

Donnavon wasn't sure if she would bite but if he wanted to prevent what the Speaker had planned, Lilith's involvement had to be minimal. And they had to make sure the crown was informed. If he was honest, it wasn't just about Nathanael's plans, it was a matter of pride.

"If we cannot purge our Order of corruption, what legitimacy do we have?" he asked, looking up at the calm Shadow.

"So I assume you don't want me to break out of here and kill everyone?" the woman asked.

"As much as it would seem to delight you, no. You made a comment about the lacking space magic runes placed on this room. Am I right to assume you have a way to get out unnoticed?" he asked.

She smiled. "You still think me a monster. Oh well. Yes, and you're a very very lucky one. I can get both of us out of here. Though my perception is cut off, at least that they managed. You will have to guide the teleport."

"I know the area. There are plenty of houses, cover. Though the Inquisitors might detect us. How far can you move us?" he asked.

"Far enough," she said and looked around. "I assume you have a plan beyond just getting out of here?"

"I have to find the Head Paladin. Bryce. With a High Cleric and the highest level Paladin on our side, we can at least make a convincing case. But most of all I want to prevent bloodshed. And for that we need to inform not just people in my Order, but the Kroll government as well," he explained.

"Do you have a way for us to talk to royalty?" the woman asked.

"Not a concealed one. But Bryce might be able to help with that. I know he regularly trained with Joel Fiore, a member of the royal guard," Donnavon explained.

"Alright, then let's go find this Bryce character," the woman said and stood up. "Close your eyes."

Donnavon did as she asked without question. She was both his only chance to get out of this room alive and to prevent a potential war involving the remaining Corinth Order members, whoever they managed to get to their side in the government, and Ravenhall. He heard something rip into flesh and winced at the sound. "What are you doing?" he dared ask.

Lilith didn't speak for a few seconds. "You can look again," she said.

He staggered back, his eyes opening wide as he glared at the body parts in front of him. It was her, remains of the same clothes she had worn before still showing in places. In her place now stood two horned shadowy creatures. "Hella, receive this servant without prejudice, your name-" he stopped, seeing the same blue eyes stare at him. *Only one has eyes... they're... ash.*

"Not going to finish your prayer?" Lilith asked. "I hope these traps are enough to burn away my skin at least."

"You... cut them off? This kind of healing... do you not feel pain?" Donnavon asked.

The woman didn't reply. "Another set of clothes gone... oh well. Think it's believable that my limbs were separated?"

"They will know you didn't die. If there's a head... but that's impo-" he said, seeing a mist of ash form in front of him, Lilith revealed a moment later with a head in her hand.

She casually placed the bleeding body part onto the pile. "Still a bit unsettling, after all this time," she murmured. "I don't suppose you want to add a few limbs?"

Donnavon touched the wall with his back, holding his breath. "No... I... I can't... regenerate... my head," he stammered out.

"Shame," Lilith said and added some ash to the pile. "So where to?"

"What's... that... one for?" Donnavon asked, pointing at the ash warrior standing next to her. He failed to identify the creature. *Pure ash?*

"It will activate the enchantments by attacking the walls if someone tries to open the entrance. Or in three hours if nothing happens, just in case," she explained.

Donnavon gulped. "You're very open about what you can do...," he said. "I appreciate your trust."

"Yeah, just don't talk about it with everyone. Not that it would matter much," she murmured. "So where to?"

"There is a large store about... sixty, maybe seventy meters to the west... the store rooms should be large enough to make teleportation possible," he explained, the view in front of him shifting as he blinked his eyes.

"This the one?" Lilith asked, picking up a glass jar with a brown sludge inside.

"Y... yes," he stuttered. *She moved me instantly... I didn't even feel the spell. How powerful exactly is this woman?*

Space magic was incredibly rare and not well understood. Of the practitioners he heard, none could simply move people in the blink of an eye. Perhaps if they had more time. But even then, he should've been able to resist partially, same as when facing void or blood magic spells attacking the body or its integrity.

