

“Dimoiya’s done!”

Frienne stifled a yawn as Dimoiya emerged from the post office in Corelyn Harbour’s west square. Before they departed for Corelyn Harbour, the inquisitive foreign affairs official who couldn’t mail herself to Arwintar insisted on at least mailing a report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

“Out of curiosity,” Frienne said, “how will the post office in Arwintar deliver your message?”

“That’s a good question. I guess I’ll find out when we get back. Oh, did you see the shop beside the post office?”

“The beauty parlour? What about it?”

Since Corelyn Harbour’s districts weren’t organised as they would be if it was an urban centre in the Empire, one found certain shops in places where they otherwise wouldn’t. For Frienne’s part, she wasn’t even keeping an eye out for a beauty parlour in what she was accustomed to recognising as a lower-class district.

“It’s run by Vampires, too!”

“...are you certain about that?”

“Yeah,” Dimoiya nodded, “when the Vampires aren’t working at the post office, they work at the parlour! They offer manicures, facials, massages...”

“For what reason would they work at a beauty parlour?”

“Money,” Liane’s voice came from behind them. “The Undead don’t need to sleep, but, for some reason, they have to take shifts at work.”

“I’m not sure if I even want to begin exploring that,” Frienne said.

“They’re working on a fashion line too. I can’t wait ‘till it comes out. Ready to go?”

Frienne nodded, and they left the square to board their carriage. Their things were already packed away for their trip to Warden’s Vale, so their next destination was the harbour where they would board a ship to Ludmila’s demesne. They found Rangobart already at the waterfront with a

single piece of baggage sitting on the pavement at his feet. The new Viscount stood with his arms crossed as he watched the activity in the drydocks nearby. It looked like several Death-series servitors were painting the bottom of one of the Sorcerous Kingdom's cargo ships red.

"What's the purpose of the paint?" Frianne asked, "Is it some sort of new technology?"

"I didn't ask," Rangobart answered.

"It's, uh...*tradition*," Liane told them.

They turned to regard the Countess.

"Tradition?" Frianne said, "That sounds interesting. Now that you mention it, I haven't yet noticed any traditions unique to the Sorcerous Kingdom in my stay so far."

"That may be true," Liane replied, "but you're probably better off not knowing the source of this one."

"That only makes me even more curious," Rangobart said.

"I'm sure that Zahradnik will be more than happy to tell you about it. Anyway, it looks like your ship is here."

One of the Sorcerous Kingdom's steel river barges emerged from a lock at the end of the harbour. In addition to the ensign of the Sorcerous Kingdom and House Corelyn, a third banner displaying some sort of white bird on a forest green field fluttered from the stern of the vessel. Liane's footmen brought their baggage to the boarding area as the ship glided in smoothly under a nearby gurney crane.

"It doesn't seem like many passengers use this route," Frianne said. "Or any at all, aside from us."

"Yeah, the route between Corelyn Harbour and Warden's Vale is almost all cargo," Liane replied. "Living things can't sail down the Katze River to the Syrellian Way without getting swarmed by the Undead and there isn't much reason for outsiders to visit Warden's Vale."

"That's surprising given how expansive Baroness Zahradnik's territory is."

"I can't say it's not huge," Liane said, "but, well, it's also probably not what you expect it to be. I know you two think you might get some hints about how to develop your new territories by visiting Zahradnik, but I'm also pretty sure how she'll respond when you ask."

“And how is that?”

“Is it truly necessary’?”

Frianne considered Liane’s answer, which was delivered in an approximation of Ludmila’s mellow voice. The words made little sense to her. Did it perhaps have something to do with the realities of frontier development? She supposed that she wasn’t very well apprised of those matters, as it was also something of a disconnect between the civilian aristocracy and their frontier counterparts in the Empire.

Liane’s footmen loaded their baggage onto the barge and Liane led them to a passenger cabin built atop the ship’s aftcastle. It shared many similarities with the luxurious carriages in which they had travelled around the Sorcerous Kingdom aside from the ship’s cabin being made to accommodate four times the number of people. Frianne touched the clear glass windows that afforded them a generous view in all directions with a gloved hand.

“And you say that barely any passengers use these ships?”

