



Lumresca

Festival of Light and Rebirth



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"A true man of faith does not support the deaths of women and children, for any reason. Always question where you stand, for Jhoras holds your soul in his hands."

-Legatus Albrecht Ludheim, Ordini Soli Obliti, Order of the Forgotten Suns

Several months after the fall of Cathyor, the winter solstice in Porto de la Luce...

Albrecht knelt in front of the altar, feeling the chapel's frozen hardwood floor against the bare flesh of his knees.

He was shirtless as well, wearing only his smallclothes, and the cold bit deeper than he remembered. It sank into his bones, wrapped around his chest, made each breath feel like swallowing ice. The chapel was small—barely large enough for the altar and a single supplicant—and it held no warmth. That was by design. Comfort was not the purpose of confession.

Maybe the cold felt worse because of the sleepless nights since Cathyor. He had lost count of how many times he had woken in darkness, heart pounding, the screams of the dying still echoing in his ears. Or maybe it was the many wounds he'd taken through years of service—old injuries that ached in the cold, scars that pulled tight against his skin, reminders written in flesh of battles fought and brothers lost.

Or maybe it was the matters of morality he'd been struggling with of late.



Regardless of the cause, he endured it.

Confession was the duty of all Jhoras' Anointed. The cold, the discomfort, the vulnerability of kneeling half-naked before the symbols of his faith—these were not punishments. They were preparations. They stripped away the armor, both physical and spiritual, that a man built around himself. They left him bare before his god, with nothing to hide behind.

Albrecht gazed at the altar.

It was simple, as all things in their order were meant to be. Three bars and a central pillar, shaped like the three-quartered cross of Jhoras. The wood was old and dark, polished by generations of hands, worn smooth by centuries of devotion.

Each bar represented a realm of Jhoras' authority.

The divine—the realm of the god himself, of faith and devotion and the light that guided all true believers.

Innatraea—the realm of the world, of actions taken in life, of how a man conducted himself among others.

The self—the realm of the inner being, of thoughts and desires and the private struggles that no one else could see.

Each bar held three candles, making nine for the virtues of Jhoras. Faith, Devotion, Righteousness. Courage, Honor, Compassion. Discipline, Humility, Commitment. Three virtues for each realm, woven together into a tapestry of belief that had guided Albrecht's life since he was a boy.

It was here, before the holy symbols, that he would confess.



After some time in utter silence and stillness—he wasn't sure how long, as one did not count time or pray when waiting upon confession; penance in itself was a form of faith and commitment—he heard the door open.

There was only one person who would enter while he was here.

Rather than looking around or standing, he merely closed his eyes and waited patiently. Every knight of his order had their own small chapel here in the compound, and many sought confession during Lumresca. The Festival of Light and Rebirth was a time for examining one's soul, for acknowledging sins and receiving absolution, for entering the new year cleansed and renewed.

Perpetua's presence reached him before she spoke.

He knew the rhythm of her footsteps, light but purposeful. Knew the whisper of her robes against the stone floor. Knew the way the air seemed to change when she entered a room, as if it became somehow warmer, somehow more alive.

He had known her for fifteen years. Had confessed to her countless times. Had memorized the cadence of her breath, the particular way she moved, the scent of the sacred oils she carried.

He had tried very hard not to memorize these things.

He had failed.

"Albrecht."

Just his name, and already the warmth of her soft voice fell over him like a balm. Like sunlight after a long winter. Like coming home after years of wandering.



"Verba tua protecta et amplexa sub Joranem Luminus sunt." *I am here to take your confession. Know that the words you speak are protected, and embraced, under the Light of Jhoras.*

The ritual words, spoken in the old tongue that the Jhorian faith had preserved across centuries. He had heard them countless times. From Perpetua they sounded like a promise, like a prayer, like something sacred and dangerous all at once.

He lowered his head ever so slightly as she walked past him and laid her confessor's tools on the table near the altar. The sanctified vessels. The sacred oils. The cloth for mercy.

"Perpetua."

He could feel her gaze upon him. He'd long since become familiar with her movements, could track her through a room without looking, could sense when her attention turned toward him like a flower sensing the sun.

