who make them move."

That was when Eleanor had finally begun to understand. This wasn't about a search for truth at all. In Percivus's mind, he already knew that Master Baden and Master Hess were guilty; he only needed their confessions so he could move on to the executions... And he needed those executions to apply greater pressure to the other people he'd decided were guilty.

"What I'm really after," he said as his eyes seemed to smolder with the intensity of his conviction. "Is a confession that will expose the conspirators who helped you and the other woman from Blackwell. It isn't an easy thing to manipulate a Marquis into believing that his dead wife has returned from the grave, and you two must have had some reason for doing it. So, Confessor, let's make this easy and painless," he said as he took a small bite of roast beef.

"Just give me the names of the noblemen or the clergymen within the Church who are conspiring against Marquis Bors," he said, as though he was asking for the name of a good tailor or a nice inn to have a meal. "Then we can put all of this unpleasantness behind us. If you're helpful enough, and if you can give me the name of a Priest or High Priest who gave you orders to enter into this conspiracy, then I might even be able to convince my superiors that you were an unwitting accomplice rather than a heretic in your own right."

Eleanor's heart froze when she heard the Inquisitor's 'request.' He wasn't looking for truth; he was looking for names. He'd already arrived at all the conclusions he needed. In his mind, guilt was obvious, and it had already been proven. He was already moving on, seeking others who could be dragged down by the tragedy that had afflicted Marquis Bors, and once he succeeded in wringing names from his current prisoners, they would share the same fate as the Master of Kitchens and the Master Physician.

Percivus was nothing like Diarmuid, she realized. When she arrived in Lothian March, Diarmuid asked her sharp, insightful questions, turning over every fact and scrap of information like a stone in his hand, examining it from every side before reaching any conclusions. He was never certain about anything, but he constantly sought out answers that would help guide him to the truth of Ashlynn's birthmark and whether or not she'd truly been a witch.

He was willing to offend people to find the truth. He was willing to venture into the forests near the vale of mists to exhume Lady Ashlynn's body, risking discovery by demons in order to recover evidence of Lord Owain's crime... He was a good man and a good servant of the Holy Lord of Light.

But Percivus, Percivus was someone else entirely. Someone who couldn't be reasoned with, someone who wouldn't change his mind even if he were to be presented with a mountain of evidence. He might be someone who hunted the wicked, and he might even believe that he'd found genuine wickedness, but countless innocents would fall victim to his methods in his attempts to uncover real evil.

"Though there is the matter of Marquis Bors witnessing you and the woman from Blackwell transforming into demons before his eyes," the Inquisitor said, pulling Eleanor out of her thoughts as he stroked the short, neatly trimmed beard that covered his chin and upper lip in a performance of contemplation.

"Perhaps the best you can hope for is a merciful execution rather than burning alive as a consort of demons. I've seen heretics burned before, you know," he added in the same tones a person would use to say they'd seen an interesting bird in the forest. "The screams last longer than you'd think. It takes quite a while for the flames to consume a person entirely, and the more wickedness there is to burn away, the more the demons have tainted them, the longer it takes for them to die."

"But, there is no conspiracy!" Eleanor protested as she realized that Percivus truly believed the Marquis's mad ravings. "Something is very wrong with Marquis Bors. He's very sick," she said in a rush as her words spilled from her lips. "He suffers from delusions, and he attacked Lady Jocelynn, but she never did anything to cause his illness. She was only trying to help care for him and..."

"Oh, Eleanor," Percivus interrupted, clicking his tongue and shaking his head as he looked at the woman in her golden robes with the red hood of her order drawn up over her head to ward off the chill.

"I already have the confessions of two men that there was a conspiracy," the Inquisitor explained patiently, as if he were speaking to a small child. "And countless witnesses will testify that you and the woman you served have been taking specially prepared meals from the Master of the Kitchens directly

to Marquis Bors every night since the Marquis gathered the Lothian Court to make plans for fighting the demons who attacked the Baronies of Hanrahan and Dunn."

"I'm not looking for evidence of your crimes," Percivus said as he set down his utensils with an ominous -
thunk- on the small wooden table before him. "I'm here to find out who else is guilty of plotting against
their liege lord..."

