

“I caught up with those entries that arrived while I was away, Lady Zahradnik.”

“What do you think?” Ludmila asked.

“They were interesting,” Nemel said. “It was disappointing to find out that Elena couldn’t qualify for the 897th annual Axis championship. The biggest shock was finding out that the nice guy who kept visiting her at the Imperial Archive was actually the crown prince! And now they’re getting married...it’s a development you’d usually only find in romantic fiction.”

“Eh? What are you talking about?” Dimoiya asked, “Is there a new volume of *Dreams of Red*?”

Frienne gently stroked the fluffy thing on her lap while listening to the other women chat. It had been merely half a year since the latest volume of the popular novel series had been released, but The Dreamer lived in the Sorcerous Kingdom and Lady Zahradnik possessed an advance copy of the previous volume during her visit to the Empire. Her getting her hands on another advance copy was entirely possible.

“I don’t think so,” Nemel said. “It’s not written like *Dreams of Red*. They’re more like the diary entries of someone who lived in the distant past...except the civilisation that this woman lived in seems to be far more advanced than anything I know of.”

“Are they from another part of the continent?”

“They refer to geographical features in our region,” Nemel said. “I can only assume that she’s from around here...except I’m not familiar with any of the places that would tell us exactly where.”

“What features does she mention?” Dimoiya asked.

“The Azerlisia Mountains is one of them. The Syrellian Way, as well.”

“There’s no mention of Re-Estize or the Baharuth Empire?”

“No. Karnassus is mentioned once, though.”

“If Karnassus is mentioned as a country,” Rangobart said, “then that woman lived before the Demon Gods. It’s strange that Baharuth isn’t mentioned. Don’t our histories claim that the Empire existed before Re-Estize?”

“Re-Estize claims that Re-Estize existed before the Demon Gods, too,” Ludmila said.

“That’s clearly a lie,” Rangobart scoffed. “It’s a sliver of the truth, at best. House Vaiself invaded from Karnassus to conquer the lands left devastated and weak in the wake of the Demon Gods. Some of the houses of Re-Estize may have existed where they were before the time of the Demon Gods, but House Vaiself usurped the lands of the original Empire.”

“So that’s where this diary is from, then?” Dimoiya asked, “The original Empire?”

“It could be,” Ludmila said. “But we can’t figure out how old the entries are. They use their own calendar and refer to historical events in their own terms.”

“What about the Dwarves?” Frianne asked, “Shouldn’t they have some records of the old Empire?”

“They do,” Ludmila said. “The problem is that they aren’t very helpful beyond knowing that the Azerlisian Mountain Dwarves once had a thriving trade relationship with the country that existed on both sides of the Azerlisia Mountains. That trade relationship was so ancient that the oldest ledgers have long disintegrated. From what we can tell, trade with the ‘Old Empire’ was already thriving before the advent of the Six Great Gods. It’s impossible to pin when this diary was written with what has been translated so far.”

“Should a diary take all that long to translate? One could just use a translation spell.”

Ludmila shook her head.

“Translation spells don’t work,” she said. “It’s written in something similar to the aristocratic cypher that some Nobles like to play around with.”

Frianne’s mind went back to the arrival of Countess Corelyn’s party at the Imperial Palace, and then their eventual meeting with Frianne’s grandmother.

“Wait,” Frianne said. “Is this related to the ‘dangerous history’ that you discussed with the Dowager Duchess?”

“It is,” Ludmila nodded. “Since then, Corelyn has labelled this language as ‘High Imperial’, but then we found out that a simplified form of it is spoken in the Draconic Kingdom. Queen Oriculus told us that it’s known as Low Draconic: a form of Draconic that was used as the world’s common language before the coming of the Eight Greed Kings.”

“That’s quite the puzzle you have on your hands,” Rangobart said. “It’s just the sort of thing that Bards, Nobles, and Sages would sink all their resources into solving. But why is it dangerous?”

“Because people who try to figure out this puzzle tend to die,” Ludmila told them.

Dimoiya clapped her hands over her ears. Rangobart crossed his arms over the table and leaned forward.

“How do they die, exactly?” He asked, “Some sort of ancient curse?”

“Assassins, as far as I know,” Ludmila shrugged. “The ancient enemy of this ancient Empire is still around and it seems intent on erasing any record and memory of its existence. We still haven’t any clue why.”

