

“Rangobart.”

The sound of his brother’s voice brought a hush to the migrants gathered around the fire. Rangobart looked over his shoulder to find his brother standing behind him, arms crossed.

“What is it, esteemed brother?”

“How long are you planning on staying out here? Father has been talking you up for thirty minutes now.”

*Talking me up, or using me to talk himself up?*

The latter was the more likely case; he had been doing it for weeks already. Rangobart didn’t begrudge him that, as he was indebted to his father for his upbringing, but his brother had appeared at an inconvenient time.

“I’m currently accompanying Miss Gran,” Rangobart told his brother.

“Oh, please don’t mind me,” Nemel smiled her smiley smile. “I’m sure Count Roberbad and his allies have much to discuss with you before we arrive at the border.”

*This woman...*

They were getting quite engrossed in their discussion about the specific domestic arrangements that Rangobart’s new company would likely need, but that didn’t stop Nemel from taking the chance to dump a bucketful of cold water on him.

“Speaking of which,” Rangobart said, “everyone would surely welcome Miss Gran to their table. This is their first visit to the Sorcerous Kingdom, after all. Miss Gran would be a wellspring of information and I’m sure she would appreciate a meal befitting a noblewoman amongst such refined company in turn.”

“Indeed,” Armando nodded. “You would be most welcome to join us, Miss Gran. In fact, my Lord father and his allies would insist.”

Nemel’s smiley smile turned decidedly unsmiley. Rangobart rose to his feet, offering her his hand. Nemel pointedly ignored it, standing on her own.

“Nob,” she called.

Arlando took a step back when the Goblin appeared out of the darkness moments later.

“Nob?” Nob asked.

“We have a dinner to attend, Nob,” Nemel said. “The good Lords wish to lean on some local expertise.”

“Nob,” Nob puffed out his chest.

As expected, Nemel reached for the nearest brick with which to retaliate against Rangobart. He and his brother watched as the scion of House Gran walked to the town gate with Nob in tow. Rangobart tried to imagine the havoc that a Goblin would wreak in a luxury inn, but his imagination failed him.

Before he knew it, Nemel had convinced the Imperial Knights at the gate to let the Goblin into the town. Rangobart rushed to catch up to her, glancing at the startled townsfolk as he did.

“Miss Gran,” Arlando panted, “this is *highly* irregular.”

“It isn’t illegal to be a Demihuman in the Empire, Lord Arlando,” Nemel replied.

“That may be true, but…”

It wasn’t illegal to be a Demihuman in the Empire, but that allowance was meant for visitors from Karnassus. ‘Civilised’ Demihumans. The Demihumans that existed along the imperial frontier were usually just obliterated on sight by the Imperial Army. The Empire’s relationship to the Sorcerous Kingdom still hadn’t sunk in for most imperial citizens – Rangobart doubted that it ever would so long as nothing in their lives changed for the worse – and any nonhuman visitors from there were still very much subject to the perceptions of imperial culture.

Nemel went straight for the highest-profile inn in the city, which went by the somewhat embarrassing name of *The Emperor’s Smile*, and rolled right through the entrance with her Goblin.

“Wel…”

The host's greeting trailed off at the sight of Nob.

"Wel," the Goblin said.

Nemel didn't say a word, her face a mask of aristocratic expectation. The host wavered for a moment before bowing deeply.

"This way, please, my lady."

The inn's patrons hushed as the Goblin made his way through to the stairs in the back. Rangobart stepped aside to speak with one of the restaurant staff near the second-storey landing.

"A table for the gentleman over there," he told him.

"The *gentleman*...? Ah, of course. What would the *gentleman* like?"

"Meat. A lot of it."

By the time Rangobart caught up with Nemel, she was already using her Goblin to hold his father's table hostage. Her brutal tactics reminded him very much of Baroness Zahradnik back when she dealt with all of the agents following Dame Verilyn around. Every Count and Countess at the table sat frozen as they struggled to exchange pleasant introductions. Rangobart's father kept glancing at him as if it was his fault. Not that he was wrong.

"Your table, sir."

Their attention was drawn to the appearance of one of the restaurant staff. He was standing about three metres from Nob, making motions at the Goblin as if Nob was a dog.

"Dinner's ready, Nob," Rangobart said.

The Goblin finally moved away, seating himself at a table in the corner of the restaurant that was piled high with cold cuts. To the shock of the patrons warily watching him, he actually used the silverware.

