

Chapter 645 Demon

“Everyone is here, High Cleric. Those who answered the call,” Bryce said.

Donnavon looked at the armor clad members of the Corinth Order. Paladins and Inquisitors ready for battle. Healers for the rear line, ready to put their lives on the line to protect their brothers and sisters.

Mateo touched his shoulder, fury in his eyes. And guilt.

“You didn’t know,” Donnavon whispered, trying to reassure the man.

High Cleric Peterson was still not to be found. High Cleric Wyssa had been arrested, her devotion to Speaker Nathaniel unquestioned despite the evidence and word of her fellow Corinth healers.

Many of their Order still seemed doubtful, those surely involved had tried to flee once word had spread. Many of the warriors near the eastern temple had simply been warned of a coming battle, to be vigilant should Lilith show any hostility.

Emilia had been questioned but provided evidence of her lack of involvement. Donnavon wondered if perhaps she had known. And chose to remain silent.

His heart ached at the betrayal, his trust broken as he looked into the eyes of warriors of Hella. Righteousness, devotion, sacrifice. Values he believed they all shared but today proved their Order was more corrupted than he had ever deemed possible. It would take years to evaluate everyone, to collect all the evidence they could, to never allow for anything like this to happen again. The remaining high ranking members of all factions within their Order had voted to rescind the rank of Speaker.

The Inquisitors would be next, Donnavon knew. He would take time to grief, to pray, and hopefully, to heal. The High Cleric standing next to him didn’t seem to share this sentiment, nor did the Head Paladin riding on his white steed with his sword drawn and wings extended.

“Brothers and sisters! Today we are tested like never before. Our home was taken, our members left for dead, murdered by those they had healed for decades. Halstein should have been a new beginning, but the roots of corruption had already gripped the heart of our holy cause. Nathaniel has betrayed what we stand for. Those who chose to stay by his side have forfeited their lives. I stand here before you, not as the Head Paladin of our Order, but as a mere follower of our gods. Friede. And Hella.

“I ask you to search your hearts, brothers and sisters, to rip out any doubts and malice you may harbor. We have suffered, at the hands of human and beast, but we cannot allow ourselves to become savages in turn. What happened today is a disgrace, one that we must remember, one we must repent,” he paused and rode past the ranks. “Remember what we are. Remember what we stand for and grip it with all that you are. The demons brought upon us by those we thought our own are coming to this city. The city we swore to protect. Let us remember who we are and repent through battle. Let us destroy the evil we brought upon this world,” he said and raised his sword, a bright shimmering glow added to the reflected sunlight.

“For our gods, for our fallen brothers and sisters, for the honor of the Corinth Order!” he shouted, voices echoing back, weapons drawn as warriors mounted their horses, healers shouldering their packs, fighters saying their goodbyes to the relatives nearby.

Onlookers had gathered near the gate. City guards, adventurers, and civilians.

The speech wasn't only for the Corinth Order, but for everyone who listened. A politician might call it a calculated decision but Donnavon knew every word from Bryce had been sincere. He too felt the shame and a wish to repent.

Donnavon too got on his horse, looking at the gathered warriors and healers. The might of the Corinth Order had been reduced to a mere expedition force and yet he felt hopeful. Hopeful for a future on the right path.

They rode, southwards and to the rocky fields of Garahill. To face the demon horde their own had brought. *Why, Nathaniel?*

Donnavon looked up when he heard a horn to the west, a hundred riders joining their flank, royal banners flapping in the wind as the heavy cavalry arrived. He moved to join them, along Mateo and Bryce.

“What's the meaning of this?” the Paladin asked.

Emmanuel Eilhart smiled, his polished armor reflecting the sunlight.

A king joining the field. I pray he does not overextend himself.

He knew the king had ample magical power but he doubted his experience. Donnavon admitted that he himself hadn't seen battle in many years, let alone against monstrous demons.

“The army shouldn't risk themselves against these creatures,” Bryce added, the leaders joining together.

Donnavon smiled when he saw the Queen.

“We will take the rear and protect your healers, should your line be broken,” the King spoke. “I'm doubtful that will happen however.”

“Where is Lilith?” Mateo asked. “Did she not offer to come?”

“She is presently still... occupied with... the feast,” the King said. “Though she should join us momentarily.”

“It matters not,” Bryce said.

“Scout report, head paladin,” one of the Paladins said. “Around three hundred demons are currently crossing the Garahill fields. The villages have been warned. Horns seem to work in drawing the demons towards us. They have not spread out yet. Most are likely close to level two hundred.”

“A recent summoning then. Good work. We ride for battle,” Bryce said, a horn next to him resounding as the formation picked up speed.

“You know of Nathaniel's location?” the Queen asked.

“Those imprisoned spoke of Fort Kalwart. I will lead a group to ride south after the demons are dealt with. To apprehend him,” Bryce spoke.

“What if he resists?” she asked.

Bryce looked up. "We are prepared to do what must be done."

They rode for half an hour, pushing forward until they reached the hills overlooking the fields of Garahill.