“In the Sorcerous Kingdom, yeah,” Liane replied. “The riverlands only cover the southern part of the Duchy of E-Rantel and there aren’t any navigable rivers elsewhere. These ships are always booked full in the Draconic Kingdom, though.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask about that,” Rangobart asked. “What happened in the Draconic Kingdom, exactly? There isn’t much information about it in the Empire.”

“They got invaded by their neighbours,” Liane said. “We came along and chased the invaders back out. Now, everyone’s friends.”

“Including the invaders?” The nobleman frowned.

“That is a *very good* question. If you ever get a chance to ask Queen Oriculus, I’d like to know what you think of her answer.”

“Will she be visiting the exhibition at some point?”

“That would be a debacle!” Dimoiya shouted, “The Imperial Ministry of Foreign Affairs will be disgraced if they don’t have a representative present!”

“It’s a good thing that they do,” Liane said.

Dimoiya stared across Frianne at Liane.

“You...you mean Queen Oriculus is *really* coming?”

“Who knows?” Liane shrugged, “We let them know what was going on, so they’ll at least send a few representatives. I think the probability of Queen Oriculus showing up depends on how much liquor we sacrifice to summon her.”

“Ugh, Dimoiya needs to prepare. This is too big of a chance for me to let slip by! How much do you think we need?”

Frianne smiled silently as Liane quoted a figure. She doubted that a sovereign could be enticed into making an appearance with something like liquor. As the two became engrossed in their scheming, Frianne pulled a chair out from under the counter running under the cabin windows, taking a seat to watch the gantry crane over the ship go back and forth.

Some sort of frame was attached to the containers in the ship’s hold, allowing them to be conveniently lifted away and deposited onto a waiting wagon being drawn by a Soul Eater. Once the Soul Eater trotted away with its load, another came to take its place and the process repeated itself. The deceptively simple routine would probably fool anyone with no experience in logistics into thinking there was nothing special about it, but any dock worker would probably cry upon witnessing what was going on.

In the span of thirty minutes, a caravel’s worth of cargo was transferred – something that would take a conventional harbour two days to accomplish. Imitation by other countries was nigh impossible. The Sorcerous Kingdom had nearly monopolised the entire Dwarven Kingdom’s steel industry to build everything that they needed and there were also many unknown magics involved.

Much like its stance on matters of security, the Sorcerous Kingdom didn’t care about others witnessing its methods because no one could hope to match them. In fact, the more people adopted those methods through the Sorcerous Kingdom, the more influential the Sorcerous Kingdom would become.

“Anyway,” Liane said, “I should hop off before they sail away with me. Clara and I will see you if you get back.”

*If?*

Liane hopped over the ship's railing and vanished. A moment later, the barge smoothly left its moorings. Rangobart looked out of a side window, leaning this way and that.

"What are you doing, Rangobart?" Frianne asked.

"Trying to see what's moving this ship," Rangobart answered. "There aren't any sails or paddles and I don't see any other external forces acting upon it."

"Golems, perhaps?"

"That sounds like a very 'Head Court Mage' answer, Your Excellency."

Frienne grimaced.

"I hope you War Wizards don't go around talking about my position like that all the time."

"You can bet that we do when it comes to our field of expertise," Rangobart replied. "I visited the Tower of Evocation before coming here. Those people are utterly useless. I think I now know how a Farmer would feel if they ever got a chance to speak with the Ministry of Agriculture."

The Tower of Evocation – officially known as the Imperial Ministry of Magic's Department of War Magic – was much like any other department in the Ministry in its organisation. In terms of its practical usefulness, however, it was far below that of the other departments. Like their former master, the fellows at the Ministry were obsessed with delving into the mysteries of magic and that more often meant changing the colour and sound of *Lightning* or trying to cook steaks with *Fireballs* than it did coming up with new magic to blow people up with.

Despite this, the Imperial Army was the department's biggest backer. The spells that they already had were perfectly fine for blowing people up and Frianne didn't know any Imperial Knights who didn't like steak. Most annoyingly, institutions didn't like too much change at once and the Imperial Army was no exception. The Department of War Magic not being a source of radical developments was a comforting thing that the Imperial Army happily accepted.

"I thought you might be a good influence on them," Frianne said.