"It has been a long time since your last confession, Albrecht."

Her voice was gentle, but he could hear the question beneath it. The concern. The reproach, perhaps, though she was too kind to make it explicit.

"We were deployed in the war against Cathyor."

He knew that she smiled at that—her small subtle one, that meant simple acknowledgment. The smile that said *I know, I understand, I forgive you for the things that were not your choice.*



Her tinder ignited. He could hear its spark, a small bright sound in the frozen silence of the chapel. She would be lighting the first candle on the altar's divine bar—the white one, for Faith.

"Yes," she said quietly. "I remember the day that you left."

Not the day that Ordini Soli Obliti had been deployed.

The day that he'd left *her*.

There had been something dangerous in her eyes that day. Love—open and undisguised, despite everything they both knew, everything they had both sworn. Because it had been the night before when she'd asked him if he'd ever leave his order.

He had said no.

What else could he say? A man did not abandon his faith for comfort, even if it caused pain. Even if that pain was his own. Even if saying no meant watching something die in the eyes of the woman he—

He had said no.

And then he had gone to war, and she had stayed here, and they had not spoken of it since.

But he still felt something loosen in his chest when she lit that first candle. It meant she would conduct his confession. It meant that she had forgiven him for her pain.

A small mercy against his own.

And the desire he had to tell none else what he had to speak of.



Perpetua's voice took on her ritualistic tone, losing some of its warmth. She was no longer the woman who had asked him to leave his order. She was a Daughter of Jhoras, an instrument of divine forgiveness.

"Juramentum facis verba tua rectitudine honesta et devota sub Joranem Luminus esse?" *Do you swear that what you speak here will be with righteous honesty and devotion under the light of your faith in Jhoras?*

Albrecht spoke solemnly, allowing the weight of his faith to guide him. "Sic juramentum facio, sub Joranem Luminus." *I so swear, under the light of Jhoras.*

A pause. Then, softer—not ritual, but personal: "You need not worry. I will respect your choice, and remain ever your friend."

Had his brow furrowed? Did she see something in his face, some flicker of doubt or fear? Or did she just know him too well—know that he was afraid of what he had to confess, know that he needed reassurance before he could speak?

The Innatraean bar of candles must have been lit, the green and brown for the world and the living things upon it, because she continued his confession.

"Juramentum facis fortitudine loqui, ut confessiones tuas honore et compassione sub Joranem Luminus affrontes?" *Do you swear to speak with courage, so that you may face your confessions with honor and compassion under the light of your faith in Jhoras?*

"Sic juramentum facio." *I so swear.*



After a few moments of silence, she continued to the last oath, the one of self. The candles of silver and white would be lit now, gleaming in the darkness.

"Juramentum facis quomodo loqueris disciplinam tuam et humilitatem in dedicatione tua ad Joranem Luminus reflectet?" *Do you swear that how you speak will reflect your discipline and humility in your commitment to the light of your faith under Jhoras?*

"Sic juramentum facio." *I so swear.*

Her hands came to his face.

He had braced himself for it, but still his breath caught. Her fingers were cool from the cold chapel air, but they warmed quickly against his skin. Her thumbs rested on his temples, her fingers curving around the back of his head, tilting it up.

"Aperi oculos, fili Jorae, ut testem sim peccatorum tui ipsius." *Open your eyes, son of Jhoras, that I may bear witness to your sins of the self.*

Albrecht opened his eyes and looked into hers.

They were brown, flecked with gold in the candlelight. He had memorized them years ago, had seen them in his dreams more times than he could count. Had tried to forget them and failed.

He already knew the pain of his first confession. One that would bite deep—not for him, but for her.

"I have dreamed of you," he said quietly. "Longed for your touch. And even now, as I confess, I revel in your presence again."

Her hands trembled.



For a moment—just a moment—she was not a Daughter of Jhoras. She was Perpetua, the woman who had asked him to leave his order. The woman who had watched him walk away. The woman who had waited for him to return, and who was now hearing him confess that he had thought of her every day he was gone.

Her voice shook.

But then her hands steadied, and she was a Daughter of Jhoras again. Her duty was larger than her heart. Her faith was stronger than her love.

