

“I hope the morning finds you well, Viscount Roberbad,” Countess Wagner said with a charming smile. “Ah, please do not interrupt your breakfast on my account. I’ve simply come to follow up on what we discussed yesterday evening.”

The Countess’ lady’s maid came forward to offer him a sealed envelope. Rangobart’s eyes were drawn to the set of wands holstered at her hips. To his dismay, the Maid blushed prettily and Count Roberbad cleared his throat in an expression of disapproval. Lady Wagner’s smile remained undiminished.

“I trust that everything is to everyone’s satisfaction so far?” She asked.

“Overwhelmingly so, Lady Wagner,” Count Roberbad nodded. “This hospitality could put even the Imperial House to shame.”

“My lord’s glowing praise shall be conveyed to Lady Corelyn and her household,” Lady Wagner said. “We look forward to seeing you and your family at the exhibition in the great hall.”

Lady Wagner and her attendant drifted over to the next alcove to speak with the house enjoying their breakfast there. A moment after she departed, Arlandor snorted.

“You seem to have attracted the Countess’ favour, Viscount *Roberbad*.”

“You’re fortunate that she’s only settled on teasing you for your blunder Rangobart,” his father growled.

“She shouldn’t have been so lenient,” Countess Roberbad sniffed, “considering your eyes have already wandered to her lady’s maid.”

“That’s...that’s not what I was doing, my lady,” Rangobart protested. “That Maid is a magic caster. Did no one else notice her armament? In fact, I distinctly recall my recommendation to adopt the same measures in the past.”

His family seemed disinterested in his excuses. They were correct, of course. All that mattered was how his outward conduct might reflect on their position. The world cared not a whit for one’s *reasons*: only the results they produced. Rangobart settled on setting the matter aside, but also he knew that he wasn’t wrong about what he mentioned. A wand at the hip of a caster was far more dangerous than the average sidearm.

While powerful at key moments in battle, mages were notorious for their poor endurance. Once they ran out of mana – and they could do so very quickly – they became no more useful than a civilian in combat. This was not only due to the fact that mages weren’t anywhere near as

physically robust as their martial counterparts, but also because of the effects of mana exhaustion. This made mages desirable, yet undesirable, at the same time in household retinues.

The nature of magic items, however, allowed those of substantial means to 'cheat' when it came to the potency of a household's mages. By using wands, staves, and other similar items, a mage could carry many times their mana capacity in a preselected variety of spells. The potency of spells cast through magic items was usually less than that of a specialised mage, but it didn't matter very much since the sheer volume of magical might that one could bring to bear on their targets with magic items was overwhelming.

Indeed, the main barrier was cost. A sprinkling of houses in the Baharuth Empire had adopted the use of wand-wielding Wizards in their personal retinues, but most did not. It was extremely difficult to find mages who were also trained to serve in an aristocratic household, with only a few dozen becoming available with each graduating class of the Imperial Magic Academy. That made them expensive to entice into service. The up-front cost of stockpiling magical items was nothing to sneeze at, either.

Even with a Wizard in the family, Rangobart's family didn't consider the benefits worth the cost. With nothing that could decisively sway their opinions, he could only agree and disagree with their arguments at the same time. There was no clear-cut 'must have' when it came to household mages. They were a luxury, at best.

"How long are you going to let that letter sit in your lap?" Arlandor asked.

"Hm? Oh, I had forgotten about it."

"You'd think that a letter from a Countess would demand your immediate attention."

"We didn't discuss a matter of immediate concern," Rangobart replied. "It was more of a query."

"About?"

Rangobart picked the letter up off of his lap, eyeing the unfamiliar seal.

"Lady Wagner suggested that I might be able to have my land surveyed sooner rather than later," he said. "Two thousand titles were granted from the Blister Campaign alone and more are on their way from the Sixth Army Group's campaign in the southern frontier. There's no way to get any survey work done quickly now that we're totally reliant on official imperial surveys."

“You’re a Viscount,” Arlandor waved his hand dismissively. “You should have priority over the lesser titles.”

“Oh, yes,” Rangobart rolled his eyes, “pulling rank will surely endear me to my fellow Imperial Knights.”

“That’s commoner nonsense. The privileges of rank are what drive people to perform, and the Imperial Army works on the same principle.”