"Any idea where we can find this Paladin of yours?" she asked, now wearing a different set of clothes and a hood covering most of her face. The ash creature she had conjured had remained within the temple cellar.

"They were... looking for a thief in the northern part of the city. That's all I know... seeking him inside of his quarters may be difficult. I have a suspicion that he was kept away on purpose. Perhaps he is being watched," Donnavon said.

"No tracking spells?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Got anything of his in your possessions... stupid question, you're wearing robes," Lilith said.

"He... touched my shoulder before. A little more than an hour ago," he said, nearly stumbling when the woman came closer and inspected his shoulder. *Is she sniffing it?* he wondered and looked away. Donnavon could feel her presence now, the power hardly contained in the close proximity. *Are those just body enhancement spells? She's not using any external spells.*

He felt the hairs on his back stand up, instincts that he had forgotten about in the last decades pushing back to the surface. A monster had come to their city, and it stood right next to him.

“Hmm... faint aura. You can guide me to the northern part of the city to check it out. Maybe I can find a trace of him,” she said and stepped away.

Donnavon nodded. “Stairs are this way,” he said and pointed.

“My perception works again, don’t worry,” the woman said.

His view changed a few times, various damp cellars appearing and vanishing around him as he closed his eyes to not get nauseous. It was exactly how he imagined teleportation to be like.

“You okay? You seem a little off the rails,” Ilea said.

Donnavon felt his mind clear, magic flowing into him. “Stop using your spell... is it mind magic?”

“No, just healing,” she said. “We’re in the northern part now. Think you can dress up a bit so that your friends in the Order won’t notice you this easily?”

“I’m not sure if you noticed, but I don’t have a spare set of clothes with me, nor do I possess a storage item,” he answered.

Brown pants, a shirt, and vest appeared in the woman’s hands. “Should be about your size.”

He couldn’t help but smile at the ridiculous situation. He had known enough adventurers in his time to know that even for them, this would be confusing. “Do you just walk around with dozens of sets of clothes in case this happens?”

“No, there’s a clothing store on the street opposite this cellar,” she answered.

“Space magic... I see. Can’t say I approve of you stealing from the local population,” he said.

She laughed, shaking her head.

“What is there to laugh about?” he asked.

“Thought you wanted to prevent bloodshed and a war. Borrowing some clothes is hardly comparable. But if you insist,” she said and summoned a single gold coin, flicking it upwards before it vanished. “Right into the store owner’s pouch. Now you owe me a piece of gold.”

He looked at the clothes before he started putting on the pants below his robes. *Hardly worth a piece of gold. The wealthy and their disregard for coin.*

Lilith sat on a nearby crate, whistling a tune to herself as she waited for him to dress, jumping up when he was done. “Take this one too,” she said and handed him a cloak.

“Like I’m some kind of rogue...,” he murmured with a frown.

“Exciting, right?” she asked, a broad grin on her face.

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Ilea found a trace of the Paladin a few minutes later, the two shady companions walking through the northern part of the city as she kept her senses focused on the faint magic she had felt from inspecting the Cleric's shoulder.

"They went down here it seems," she said, pointing at a set of stairs leading into the sewers.

"The culprit must've tried to flee," Donnavon said as he glanced back to see if someone was following them.

Ilea smiled, looking at the man until he glanced back at her.

"What?" he asked, obviously quite stressed about the whole situation.

"You know, I'm not the best at hiding, but you're acting awfully suspicious," she said and chuckled to herself, walking down towards the entrance.

A few teleports later, she held up her hand and watched a scene unfold through her dominion. Voices resounded from a few dozen meters away, dulled lightly by the bending tunnels in the way.

Two heavily armored warriors were standing in front of an enchanted wall, one of them crouched. "We have to get an inquisitor down here," a male voice said.

"Not now. We should wait until the meeting with Lilith is concluded. More important than finding out whatever this is. Probably just a smuggler stash," a woman replied.

"That's Bryce," Donnavon whispered.