"Absolutus es, fili Jorae, et poenitentia donata erit super confessionem tuam." *You are forgiven, son of Jhoras, and penance shall be gifted upon your confession.*

Her hands withdrew, and she turned away from him to prepare the sanctified wax—the gift of penance that would absolve him of sin.

All he could see was her back. Her shoulders, straight and proud beneath her robes. Her hair, dark and bound in the simple style of her order. The slight tremor in her movements that she was trying so hard to hide.

No one was allowed to see or touch the sanctified candles once the ritual of confession began, save the Daughter of Jhoras who was present. But Albrecht often wondered if her hands trembled as she prepared them. A simple representation of how causing him pain hurt her.

Was that also a sin? Causing her pain? Questioning her strength and resolve?

Perpetua faced him again.



Her right hand touched his flesh, tracing lines along his chest, looking for—what, he never knew. The right place for penance. The spot where the wax would burn brightest. The location that Jhoras himself chose, perhaps, guiding her fingers across his scarred skin.

After a few moments, her fingers paused and spread, carefully applying gentle pressure to his skin, pulling it taut.

Then her left hand came, and poured from the sanctified vessel.

Hot crimson wax dropped onto his skin.

The pain was searing—a bright, sharp agony that bloomed across his chest and drove all thought from his mind. He did not cry out. He did not move. The pain was a part of his duty and would absolve his soul.

Perpetua spoke as the wax cooled and hardened. "Scito donum poenitentiae absolvo peccata tua ipsius. Invenis iterum humilitatem et disciplinam dedicare fidem tuam sub Joranem Luminus." *Know that with this gift of penance I absolve your sins of self. May you once again find the humility and discipline to commit yourself to your faith in the light of Jhoras.*

"Benedictus sim sub Joranem Luminus." *May I be blessed under the light of Jhoras.*

Her hands returned to his face, cradled his head, and he was once again looking up into her eyes.

"Respice in oculos meos, fili Jorae, ut testem sim peccatorum tuorum vitae in Innatraea." *Look into my eyes, son of Jhoras, that I may bear witness to your sins of life on Innatraea.*

Albrecht paused for a moment, gathering himself for what he had to say next.



There was no question that he would tell her. Confession was sacred, and he would not dishonor it with silence or evasion. But he needed to muster the courage.

It was a strange thing, that a man like him—an anointed knight who had faced death a hundred times, who had walked through fire and blood and the screaming chaos of battle—needed courage to speak words to a woman.

But that's just how it was.

"During the Cathyoran campaign," he said slowly, "there was a woman of Trefn Cyfiawnder. And her child. A girl."

There was a deep glimmer of something in Perpetua's eyes. If he didn't know better, he'd swear it was fear.

"They were surrounded by Aedonian soldiers. Our allies." He swallowed hard. "And I could tell by the men's speech what they planned to do."

The words hung in the air between them. *What they planned to do.* He did not need to say more. She understood.

"I put them down," he said quietly. "And allowed the woman and her daughter to escape."

Perpetua's hands shook. Her trembling fingers seemed desperate in their presence on his temples, as if she was holding onto him to keep herself from falling. Tears dripped down her cheeks, silver in the candlelight.

"Oh, Albrecht..."



They both fell quiet, looking at one another, and the weight of what he'd said settled between them like a stone.

She continued to cry silently, as if they were somewhere else—somewhere that belonged to just the two of them. Not a knight and an inquisitor, but a man and a woman. Not bound by oaths and duty and the rigid structures of faith, but free to simply *feel*.

Eventually, when it became too heavy, she broke away.

She turned back to the altar, and her duty.

Albrecht watched her go, his heart a leaden weight in his chest. What would she do? He had admitted to not only aiding their sworn enemies—the Cathyoran, Trefn Cyfiawnder—but slaying their allies. Aedonians. Men who wore the same symbols he did, who prayed to the same god.

The only way it could have been worse was if they were his anointed brothers, and not merely Aedonian soldiers.

But he couldn't leave that woman and her child to such a terrible fate.

No true man of faith could do that.

Jhoras was not a god of cruelty. He was a god of light, of justice, of mercy. And what those soldiers had planned—what they would have done if Albrecht had not stopped them—was none of those things.