“You’re not wrong, esteemed brother, but the Imperial Knights still face the same problem as a whole. If I can find a way to have my land surveyed and refer my comrades-in-arms to the same service, then I only stand to gain on all levels...is it just me, or is this the wrong seal?”

He held up the envelope and his brother leaned in to take a closer look.

“Never mind the wrong seal,” Arlandor said, “isn’t this the royal seal of the Sorcerous Kingdom?”

“What!” Count Roberbad barked.

Rangobart passed the sealed letter to Arlandor, who passed it to their father. Count Roberbad scrutinised the letter with even more intensity than he had Baroness Zahradnik’s.

“Why would the Sorcerer King personally send you a letter?”

“I have *no* idea,” Rangobart said. “It was supposed to be the reply to a query about the local Adventurer Guild.”

When he finally got his letter back, he gingerly worked open the seal with his dagger. He pulled out the sheets of paper folded within, frowning as he read the cover letter.

*Special promotion? Fifty per cent off? And what are these things attached to the bottom...what in the world are ‘coupons’?*

Was this the hand of the Sorcerer King, or was he dealing with some sort of salesperson from a common market?

“I...I can’t decipher this,” Arlandor said. “Is it magic?”

“It’s noble paper, so I suppose it’s been conjured by magic...”

Just in case, he cast appraisal magic on the cover letter. His family shifted away from the table warily.

“It’s just a piece of noble paper,” Rangobart said. “There’s nothing magical about it beyond that.”

A collective sigh of relief rose from around the table. Feeling a bit like an idiot, Rangobart decided to skip the cover letter to see what else was included.

“Alright, this makes much more sense...”

An official summary of the Adventurer Guild’s services pertaining to land survey had been included with the cover letter. He spread the documents out across the table as he scanned through them.

“What’s this about ‘first contact protocols’?” Count Roberbad said, “They’re offering diplomatic services with tribal Demihumans?”

“I don’t think that’s outside of the realm of possibility for the Sorcerous Kingdom,” Rangobart said. “Baroness Zahradnik also proposed an approach to that effect when it came to The Blister. It’s a moot point now, though. The tribes have somehow vacated the region without alerting the Imperial Army’s patrols.”

“How does this compare to the Imperial Survey Corps?” Arlandor asked.

“It’s much more comprehensive,” Rangobart answered. “The Imperial Survey Corps focuses on identifying areas suited for industrial development, water resources, and potential wilderness hazards.”

What was in the offering was truly suited for an organisation based in the Sorcerous Kingdom. Not only did they offer everything that the Imperial Survey Corps included in their official work, but also a geological survey and analyses of native flora and fauna. Additionally, there were services that few in the Empire would ever consider, such as the aforementioned diplomacy, mapping elemental gradients, measuring positive and negative energy balances, and an offer to excavate and catalogue any ruins for the employer.

“I’d be tempted to hire these fellows for Roberbad County,” Arlandor said, “just in case we missed an ore vein or two.”

“So, you think I should commission them?”

“It’s pricey, but considering everything that they offer...”

“It’s a gamble,” Count Roberbad said. “If they don’t locate any valuable resources, their services will add that much more to your development overhead. It would be more efficient to develop apparent industries first and use the revenues from them to hire these Adventurers later, but it looks like you’ve fallen into one of the Sorcerer King’s traps.”

Rangobart glanced down at the sheets of paper on the table.

“This is a trap?”

“Of course!” His father shook his head, “Regardless of how you’ve received it, the Sorcerer King has made you a personal offer. There’s no way you can refuse.”

“What a shrewd fellow,” Arlandor muttered. “With nothing but a seal and a cover letter, he’s forced open a crack in the Empire’s defences. I wonder if the Emperor will let you keep your head after this...”

He had gone from a tool of House Roberbad to a tool of the Emperor to a tool of the Sorcerer King. Was it possible that Ainz Ooal Gown had predicted this turn of events as far back as the Second Army Group’s order to conquer The Blister? Was Baroness Zahradnik’s letter of recommendation a part of that ploy? And Countess Wagner had seamlessly picked up where the Baroness had left off. She had even mentioned them working together and sharing information about him, but he had been foolishly oblivious to it all.