After all, the Inquisitor thought. Marquis Bors would never acquiesce to the Inquisition's demand to
move their temple from Maeril to Lothian City unless he believed that there were countless conspirators
surrounding him that only the Inquisition could root out. A pair of servants, a single noble woman from
far away, and her Confessor cousin were hardly enough to make Bors relent on his determination to
keep the Inquisition from establishing a presence at the heart of his domain.

But Percivus knew his mission well. Even if they had not conspired against the Marquis, these noblemen
were almost certain to be guilty of other crimes. Crimes that a Confessor may have learned of in
confidence from her sisters in Lothian March, or perhaps from the daughters of the corrupt lords who
spent their time taking tea with Lady Jocelynn.

It didn't matter whether they were guilty of this crime or not, so long as they were wicked men, Eleanor
should be grateful to see them pulled down for their crimes... and if convincing Bors Lothian that they
were part of this conspiracy against him could secure both their deaths and advance the needs of the
Inquisition, then as far as Percivus was concerned, whatever transgressions or excesses he might
commit in the process could easily be forgiven.

Chapter 1036: A Trio Of Madmen

Once she understood what Percivus wanted, Eleanor's decisions became very simple. He was looking for
names and he didn't care whether the people Eleanor named were part of any grand conspiracy against
the Lothian Marquis or not.

In one world, perhaps in the world Percivus lived in, he was offering her an opportunity. She could
betray the confidence of people who had confessed their wrongs to her, or rattle off a list of names of
people who were normally beyond the reach of justice. Percivus would accuse them of taking part in the
plot against Marquis Bors and the wicked people who Eleanor named would finally be punished for their
crimes.

Perhaps to an Inquisitor who often found truly wicked men to be beyond his reach when they were shielded by wealth and titles, this would be an appealing offer. After all, without the backing of the Marquis, men like the barons of the march or their families were all but untouchable.

Many men like Percivus would grab hold of the opportunity he offered to take advantage of the delusional Marquis and strike back at wicked men in this brief moment of time when he was still healthy enough to cling to his throne and his madness wasn't yet well known.

But to take such an opportunity, Eleanor would also have to confess to crimes she didn't commit. Worse, she would have to betray Lady Jocelynn, becoming the latest in a line of innocent people who implicated her as a participant in the crimes they'd been forced to confess to. And in the end, even if Jocelynn stood strong and never admitted to things she hadn't done, she would still be judged guilty in the eyes of the people, and her head would roll for it.

"I'm sorry, Brother Percivus," Eleanor had told him at the end of their first 'conversation' in the dungeon. "I know of no conspiracy against the Marquis," she said, loudly and clearly for the acolytes in the room to hear. "I can give you no names because there is no plot. Lady Jocelynn cares deeply about her sister," she said, speaking words that she knew were true, even after Jocelynn had wronged her sister in the worst way possible.

"Since Lady Ashlynn cannot be here to care for her father in law," Eleanor said, holding to the truth even though there were holes in that truth wide enough to sail a ship through. "Lady Jocelynn stepped up on her sister's behalf. Lord Bors is sick and suffers from delusions," she insisted.

"If you want to obtain a list of names, perhaps Lord Bors can supply one. I'm sure there are many people he has doubts about," she suggested. "Perhaps you should ask those people the questions you're asking me."

It was a feeble defense, but at the moment, it was the only one she could think of. If she could keep Percivus busy chasing down whatever delusions sprung from the mind of the ailing Marquis, then perhaps he would be occupied long enough for Jocelynn's other retainers to find a way to rescue them from this nightmare.

She glanced past Percivus to the two acolytes standing near the door, hoping to see some flicker of discomfort or doubt on their faces. Surely they could see that this was wrong. Surely they understood that an Inquisitor could not simply decide guilt and demand names without evidence or trial.

But the young men's faces showed no sign of discomfort. Instead, they leaned forward slightly, watching the confrontation with an intensity that bordered on eagerness. Their eyes were bright, almost hungry, as they waited to see what their master would do next.

Eleanor's heart sank. These weren't reluctant witnesses to Percivus's excesses. They were willing participants, perhaps even enthusiasts of his methods.