He had made his choice.

He would live with it.



When Perpetua faced him again, her eyes were still glistening, but her movements were all ritual. Whatever she was feeling had been pushed inward, locked away behind the mask of her duty.

And to him, somehow, that seemed even worse.

The fingers of her right hand touched his flesh again, seemingly slower than before. She traced the contours of his scars—the long slash across his ribs from a Cathyoran blade, the puckered burn on his shoulder from a siege engine's fire, the dozen smaller marks that mapped a lifetime of violence. Her fingers moved across his muscles, taut from years of training, finding the place that Jhoras chose.

When they stopped and gently splayed out again, Albrecht braced himself.

This would hurt more than the last.

Each time the sanctified vessel poured, the previous wax had already hardened, but the pain remained—a punishing journey up the pillar of Jhoras, penance for his sins.

Hot green and brown wax poured onto his bare skin.

The pain was worse. Not only from the physical sting—the wax was hotter this time, or perhaps his nerves were already raw from the first—but also because of her eyes. There was a softness in them, behind a pain of their own. As if she somehow shared in this sin.

As if saving a woman and child from rape was something that didn't need to be forgiven at all.



"Scito donum poenitentiae absolvo peccata tua vitae in Innatraea. Invenis iterum fortitudinem et compassionem invenire honorem fidei tuae sub Joranem Luminus." *Know that with this gift of penance I absolve your sins of life on Innatraea. May you once again have the courage and compassion to find the honor of your faith in the light of Jhoras.*

Albrecht almost choked on his words.

Would this woman forgive everything he did in this life? Every choice, every sin, every dark and bloody deed done in the name of duty?

That forgiveness wasn't hers, though.

Was it?

Forgiveness, as with everything, belonged only to Jhoras.

"Benedictus sim sub Joranem Luminus." *May I be blessed under the light of Jhoras.*

Perpetua's hands again came to rest gently on his face after setting aside the sanctified vessel, and she met his eyes. There was solemnity in her gaze now—the weight of what was to come.

"Respice in oculos meos, fili Jorae, ut testem sim peccatorum tuorum divinae." *Look into my eyes, son of Jhoras, that I may bear witness to your sins of the divine.*

Sins of the divine.

Sins against Jhoras himself.



Albrecht dry-swallowed and licked his lips, unsure of how to speak what he had to say. Blunt honesty was, however, the only real choice. You could not lie in confession. You could not soften or evade. The whole point was to bare your soul, to show Jhoras everything you were, and trust in his mercy.

"I begin to doubt my faith."

Perpetua's fingers tightened on his face. Not gently—*painfully*. Trembling with something that might have been anger, or fear, or grief, or all three at once.

And then she slapped him.

Hard.

His head rocked to the side with the force of it, his cheek blazing with sudden heat.

"After everything we have been through?" Her voice was raw, broken, no longer ritual at all. "After what I asked of you—and now—*now* you doubt your faith?"

They both went still.

Looking into one another's eyes.

Silent.

Her looking down at him, eyes bright with tears and fury. He looking up at her, his cheek burning, his heart breaking.

What could he say?



He had told her the truth. The war had shaken something loose in him. The things he had seen—the things he had done—the gap between what his faith taught and what his faith *did*—

He had begun to doubt.

And now she was standing before him, this woman he loved and could not have, and she was asking him how he could doubt when she had given up everything for her faith.

When she had let him walk away.

This next part of the ritual was hers. He could do nothing but stare into her fury, waiting.

Then her eyes softened.

She leaned down toward him, her hands running through his hair—gentle now, so gentle after the violence of the slap—and she kissed his forehead. Her lips were warm. Her breath was soft against his skin.

"You have ever been a man of duty and service, Albrecht," she whispered. "Even in the face of hardship."

She stood up again and turned toward the altar, to prepare the sanctified wax, leaving him with his thoughts for the moment.

What did that mean?

Was she forgiving him? Condemning him? Simply acknowledging what was true?

He didn't know.



He wasn't sure she knew either.

When she faced him again, the wax in her vessel gleamed pure silver and white in the chapel's candlelight. The colors of the divine. The colors of Jhoras himself.