It was commonly said that there was no such thing as a perfect plan, but the Sorcerer King’s existence seemed to laugh in the face of that bit of old wisdom.

With a mind full of new worries, Rangobart stuffed the letter back into its envelope and cleaned up his plate. He excused himself from the table and wandered down to the great hall, where the exhibition mentioned by Countess Wagner was already underway.

At a glance, the layout appeared to divide the floor of the hall into sections for each of the duchy’s houses. Manning each exhibit was a mix of household staff and Merchant company employees. There didn’t appear to be any Nobles standing among them, so he wondered how the lords and ladies of the realm were involved.

He wandered along the northern part of the exhibition’s circuit, stopping at the display of a stud farm. Equestrianism was a staple of imperial culture and several other visiting Nobles were already gathered there, so it felt like a safe place to linger while he got his bearings. It took a moment for him to realise that the display was part of House Wagner’s exhibit.

“I thought House Wagner specialised in machinery,” he murmured to himself.

“Machinery is merely one of House Wagner’s many ventures, my lord,” a redheaded woman with freckled cheeks smiled up at him. “Producing thoroughbreds to draw its fleet of vehicles goes hand in hand as a business, don’t you think?”

“That makes sense,” Rangobart conceded. “I mostly see horses, though. Do you breed any Magical Beasts?”

Now that he thought about it, he couldn’t figure out what had pulled their carriages to Corelyn Castle. He expected Soul Eaters, but without them, his best guess was something like a Golem integrated into each vehicle.

“Ah, that would be the other purpose of our stand here, my lord,” the company representative said. “The...*technological* aspect of our business has gotten far ahead. We’re seeking suitable alternatives to Soul Eaters for locales where the Undead are poorly received.”

“I’m not aware of any locale within the Sorcerous Kingdom’s sphere of influence where the Undead are explicitly forbidden,” Rangobart said.

“It’s a consideration for the future. Breeding beasts is a generations-long process, after all. When one thinks about it, it’s quite absurd: one could hitch a legendary creature capable of destroying countries to a wagon and the world will admire the owner for it. If the creature in question is Undead, however, one experiences the opposite reception.”

“I can see the Empire taking a long time to become accustomed to the presence of the Undead,” Rangobart said, “so your efforts seem prudent. Our campaign in the Blister has brought many new and exotic beasts to light, and I shall keep your needs in mind as development proceeds there.”

The representative lowered her head.

“Your consideration is most appreciated, my lord.”

Rangobart slowly made his way past House Wagner’s exhibition, examining the miniature models on display with passing interest. Apparently, the lion’s share of their business was in commerce, but it was the technology that they were spearheading that drew the most attention.

*A lot of these things look useful...if only I knew what was on my land.*

His annoyance grew over the haphazard manner in which the Empire had bestowed his title. At first, he was sympathetic to the circumstances surrounding it, but as the sheer weight of the task that faced him settled on his shoulders, he couldn't help but feel a bit of resentment. The Empire couldn't process such a huge influx of land so quickly, but that didn't stop it from rushing to show how it rewarded its loyal servants to prime the country for whatever its next campaign would be. Now that he considered it in those terms, his transfer to the Sixth Army group felt far more dangerous than it did initially.

*I'm going to have to train a whole damn company of random Wizards to fight the gods knows what out there and it sounds like we're going to start campaigning in a year or two.*

The promotion to Viscount felt more and more insufficient for the magnitude of his task. Even if he did get promoted again down the line, they'd probably give him another mountain.

"*Geh!* Rangobart..."

Rangobart sighed and turned around to see who his newest tormentor was. To his surprise, it wasn't one of Nemel's gang, but another Academy student from his year, Dimoiya Erex. And behind her shoulder was...

"*Geh!* Prez..."

"A good morning to you, as well, Viscount," the new Imperial Head Court Mage said.

He hadn't seen her for more than a year, but it wasn't a surprise to see that she was already on her way to having a family. It was the customary next step for noblewomen after graduating from the Imperial Magic Academy, and the princess of House Gushmond was ever the perfect student.

Rangobart intended on having a long discussion with her about his promotion at some point, but an exhibition in the great hall of Corelyn Castle was hardly the place for it.