"A shame," Nemel sighed. "I was hoping that Nob would do us the favour of dining with us."

“...do *us* the favour?” Count Roberbad furrowed his brow.

“Yes, my lord,” Nemel replied. “It is readily apparent that the members of my lord’s esteemed party are unaccustomed to the presence of other races. I suppose that the extent of everyone’s previous experience would be dealing with prominent Merchants from Karnassus?”

The Nobles around the table nodded.

“So you mean to say that the Sorcerous Kingdom is similar to Karnassus, Miss Gran?” Count Roberbad asked.

“It is not, my lord,” Nemel answered. “Karnassus has a culture all of its own. The races that participate in their society are the same races that have done so since antiquity. Goblins are treated no differently in Karnassus than they are in the Empire. The Sorcerous Kingdom, on the other hand, is indiscriminate. Rule of law reigns and all are welcome so long as they observe the law. Acting out of sorts in the presence of a Goblin, Ogre, Troll, or any other race that receives a less than cool reception in the Empire will mark you out as uncouth.”

“What about the Undead?” Another Count at the table asked, “Is it true that they make a regular appearance?”

“It’s more that they’re a constant presence,” Nemel replied. “They serve as the security forces of the Sorcerous Kingdom, after all. The Undead also participate in its administration and various government services.”

None of the High Nobles at the table were touching their food anymore. Rangobart forked a wedge of potato into his mouth.

“How...how close do the Undead get?” Countess Roberbad’s voice trembled, “I won’t find a Zombie standing at the foot of my bed, will I?”

“That is no more likely than finding an Imperial Knight at the foot of one’s bed, my lady.”

Rangobart held the back of his hand against his lips, stifling a laugh as the faces around the table paled. The woman had developed a uniquely cruel streak if she had said that on purpose. Finding an Imperial Knight at the foot of one’s bed was a common nightmare for civilian aristocrats in the Empire.

“If I’m not mistaken,” Nemel said, “the imperial trade delegations visiting the Sorcerous Kingdom will be staying at Castle Corelyn?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Then please rest assured. The household staff there is Human.”

A collective sigh of relief rose from the assembled aristocrats. Rangobart eyed Nemel appraisingly. She was dominating the table of Counts and Countesses as naturally as a Margrave might. The woman had changed much from the shy, unassuming classmate from the Academy who allowed herself to be exploited by a shameless commoner.

The hours went by with the dinner turning into a briefing being held by Nemel Gran. The next morning, as their caravan embarked on the next leg of its journey, Nemel gave him a pointed look.

“You owe me.”

“Do I?” Rangobart replied.

“You wanted me to foil your father’s plans for the night, didn’t you?” Nemel sighed, “Once upon a time, you thoughtlessly acted to shield a helpless young maiden. Now, you shamelessly use helpless young maidens as shields.”

“I was doing you a favour back then if you didn’t notice,” Rangobart said. “You were utterly defenceless against that parasite.”

“Jet's dead.”

Rangobart frowned at her words. He looked up at Nemel's downcast countenance.

“When did this happen?”

“Sometime during the winter,” Nemel replied. “I went to visit him in Arwintar and found out that Miss Testania had died of starvation. Jet always worked hard to support his mother, so it’s unimaginable that he’d let her perish like that. I tried to reach him with a *Message* spell, but...”

It was the lot of an army recruit. The Empire spared no resources for anyone who wasn’t worth its time. Only Third-class Knights and above saw any care go to their bereaved.

*At least he tried to make something of himself using his own power, in the end.*

He kept that particular thought to himself. Never mind Nemel, most women didn't see things that way. They wanted their friends and loved ones to be safe and happy, ignoring the fact that the commoners who joined the Imperial Army enlisted precisely because they weren't happy with their lot in life. They willingly gambled their lives for something better and losing that gamble was a distinct possibility.

"Which Army Group was he in?"

"The Eighth, but he went to join the Sixth during the reorganisation."

"I see."

The Sixth Army Group's campaign on the southern frontier had even higher casualties than the Second did in The Blister. Rumour had it that it was the doing of General Ray, but the General had only continued to rise in prominence. Going by what he told Rangobart, it meant that the Empire would be shifting to a more aggressive foreign policy in the near future.

*What an obnoxious parallel...*

Just as Jet worked to take care of his mother, so, now, was Rangobart. He had even ended up in the Sixth Army Group.