Ilea rolled her eyes, looking at him with an annoyed expression. She didn't react when the Paladin appeared close by with his sword drawn.

"Hey there," Ilea said with a wave.

"Identify yourself," the man demanded, his eyes going wide.

The woman rushed to his side, her weapon drawn as well.

"Naomi, stay back," he said immediately, his voice tense.

**[Divine Paladin – lvl 305]**

**[Veteran Paladin – lvl 215]**

"Bryce, it's me," Donnavon said, taking a step forward as he pulled back his hood.

Ilea kept her eyes on the woman, using space shift to prevent a teleport. Just in case.

"What's the meaning of this," Bryce demanded. "Are you being held captive?"

"Quite the contrary. Lilith may have saved my life, and many more in turn. But only if we can figure out what is happening," Donnavon said. "Can you trust her?"

Naomi winced, taking a small step back.

"We trained and fought together for decades. I trust her more than the monster by your side," Bryce said.

"My name is Lilith, and if you call me monster one more time, I'll show you just how right that description is," she said. *Hey wait. Ah well, whatever.*

“Bryce,” Donnavon said and walked a few steps closer to the man. “The High Clerics or even the Speaker put me in a room below the eastern temple... for the talk with her. They tried to poison us, and put enchantments in place to keep us locked in there. Coupled with traps that would kill us if we tried to escape.”

“Ridiculous,” Naomi said.

“Go on,” Bryce said, ignoring the woman by his side.

“I suspect it was a ploy to put the blame of my death on Lilith. To kill her too if possible and start a conflict with Ravenhall... or just the Sentinels,” he explained.

Ilea chuckled at the mention of her death. *You’re being arrogant, Ilea*, a part of her thought but she had a hard time listening to the voice. *If anybody is being arrogant, it’s the Corinth Order.*

Bryce seemed to agree, glaring at her with apprehension. He remained surprisingly calm. The Paladin was likely the only one here who knew she was a three mark after all.

“Did you meddle with his mind? Tell the truth, creature,” Bryce said to her. He didn’t sound condescending, merely stating what he thought she was.

Ilea wondered if he specifically didn’t call her a monster and smiled. “I’m not a mind mage. You identified me Bryce, right?”

He didn’t reply but the look in his eyes made it obvious.

“Then you know I have little reason to fear the inquisitors and paladins stationed near the temple. The High Cleric here is the only reason there wasn’t a massacre. Yet,” she explained. “We would both appreciate it if it stayed that way.”

“What does she mean?” Naomi asked. “Is she that much stronger than you?”

Bryce lowered his sword, sheathing the weapon a moment later. “I trust you Donnavon, you know that. I pray to Hella and Friede that I’m not wrong about this.”

“I’ve been wondering,” Ilea said. “The gods you pray to. Are they around?”

“What are you talking about?” Naomi asked.

“I’m not aware of physical manifestations,” the High Cleric answered.

“I see,” Ilea said, a little disappointed.

“Are you a god yourself?” Bryce asked, taking off his helmet to reveal his luscious blond hair.

Ilea smirked. “No. We’re trying to avoid that branding. But surely you’ve been mistaken for a god before, with your power.”

Bryce actually smiled at that. “You seem grounded, despite your incredible strength.”

“I mostly fight because it’s fun, not because I want to gain more power,” she said. It was mostly true, though to protect her friends and allies, she had good reasons to reach for more as well. It allowed her to talk to level three hundred paladins instead of getting cut up the instant she showed up too, which was nice.

Naomi glared at the other Paladin with a questioning look.

Donnavon didn't seem to be quite as bothered by the whole conversation, either glad that Bryce listened or simply because he had seen some of her abilities before.

The Paladin gave Ilea a questioning look.

She shrugged.

He smiled. "Lilith is a three mark. She's above level five hundred, and the strongest human I have ever seen."

The other Paladin opened her eyes even wider, Donnavon saying another prayer to himself.

"Enough with the wanking, I thought you wanted to prevent a conflict?" Ilea said.