"Lady Frianne," Rangobart started, then paused, "no, you should have a title of some sort by now..."

"I was granted the County of Waldenstein."

"Waldenstein...oh, that place. I suppose ruling over an undeveloped nothing is something we both have in common now."

“My, is that a hint of resentment that I sense, my lord?”

“*Just* a hint? At least you know what your land looks like...and I believe Waldenstein does have an old imperial estate.”

“Looks like everyone already knows one another here.”

Countess Wagner appeared from behind Countess Waldenstein, looking back and forth between them.

“The Viscount was my junior in the Academy,” Lady Waldenstein said, “so, yes, we are acquainted.”

*Acquainted? More like persecuted...*

“That’s great!” Lady Wagner grinned, “How about we make this a party and go for a spin?”

“A spin?” Rangobart frowned.

“Yup! The way this event works is that we split up into different parties, and each party gets paired off with one interest or the other. Over the next two weeks, everyone will have a chance to see what everyone has to offer. Tours and demonstrations happen during the day while negotiations occur in the evenings. Your father and his allies will likely be...*digesting*, so I figure we should take the opportunity to get out first.”

“That sounds like a wonderful idea, Lady Wagner,” Lady Waldenstein said. “Shall we depart?”

Outside of Castle Corelyn, Rangobart found a pair of carriages identical to the ones that had conveyed them from the border. This time, however, a pair of Soul Eaters were hitched to the front of each.

“I thought you said that these carriages were magical,” Rangobart said.

“I did,” Lady Wagner skipped down the stairs to open the door herself. “Why do you ask, my lord?”

“Wagner is a *bad woman*,” Dimoiya intoned. “She tricked me like twenty times since we arrived!”

“How did you get tricked *twenty* times?” Ragobart asked, “I recall you being rather shrewd in the Academy.”

“Because she’s a *bad woman*.”

From the inside of the carriage, the bad woman smiled at him while patting the cushioned seat beside her. He was right to be wary from what had happened so far, but he couldn’t see any way out of his current situation.

Once they were out of the castle garden, the carriage sped off to places unknown. Rangobart watched the harbour pass below them, then the town, and then the vineyards outside of the town walls.

“Lady Wagner,” he said. “I don’t think you mentioned where we’re going.”

“Feoh Berkana.”

“I see, Feoh–*huh?*”

“Feoh Berkana, the capital of the Dwarf Kingdom in the Azerlisia Mountains.”

“I know what it is! Why are we going to the Dwarf Kingdom?”

“The Mountain Dwarves are participating in the event, too,” Lady Wagner told him. “Waldenstein and Dimoiya have already seen everything here, so we’re going there now.”

*These women, doing whatever they want...*

Across from them, Lady Wagner’s partners in crime smiled innocently at him. Why had they bothered dragging him into their escapades? Was it because he was the odd Noble out in his father’s party? After a moment’s thought, his eyes went to the Head Imperial Court Mage.

“So,” he said, “would Your Excellency mind explaining why I received this promotion to Mage Captain?”

“You needn’t be so formal when it’s just us here, Rangobart.”

Rangobart held the imperial princess’ gaze for a long moment before she released a quiet sigh.

“Because you are currently the best candidate for the job,” she told him. “What other answer would there be in the Baharuth Empire?”

“I don’t see how that can *possibly* be,” Rangobart said. “I understand that Nobles who are also War Wizards are rare, but there must surely be a handful out there in the Imperial Army. Someone older and more experienced would be far—”

“It is precisely age and experience that disqualify them for the role,” the Head Court Mage told him. “While they have served with honour, they have also demonstrated a lack of the required initiative during their service. They have accepted the role that the Imperial Army has chosen for them. Artillery. A *tool*. A convenient sidearm for every company. You, on the other hand, have expressed the desire to see our War Wizards turned into something *more*.”

“I wouldn’t have given it much serious thought if Baroness Zahradnik hadn’t brought up the state of mages in the Imperial Army during her time as a liaison.”

“I cannot say for certain whether that would have been the case or not, but the fact is that you have continued to pursue the subject of arcane culture in the Imperial Army since then and you are eminently qualified for the position. Also...Baroness Zahradnik is a chivalrous woman.”