"How are the others who went with you doing?" He asked.

"They're fine. Rei is staffing our office in Warden's Vale, but she goes back and forth between the village quite a bit. Everyone's helping to manage things and they're teaching magic, as well."

*Didn't she say that most of her population was Goblins?*

He looked over his shoulder at the migrants loaded into the train of wagons. Arcane magic was a realm shrouded by esotericism, superstition, and rumour, but one or two people in the Imperial Ministry of Magic theorised that the general population had more potential for it than common sense suggested. No one could put that theory to the test, as it was far too expensive to try even for a country like the Empire.

"So you'll be training these migrants to be magic casters?" Rangobart asked, "That's a pretty big gamble."

"No," Nemel shook her head. "These people signed up as whatever vocations their families specialised in. The territory I'm managing was pure primaeval forest when I started working, so there's a huge demand for the basics."

“Primaeval forest, huh. I suppose that’s something else you and I have in common now. The lands I was granted upon my promotion are all in The Blister.”

“What are they like?”

“I don’t know,” Rangobart shrugged. “The first thing that the Imperial Administration suggested is that I hire Adventurers to survey my territory.”

“They didn’t survey the land *before* partitioning it?” Nemel furrowed her brow, “That’s pretty haphazard.”

Territories – be they the expansive demesne of a Count or a single common tenancy – were usually partitioned according to the quality of the land. It was through that quality that administrators could infer how productive the land would be and thus how to distribute it fairly. If Nobles just arbitrarily assigned land to their tenants, they would not only result in a lot of dissatisfied tenants, but also a pile of dead ones. Imperial Knights would similarly voice complaints about their awarded territories in the same situation and the Emperor would lose his grip on the military.

“The Imperial Administration is already woefully short-staffed as it is,” Rangobart said. “This is probably what happens when you apply a bit of extra pressure on it. Standards just fly out of the window in the face of deadlines and their problems become your problems instead.”

“Well, do you have *any* idea what your new land is like?” Nemel asked.

“No, but they all sound inhospitable. I wouldn’t be surprised if the part that’s *normally* hospitable has been taken over by Fire Elementals.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Nemel said.

“Oh, yes, I’m sure I’ll be most ecstatic when I get my weekly notification about how Fire Elementals from my territory have burned down the surrounding countryside. My reign will be noted for how many dozens of times I was sued a week.”

Getting feistier wasn’t the only thing that had changed about Nemel. She now seemed to see more than a few things far differently from the average imperial citizen. Her discussions with the Nobles in his father’s delegation went over the strangest points so naturally that all the Nobles could do was nod out of the awkward fear that they would be seen as the strange ones instead.

“Sued, huh…” Nemel looked up at the clouds passing overhead, “Come to think of it, I haven’t had to worry about that at all.”

“You haven’t?”

“Nope,” Nemel said. “Early on, I thought that the neighbours would cause problems for us, so I sort of subjugated them. After a little bit, they just started joining on their own.”

*Who are you and what did you do to my cute and harmless Nemel Gran?!*

A part of him wanted to shake her by the shoulders while yelling that, but it probably wasn’t a good idea. House Gran was rumoured to have several nasty heirloom spells and he didn’t feel like testing the veracity of their existence.

“Wait,” he frowned, “so you subjugated your neighbours and, as a result, your other neighbours decided to join you?”

“That’s what Goblins are like, right?”

*Sorry, I don’t know what Goblins are like.*

He glanced at Nob, but the little green Demihuman holding the reins to Nemel’s wagon was shrouded in mystery. Beyond occasionally showing up to infringe on the imperial frontier, he knew very little about Goblins. Even in the tales, they were usually never afforded more than a cursory mention as dimwitted savages unless said tale was so fantastical as to be dismissed offhand.

“You said that your Human migrants are being brought in for their professions,” Rangobart said, “so does that mean the people you’re teaching magic to are Goblins?”

“In Warden’s Vale,” Nemel replied, “children with a decent aptitude for arcane magic are offered the chance to enrol in the magic stream of the barony’s public education system. In my village...well, I’m not exactly sure if you can call what we’re doing ‘teaching’. Goblins aren’t smart enough to learn magic as Wizards, but more than a few can pick it up by watching us cast magic.”

“...you mean to say they’re Sorcerers.”

