

“You’ve fought some magnificent creatures. I wouldn’t say no,” Trian said.

“I’ll show you the collection later,” Claire said. “Though it might not help with your ongoing issue of Lilith.”

“What issue?” Ilea asked.

“Your reputation,” Trian said with a sigh. “I’m glad you’ve been around a little more lately. The Sentinels might even believe you’re human. The citizens of Ravenhall however? Maybe not so much.”

She just waved him off. “I don’t see the issue. Let them believe the mystery.”

“You won’t say that once they actually start to form a cult and do things in your name,” Trian said.

“We’re keeping an eye on it,” Claire said. “Plenty of people are employed by Lilith and there’s enough known about you that most people understand the less mythical background. But some opinions can’t be changed.”

Will I have to deal with the same shit as Meadow?

“As soon as the gates are ready, I’ll just send them north,” Ilea said.

Claire glanced at her but chose not to say anything.

“So why did you call for me?” Trian asked.

Ilea displaced herself a bottle of local ale from Claire’s bar. She gave the woman a questioning look and opened it once Claire nodded lightly.

“Thanks. Well... I had another idea. It’s not particularly spectacular but with the funding we can provide, it might actually be helpful. The Sentinels are better than I hoped, especially after such a short time. Obviously we can only take people in who are ready to brace the training, only those who have a clear goal to become healers or adventurers.

“Now with how much people restrict information about magic and Classes, I thought it nice to have a magic school or college here where people could learn, mostly for free.”

“That’s a massive undertaking,” Claire said. “More trained mages of all kinds would benefit Ravenhall as a whole, that much is obvious. Gold isn’t an issue either. Not with how things have progressed with both Ravenhall and Morhill. Let alone if the teleportation gate project is as promising as it sounds.”

“Neither me nor Claire have time to set it up however,” Trian said.

“William maybe?” Ilea asked. “He knows a lot of shadows and has experience giving lectures.”

Claire shook her head. “He has his hands full too. With the Shadowguard, Shadows, and even Sentinels. He will be a good resource to ask for contacts, teachers, and organizational structures. Dagon and Elise will be able to supply a lot of teaching materials. Sulivhaan will be happy for some Shadow funding too. Your wealth and influence has been growing. I think a bit of balance there might be good for everyone.”

“Don’t think Kyrian would be interested either,” Trian said. “He might want to teach Sentinels but with how powerful he is now... his talents would be wasted on lower level Classes. Finding teachers won’t be an issue either. Plenty of adventurers look for ways to retire. Teaching is somewhat easy, just not very well paid usually. We can change that.”

“I have an idea already as to the building we could use. I’ll get in touch with the librarians and William,” Claire said.

“So we just need a good match to take over the project,” Ilea said with a smile. “Noble or ex military would be nice. I’ll think about who could be interested. Let me know if you find someone as well.”

“An academy providing free magic knowledge and training will create an uproar with nobility in the plains,” Claire said.

“More so than a healing organization?” Ilea asked.

“Nobles care for their secrets and the balance of power,” Trian said. “They don’t care about a few new healers. Well, they will once they understand that Sentinels aren’t exactly comparable to a conventional Order healer. I don’t know if it would be quite as difficult as you think, Claire. As long as we don’t share knowledge and training noble houses claim as their own.”

“Difficult to say. I’ll run the idea by the other council members and hear what they have to say. Sulivhaan will agree, knowing him. Dagon might not be a fan of sharing all that knowledge with everyone but as long as we pay him the requested fee, he won’t complain,” Claire said.

“I’ll send a few letters to Virilya. Maybe I can gauge a possible reaction,” Trian said.

“Thanks,” Ilea said with a smile.

“Is it alright if I think of ways for the Academy to pay for itself? Without the students having to pay basic fees of course,” Claire asked.

“Academy. I like it,” Ilea said. “Of course. Just don’t keep knowledge away from them. Honorary titles or donations maybe. But I guess we need a reputation first for that to work.”

“We have plenty of reputation to throw around,” Claire said with a smile.

Ilea nodded absentmindedly. *Maro? No, all he wanted was to be free of responsibilities. I wonder where he is anyway. Guess I’ll find out when the cults he forms spread far enough through the lands.*

Lord Harken or another Baralia noble? Eh... don’t really want an ex slaver to be part of Ravenhall’s decision makers.

Could... might be worth a shot.

“Got someone in mind?” Trian asked.

Ilea waved her hand sideways. “Shot in the dark,” she said. “I’m sure we’ll find some people though. No time constraint anyway.”

“Well if we know anything about you, it’s that you can conjure up allies from the most unexpected of places,” Trian said with a laugh.

“Think I’ll visit Halstein first though, see what kind of trap they set up for me,” Ilea said and stood up.

Claire sighed. “Not a week without a diplomatic incident.”

“No wonder you haven’t gotten bored yet,” Ilea said, jumping out of the window.