His face screwed up in confusion. It didn’t help that the Head Court Mage looked like she also didn’t quite believe that she was saying what she was.

“It sounds silly, I know,” the Head Court Mage said. “But, believe me, it’s important. The Baroness is a paragon of the martial aristocracy. As a chivalrous woman, she carries out the will of her liege and her king to the utmost of her ability. That will extends to the Baharuth Empire as a client state of the Sorcerous Kingdom. I trust that the meaning of her actions is not lost on you?”

“Can you really place so much significance on that?”

“I can. It wasn’t just you, you know? General Kabein noticed. As did Commander Enz and your Captain. The Fifth and Sixth Army Groups did, too. Most importantly, His Imperial Majesty noticed. Baroness Zahradnik did not come as a mere liaison officer to run some friendly errands around the Empire: she came as a harbinger of change. Everything she did was for the express purpose of preparing the Empire to face the world as a member of the Sorcerous Kingdom’s hegemony, and she is wise enough to understand that we must build the Empire by our own will.”

Was it truly so grand as that? If so, General Ray must have been thinking the same thing when they spoke in Arwintar.

“Fine,” Rangobart said, “let’s assume for now that this is the case. What is my place in all this?”

“To rectify the mistakes of the past,” the Head Court Mage told him. “Well, it’s more accurate to say that an overarching arcane culture is next to nonexistent in the Baharuth Empire. As instrumental as Fluder Paradyne was to the creation of the Baharuth Empire, he never considered his own behaviour as problematic on a societal level. You know the results as well as I: Wizards are now an existence that stands apart from the rest of the Empire. The Imperial Administration has assimilated this unfortunate product of our common culture and similarly treats us as accessories to equip and unequip as demanded.”

In *Fundamental Principles of Magocratic Governance*, Frianne Gushmond attacked the same issue in a far more roundabout way – probably because she didn’t want to have the treatise shredded by the Imperial Ministry of Magic. Now that she was the Head Court Mage, however, all of her reservations had gone out the window.

“And what does that mean for the Imperial Army?” Rangobart asked, “As you’ve mentioned, the example created by the former Head Court Mage combined with the lack of a unifying culture for mages in the Empire has created, well, a *mess*. How can I address such a deeply-rooted problem as a single Mage Captain? The average War Wizard in the Imperial Army is more likely to hide in their tent than participate in anything that I propose.”

“Honestly, you’re in a far better position to answer that question than I.”

“...useless.”

The useless Imperial Head Court Mage hid her face in her hands.

“How cruel!” She sobbed, and then one of her blue eyes peeked out at him from between her fingers, “Honestly, I believe Baroness Zahradnik’s approach is correct. It’s best for the Imperial Army’s War Wizards to build something of their own. As it *is* the Imperial Army, it should be easier to accomplish as there is at least some expectation of order.

“In building an identity for the Empire’s War Wizards and establishing various traditions for them, you will, in turn, help stimulate the development of arcane culture elsewhere. Identity begets identity, after all. I won’t be sitting idle, of course, but it is my hope that this will ultimately lead to the creation of a broader community for mages of every leaning in the Empire.”

“...and those that lead this community are the ‘Imperial Arcansists’ that you proposed in your treatise.”

“Exactly,” the Head Court Mage smiled. “Both you and I are Imperial Arcanists. If we are successful in our efforts, we’ll be the first of many that lead the Baharuth Empire into the future.”

Frienne’s sappy closing point did little to sway Rangobart, but he was already invested from his own standpoint.

“Just to be clear,” he said. “You didn’t do this to torment me, did you?”

“Whyever would you think that, my lord?” She fluttered her eyelashes innocently.

“I *wonder*.”

The imperial princess’ playful demeanour faded and she looked him in the eye.

“I’m perfectly serious about this, Rangobart,” she told him. “The future of the Empire is at stake. You have been called to serve precisely because you are the best we have. His Imperial Majesty expects great things of you.”

“In that case,” he said, “I expect to receive all of the support necessary to make this work. It wouldn’t hurt to start discussing some things right now...Lady Wagner, how long until we arrive at Feoh Berkana?”

“Uh, actually,” Lady Wagner replied, “we’re stopping to see the Lizardmen first.”

“*Hah?*”