"I see that there is a misunderstanding," Percivus said, his voice taking on a tone of patient instruction as if he were correcting a fundamental error in her thinking. He tore a piece of bread off the small roll and used it to wipe up the meat juices on his plate, chewing slowly before continuing.

"You seem to believe that the Inquisition of the Frontier operates the same way it does in the soft lands you come from, Lady Eleanor. In Blackwell County, perhaps, where the worst threat people face is a bad harvest or a merchant's dishonesty, Inquisitors can afford to be... gentle. Methodical. Patient."

He retrieved the knife he'd used to slice his roast beef and stood, advancing slowly toward the raven-haired woman.

"But here on the Frontier," Percivus continued, "we face true evil every day. Demons that tear children from their mothers' arms. Horned beasts that impale good men on their spears. Creatures that corrupt the faithful and turn them against the Holy Lord of Light himself."

Reaching out with his left hand, he grabbed a fistful of her golden robes, hauling her to her feet with surprising strength for a man of the cloth who wasn't a Templar.

"These young men behind me?" Percivus gestured with the knife toward the acolytes. "They weren't recruited from comfortable halls of worship in the duchies you called home, where most people haven't even seen a demon in generations."

"They came to me from families who have suffered at the hands of the demons that infest these lands. Brother Niklas over there is from Aleese Barony where the Horse Lord sends his horde to raid at least one village every year. His mother covered his body while the demons filled her back with arrows as though she was a target for sport," he said in tones that held genuine admiration for the fallen woman.

"She might just have been a shepherd's wife, but she earned her way to the Heavenly Shores with her sacrifice," he said solemnly. "He's followed me ever since I purged his village of Sir Nurin, the heretic responsible for allowing the demons to raid their herds and flocks with impunity."

"Brother Samlet is much the same," Percivus added. "It's a miracle that his father survived being mauled by a Claw Demon during the War of Inches, but Brother Samlet has seen first hand how much his father suffers to this day for his wounds. So while you may think that you can sow division among my men, your attempt just makes it more obvious to them how corrupt and twisted you've become."

The acolytes' expressions hardened at the mention of their losses, their eyes fixing on Eleanor with something approaching hatred as the Inquisitor pointed out that she'd been trying to manipulate them into turning against their benefactor and mentor.

"They know what evil looks like," Percivus said, his voice dropping to something quieter but no less intense. "They've felt its touch on their lives. They've buried the people they loved because of wickedness left unchecked. And they've followed me because they understand that sometimes, the only way to root out evil is to be ruthless. To be uncompromising. To extract the truth by any means necessary before more innocent people die."

He turned his attention back to Eleanor, bringing the knife up to the laces that held her vestments closed.

"So you needn't worry about my methods offending their delicate sensibilities," he said. "They're quite eager to see justice done, even when that justice requires... uncomfortable measures."

Eleanor felt the blood drain from her face as she looked again at the young acolytes. They weren't horrified by what they were witnessing. They approved. They believed Percivus was right to treat her this way.

She had no allies here. No one who would restrain him. No one who would question his authority.

She was completely, utterly alone in this cell with a trio of fanatics... No, with a trio of madmen!

Chapter 1037: Burning Robes (Part One)

"Your life as a Confessor ended the moment you chose to side with demons plotting against the Marquis," Percivus said, his voice cold and clinical as he began to cut through the laces that held her vestments closed. "Why else would the Holy Lord of Light have punished you so severely for attempting to use his power for a healing miracle?"

He gestured to her gaunt features and withered hands with the point of the knife, the blade hovering dangerously close to her throat.

"My faith is still pure," Eleanor insisted, staring defiantly into the flame-haired Inquisitor's merciless hazel eyes even as fear made her voice tremble. "The Holy Lord of Light demands a price for his miracles, and I paid the price willingly to protect Lady Jocelynn. If I served demons, he would have withheld his miracle from me, and if Lady Jocelynn was a heretic then the miracle would never have saved her life."

"You know this to be true," she said, forcing what little strength she still possessed into her voice. "You cannot expel me from the church without a trial. So unless you're willing to bring me before a High Priest with proof of my crimes, then I am still your 'Sister' and you are still 'Brother Percivus' to me."