Donnavon looked at his reflection in the small mirror, the warm candle light casting shadows on his face. *Your age is showing*, he thought, brushing his long white hair back before saying a short prayer. He cleaned his hands and sighed. Today could very well be the most important day of his life.

He checked his gown and slipped into his comfortable shoes. One of the few luxuries he allowed himself. There were no rules against such, especially being a High Cleric, but he thought it hypocrisy. To pray to Friede and live a life of luxury. *Do not judge your brothers and sisters. They are as devoted as you.*

Donnavon had thought that perhaps the latest struggles the Corinth Order had gone through were merely a test. A sign that they had left the ways of Hella and Friede. It was not his position to judge them. The gods would guide their way, one way or another. He would trust their guidance. *May you protect me from the evil of this world*, he murmured, one hand to his heart as he closed his eyes.

A knock on the door signaled that it was time.

“High Cleric, may I enter?” the voice of a young man came from the other side. One that made Donnavon smile.

“Come in Bryce,” he said.

The young Paladin entered gracefully, all his movements a testament to his power and expertise in battle. The heavy white plate armor hardly seemed to bother him, long blond hair falling down his back. He went down to one knee as soon as he had entered.

[Divine Paladin – lvl 305]

Donnavon felt pride swell up in his heart. “Stand, Bryce. You do not need to kneel before me. It is you who goes into the wilderness to battle the creatures who would seek our death. I am merely a servant, healing those in need and tending to this temple.”

Bryce looked up and smiled. “You are far too humble. I’m only giving you the respect you deserve,” he said and stood up, closing the door behind him. “You know why I came.”

“The fateful meeting. Yes,” Donnavon said.

“You don’t have to be the one to meet with her. Let me go in your stead,” the warrior said.

Donnavon touched the man’s shoulder and shook his head. “It must be me. Let me show her the heart of our Order and what we stand for.”

“What if the rumors are true? What if the songs hold merit? What if she truly is a monster corrupted by evil, selfishly purging those she deems unworthy or unjust?” Bryce asked.

“Those are not the full truths of what I learned of her. Has she not helped free Ravenhall of the demonic plague? Has she not fought in Virilya, alongside the imperial army? Her exploits in Baralia do not tell of a monster, not entirely at least,” Donnavon said.

The Paladin gave him a doubtful look. “Songs can easily be bought, information spread by those who won the war. You know how much influence her gold has bought. It reaches all the way to Riverwatch. The Inquisitors whisper that even in Dawntree, she funnels in her wealth.”

And how often have we done the same? I wonder, Donnavon thought. He had faith in his brothers and sisters in the Order but it couldn't be denied that he was kept out of important discussions, their demeanor colder by the year. He wondered if it would be different, if Wurt were still alive.

“If we are to meet her, it has to be with an open mind. And if she truly is the monster so many in our Order deem her to be, we need you to be ready. You and everyone else. Her influence cannot be understated. We cannot allow a monster to lead an order of healers. We both know this, but we must prevent further bloodshed. So many of our own have died already,” Donnavon said.

Bryce put on his helmet and gave him a nod. “Hella be with you, Donnavon. I will pray that our intervention won't be needed.”

Donnavon smiled. He didn't miss that Bryce had failed to mention Friede. Today he chose not point it out. The principles of devotion and sacrifice carried a different weight before meeting a monster after all, especially the latter.

“Will you meet her here?” Bryce asked, turning back once again.

“In the eastern temple. Her welcome has been prepared. These grounds have been deemed too plain to welcome someone of her reputation,” Donnavon explained. He was surprised the Paladin didn't know about it.

“Bryce? Trouble in the north. Break in. A few wounded and culprits on the run,” a female voice said, the heavy steps of another Paladin resounding in the hall.

“Naomi. Lower your voice,” Bryce said. “We're on holy grounds.”

“Of course, apologies High Cleric,” the woman said, bowing to Donnavon when she saw them step out into the hall.

Bryce turned to Donnavon one last time and touched his shoulder, not saying another word before he left towards the open gate.

Naomi looked after her fellow Paladin before she glanced at the High Cleric. “I...,” she started, looking at the walls before she turned back to him. “May Friede and Hella bless you today.”

Donnavon bowed his head lightly before he followed, only catching a glance of the Paladins as they spread their wings, flying northward. *Paladins of the Corinth Order hunting after petty thieves. They could be doing so much more.* It was a battle for another day, Donnavon thought, greeting the Inquisitors waiting for him.

He prayed for his protectors. None would have dared lay their hands on a healer of the Corinth Order even ten years ago but times were changing. Refugees from the west and now Baralia had flooded Halstein. Desperation pushing people to do unspeakable things. It was these people that needed help the most but he would not deny reality. Other members have already been abducted, either to work for criminals or be forced to join a team of adventurers quickly leaving the city. It was why the Orders had been formed, why healers needed to be part of one.