"They're not even War Wizards," Rangobart scoffed. "They're Evokers. You cease to exist the moment you start talking about any aspect of being a War Wizard that doesn't involve lighting things on fire."

“But you’re the Lord of Brennenthal,” Frianne noted.

“Don’t even joke about that,” Rangobart grumbled. “I’m fairly certain half of them were excited to meet me solely because they thought that I turned an entire dale into some hellish conflagration.”

“I think it’s a very fitting title for a War Wizard,” Frianne smiled.

Rangobart gave her a sidelong look.

“Don’t tell me *you* named that fief...”

“I didn’t, but the Court Council just *loves* putting meaning into titles. They are all Nobles, after all; I wouldn’t be at all surprised if that’s why you received it.”

“Then, I hope that means that my land isn’t actually on fire. Anyway, I don’t think I can make it work with the Department of ‘War Magic’. The Imperial Army will probably end up with its own thing, much like the Corps of Engineers does.”

It was an expected conclusion. Just as the Corps of Engineers avoided the Tower of Transmutation like the cousin that no one wanted to admit to having, the Imperial Army’s War Wizards would likely pretend that the Imperial Ministry of Magic’s Tower of Evocation didn’t exist.

“So long as something useful comes out of it,” Frianne said, “I doubt the Empire will care what form your efforts take.”

“If I succeed,” Rangobart told her, “I’m going to steal a sizeable chunk out of the Ministry of Magic’s budget.”

“I don’t consider that explicitly a bad thing. Magic in the Empire is too esoteric due to the precedents that Fluder Paradyne set. The Ministry of Magic has been able to get away with far too much because of this.”

“You would rise drastically in the estimation of the nobility if you admitted that to them,” Rangobart said.

“Where do I sit right now?”

“On top of the pile of imperial princesses,” Rangobart said. “I’m sure the impression will remain unchanged in our generation so long as you don’t do anything hateworthy.”

“What about my posting as Head Court Mage?”

“You’re the imperial princess serving as Head Court Mage.”

Frienne let out a tired sigh, leaning back on her chair to lightly cross her wrists over her belly. The barge was slowly sinking into one of the pair of locks on the western side of the harbour, waiting to be released into the Katze River. After a moment, she cast a *Mage Hand* spell to fish a Lizardman blanket out of one of her bags. For some strange reason, they felt very nice to wear.

“You know,” Frienne said, “you’re right about the ‘Head Court Mage answer’ thing. It only goes to show how poorly developed our institutions are when it comes to magic.”

“Are you saying that Fluder Paradyne would have provided the very same answer?”

“It would be something similar, though I don’t have a long white beard to give off the air of sagacity. That’s just the way that the laymen see us. Questions about magic can somehow be asked of any Wizard, and the Head Court Mage is the go-to source of magical knowledge in the Court Council.”

“Well,” Rangobart said, “that doesn’t sound dire at all. Then again, I suppose it shouldn’t be a surprise.”

She could only be thankful that he chose to express his understanding rather than blame her for her inexperience or gender as the members of the Court Council might. As long-lived as Fluder Paradyne was, no mage could know everything about magic. Yet, that was how people saw things in the Empire.

“The Baharuth Empire was famed across the region for having a Sixth-tier caster for generations,” Frienne told him, “yet, that same man prioritised magic over the Empire. Looking back, the only thing that seemed to matter to the Empire was the fact that he was strong. Everyone took him at his word and did whatever he suggested. The result is beyond ‘dire’. Now that he’s gone, nearly everything he left behind rings hollow and we are burdened with the task of replacing the illusion that he wove over us with something that can stand up to reality.”

“Then I hope you have an army of geniuses hidden away somewhere,” Rangobart replied. “Even the magic stream in the Imperial Magic Academy barely gets its students anywhere. You’ve often said that we should treat magic as something that society in general should embrace, but even mages do not understand magic.”

Frienne gazed absently at the neatly-ordered vineyards planted along the river. It was indeed one of the fundamental problems that they faced. In any field, imitation was far easier than innovation. With magic, however, the difficulties of innovation were far beyond what mundane vocations faced. The way that the Empire did things compounded the problem incalculably.