“Yeah. It indirectly implied as much in our army training, doesn’t it? They go over the different types of Demihumans a patrol might encounter, and regular Goblins are divided up into hunters and mystics. The ‘hunters’ are basically Rangers. Mystics are divided into ‘shamans’ that cast divine magic and the other mystics are arcane casters. If they can’t learn arcane magic through study, then they must be Sorcerers.”



“I suppose so...”

Did everyone usually come to the same conclusion? In hindsight, it made sense, but most people gave Goblins little thought and even less thought about what they might be beyond being a Goblin. When it came to the Imperial Knights, a Goblin casting magic marked itself as a priority target and all that mattered after that was making sure it was dead before it did something to one's squadmates.

“I'm not sure what you're imagining,” Nemel said, “but it's not as glamorous as it sounds. I'm more inclined to call it ridiculous.”

“Why is that?”

“Goblins are pretty simple,” Nemel told him, “but that simplicity makes it stupidly easy for them to pass along knowledge in the ways that they know. Goblins usually live in troops of under a dozen, so sharing information doesn't get them very far. When you put a lot of them together, however, it becomes something else entirely. A while ago, I noticed that a Goblin had succeeded in picking up a *Summon Spices* spell. By the end of the week, there were ten Goblins capable of casting *Summon Spices*. By the end of the month, there were over two hundred of them. Goblin-summoned salt supplies all of the village industries, now.”

“...just how many Goblins are in this village of yours?”

“The Elder Liches go crazy trying to keep track of them,” Nemel said, “but I'm guessing around ten thousand in the forests around the village.”

He wasn't sure whether he should be shocked that she had so many Goblin Sorcerers or relieved that it was only about two per cent of the total population of Goblins.

“Won't that be a problem if they start learning offensive spells?”

“Not really,” Nemel said. “Actually, they already have. An Ice Elemental wandered down the mountain the other day and like fifty of them overwhelmed the thing with *Magic Arrows*.”

“I know more than a handful of Commanders who would go into conniptions upon hearing that.”

So many *Magic Arrow* spells were a guaranteed death sentence for all but a fraction of a percentage of the Imperial Army's soldiers unless they had the appropriate counter deployed in advance.

“That wasn’t even the most interesting part,” Nemel said.

“Oh?”

“After they defeated the Ice Elemental, they collected the remains and brought them to the village. That’s when I found out what they had accomplished. I brought them over to Warden’s Vale to sell the materials, which netted them a pretty tidy sum. Guess what they did with it?”

“They bought food?”

“They bought *equipment*. But not for themselves. You see, a few Goblins had died holding off the Ice Elemental while they were trying to bring it down, so they used the money that they earned to order armour, shields, and new spears for their vanguards.”

As Nemel’s tale grew increasingly dire, she puffed out her chest like a proud mother hen.

“I wonder if that means those tales about Goblin Armies weren’t just overindulgent exaggerations,” Rangobart said.

“Why would you assume that?” Nemel looked sidelong at him, “They’re pretty organised even when fighting Imperial Patrols, aren’t they?”

“Sort of..”

Imperial Army patrols fought as light and heavy cavalry most of the time. *Not* letting their enemies organise against their devastating charges was the order of the day to minimise risks to personnel. Nemel served in the Imperial Air Service, so maybe things looked different from above.

The Second Army Group had fought as infantry in The Blister, but, as a War Wizard, he was too preoccupied with Green Dragons and Gnolls to pay any real attention to the Goblins. Maybe the regular Imperial Knights had a better appreciation for them.

Rangobart walked silently along as Nemel launched into a full-blown lecture on Goblin society, extolling their qualities just as she might extol a potato. The more he learned, the more it seemed obvious why everyone eradicated Goblins whenever they had the chance: if they truly did everything that Nemel described, a Goblin Army gaining access to a source of substantial industrial production could spell the end of any country caught in their path.

“What are you going to do when your Goblin population grows too numerous to support?” Rangobart asked.

“A portion will probably split off and migrate somewhere,” Nemel answered. “I think that’s what they usually do…”

“Isn’t that *just* a bit irresponsible?” Rangobart told her, “You’re effectively raising Goblin armies and unleashing them on the surroundings.”

“...I hadn’t thought that far. I-I just wanted to make things work, you know?”

He buried his face in his palm. Maybe his carefree classmate of old hadn’t changed at all.

“I-I’m sure it will be fine,” Nemel said. “It’s not like they’ll become an army *tomorrow*. By the time it becomes a concern, I’m sure they’ll have plenty of options.”

