

Chapter 647 Paladin

Ilea tried to remember any members of the Corinth Order she had fought and killed. She considered the woman who attacked her after the Basilisk encounter. She couldn't remember if she had indeed been part of the Order. The only other person she could think of was the healer working with the Riverwatch smugglers. Ilea knew she had been part of the Corinth.

But she helped them torture guards, showed no remorse, and spewed threats until the last moment.

Everything that happened today was because of that healer? I don't even remember her name.

She thought back to the Speaker's look. The fury in his eyes. There had been regret too, the man so consumed by his revenge he would sacrifice himself in a last attempt to take her down with him. Ilea watched the battle unfold, the Paladins circling the creature, attacking its back whenever it focused on one of them. All were experienced fighters, calm as they probed the monster's defenses.

Ilea wondered if she should intervene, if she should face the Speaker herself, as he had intended. If only to prevent any of the Paladins from dying. She didn't owe the man anything, nor did she regret what had happened. And still she respected his grief, his wish for vengeance. He hadn't sent anyone to kidnap or kill people she was close to, nor did he seem lost. Just a father who sought revenge, willing to sacrifice his own life to fight her. *But with that low of a level, I'd slap him dead with a single strike.*

It just didn't feel right. Not with the people here who had been betrayed, itching to prove themselves, to get their own revenge and perhaps some sort of redemption.

She chose to stand back, watching as the silver spear pierced the armor of a Paladin, the woman stumbling back before she fell, clasping the wound. Ilea displaced her behind herself. She chose not to heal her for now. The Speaker had betrayed all of them. He seemed willing to forsake his entire Order to get his vengeance.

Ilea would leave the Paladins to their battle. And if it came down to it, she would finish the job. If she could prevent their deaths, she would. But they weren't exactly her allies either. So far the Corinth Order had always caused issues and even now, the only reason they were somewhat cooperative seemed to be her overwhelming power. Not exactly a precedent for fruitful cooperation. Saving lives indirectly would help more than killing the Speaker herself.

The future could be different, depending on the actions of Bryce and the High Clerics. Another two Paladins got hit by the spear, the surging energy within throwing them to the side, blood splattering to the ground as one of them tried to get his entrails back into his stomach.

Ilea teleported them behind herself, giving the man a hand before she healed the wound itself, all color gone from his face as he fell on his ass, looking at her with shame in his eyes.

She didn't comment on it, remembering her own battles against higher level creatures back in her two hundreds. Plenty of limbs and organs had been lost, though it seemed the Paladins' healing was simply inadequate. They recovered fast, but not fast enough to take hits like that in an ongoing fight.

Bryce deflected a blow that would've taken the head of one of his comrades, saving Ilea the use of her space magic.

The former Speaker had dozens of dents and cuts in his armor by now, thick blood flowing down from the wounds below. He hadn't slowed down much but the Paladins were pressuring him. Eight remained.

She raised her hand when one of the injured warriors tried to rejoin the battle. "You had your go."

The woman looked at her with furious eyes below her helmet. "You want to watch them die?!"

Ilea glanced back, keeping her attention on the fight through her dominion, displacing a Paladin who had lost both his legs, her healing preventing him from bleeding out in the coming seconds.

"She saved you, listen to her..." the man whose stomach had been cut said.

She had known the battle was over as soon as Bryce had exchanged blows with the being. He was capable of perhaps even facing it alone. With the others there to distract and damage it, the creature was dead.

The monster managed to pierce one of the warriors through his chest, energies spreading before the body vanished and appeared next to Ilea.

Her third tier healing restored the Paladin's heart in an instant, his shoulders and thighs rupturing because of her lacking familiarity with his body. Everything else seemed to be in order however, the man grasping at the hole in his chest plate.

Close one, that.

Bryce used the opening to slice through one of the Speaker's arms, his blade flaring up with power as he painted the hall with blood.

The others were more cautious by now, only moving between the monster and Bryce when an obvious opening presented itself.

Slowly, they overwhelmed the creature, injuries mounting as it slowed down more and more, its spear now swiping aimlessly from side to side.

Ilea watched the warriors closely, but none of them grew overconfident, their approach even more cautious now that the monster was close to death's door.

Bryce stepped into its range and deflected an obvious blow, his sword lighting up with bright magic before he sliced through the Speaker's neck. A clean strike, his eyes focused on the spear as he jumped back to assess the creature.

"Dead?" Ilea asked.

"Yes," one of the Paladins behind her said.

She checked the body through her dominion, just in case there was a trap hidden, a rune that would cause an explosion of blood upon its death or something. But the corpse was just that, a corpse.

Bryce swiped his sword to the side, blood splattering to the ground as the blade heated up, burning up whatever was still stuck to it. He took off his helmet, his eyes focused on the removed head.

"May you find rest," he whispered, a fist to his heart. "The Speaker has fallen."

The other Paladins didn't celebrate, instead tending to the surviving Inquisitors while looking out for more enemies.

"Well fought," Ilea said as she walked past the Head Paladin.