She had little hope that he would listen to her words, but she had to try. She had to believe that somewhere, somehow, the truth still mattered. If not to him, than to the Acolytes behind him. If they were as devout as he claimed, if they abhorred wickedness as much as men who had suffered such tragedies must, then surely they could see that Percivus was deviating from the path of justice in his quest to unearth a conspiracy where none existed.

"You truly are a Blackwell under those robes, aren't you?" Percivus said, his voice dripping with scorn as the knife sliced through another set of laces with a sharp tug. "Jocelynn tried the same thing, demanding to be brought before a tribunal to prove her innocence as soon as I stepped into her cell yesterday. Only I haven't charged her with any crimes yet, and it's the same with you. Right now, I'm only asking questions and searching for the truth."

He shook his head as if he'd witnessed something truly pathetic.

"But a woman who hasn't renounced her noble lineage has no right to wear these robes," Percivus continued, his movements methodical and unhurried. "So let's both stop pretending you ever took your

oaths seriously, Lady. Eleanor. Blackwell," he said, pronouncing each word slowly, as if it were an accusation of a crime worse than heresy.

As he spoke, the knife continued its work, cutting through lace after lace with surgical precision. There was no anger in Percivus's movements, no rage or heat. His expression remained calm, almost serene, as he systematically dismantled the vestments that had defined her life for years.

"No, no, you can't," Eleanor said, her hands fumbling desperately to stop him from cutting away the robes that had meant more to her than anything else in her life. The combination of the chains binding her wrists and the bar that stopped her from bringing her hands within a foot of each other made her incredibly clumsy as she struggled against the inevitable.

It was true that the Blackwell name still meant something to her. She still acknowledged Rhys as her cousin, even if they were separated by several generations, and by extension, she acknowledged Jocelynn as well. She'd never denied those relationships, never pretended her family didn't exist.

But she had renounced her claim to the family name and its titles when she took her oath as a Confessor. She'd chosen to become a beacon in the darkness, a woman who could walk among the wicked and the lost to offer them a path to salvation.

Confession was only the beginning of a journey back to the light, after all, but she'd pledged to listen without judging, offering only solace and guidance to those who had gone astray so they could find a way to atone, taking up the struggle to redeem themselves in this life or the next.

The golden robes were a manifestation of her pledge to bring light into the darkness, and the crimson hood was a sign that she would spill her own blood before she would divulge the things that had been confessed to her.

-RIIIIP-

Percivus pulled the front of her vestments open, the cut laces no longer able to hold the heavy fabric closed. He pressed her firmly against the cold stone wall with one hand while he used the knife to slice through the sleeves that couldn't be removed properly without releasing her from the shackles.

Eleanor struggled, but her weakened body could do nothing against his strength. Perhaps if she hadn't given so much of herself to heal Jocelynn, her resistance would have amounted to something more than the frantic pawing of a scruffed kitten. As it was, she was helpless to stop him.

Throughout it all, Percivus's face remained impassive. There was no lust in his hazel eyes, no hunger or desire as he worked to remove her vestments. He showed no interest whatsoever in the woman beneath the robes. His focus was entirely on the fabric itself, on the symbols of her place in the Church and the authority and protection that went with them as he slowly, methodically, cut them away from her.

As he worked, he was careful to ensure her thin shift remained in place beneath the heavy robes. When the sleeves resisted, he adjusted his grip to pull them down without displacing the simple undergarment. When the last section of fabric threatened to take the shift with it, he paused to make sure it stayed where it was.

It wasn't mercy. It wasn't pity. It wasn't even basic decency.

It was worse than any of those things.

Percivus didn't see her as a woman at all. He saw her only as a covetous noblewoman, play acting at joining the faithful to enjoy a life of power and luxury that had been denied to her because she hadn't been born into the branch of her family that inherited the throne of Blackwell County. She had profaned the robes she wore, betraying the Church to demons and witches, and he was correcting that error with the same dispassionate efficiency he might bring to removing a stain from an altar cloth.