Frienne considered the presented points. Nemel mentioned that the civilisation of the ancient empire was highly advanced – more advanced than the present-day countries that she knew of. The most apparent motive was that the ‘ancient enemy’ was a rival of the ancient empire and still feared its resurrection even after untold centuries had passed.

Once in a while – though less frequently as time went on – ancient ruins would be discovered in the region. It was well known that such ruins tended to contain wealth and relics from ages past and most of those relics were beyond the artifice of present-day industry. Every country had a few of them, though the ones in the Empire belonged to one Noble house or the other. Those who wielded them were far too dangerous for the Empire to challenge.

The glaring omission in the discussion was the Sorcerous Kingdom’s stake in the investigation. The Sorcerer King’s claim to the E-Rantel region was supposedly ancient, so the Sorcerer King could very well know more than Ludmila was letting on. This presented several possibilities.

One was that the Sorcerer King was the ‘ancient enemy’ and the investigation was simply bait to attract any would-be investigators and use them to sweep up leftover bits of information. With the Sorcerous Kingdom now exerting control over the area once occupied by the ancient empire, the ancient empire would be definitively lost to history.

Another possibility was that the Sorcerer King represented a surviving fragment of the ancient empire. The absurd military might of the Sorcerous Kingdom and its robust defensive infrastructure might be preparations to fight a war of the ancients that would make the Demon Gods’ rampage seem like a minor Goblin raid.

*Should I include that in my report? No, that might end up in a dead Court Council. It’s something better shared in private with Jircniv...*

Maybe his hair would start falling out again. Was there even a point in knowing? The Empire could do nothing if a war between these ancient powers erupted, so ignorance was bliss.

The third major possibility was that the Sorcerous Kingdom was quietly investigating the ancient empire and its ancient enemy to see what sort of threat it might represent. That could also explain its ongoing military preparations.

If so, how did the Empire figure into the scenario? Were they simply a buffer state to stall intruders from the east? Was that why the Sorcerous Kingdom had pushed to integrate Death-series Servitors into the Imperial Army? Once, it made it seem like the Empire would be invulnerable with their help. Now, she wasn't so sure.

"Maybe that's why the Katze Plains exists," Dimoiya said. "A war so terrible was fought there that it turned into a permanent negative energy zone."

"The histories do say something to that effect," Rangobart said. "They don't mention the cause of the war or what used to be there. Every country in the region has a claim on the Katze Plains, though."

"What if they were all once a part of the old Empire?" Nemel asked, "Wouldn't that be sad?"

"Sad?"

"Yes, sad. It could be that the countries here are all fragments of the old Empire and now we just squabble over a past we can't remember. A family that has forgotten that it's a family."

Rangobart cleared his throat.

"House Gran may be nice and peaceful internally," he said, "but families to this day squabble over inheritance."

Nemel gave Rangobart a sour look. Nemel's sentiment was nice, but Rangobart was right. If someone had convincingly reconstructed this forgotten history and presented it to the countries in the region, it would likely just become yet another source of conflict.

*It could be that the Sorcerous Kingdom is creating this new hegemony for precisely that reason. An acceptable middle ground that recognises the history that has established itself since then.*

“What do you think about all of this, Zahradnik?” Frianne asked.

“As with many things,” Ludmila answered, “we’re still learning about it. Politically speaking, my duty is to uphold national policy regardless of the outcome.”

Frianne supposed that should have been the expected response. The Sorcerous Kingdom was the preeminent power in the region. The Slane Theocracy, which should have been the power to oppose them, remained quiet on any matter involving the Sorcerous Kingdom. There was Argland, as well, but they had a well-documented policy of non-interference.

*It must be nice to live so worry-free...*

If they had still been Nobles of Re-Estize, switching allegiances to the Theocracy or the Empire would have been a real consideration. Their territories were sitting in the heart of the contested claim, after all, and Re-Estize didn’t stand a chance against any of its neighbours in a serious conflict.

With the Sorcerous Kingdom, loyalty was the best policy. It was other countries that had to worry about losing pieces of themselves to it, which was one of the major reasons why the Emperor had capitulated so quickly. Nobles disgruntled with Jircniv’s rule had no chance to join the Sorcerous Kingdom if the Sorcerous Kingdom recognised the Empire in its whole state.