“A mindless beast,” Bryce murmured. “Thank you, Lilith. We will not forget it. Not this, nor your many interventions to save lives.”

“Make sure it’s not wasted,” Ilea answered, going for the hallway beyond.

Bryce started giving orders to his team a moment later while she started checking through the various rooms with her dominion.

There wasn’t much of interest to her. Weapons, armors, some valuables, but nothing she bothered with after checking.

“Done with your inspection?” Bryce asked when she returned. A few of the Paladins had started searching through the rooms as well, others trying to clear a path back up through the rubble blocking the entrance.

“Nothing much of interest. I assume they’ve been staying here for a while,” she answered.

The corpses had been covered by sheets of white cloth.

“We will study the runes placed on his body. To think Nathanael would go this far,” he said and shook his head lightly. “He mentioned his daughter before his change.”

“I heard him, yes,” Ilea said. “Did you know her?”

“I did. Her name was Pan. She didn’t return from one of her missions a few years ago. Riverwatch apparently. I had little interest in investigating further, though I’m aware of a team being sent out by the Speaker directly. May I inquire about her death?” Bryce asked.

“So it was her. She was hired by a group of smugglers. They traded slaves and tortured people. She helped. Threatened me a few times, invoking the name of the Corinth Order. I killed her in the end,” Ilea said.

Bryce listened and sighed. “She enjoyed... a special status, given her father. Though I won’t pretend that she was the only one who worked with scum. Nor will she be the last.”

“You’re the Head Paladin. Why have you turned out different? The impressions I got from your Order before coming to Halstein weren’t good, I’ll be honest,” she said.

“Dawntree happened. I... and others... had to ignore orders to save people, instead of slaughtering civilians. They called them rebels and criminals. Many of them still hold positions in our Order, though they’re no longer quite as vocal. I hope the humbling experiences from the past years have shaken their arrogance,” Bryce said.

“Doubt it,” Ilea answered.

“I said I was hopeful. But with Donnavon and Mateo at the top, we have a realistic road to sustainable change. The healer hunts will stop either way. A waste all along but now we barely have enough people to defend our own,” the Paladin said. “Nobody will be able to justify such actions.”

“You stayed in an Order that hunted healers? Why?” Ilea asked.

“They tolerated it, more than ordered. You know how easy it is for someone of our power to kill without consequences. Who would ever learn of a murder that happened in an unknown village? Who would report it, or seek justice? Those who did were silenced, with gold or worse. An open secret long before my time and an accepted evil to keep our position before the rebellion. Some even thought it a holy cause.

“Healers are always in high demand, the Orders know as much. Either they join one or they join the military forces of whatever country they’re in. Demand remains high and both power and wealth comes to those who can supply. With the Order of Truth splintered and Baralia taken by Lys, the Corinth driven out of Dawntree, weakened to this degree... only the Order of Balance remains. No smaller Order will stand in your way,” said Bryce.

“You don’t paint a very grand picture of your own Order,” Ilea said.

“I grew up within the temples of the Corinth, trained and learned from their members. I look up to many of them. Some did good where they could, others thought they were doing the same. I will not give up on the Corinth. This is our lowest point, and only here is where our millennia old Order can find fundamental change. I killed the Speaker with my own two hands. There is no way back, only the road forward,” he said.

“You’re the most reasonable out of the Corinth I’ve met. I hope you’re right. Because if I find out your members are killing or threatening independent healers, I’ll come knocking,” she said.

“And I will join you. Let us hope it does not come that far. Today brought many lessons. I believe anyone with a even a speck of wisdom will have a lot to think about in the coming weeks and months,” Bryce said. “I’ll be looking forward to seeing your Sentinels work. If they’re anywhere near as impressive as you are, the coming decades will definitely be interesting.”

“They most certainly will be,” Ilea answered with a smile, thinking about all the projects currently under way. The alliance between Ravenhall and a northern settlement of non human beings alone will likely send waves through the kingdoms of humanity, let alone the introduction of a teleportation network and high level healers joining adventuring teams. *The things you can do with gold and ancient god like creatures on your side.*

“There is a lot to do. Will you stay?” Bryce asked.

Ilea smiled. “No. I’ll explore Halstein a little, I suppose. I’m sure we’ll get the chance to talk again once your Order is in a less chaotic state.”

“You will always be welcome, no matter how much some of our members will hate it,” Bryce said, smiling slightly.

She rolled her eyes. *Even after all that work. Not that I expected anything different. Well, Bryce and Donnavon seem reasonable enough. And if nothing else, my demon presentation left a lasting impression.*

“I don’t suppose...,” Bryce said, looking at the Paladins carrying away rubble from the caved in entrance. “You could help with that?”

“Can’t smite your way through?” Ilea asked, walking towards the tunnel.

“It would take longer than what you can surely do. If you want I can pay you,” Bryce suggested.

Ilea waved him off. “A nice feast next time I visit,” she said and displaced the working Paladins away, a large drill of ash forming in front of her before it started spinning.