The robes weren't protecting her modesty, he seemed to say with every clinical movement. They were shielding her from the cold harshness of the world she deserved to experience. They were giving her a warmth and dignity she had no right to claim, along with the respect and admiration of the common people that she couldn't possibly have earned if she'd faced the same struggles that common folk did.

And now he was taking that protection away.

"Please, don't," Eleanor pleaded one final time as he worked the last section of sleeve free from her shackled arms. "You know that I've never betrayed my oath. This isn't right."

"This isn't right..." she repeated softly, but the simple statement did nothing to stop the inevitability of the tragedy that she was trapped in.

Chapter 1038: Burning Robes (Part Two)

"Begging is unseemly of a noblewoman, Lady Eleanor," Percivus said coldly, his voice as clinical as his movements as he finally pulled the tattered robes free and tossed them carelessly into the corner of the cell.

He released his grip on her, and Eleanor immediately collapsed back onto the rough wood and leather cot, her arms instinctively wrapping around herself despite the chains. The thin shift that remained provided minimal coverage, and while it preserved her modesty, it did nothing to protect her from the biting cold that immediately began seeping into her bones now that the heavy robes were gone.

She felt naked despite the shift. Not physically exposed, but stripped of something far more precious than just the garment itself.

Percivus looked down at her for a moment, and there was something almost like satisfaction in his expression. Not the satisfaction of a man who had humiliated a woman, but the satisfaction of someone who had completed a necessary task.

"You should thank me," he said, turning away from her to cross the room toward the oil heater that had kept the worst of winter's chill at bay. "I'm freeing you of the delusion that you ever served the Church with your whole heart."

He knelt beside the heater, and Eleanor watched with growing horror as he pulled out the stopper in its base and turned the simple device on its side. Expensive lamp oil spilled out in a steady stream, soaking into the gold and crimson fabric of her discarded vestments.

"No," Eleanor whispered, but her voice was too weak, too broken after what she'd already endured to carry any real force.

Percivus ignored her, his movements still methodical as he ensured every part of the fabric was thoroughly soaked. When he was satisfied, he pulled a small golden sun pendant from underneath his robes, holding it before him as he spoke a simple prayer.

"In the Flames of Purity. Burn," Percivus commanded, conjuring a small, dancing flame the size of his palm that spilled from his outstretched hand like the golden rays of dawn falling to the earth.

As soon as the Holy Fire descended, the fabric ignited with a sudden whoosh, flames leaping up eagerly as they devoured the oil. The fire was bright in the dim cell, casting dancing shadows across the stone walls. The golden fabric blackened and curled, the crimson hood seeming to bleed as the dye ran and the cloth turned black and crumpled upon itself.

Eleanor couldn't look away.

She watched as the robes that she had proudly worn for more than a decade were slowly consumed by Percivus's Holy Fire. The flames crackled and popped, and she could smell the burning fabric, an acrid, bitter scent that made her throat catch and turned her vision blurry with a misty haze.

Or perhaps that was just the tears.

"You should learn from this moment, Lady Eleanor," Percivus said, standing and brushing his hands off as if he'd just ignited a pile of rubbish at the end of spring cleaning rather than burning the sacred robes of a respected Confessor. Then, he returned to his small table and began carefully packing away the remnants of his lunch, cleaning each utensil with meticulous care.

"After all," he said, glancing back at her over his shoulder, "it's the fate of heretics to burn for their crimes. Consider this a preview of what awaits you if you continue to refuse cooperation. The flames will consume your body just as easily as they consumed those robes. And they'll take far longer to finish their work."

He picked up his leather case, now neatly packed, and gestured to the acolytes.

"Brothers Niklas and Samlet, take the heater with us when we leave. Lady Eleanor has no further need of it. Let her contemplate her choices in the cold."

The two young men moved forward eagerly. One of them picked up the now-empty oil heater while the other gathered Percivus's chair and table. They cast almost gleeful glances at Eleanor as they worked,

clearly pleased to see the woman who Percivus claimed had been punished by the Holy Lord of Light now shivering without the sacred robes she'd been profaning.

"We'll speak again soon, Lady Eleanor," Percivus said from the doorway, emphasizing the word 'lady' when he addressed her. "Perhaps after you've spent a few more days in proper contemplation, you'll be more willing to provide the names I require. After all, I'm certain you're familiar with plenty of wicked lords who have evaded punishment for their crimes... you just need to part your lips and speak their names and I'll take care of the rest."