“By the way,” Frianne said, “Have there been any interesting goings-on regarding Re-Estize?”

“What do you mean?” Ludmila asked.

“It’s been long enough since the Battle of Katze Plains for them to digest the new realities of the region,” Frianne answered. “We haven’t heard anything on our end, but there must surely be hundreds of Noble houses who have made friendly overtures to the Sorcerous Kingdom – especially the ones close to your shared borders.”

“Strangely enough, no.”

“That’s *super* weird,” Dimoiya said. “It should be clear which way things are going. There’s nothing that Re-Estize can do if the Sorcerous Kingdom offers its Nobles a superior contract. You guys should have droves of Nobles joining.”

“I *did* mention how stubborn they’ve been about pursuing any relations with us,” Ludmila said. “If they won’t even agree to a regular economic exchange, political manoeuvring is out of the question.”

Frienne exchanged pointed looks with Dimoiya and Rangobart. There was no way that was possible. The only thing that kept Re-Estize’s Nobles from openly declaring for the Empire was the fact that they were physically cut from the Empire by the Azerlisia Mountains and the Duchy of E-Rantel. With the Sorcerous Kingdom, that wasn’t a concern.

The most likely answer to the puzzle was that the Sorcerous Kingdom was planning on taking the whole country at once. They probably had an insider that they planned to install as Re-Estize’s new sovereign, ruling over the Kingdom as a client state in a similar arrangement as the Sorcerous Kingdom had with the Empire.

*Ramossa has been sitting on the matter of succession for years. One of the Princes must have jumped at the chance to strike a deal with the Sorcerous Kingdom.*

If so, it would be the Second Prince, Zanic. Reports made to the Court Council indicated that he was far superior to his brother, Barbaro, but Barbaro was the rightful heir and had support that the King couldn’t ignore. The rise of a pretender through marriage with one of the royal princesses was also a distant possibility.

*Or the Sorcerous Kingdom could be colluding with the monster herself.*

After a moment’s thought, Frienne decided that was the most likely case. While they had adopted the laws of Re-Estize, the Sorcerous Kingdom had not adopted its customs and had no reason to. The Empire’s dealings with their suzerain over the past year made it clear that they valued capability over tradition.

Re-Estize would be ruled by Queen Renner sooner or later. It was only a question of when she would take power and how it would happen. The Sorcerous Kingdom could easily support a coup, but that wasn’t the way it operated.

Their chatter died down as a rugged-looking man came up the stairs. He made an awkward bow before delivering his report.

“The next patrol is ready to sortie, Miss Gran.”

Nemel rose from her seat.

“Anything to report from last night?” She asked.

“No, ma’am,” the man replied. “Things are quiet as usual. The closest thing to trouble is the Ogre tribe across the river, but they’re still keeping to themselves.”

“I see. What about the Sun Rock Tribe?”

“There’s been no trace of their raiding parties since our boys licked ‘em upriver last week.”

“You got raided?” Rangobart asked.

“We did,” Nemel answered. “The big tribe on this side of the Upper Reaches has been expanding since mid-spring.”

“That’s terrible!” Frianne said, “Aren’t they fellow subjects of the Sorcerous Kingdom?”

“The Upper Reaches is a special administrative zone that retains many of the traditional practices of the local tribes,” Ludmila said. “This side of Mount Verilyn is technically a part of the Upper Reaches.”

“But...”

“I’m alright with it, strangely enough,” Nemel said.

Friane gave Nemel an incredulous look.

“Why? Isn’t this an unnecessary expenditure of resources? Not to mention exposing your people to the threat of injury and death.”

Nemel laughed and waved her hand dismissively.

“It’s not as if we’re fighting a war,” she said. “Think of it like Imperial Army patrols, I guess? Most of the ‘raids’ consist of unlicensed hunters poaching our game and us chasing them off.”

“If you require security,” Friane said, “just employ Death Knights. There are hundreds of them in Warden’s Vale.”

“This might sound weird,” Nemel said, “but I think things are fine the way that they are. The Goblins volunteered for it in the first place and it’s good for them.”

“I don’t see how it could be ‘good for them’.”