The Imperial Magic Academy could ‘teach’ magic, but what it amounted to was rote learning. Students learned to do what the coursework said that they should be able to do. In all but a few cases, what amounted to magical theory could not be solidified into magical law. The Empire would never accept a foundation based on unproven theories, and so the Academy’s curriculum focused on making sure that students could at least cast a set of state-mandated spells based on their ‘growth’ as mages.

Most students in the magic stream graduated as First-tier casters. People who achieved the Third tier of magic before graduating – such as Frienne and her friend, Arche – were hailed as geniuses. Of the two of them, only Arche showed anything resembling enough of an understanding of magic that could lead to a career in research.

Magical research was difficult: especially when it came to creating new magic. The established theories that had wormed their way into the Academy’s curriculum were useless and magical ‘law’ was no better than magical theory. When attempting to cast new spells, failure resulted in expended mana and no tangible result. There was no hint as to what went wrong or where the researcher might have gone astray. Most aspiring researchers quit, claiming that there was something wrong with magic itself. Most who succeeded in their research could not adequately explain how they succeeded, and those who claimed that they did pretty much didn’t.

To an Empire that refused to believe in anything but equations that they could put to practical use, the only way to implement magic was through imitating what was already proven. They were all too happy to take advantage of magical knowledge and all too ready to reject the problems associated with that same knowledge. The Imperial Administration was akin to a faith in itself and challenging anything recognised and approved by the state was heresy.

“I hope Warden’s Vale has some hints for us,” Frienne sighed.

“You mean Nemel?” Rangobart asked.

“Nemel? Why would her name come up now?”



"Nemel and a few others live there now," Dimoiya told her. "Well, in some part of Baroness Zahradnik's territory."

Had Ludmila mentioned that? Frianne couldn't recall. She had been exposed to so much new information since her arrival in the Sorcerous Kingdom that there was no telling how much she had already forgotten.

"How did you know that, Dimoiya?"

"Hehehe," Dimoiya adjusted her spectacles, "Dimoiya has her sources."

"Dimoiya lives right next to the Grans," Rangobart's voice was flat.

"S-Stalker!" Dimoiya cried.

"Did you know about this, Rangobart?" Frianne furrowed her brow, "Don't tell me what I intervened in back at the Academy was worse than I—"

Rangobart put up a hand between them. His reactions were nowhere near as satisfying as they were during her Academy days.

"Back after the Blister Campaign," he said, "Nemel had already been taken on as a seneschal by one of Baroness Zahradnik's Knights. Fendros, Elise, and Ida went with her as assistants. I thought for certain that you were going there because of them."

"Why would I go there just for Nemel?" Frianne asked.

"Because...well, I'm not aware of everything that she's been up to, so it's probably best to hear it from her directly."

*If it's Nemel Gran, then she must have taken up her family craft on top of being a seneschal...*

Frianne had heard that her junior at the Academy joined the Imperial Air Service as a customs officer, but it felt like a wasteful decision to her. House Gran did perfectly fine doing what they were doing and Nemel could have gotten work anywhere as both a noblewoman and a Wizard. She wasn't sure what was more confusing: the fact that Nemel had joined the Imperial Army or the fact that she had left the army to do in the Sorcerous Kingdom what she should have done in the Empire in the first place.

The warmth of the Lizardman blanket eventually got to her and, when she next stirred, she swore that a distant roar had awoken her. Frianne yawned and peered about, trying to make sense of what was going on. She was alone in the cabin, however.

*I thought my sleepy days were over. Maybe I've gotten lazy from being in the Sorcerous Kingdom for the last few weeks...*

Life in the Sorcerous Kingdom was filled with all sorts of temptations...or maybe it was just living with Clara. Everything in Clara's personal apartments on the third floor of Corelyn Castle was luxuriously comfortable and Frianne found herself randomly taking naps in various places. Strangely enough, Clara always seemed to be awake – as did Liane.

Another set of roars turned her head to the starboard side of the barge, but all she could see was a rocky cliff of dark granite. She rose from her chair, wrapping her blanket around her shoulders before leaving the cabin to look for Dimoiya and Rangobart. Her two juniors were outside standing at a railing as they looked up at the same obstacle that had blocked her vision from the cabin.

“What's going on?” Frianne asked.