He paused in the doorway, looking back at the burning robes one last time.

"Or perhaps you won't," he added with a helpless shrug. "Either way, I have all the time in the world. Do you?"

The door closed behind him with a heavy thud, and Eleanor heard the sound of a bar being slid into place, locking her inside, leaving her alone with the flames.

For several minutes, Eleanor simply sat there, wrapped in her thin shift and the rough blanket from the cot, watching her life burn. Silent tears rolled down her gaunt cheeks, but she didn't sob. She didn't wail. She just sat there and... watched.

The heat from the fire reached her across the small cell, and despite everything, despite the horror of what it represented, despite clearly understanding every message the merciless Inquisitor intended to send by burning her robes, she found herself grateful for the warmth.

The cell was already growing cold now that the heater was gone, and winter's chill was beginning to seep through the stone walls. She pulled the blanket tighter around herself and edged slightly closer to the flames, close enough to feel their heat but not so close as to be burned by them.

As she moved, her shackles clinked softly with each subtle shift, as if to remind her that there was no escape from this nightmare.

"Did you know, Cousin Ashlynn?" Eleanor whispered as she stared into the flames that were consuming the most sacred treasure she owned. "Did you know how bad it would be to fall into the Inquisition's hands with a birthmark that made you resemble a witch?"

"And was there a part of you," she said in a voice that was very small and fragile. "Was there a part of you that was glad when Owain released you from a lifetime of fear? Because part of me is feeling that now," she said as her lip began to tremble. "And I don't know if I'm strong enough to hold on now that the Inquisition has decided I'm guilty."

"How did you do it, Cousin Ashlynn?" Eleanor asked. "How did you face every day knowing that this was the fate that awaited you if you were discovered? Where did you find the courage? And... can you lend me some of it now? Because I need the strength you once had..."

Chapter 1039: A Light In The Darkness (Part One)

For a time, Eleanor simply sat in her cell, huddled in the fading warmth of her burning robes and watching the flames slowly burn down into embers. The sun had set long ago by the time the last of the flames died away, leaving her alone in the darkness of her cell as the cold of a winter night seeped in.

Inwardly, she knew that she should get up off the cold, stone floor of her cell. Much like wading into the cold sea would leech warmth from the body, so too would remaining on the ground. If she wanted to stay warm, if she wanted to survive, she needed to leave the burned scraps of her sacred robes behind and move to the dungeon cell's rickety cot. It wouldn't be any more comfortable than the stone floor, but it would at least be warmer.

Still, she couldn't move. The cold had settled deep into her bones, making her thoughts slow and thick like honey left out in winter. Her fingers had gone numb hours ago, and now even her arms felt heavy and distant, as though they belonged to someone else. The shivering that had wracked her body when the robes first finished burning had gradually subsided, not because she was warming up, but because her body no longer had the strength to shiver.

She knew, dimly, that this was dangerous. She'd heard the sailors back home tell stories of men who'd fallen into the winter sea, how they'd grow quiet and still before the end came. How they'd stop fighting, stop struggling, and just... slip away into the cold.

But knowing she was in danger and being able to do something about it were two very different things. Her mind railed at her, berating her to get up and do something, anything other than sitting here and

allowing herself to freeze to death, but her body refused to obey. The cot might as well have been hundreds of leagues away from her instead of just two short paces from where she lay on the cold stone floor.

The Holy Fire had consumed more than just her robes when Inquisitor Percivus lit them on fire. By the time the flames went out, she felt as brittle and fragile as the ashes of her vestments, and the cold was finishing what the flames had started.

"Why did the miracle work for him?" Eleanor whispered, her voice barely audible even in the silence of the cell. Her throat was painfully dry, and her lips felt stuck together until she forced them apart to speak.

They'd given her no water since before Percivus's visit, and the hours of sitting in the cold had left her parched. She reached out with a trembling hand to touch the ashen remains of her robes, her fingers so stiff and clumsy that she could barely feel the texture of the ash.