And there was more of it.

Much more.

"Scito donum poenitentiae absolvo peccata tua divinae. Invenis iterum devotionem rectam ad fidem tuam sub Joranem Luminus." *Know that with this gift of penance I absolve your divine sins. May you once again find the righteous devotion to your faith in the light of Jhoras.*

Albrecht gritted his teeth against the pain.

The wax was hotter than before—much hotter, almost unbearable. It poured across his chest in a stream of liquid fire, pooling in the hollows of his muscles, spreading across his scarred skin. He did his best not to make a sound before it was the right time.

Devotion even in the pain of his absolution.

"Benedictus sim sub Joranem Luminus." *May I be blessed under the light of Jhoras.*

The words came out steady. Clear.

He was not sure how.

Perpetua turned away to prepare for the last step of confession.

Mercy.



When their eyes met again, he could see everything there. Her feelings—the love she had tried to bury, rising to the surface despite her will. The anger—at him, at herself, at the choices they had both made. And the Daughter of Jhoras, steady beneath it all.

Forgiveness.

She held the sacred oil and a cloth in her hands.

"Scito donum misericordiae do balmum dolori tuo, et absolutionem, sub Joranem Luminus, ut mundum ingredi possis purgatus peccatis tuis et servire iterum." *Know that with this gift of mercy I give balm to your pain, and absolution, in the light of Jhoras, that you may enter the world clean of your sins and serve once again.*

Albrecht didn't speak.

He merely closed his eyes as Perpetua began applying the sacred oil, cooling the burning wax, soothing the pain that radiated across his chest. Her fingers were gentle now—so gentle, after everything. She cleaned the wax off his skin with the cloth, each stroke careful and reverent.

He was clean.

Absolved.

An anointed of Jhoras.

But he did not feel clean. He felt raw, exposed, as if she had seen every dark corner of his soul and he was not sure whether she had found him worthy or wanting.



After she had gathered her tools and he felt her presence withdraw, Albrecht opened his eyes.

She was at the door. Her hand was on the handle. She was leaving.

"Perpetua, I..."

The words died in his throat.

What could he say? *I love you?* She knew that. He had confessed it. *I'm sorry?* For what—for telling her the truth? *Don't go?*

She couldn't stay. He couldn't ask her to. They both had their duties, their oaths, their faiths.

This was all they could have.

These stolen moments in cold chapels, surrounded by candlelight and ritual, speaking the unspeakable and then walking away.

She looked into his eyes for a heartbeat.

"I know," she said softly.

And then she was gone.

Later, after contemplating his confession and absolution, Albrecht got to his feet.

His weary body protested. His knees ached from the cold floor. The sanctified wax's sting lingered across his chest, a map of pain that would fade to nothing by morning but felt permanent now. And he could still feel the heat of Perpetua's hand on his cheek—the slap that had been anger and love and grief all at once.



All these things were a part of his devotion.

Service always involved pain.

He walked to the small window and opened it, listening to its satisfying creak, feeling the crisp cold air wash over his body. It felt clean, somehow. Purifying.

It was almost time to meet his brothers and perform their Lumresca service. Every year, their order gave out food and children's toys to those in need—the poor, the orphaned, the forgotten. The people that Aedonia's wealth and glory had left behind.

It was the right thing to do. Generosity built humility. And humility was one of the nine virtues.

Distant festivities carried to him on the wind. Singing, musical instruments, the chatter of masses. For most in Aedonia, Lumresca was a time of celebration, not penance. A time to gather with family, to exchange gifts, to feast and drink and give thanks for another year of life.

In a way, his sacred duty made sure of that. The knights of Ordini Soli Obliti stood between the innocent and the darkness. They fought so that others could celebrate. They sacrificed so that others could live in peace.

The thought brought a smile to his face, in spite of everything.

Somewhere out there, a woman of Trefn Cyfiawnder was alive. Her daughter was alive. They would celebrate this winter solstice together, perhaps not even knowing the name of the knight who had saved them.



That was enough.

That had to be enough.

Albrecht turned away from the window and began to dress for service.

The festival of light and rebirth waited.

And tomorrow, the sun would rise again.