The High Cleric shook his head. "Your language could use some reform. But yes. Bryce, I believe we have to gather our allies, and speak to the royals before the responsible people present their own version of the story."

"I...", Naomi started, looking at the ground. "I suspected... that something would happen to you... High Cleric."

"What do you mean?" Bryce hissed.

"I heard... conversations, between high ranking members. Donnavon is not well liked. I thought it was possible they wanted to send you to the m... to Lilith. To die," she explained.

"And you didn't think to tell me about this?" Bryce asked, taking a step towards her.

"We all knew what was expected of me," Donnavon interrupted. "But we were blinded by our fear of the unknown, that we missed the traitors among our own. Now let us not waste anymore time. We need to figure out who we can trust and how we can find those who have corrupted our Order from within."

The Paladin turned towards the Cleric and sighed. "What's your role in this?" he asked, looking at Ilea.

"Came here to see if any relationships could be established with the Corinth Order. Didn't expect much but it's shaping up to be quite interesting," she answered and smirked. "They did technically try to kill me, so I'm happy to help with the cleanup."

"Like you did in Yinnahall," Donnavon whispered.

"Exactly," she answered.

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Emmanuel tapped his chair, looking at his advisors.

"She's been in there for over two hours," Julianna said. "With dozens of high level Inquisitors and Paladins surrounding their temple. Even our spies can't get through."

“Nothing suspicious so far,” he said. She wore her hair in a braid today, like she often had during their adventuring days. *I wish we were alone right now, without this annoying business.*

“I don’t know what they’re planning. The Speaker has been vague. His warnings about the Sentinels were dismissed but I’m worried about how far they would go,” the Queen answered.

“The Head Administrator wouldn’t want a conflict, nor would Ilea. Everything we learned about them suggests that,” he said.

“If they succeed in a brazen plan and civilians die, we won’t be able to deny assistance,” Katarina said.

“Not without an explanation,” Julianna answered.

“What do you think, Lady Veyer?” Emmanuel asked. Perhaps it had been a mistake, not to intervene in the meeting.

His mother in law smiled lightly, her inquisitive eyes looking at him with interest.

“The current Speaker of the Corinth Order is rather young. Inexperienced. He will make a blunder,” she said. “He thinks himself invulnerable. Lilith has faced armies, and creatures beyond our understanding. She will not be defeated by the Corinth Order.”

*How strong is she really? The Paladins have a member at level three hundred. Powerful enough to challenge everyone in this very room, he thought with a sigh. If the Corinth Order can’t stop her, what can we do?*

He already dreaded the negotiations with Ravenhall. The first letters have been sent, mundane trade suggestions so far but it wouldn’t remain that way forever. They had to be prepared. And they had to prevent a war at all costs. If the Shadows joined the field, their armies would be slaughtered.

Kyrie appeared next to him, on one knee. “Your majesty, Joel Fiore has sent an urgent request for an audience.”

“Who is it?” he asked.

“High Cleric Donnavon and Paladin Bryce of the Corinth Order, and Lilith,” the man whispered.

Lady Veyer smirked to herself, in an almost predatory manner.

“How did our spies miss them?” Julianna asked.

“My brother did warn us,” Katarina said. “She’s a space mage among other things. There is no reason to doubt his word anymore,” she added, gritting her teeth.

“Where are they now?” Emmanuel asked.

“They are waiting in the Kingsguard training dome,” Kyrie answered.

Julianna stood up. “That area is off limits for civilians. How did they get in there?”

“Your majesty, it doesn’t matter,” Kyrie said. “I identified Lady Lilith. She showed three marks.”

Emmanuel groaned and stood up. “Of course she did.”

“You don’t intend to meet her right there?” Katarina asked. “I implore you, invite her into the throne room.”

Emmanuel smiled. "I believe the time to feign strength has passed. Let's meet her and find out if our extensive espionage funding has indeed paid off."

*If she really is the Ilea I read about, there should be no issues at all.*

"Inform the cooks to prepare a feast," he added as he walked out. "Anybody who would like to join me is welcome to do so."