"Why did the Holy Lord of Light let him do this to me?" The question came out cracked and hoarse. "Am I really, really unfit to be a Confessor?"

Ever since the incident in Marquis Bors' bed chamber, Eleanor and Jocelynn had argued that her ability to call upon the miracle of healing in order to save Jocelynn's life was proof that they weren't aligned with demons or the forces of darkness. They still walked in the light and they couldn't be heretics or the miracle would have failed them.

But if that was true, then why had the Holy Flames come to Percivus's hand when he called on them to burn her robes to ash? Had the Light forsaken her? Was this part of the price she needed to pay for Jocelynn's miracle?

She didn't know, but she knew who to ask.

If she could just find the strength to pray. If her body would just cooperate long enough for her to make one final plea.

Chains clanked in the darkness of the night as Eleanor slowly collected herself, folding her legs underneath her body and bowing in the direction of what little remained of her robes as she pressed the palms of her hands and her forehead to the floor.

The iron bar between her wrists prevented her from clasping her hands in prayer, and many formal supplications would be awkward, if not impossible, with the shackles restricting her movements, but in his hubris, the Inquisitor had forgotten something that a person of true faith should always remember. Before the Holy Lord of Light, even Kings and Saints must submit, and so she submitted now, praying in the manner of a beggar without pride or position.

"I am lost and unworthy of your miracles," she said in a soft, reverent whisper. "But I have always believed that even those who have drowned in darkness can still see the faintest glimmers of the light. Why else would you give us so many stars at night if not to guide us back toward the light of day?"

It was one of the central tenets of her order. A Confessor's duty in life was to help people admit their wrongs, to allow them to bring their crimes into the light of day so that restitutions could be made, and penance could be done.

For some, it might be impossible to fully atone in this life, but so long as a person was willing to struggle against their own darkness, to do the right things with however many days they had left, they could reduce the burdens they carried into the next life.

Eventually, even the most depraved of men could reach the Heavenly Shores if they were willing to turn away from the darkness and truly sought the Light with their whole hearts. There was no way of knowing if any of the people she'd guided over the years would reach the Heavenly Shores at the end of this life, but she'd seen broken families made whole again.

She'd seen men consumed by strong wine who turned away from the bottle, and she'd seen women consumed by bitterness and hatred who learned to open their hearts once more. She'd seen miracles that touched her heart and reaffirmed her faith almost every day of her life since she donned the gold and crimson robes of her order.

Now, kneeling in the dark, she poured every ounce of faith she still possessed into a prayer carried all the way from the sea to guide lost sailors home, hoping against hope that she could find the strength for one last miracle...

Chapter 1040: A Light In The Darkness (Part Two)

"Light upon the water, shine for those at sea,

Light upon the water, bring us home to thee,

Through the storm and darkness, through the wind and rain,

Light upon the water, guide us home again..."

Her voice was frail and weak, barely above a whisper, and still she had to strain to get them out. Somehow, despite how dry and parched her throat was, her eyes still held plenty of tears and they dripped slowly to the cold stone floor while she drew a deep, shuddering breath to continue her song.

The words that spilled from her lips would never be sung in any temple, nor were they written in any book of hymns, but to Eleanor, that didn't matter. She'd taught countless men and women that intentions mattered more than mindless rituals, and even if they didn't know the rituals to perform, the Holy Lord of Light would judge them for their deeds... He would hear the intentions behind the words, no matter their origin.

"Oh keeper of the beacon, standing tall and true,

When the gray sky meets the water and we can't see through,

When the wind comes howling wicked and the waves rise high,

Keep your light a-burning bright to guide us by."

Perhaps Percivus had been right about one thing... She'd never truly left her heritage behind. There was salt water in her veins, and her sinews were braided like a main-sail's ropes. But even on the darkest nights, when the fog closed in and the stars themselves were hidden away, the beacons on the shore still burned bright, guiding lost souls home.

Here in the darkness of her cell, when she most needed a miracle, it wasn't the scripture of the Church she reached for. Instead, it was a simple shanty she'd learned as a young girl that could be heard on the darkest, foggiest nights, echoing from taverns across Blackwell City and all up and down the coast from men who put their faith in the Holy Lord of Light and the keepers of the lighthouses to guide them back to port.