The higher level Paladins got off their mounts, checking their swords and bows, groups of mages preparing spells. Healers readied their equipment and took their positions, surrounded by heavily armored knights and trained combat mages.

"Now we know what Virilya saw when the demons descended unto them," the King said, joining the clerics with the Queen in tow.

A few nobles had joined the ride, mostly those holding ranks within the Kroll army.

"Monstrous creatures indeed," Mateo said. "They move quickly."

"They are deadlier than their level suggests," the Queen said. "Those they kill will rise as demons themselves. We have to thin their ranks before they reach your lines."

"What about our horses?" Donnavon asked.

"Look closely, they can outrun them," the king said.

"The demons will reach us in a few minutes. Prepare for battle," a nearby Inquisitor said.

Many of the healers said prayers, spells flaring up in the front, the slope allowing them to see everything below.

"She didn't come," Mateo said, looking back. "I had thought her sincere."

"She seemed... disinterested. In our affairs. Even when she learned that her life had been in danger," Donnavon said.

He didn't miss the smile on the King's face.

"Come and see, she said," Emmanuel Eilhart spoke.

A whistling sound came from the north, many of the fighters looking up. Donnavon covered his eyes against the sunlight, finding a dark winged figure fly towards them. The sound became louder as the being passed overhead, slowing down as it descended to about a hundred meters.

Donnavon recognized the form now. "Lilith," he whispered.

They looked on as she spread her arms, dozens of dark spears forming, glowing lines of fire covered her armor now, the spears moving in close as they too took on the embers. Lilith flew closer still, her wings moving slowly as she descended, ahead of their defensive lines.

A horn resounded, the signal to charge.

And so it starts, Donnavon thought, watching the foremost Paladins spur their horses, the savage demon horde advancing on them with open maws, dead eyes and bloodied claws.

A high pitched whistle interrupted the charge, everyone stopping in place as the powerful magic reverberated over the hills.

'ding' 'You have heard the call of Lilith. Do not be afraid – You are paralyzed for five seconds'

Donnavon had experienced it before. He knew she had this power. And yet he couldn't believe his eyes. Not only their own had remained where they stood. The demon horde had halted, entirely frozen in their tracks, as if a mere painting of the horrific display.

The charge of the Corinth Paladins against the monstrous demon horde, captured perfectly by a master artist.

Donnavon felt his heart beat faster, a primal anticipation building, for blood and battle. He watched as the serene painting was interrupted, whistling spears of burning ash coming down from the heavens. He blinked, bright light flashing up where the projectiles entered the ground, flames exploding outwards in a rain of fury. He felt the ground shake, a loud whistling picking up in his ears as he was deafened by the impacts.

He watched in awed fascination as the demon horde was disintegrated, those close to the blasts incinerated instantly, the creatures farther away sent flying, ripped apart as limbs and entrails clashed in the air, only to be burnt by the next impact. Hundreds were gone when they started to move once more.

Donnavon took a deep breath and gulped, watching Lilith land ahead of the front line. The grass around her caught fire, horses shying away despite the distance. His hearing returned, healing flowing through him.

Nobody moved as they watched the remaining few dozen monsters charge at the ashen healer. Nobody dared interrupt.

Ilea raised her hand, a bright beam of fire and heat flashing out.

Donnavon could feel the heat despite the distance, horses near the front now panicking as they backed up into the line behind them, those at the flanks trying to run away.

The spell had enveloped all of the demons, a cone of fire and death. Nothing remained of the beings, a deep furrow in the ground joining the dozens of deep smoldering craters.

The High Cleric found that it smelled faintly of roasted pork. He smiled and started laughing.

To his surprise, the king next to him joined in. Nobody else did.

Lilith turned around, the armored monster taking in the gathered army, her eyes almost bored as a few of the troops shied back a step or two.

Donnavon had calmed down, glancing at the icy look of the Queen, not meant for him but for the now serene looking King standing next to her.

Their army was silent, all eyes on the monster now walking towards them. Horses and Paladins stepped aside, letting her pass.

This is the slaughter she meant back in the temple, Donnavon thought, a wry smile on his face. He gulped, thinking about what could've happened today, had he said something different, had he acted in another way.

"All yours, Paladin," Ilea said when she passed Bryce.

The man stayed silent, taking a look at her before he turned his head to the battlefield.

Ilea grinned, looking at the terrified faces of the Corinth Order and Kroll soldiers. With her armor on, she didn't have to pretend.

"You heard her, kill any survivors, burn what remains," Bryce said and moved towards the corpses.

There were no survivors. Ilea had made sure of that. It had been a nice speech. Regaining the honor they had lost. But she wouldn't make it quite that easy for them. They did try to kill her after all, even if the attempt had barely been worth a mention.

"Enjoyed the show?" she asked when she reached the King.

"No wonder you ate that much," Emmanuel said, leaving whatever he wanted to add at the cold stare of his wife. "The grand tales of your battle in Riverwatch don't seem quite as grand anymore. Was it just as one sided?"

Ilea didn't reply. Facing demons and human soldiers wasn't comparable to her. She had done things much more noteworthy than kill a bunch of people following Lord Harken to the bitter end.