“The pride that it creates is important,” Nemel said. “It gives people definition. A sense of ownership. Just letting everyone enjoy everything freely and without consequence leads to detachment and decadence. Maybe I’m explaining this poorly...”

“I get what you’re saying,” Rangobart said. “Most of the Imperial Knights think the same way. Even with the Death-series Servitors being incorporated into the army, no one wants to quit. If anything, they’ve become more competitive.”

*These two military idiots.*

Rangobart was a man so Frianne expected some of that thinking out of him, but it looked like Nemel had caught the Imperial Knights’ collective stupidity from her brief period of service, as well.

Friane was startled by a collective stomp that sounded as Nemel went to the railing of the balcony. Unbeknownst to Friane, a group of Goblins had gathered in the clearing below them.

“Is that a Goblin company?” Rangobart asked.

“Something like that,” Nemel smiled and waved at the Goblins. “At first, they formed squads. Once there were enough squads, they formed companies. No one asked them to – they just banded together like that on their own.”

The little green Demihumans formed a neat, ten-by-ten square and offered a salute to Nemel. On the right side of each rank was a Goblin atop a big, black wolf. Beside them was another Goblin in shamanistic garb.

“Squads of ten with one Rider and one Druid each,” Rangobart murmured. “All this company is missing is its Captain.”

“That’s supposedly a Hobgoblin’s role,” Nemel said. “We don’t have any yet, but Lady Zahradnik says that she’s killed thousands of them so there are bound to be more around. Actually, I’m not even sure how Hobgoblins happen – they just appear in the Imperial Air Service’s study materials without an explanation about what causes them to appear.”

*This is probably how you end up with Hobgoblins...*

Frienne's familiarity with the topic was a mix of cursory education, common knowledge, and old folklore, but it all pointed to the idea that 'advanced' Goblinoids tended to appear as regular Goblin populations grew numerous. Not only did Hobgoblins appear to lead them, but Bugbears showed up to supplement their ranks with the brutish strength that Goblins lacked. Monsters and magical beasts with special relationships to Goblins, such as Barghests, Boggarts, and Wargs, also appeared. Curiously, everything that manifested with large numbers of Goblins was known to eat Goblins, but the Goblins didn't seem to mind.

"So does this company patrol your village's surroundings," Rangobart asked, "or all of Dame Verilyn's fief?"

"Dame Verilyn made me seneschal of a roughly fifty-kilometre span of the valley below Mount Verilyn," Nemel answered. "It's only the north side of the river that joins with the Katze here, but it's still a good three hundred square kilometres or so of ground to cover."

"...that's a lot of land," Rangobart said. "It's twice the size of your family's barony."

"I know right? When we first discussed what I would be doing here, Dame Verilyn said it was about ten villages' worth. What I didn't realise was that it was ten Warden's Vale's villages-worth. It's a good thing she's a Dragon. A Human liege from the Empire would have pestered me endlessly about developing the land as quickly as possible. Not that I'm slacking or anything..."

"Does this whole company patrol together, or do they split up into squads?"

"They patrol as a loose group," Nemel replied. "It takes three days to go upriver and three more days to come back down. They also camp for two days in our little harbour village here and two days at an outpost that they've established at the eastern end of my territory."

"And setting all of that up took a bare handful of months?" Rangobart frowned, "How many of these companies do you have?"

"There are ten of them at the moment. Also, I told you before, right? The Goblins do a lot of this stuff on their own. Rather than organising them, they sort of organise around me."

"Didn't you say that you had around ten thousand Goblins in your territory?"

"Yeah. They're spread out across the forests in the territory, so it isn't as if the companies are patrolling for no reason."

*Was House Gran always so militant? Or Nemel, for that matter?*

Back at the Academy, she mostly registered as timid and harmless when it came to politics between the scions. Most – including Frianne – figured that she would graduate with a respectable academic record and live the relatively quiet, undisturbed life that members of House Gran tended to lead on the surface.

The fact that she had joined the Imperial Air Service may have indicated that she always had a militant streak beneath her innocent guise. Roughly one per cent of the Empire's population was directly involved in the Imperial Army. Nemel, on the other hand, had ten per cent of her Goblin population serving in the military.