"Light upon the water, shine for those at sea,

Light upon the water, bring me home to thee,

I've seen your blessed beacon and I know I've found my way,

Light upon the water, shine as bright as day."

There was no crew to sing the chorus with her, no one to ring the ship's bell to ward off the dangers of the deep, but in the darkness of her cell, none of that mattered. Her heart cried out for light to banish the darkness, and the Holy Lord of Light answered her fervent prayer.

In the corner of the room where all that remained of her sacred robes were a few scraps of fabric, a brilliant, pulsing light pushed back the darkness, revealing a scrap of golden fabric with a trace of crimson on one edge that had refused to burn in Percivus's flames.

For a moment, Eleanor thought she was imagining it. The cold did that sometimes, making people see things that weren't really there. Giving people hope that rescue was coming when they were really just dying.

But the faint, pulsing light was real. She could feel its warmth, feeble as a candle flame, but real and reaching across the cell toward her frozen body.

"Please," she whispered, the word barely forming on her cracked and parched lips. "Please be real."

She tried to move toward the light, but her body wouldn't respond. Her legs had gone completely numb from kneeling on the stone floor, and when she tried to unfold them, they simply refused to cooperate.

Instead of standing, she toppled forward, catching herself awkwardly on her shackled hands as the sensation of pins and needles stabbing into her flesh consumed her legs.

Desperately, hardly daring to believe it was real, Eleanor began to drag herself across the stone floor toward the glowing scrap of fabric. She couldn't even crawl, her legs wouldn't work the way they should and the chains constrained her movements, so she pulled herself forward with her arms, inch by agonizing inch, the shackles clanking against the stone as she dragged her body forward.

The scrap of fabric couldn't have been more than a pace or two away, the cramped cell wasn't that large, but it felt like she dragged herself for leagues across the cold stone floor. Her arms shook with the effort, and twice she had to stop because the dizziness threatened to overwhelm her. But the light was still there, still glowing, still waiting for her to reach it.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, her fingers closed around the scrap of fabric. It was warm to the touch, impossibly warm, as though it had been lying in summer sunlight instead of in a freezing dungeon cell. Whether that warmth came from the Holy Light of her own prayer or it was a remnant of the flames that consumed it, she couldn't say, but it didn't matter because it was there... And it was real.

She clutched it to her chest with one of her shackled hands, curling around it like a child with a precious treasure, and felt warmth begin to spread from the fabric into her frozen body. It wasn't much, just a trickle of heat, barely enough to feel, but it was there, and it was proof that she hadn't been abandoned.

"Thank you," she whispered to the fading, pulsing light as the cell turned dark again. Tears flowed freely from her eyes, but they were no longer as hopeless as they'd been. Despite everything that happened, the Holy Lord of Light hadn't forsaken her. That alone was enough to give her the strength to crawl back across the cold stone floor, retrieving the thin blanket on her way to the rough cot.

She still didn't know what it meant that she could call upon the miracles of the Holy Lord of Light even after Percivus had all but expelled her from the Church. She had no idea how he could draw upon Holy Flames while she summoned Holy Light... In some ways, she was even more adrift than she'd been before her confrontation with the fanatical Inquisitor.

But she wasn't alone in her struggle. Her faith had been shaken to its core, but it hadn't broken. She just had to hold fast while the tempest battered her, and find a way through the reefs and shoals that would try to break her.

Confessor Eleanor could never imagine doing such a thing. The idea of resisting the Inquisition was incomprehensible to the woman she had been before she joined her cousin, Jocelynn, on this perilous journey to the frontier. The young Lady Blackwell who she had been before she joined the Church, the noblewoman whose status depended more on her father's shipping company than their family lands or inheritance, was even less equipped to face this monumental struggle.

But perhaps... if there was such a person as Confessor Eleanor Blackwell... If, buried deep inside her heart, she could pull out a fraction of the strength she'd seen from the captains who sailed the seas, and a sliver of the courage possessed by her Cousin Ashlynn to live an entire life hunted by the Inquisition...

Then perhaps Confessor Eleanor Blackwell could find a way to weather this storm and find the light that burned for her upon the shore.