“It sounds like there's a battle going on up there,” Rangobart said.

“A battle? In the Sorcerous Kingdom?”

“Well, they do have an army. Lady Zahradnik mentioned that there was a military base in her demesne, so it would stand to reason that they conduct exercises of some sort.”

*Is there any point in having the Undead train?*

As far as she understood it, the Undead manifested in forms that were already deadly enough. Undead beings summoned through necromancy didn't need any training to do what they did.

More roars rolled over the edge of the cliff, but this time they were accompanied by cheers.

“Yeah, probably training,” Rangobart said.

“Is the Imperial Army like this?” Dimoiya asked.

“If you get enough Imperial Knights together, it can sound similar.”

Frienne shook her head and scanned their surroundings. The Katze River was half as wide as when it flowed by Corelyn Harbour and a mountain range rose in stark relief to its waters on the port side of the ship. Directly ahead of them was a massive, snow-capped mountain with cascades coursing down its forested slopes like dozens of white veins.

“I never knew there was a place like this in the Duchy of E-Rantel,” she shaded her eyes against the afternoon sun.

“You never heard the rumours from the Imperial Army?” Rangobart asked.

“Apparently not,” Frienne answered. “What rumour is this?”

“That the patrols in the southwest noticed that one of the peaks here didn’t lose its snow during the summer. Lady Zahradnik has a Frost Dragon, so I assumed that that mountain is where she lives. Nemel confirmed it on our trip from Arwintar.”

Did that mean that Frost Dragons had the power to freeze over mountains? The only place that they were known to exist in the past was the Azerlisia Mountains, and those peaks were perpetually covered in ice.

As the cries of battle or training or whatever it was faded behind them, they came to a distinct stretch of the cliff that looked like it had been cut out, complete with towers sticking out of the water where the landmass should have continued. Pairs of crimson eyes watched them as the barge made its way by, eventually arriving at a series of huge slots cut into the stone. It took a moment for Frienne to realise that each one of them was a lock similar to the ones at the entrances to Corelyn Harbour.

There were far too many of them, however, and she remained confused until their barge entered one of them and was raised to the harbour level. Each lock was in reality a berth that brought them before a long line of warehouses and cargo lots that nearly stretched to the northern horizon. The gurney crane sitting above the berth started moving as soon as the water finished rising and Frienne disembarked with Dimoiya and Rangobart through a gangway on the ship’s starboard side.

“This is sort of weird,” Dimoiya said. “It’s noisy, but quiet at the same time.”

Frienne nodded in agreement. The statement seemed contradictory, yet it was easy to see why she had said it. Undead dockworkers could be seen everywhere as they unloaded the barge and went about some other tasks, but there was a distinct lack of the living. It made the entire place seem cold and sterile compared to Corelyn Harbour.

The yellow-green flames of a Soul Eater drew their attention to some sort of vehicle coming up the road toward them. It didn't much resemble any of the carriages they had seen in the Sorcerous Kingdom so far, but its boxy look and glass windows suggested that it was a carriage of some type. A Death Knight stomped up to open what appeared to be its only door – which opened the rear of the vehicle – and Ludmila stepped out along with two Maids. One of them was Aemila Luzi, whom Frianne had first met in Arwintar. The second was a teal-haired woman with distinct elven features.

“Countess Waldenstein,” Ludmila smiled. “Officer Roberbad. Officer Erex. Welcome to Warden’s Vale.”

“Thank you for having us, Baroness Zahradnik,” Frianne returned her greeting. “This is quite the place you have here.”

“That’s probably the most popular opening statement that new visitors make. I can understand the sentiment, however. My fief isn’t much to look at after coming from Corelyn Harbour and the rest of the Sorcerous Kingdom. We have little aside from the scenery.”

“You could probably set up pensions here,” Dimoiya said. “I bet people would come from all over the place to relax.”

“I’ve had that suggested on several occasions,” Ludmila replied. “Some of the other Nobles have even asked if they could build summer villas here. I don’t consider it a bad idea, but my territory is a bit complicated.”

Three Death Knights came over to carry their things. Their host gestured to the vehicle parked on the road near the berth.

“Let’s get everyone situated in their accommodations first,” she said. “Explaining how things work here will take a very long time.”