Frianne examined the Goblin company arrayed below the balcony. They weren't anywhere near as well-equipped as Imperial Knights, but their armament was still probably enough to give their opponents pause. The wolf cavalry was equipped lightly with bows and demilances, while the infantry was half heavy and half light. Each member of the light infantry was equipped as a hunter with leather armour and a shortbow. Their heavy infantry counterparts also wore leather armour, but each also bore a body-length kite shield, sported steel half helms, and held a steel-headed boar spear.

Once their inspection was completed, the Goblin company marched off in an orderly column through the village. Nemel had her hands on her hips, displaying a satisfied expression as they disappeared into the forest to the east.

"Are you sure that they aren't going off to fight a war somewhere?" Dimoiya asked.

"If the Empire encountered those guys on the frontier," Rangobart added, "there'd be quite the panic. Every village in the area would be screaming for protection."

"They probably would," Nemel replied. "But have you ever thought of it the other way around? The Imperial Army regularly patrols the frontier and their companies are far more intimidating. Why is it unacceptable for Goblins to do the same thing in the eyes of imperial frontiersmen? The only time that they fight is if a fight comes to them, but the Imperial Army will preemptively strike at what they consider imminent threats."

"People's actions are informed by what they believe," Ludmila said. "Fortunately, what they believe isn't necessarily set in stone. The Empire's expansionary policies have led to antagonistic relationships with its neighbours, but General Ray's battalion adapted quickly enough to the presence of Demihuman allies. As have Nemel's settlers. I won't be so naïve as to demand that you should give everyone the benefit of the doubt, but sticking to untested preconceptions has a way of closing doors that one might otherwise benefit from."

“Now that I’ve seen the company off,” Nemel said, “we can take a look around the village. It’s nothing near as grand as Arwintar, but I like how cosy it’s become.”

Their first stop was a long, hall-like structure constructed out of wood. It was completely functional in its appearance, and stepping inside immediately made that function clear. Rows of long tables with chairs facing forward were occupied by Humans and Goblins alike. Fendros was standing before a board at the front, reciting the letters written upon it.

“I was wondering where she disappeared to,” Frianne said.

“Everyone has work to do here,” Nemel said. “It’s quiet, but busy at the same time. Rei spends most of her time in the village teaching classes. She also frequents our office in Warden’s Vale, travelling around while seeing what she can find with her Talent.”

“I don’t recall her having a Talent.”

“It wasn’t anything that she was particularly proud of back in the Empire,” Nemel said. “Master Paradyne and Arche both had superior versions of her Talent, so she didn’t talk about it much out of fear of looking pathetic.”

A frown pulled at Frianne’s lips as Nemel spoke.

“...are you saying that she has the same type of eye power?” Frianne asked, “The one that allows one to visualise arcane potential?”

“Yes, that one. It doesn’t work all the time, so even her parents saw it as useless. If she teaches the same students every day, however...”

“...it’s bound to trigger.”

“Right.”

Frianne’s fingers came up to pinch the bridge of her nose. Ludmila had mentioned that they had someone who could do that, but Frianne never imagined that it was someone from the Empire. How could something like that have happened? The Empire had lost an invaluable Talent holder: one that could have significantly altered several generations of its caster demographic now that Frianne was the Head Court Mage.

*It’s because she’s from an attainted house. First Arche; now Fendros...how much has the Empire lost?*

Once again, the Empire's heavy-handed policies were proven to be self-destructive. Entire Noble lines were attainted for political and ideological reasons and were effectively erased in the eyes of the Imperial Administration. No one would associate with them out of fear of being purged themselves and little to no effort was made to salvage promising individuals.

"How many arcane casters has she identified?" Frianne asked.

"Roughly one in three have the potential for magic," Nemel answered. "They're common to the point where we have to limit how many arcane casters we train, or else we wouldn't have enough tradespeople for the village. Lady Zahradnik also mentioned something about those already committed to other professions being better off doing what they were doing."

"Do you think it would be possible for the Empire to borrow Fendros once in a while?"

Even if the Empire had to pay, it would be worth it to identify new magic casters. Nemel's lip twitched and she turned away to watch Fendros teach her class.

"After all that they've been put through," Nemel said, "do you think you'll receive a favourable reply? The Empire destroyed their houses and their lives, consigning them to a fate that we would consider worse than death. Perhaps the Emperor believes that what he did to them was necessary and justified, but the children of the attainted will never forgive him for his actions."