The walk was swift, Donnavon healing a few people who noticed his white gown. His guards didn't interfere this time, though not open for conversation either, as per usual.

"Lilith has arrived!" a young teen shouted to one of his friends, the two running off to see the legendary healer.

Never has she set foot into this city and yet the people think her a savior, Donnavon thought. Did she come to answer our summons? Or to bring her influence and power down onto our weakened Order?

He had hoped the creature would not arrive for a few more weeks, though perhaps it was a good sign for her to arrive so quickly. *We're not just an afterthought to her.*

They arrived at the eastern temple ten minutes later, Donnavon looking at the high reaching building of marble. White and red banners had been hung, a rich carpet rolled out all the way onto the street. Inquisitors and Paladins patrolled the area, sending away those seeking help. *All for a pretentious welcome, Donnavon thought, gritting his teeth as he deliberately avoided the carpet.*

His temple was plain but what they did to this building seemed almost preposterous. One might think they were a military order, and not one meant to heal. He endured it, if it was to receive an important guest whose cooperation may be vital to the future of their order. He had volunteered, as had others but it was him the Speaker chose.

"Welcome, High Cleric Donnavon," Emilia said, most of her face covered by the white hood she wore, her hair hidden below.

"Greetings, High Cleric Emilia," Donnavon said, bowing lightly. He wondered why none of the other High Clerics had come. Perhaps it was a security concern. *Though surely, with all these guards? Nobody would be foolish enough to start a battle here.*

A few of the present paladins were above level two hundred after all, a might even a group of Shadows wouldn't want to challenge. He looked up to one of the banners, sunlight reflecting off the perfectly white fabric. *What if it's all true? An army could not stop her. Who are we to stand against her?*

He closed his eyes in prayer, feeling his heart waver at the unknown.

"Ridiculous, isn't it?" Emilia said. "Are we not beyond these petty displays of wealth and power?"

Donnavon looked at her and smiled. "We must speak in a language those around us understand. If this is what is necessary, then so be it."

"I hadn't expected you of all people to give up on our principles so easily," the woman retorted, giving him a look of pity. "I shall pray for your safety, High Cleric. May you pave a way for our continued prosperity."

They bowed to each other, the woman remaining near the entrance as Donnavon entered the temple. He was still being escorted by the inquisitors, the two leading him through the halls and down to the extensive basement. Paladins and Inquisitors alike nodded his way as he passed, some saying short prayers or words of encouragement. He could feel the tension in the air. Obvious of course, considering the guest.

I wonder if there was any prosperity in the last few decades, he thought, entering the large windowless room, a luxurious wooden table and two leather chairs standing within.

"Any reason this meeting isn't happening on the ground floor?" he asked one of the Inquisitors.

“I’m afraid it would be a security concern, High Cleric. Should... Lilith be hostile, our chances will be significantly better with her down here. Defensive enchantments protect the whole temple, but especially this room,” the man explained.

Donnavon sighed, sitting down in the chair. He could faintly see the magic flowing through the walls. *There hardly is a more dangerous place to face a monster. Friede, be with me.*

He meditated for a while until a Paladin entered, setting down a tray. A tea pot rested on a heating plate with two mugs next to it.

“She will arrive shortly,” the Paladin said.

Excited for battle? Donnavon thought, unsure how he should categorize the inflation in her voice.

He waited, the Paladin’s steps soon replaced by those of several people walking along the hallway.

“Your conversation will of course be secure. Various enchantments were placed in the room. I’m sure you would understand the precautions,” Emilia said, her voice coming closer.

“Of course,” a female voice answered, the tone almost sounding bored.

They stepped inside a moment later, Emilia followed by a woman dressed in normal black cotton pants and a white shirt. She neither wore armor nor did she show the horns and wings mentioned in many songs and stories.

Donnavon was a little taken aback by just how normal this woman looked. He wondered for a moment if they had sent a lookalike but the idea seemed utterly ridiculous to him. And they would’ve done checks.

[Battle Healer – lvl ??]

He smiled, knowing that she was well over level three hundred. Higher than Bryce by at least ten levels, maybe even more. She was the real one. Lilith. Black hair fell down her back, open but orderly.

“If you require anything else, just knock on the door,” Emilia said with a smile and stepped out, the heavy stone gate closing shut a moment later.

Lilith turned around, brushing a hand against the door as she looked at the walls. She finally plopped down on the chair in a casual manner and smiled, piercing blue eyes focusing on Donnavon.

“Welcome to Halstein, Lilith, of the Medic Sentinel Corps,” he said, copying her smile. This was not at all what he had expected. If anything she looked like a young rural woman, visiting Halstein for the first time. “I do hope your trip was safe.”

“You’re not aware, are you?” she asked, leaning forward slightly.

“What do you mean?” Donnavon asked.

Lilith’s smile broadened. “Oh no. I mean I heard you had a goddess of sacrifice or something but this just seems cruel.”