She straight up walked into the rubble, pulverized rock and wood collecting behind her as she made her way through the remains of the Fort.

Ilea broke out on the other side, finding a devastated battlefield. *That explosion did quite some work. Claire would be proud.*

She tried to find a barrel or crate in the underground with her spherical perception but everything seemed to be gone. Her ash armor receded, clothes still clean as she stepped out into the open, finding not only a few Paladins but also Joel and Kyrie waiting for her.

A Paladin rushed out from within the tunnel, taking a wide berth around her before she joined up with the other members of her Order, relaying Bryce's commands.

Joel grumbled something, handing a pouch to his brother.

Kyrie remained silent, nodding to Ilea with a grateful expression.

"What was the bet?" she asked, joining them as she stretched. "I don't suppose you have the formula for whatever alchemical agent caused this explosion?"

"I thought you disliked the discussion of trade," Kyrie said.

"You're right. I'm sure your Queen can work something out with Ravenhall. Let her know interest may be there," Ilea said. "The bet?"

"You're the first one out. Not a drop of blood on you," Kyrie answered.

Ilea glanced at Joel. "You thought I'd get hurt?"

The man smiled. "No. I said you would teleport up. Kyrie suggested you would help the others out."

"I just can't help my selfless heart," she said.

"I'm sure I would do a lot of good too with that kind of power," Joel said.

"No you wouldn't," Kyrie stated.

Joel looked at the tunnel. "Yeah, probably not."

"I really can't be bothered with more political shit or training today," Ilea said. "Care to give me that tour you mentioned?" she asked, looking at the kingsguard.

Joel looked at her, a smirk on his face as he shook his head lightly. "I'm afraid one of us has to remain to make sure the Corinth don't summon more demons."

Ilea looked between the two brothers. She was pretty sure one of them would very much hate that job, which made the situation a little confusing.

Until Joel punched his brother and walked past them. "You did win the bet after all."

Kyrie leaned back a little, a slight smirk on his face as he looked after his brother. "I would gladly give you a tour, if you would have me."

I see, Ilea thought, seeing Joel roll his eyes within her dominion. "I'm not interested in a political marriage."

"A shame. I would've hunted the courting gift myself," Kyrie said in a dry tone. He walked closer and stopped by her side. "I'm sure you're aware of my capabilities. Perhaps you'd be interested in a tour of our capital involving the creations of its highest level cooks."

"I'm aware of your investigations. Bribing me with food isn't going to work more than once," she said and turned to look at him.

“I was hoping it would work. I lack a few hundred levels to impress you with magic, I’m afraid,” Kyrie said. “Though I do know some beautiful spots in Halstein.”

Ilea smiled, extending her hand. “I suppose I could be convinced if a nice view is involved.”

Kyrie spread his wings and gently took her hand.

She smirked, her ashen wings spreading as well. “I suggest you hold on tight.”

The man didn’t hesitate, holding onto the spreading ash and her arm as he braced himself.

“Try not to pass out,” she said, her wings vibrating with power before they shot off towards Halstein.

Joel looked after the flying pair, cloaks fluttering as a wave of wind rushed past. *Always going for the most dangerous prey. I suppose they have that in common.*

“Are you interested in that monster too?” Naomi asked, the Paladin joining him to give an official report of what happened inside the Fort.

“How could I not? She could kill me with a single strike,” he mused.

The woman shook her head. “Men,” she murmured.

“You don’t seem disinterested either, with that look on your face,” Joel said, lightly punching her shoulder.

“Joel, stop it,” Naomi hissed before she looked around.

They stepped aside, letting the Corinth Order get to work. A lot of cleanup had to be done after all. They would probably be here for the better part of today, much longer if they ever wanted to use this Fort again.

“She’s dangerous. I hope you know that,” Naomi said when they had sat down, Joel sharing some of the food he had stolen from the feast.

He bit into some poultry, watching one of the Paladins talk about the monster they had fought. “A true demon, that’s for sure. Couldn’t be happier that she’s Lilith. Can you imagine if one of yours had that kind of power?”

Naomi sighed. “Wouldn’t be much better in Eilhart’s hands.”

“He wouldn’t be the worst. But for once we actually agree on something,” Joel said and grinned. “There’s a village half an hour eastward. Why don’t we find a comfortable inn to get that report done?”

“Weren’t you tasked to oversee our problematic Order?” Naomi teased, leaning back a little.

“Bryce is here. His sense of duty is plenty for all of Halstein. I’m sure nobody will complain too harshly,” he said.

“Only if you promise not to think of her,” Naomi said.

“Didn’t think you’d care,” he answered and stood up. “Let’s see if they have enough ale available for the both of us.”

Naomi brushed off her armor and joined him. “She may have been sent by our gods. I’d feel... a little conflicted.”

Joel started laughing, dodging the punch coming at his face. He dodged a few more times as he retreated, the two ending up in a tumble. “The inn,” he said, his face close to hers.

“The inn,” Naomi repeated and flew upwards.