"Now that I lured you all out here," she said, turning her head towards the king, Kyrie appearing in front of him. "We can do some shadow magic training," she added with a smile, feeling the tension in the people around her.

"You risk much. A joke like that would cost someone else their head," Emmanuel said, obviously the only one very much amused by the whole situation.

She tilted her head. "Good thing I'm not someone else then. How about it, Kyrie?"

The man glanced at his king, the latter nodding.

"What's the plan from here?" she asked, looking at Donnavon.

The Cleric smiled. "Speaker Nathaniel seems to have retreated to Fort Kalwart, located in the southern mountains. The Head Paladin will lead the charge himself, accompanied by a team of high level Corinth warriors."

"I see. Guess I'll be joining them then," Ilea said. She noted the conflicted looks in the present High Clerics but didn't much care. She wanted to find out why the man had tried to have her killed, and just because she thought both Bryce and Donnavon alright didn't mean she trusted the Order as a whole. Who knew what would happen at Fort Kalwart. "I won't keep him long then," she said and vanished, Kyrie appearing close by a moment later.

"Impressive display," he said. "Charged heat, right?"

"How did you know?" she asked.

He nodded lightly. "I have faced many fire mages and creatures of the element."

"Hmm," she mused, teleporting a few times to get some distance to the gathered troops.

Kyrie followed. "I don't assume I should hold back."

“No,” Ilea answered, her armor receding to show her head. She kept it active for now, just in case. “Aim for the eyes, they’re a little more vulnerable.”

“To so easily share your weaknesses,” Kyrie said, the area dimming visibly as his magic spread. “What you showed today... it was only a fraction of your true power, wasn’t it?”

“You’re the experienced warrior,” Ilea said. “I’m sure you have an idea of my capabilities.”

“Honestly? I don’t,” he said and smiled. “Exciting in a way. It will be interesting to see how your endeavors impact the balance of power.”

“More healers and more people with opportunities,” she said.

“And fewer of your enemies alive,” Kyrie said, his shadow spreading until it seemed to grasp her in place, constricting around her armor until she felt pressure on her head.

“You don’t have to hold back,” she said.

The man chuckled. “If you were a politician, I’d commend your deep cutting insults. This spell has crushed opponents close to my own level.”

[Shadow Mage – lvl 262]

“But I am facing a three mark creature,” he murmured. “I had not expected anything different.”

Ilea dismissed her mantle of ash, feeling the effects of his spell increase massively. Blood started trailing from her nose and ears, the pressure nearly managing to pop her eyes. “Movement restriction too,” she noted, slowly getting her shaking arm up to her face.

“Spells like that are massively undervalued,” Kyrie said.

“Maybe you should tell people about it,” Ilea said, her voice subdued as her jaw had to fight the pressure to talk.

“Those who realize usually die a few moments later. I’m sure it will be valuable information to your allies,” he said.

Not exactly a revelation. Though I admit I haven’t seen something similar used against me many times before. Ascended and Hector. But those weren’t exactly everyday adventurers.

“You could very well be among them soon enough,” Ilea said.

“After your display today, Emmanuel has everyone on his side. Any cooperation he deems responsible will be approved by the nobility. If only in fear of your wrath,” Kyrie said.

“And you explain these plans to me?” Ilea asked with a strained smirk, healing her face against the shadow magic.

He looked at her and released the spell. “I need a break. I told you that because it’s as inconsequential as you telling me about your weakness. And I believe if we are to establish more than mere trade based on fear, mutual trust is the only way towards that goal. Not that it will be easy. There are plenty in this country who would rather have a war than side with Ravenhall.”

“Why’s that?” Ilea asked, ash moving across her face to get rid of the blood.

“Personal vendettas, history with specific shadows, economic interests, competition, independence. Many reasons. But none of that matters if the key players side with our king. And I believe you just gave him a strong argument,” he said.

Ilea didn't much care, as long as it meant everyone would benefit in the end. She didn't mind a few angry nobles if they could avoid a potential conflict.

"If I may give you some advice," Kyrie said, looking at her.

She shrugged.

"It may be better to let the Order deal with their former Speaker. Who knows what else he has up his sleeves," he said.

"That's exactly why I'm going with them. Some of them were obviously manipulated into this stupid play. It would be a shame if they died," she said.

The man looked at her for a long moment before he smiled ever so slightly, resuming his magic.

They joined back with the Corinth Order half an hour later. The Kroll representatives and soldiers had already left.

"They left the cleanup to you," Ilea said when she found Mateo, the man dragging half a demon corpse into a growing pile of burning flesh. He didn't seem bothered by the smell.

"It is us who caused this incident. And so it should be us who deal with it," the man said, turning towards her. "You shamed us greatly today, Lilith," he added with a frown.

"You were the ones who tried to kill me," she answered.

"I didn't say we didn't deserve it," the High Cleric said. "I have no right, and yet I ask you. When the time comes, to face Nathaniel. Let it be the Corinth Order to deal with him," he said and stepped closer, various people nearby listening. He continued in a whisper. "Let it be us, I beg of you."