That didn’t sound ominous at all. Then again, it wasn’t as if he could talk. The Baharuth Empire was preparing to embark on its own military ventures.

Their conversation dried up not long after that, which came as a surprise to him. Back in the Academy, he always had the energy to socialise, leading conversations and spearheading various efforts in the student body. Perhaps it was because he was on a continual quest that meant the world to him: acquitting himself as an upstanding member of House Roberbad and the aristocratic establishment. Now, it seemed like all that effort had little, if any, bearing on his life. Maybe that was what it meant to become an adult.

He didn’t want to return to the carriage and suffer his brother’s company, but walking quietly beside a woman who had clearly gotten tired of talking with him was also out of the question. Instead, he went down the caravan, seeing what the migrants had to say. Each wagon had two benches running the length of its sides that made the migrants face inwards, so when he dropped back behind the next wagon to speak to one of them, he ended up speaking with all of them.

“So,” he said, “are you excited about your new lives in the Sorcerous Kingdom?”

The men and women in the wagon – they were mostly young women – exchanged blank looks.

“I don’t know about *excited*, m’lord,” one of the men seated at the back of the wagon said, “but it’ll be good to have a licence.”

“Or a husband with land,” one of the women added.

“A husband with land?” Rangobart frowned.

“Ehm, most of the women here are going as wives for the men who settled in Miss Gran’s village this spring, m’lord,” the man told him. “I ain’t a wife, though.”

“Right. What’s your trade?”

“Stonecutter,” the man clapped his forearm twice, “city life’s wasted me away, but I still got my skills. Figured I’d take Miss Gran up on her offer while it was still in the offering. The office lady said the village is in a mountain valley, so there’ll be plenty of work.”

“Why did you decide to join Miss Gran instead of heading to the Empire’s new frontiers?”

The reorganisation of the Imperial Army also saw the imperial propaganda machine go into full production. Spares in every town and city were encouraged to prepare for the opening of ‘new frontiers’ that would give every man a workshop or tenancy of their own. Most guessed that the new frontier would be the wildland south of the Wyvernmark and preemptively started looking for opportunities there. The Empire didn’t dissuade them of the notion, as it was indeed one of the new frontiers hinted at.

Combined with the sudden and secretive nature of the campaign in The Blister, the newly landed soldiers of the Second Army Group – including Rangobart – found themselves short on migrants. In the eyes of the Imperial Administration, it was a problem that couldn’t be helped. Rangobart’s new team of seneschals pledged that the problem would be rectified within a year.

As if to show proof of their intent, the Imperial Administration had posters up all over the place encouraging intrepid men to fling themselves into the disease-ridden jungle – though not precisely in those terms – when the First Division arrived in Arwintar.

“A guarantee,” the man said.

“Does that guarantee truly hold so much weight?” Rangobart asked.

“After what happened in the Wyvernmark, yeah. The Army didn’t conquer anywhere near as quickly or as much as everyone thought they would. I know a lot of folks who spent everything they had to travel south and I shudder to think what’s become of them.”

The thought didn’t sit well with Rangobart, either. As a member of the aristocratic establishment, he was instilled with the notion that a Noble was responsible for their people. A lord and their tenants were inextricably tied to one another, after all. If a fief was mismanaged and the people

plunged into hardship, so, too, would the house responsible for them be plunged into hardship. Shortfalls in industrial production meant shortfalls in tax revenues, be they caused by natural disasters, monsters, raids, or ill-conceived domestic policies.

“What were you promised?”

“Like I said, m’lord, a licence.”

“Or a husband with land,” one of the women added.

“I see.”

It was such a simple thing, but it meant the world to the migrants and they jealously guarded their respective pledges. It wasn’t hard to imagine why.

In the Baharuth Empire, the people existed at the convenience of those with land, wealth and political power. The Imperial Administration encouraged impoverished citizens to expend their personal resources to chase the opportunities that the Empire dangled before them. If one failed to seize those opportunities, it wasn’t the Empire’s problem.

Ideologically speaking, the Empire firmly adhered to what they considered the precepts of meritocracy. To get ahead, everything was allowed so long as the Emperor allowed it. Those who couldn’t find success were considered failures, and failures effectively weren’t considered people until they found success.

The men and women from the slums before him were firmly entrenched in the culture that spawned from those views and practices. Rangobart was sure that, like himself and the members of his father’s delegation, the Sorcerous Kingdom held many new and alien things in store.