

“I think we lost him,” Themis said.

“I think he lost us,” Lady Zahradnik replied.

Rangobart looked between the two women with a somewhat incredulous look. Was it fine to leave things at that?

The aerial ambush barely fazed the Adventurer expedition and the patrol along with its ‘bonus’ was quickly dispatched. Now, the Adventurers were going from building to building, dispatching the Undead populating the ruins. With how the Adventurers framed things, a part of him couldn’t help but imagine that they were systematically butchering the residents of a living town.

One of the Rogues brought another batch of Undead to the expedition, running past the front line.

“Tailor, wife, and four kids,” she said.

“Why a Tailor?”

“Cause we haven’t used it yet.”

Since most of the ruins were little more than outlines of rubble where buildings once stood, the Adventurers passed the time by trying to reason out what everything used to be. Some of them seemed obvious, like the Temples and a few of the public buildings, while the rest were loosely categorised into ‘workshop’, ‘apartment’, and ‘warehouse’.

“Is it fine to leave Momon out there?” Lady Waldenstein asked.

“He’s the strongest Adventurer in the Guild,” Themis said. “He isn’t at any risk of being harmed.”

“Why did he do something like that?”

“The Adventurers,” Alessia said, “they like to show off, yes? Especially the veterans from before the new Guild. He probably had something impressive in mind, but it didn’t work out as he wanted.”

“Displays of prowess are essential in the old Adventuring business,” one of the Bards, Vincent said. “Trying to get by on posted commissions alone is both slow and monotonous. Impressing clients is a good way to spread awareness of one’s team and secure personal requests. In

Momon's case, he had somehow become famous enough that his first quest as a Copper-rank Adventurer was a personal request from a well-known Alchemist in the city."

"Did he know the Alchemist from before?" Dimoiya asked.

"I don't think so. Heroes are just made of different stuff, I guess."

From the way that they fought, the new generation of Adventurers tended to keep things uncomplicated despite their constant banter. Rangobart didn't particularly care about how visually impressive they were so long as they could do the work that was advertised in the promotional materials he had received earlier that week.

"Ah," Henrich's voice came from the front, "this one's got a funny-looking sword."

A few people near the Fighter turned their heads as he used the head of his warhammer to bind the blade tightly over the top of his shield.

"Maybe you're fighting a Herbalist," Cass suggested.

"This is a bit *too* much to be a harvesting tool, don't you think?" Henrich asked.

The Fighter shoved the Wight off balance and buried his warhammer in its chest. It crumbled into dust in a matter of seconds, as did its exotic weapon.

"Dammit, why can't these things drop their stuff?"

"The Katze Plains would be an iron mine if we could."

"Who decides this stuff? They can kill people just fine with their fake weapons."

It wasn't a question Rangobart had ever asked. Most people just accepted such things as a reality of the world.

"We're clear to the town square," one of the scouts announced.

"Let's set up on the near side," she said. "It doesn't look like there's a market filled with townsfolk or anything like that."

The square wasn't anything like a square, either. A circular area roughly thirty metres across was ringed by the remains of the town's largest buildings. Rangobart scanned the nearest piles of worn, moss-covered rubble, wondering what the place looked like before it was destroyed.

"I find it hard to believe that one can discern anything from this," he said. "It's worn down to practically nothing."

"We'll have to do some digging around to find better-preserved pieces of the place," Lady Zahradnik told him. "Considering how widespread the ruins are, this expedition may take many years to complete."

"Is that a good thing, or a bad thing?"

"It's good in the sense that we'll have plenty of sites for field training," Lady Zahradnik replied. "I'd like to have some answers sooner rather than later, though."

The Baroness' voice carried nothing in the way of urgency. Rangobart's experience with her also indicated that she was the furthest thing from impatient.

"Does it have something to do with your development plans?" He asked, "I believe you mentioned building a port on the river here."

"There is that," Lady Zahradnik answered, "but it's a minor concern. What's bothering me is...well, this giant *hole* in our history. We barely know anything about the past, yet we use past examples to inform our future actions. There's simply too much about the world that we don't know or understand."

He couldn't deny that, but, at the same time, he wondered if it mattered all that much. Whenever ancient ruins were found, the first things that came to people's minds were undiscovered riches and powerful artefacts. Now that he thought about it, very little, if any, history was associated with such discoveries. Nobles put great value in history, so he had always assumed that any findings were inconvenient or outright damaging to the houses that found ruins on their lands.

It was a perfectly rational conclusion to come to. Few houses had histories that preceded the Demon Gods, so chances were that the history discovered in any ancient ruins would say that the land belonged to someone else. Ultimately, ruins were stores of practical rather than historical value.

『Eastern temple first. Let's try not to get the whole thing at once.』

A single Ranger stepped forward and nocked an arrow to his bowstring. His attack shattered the skull of an 'acolyte' standing on one side of the temple entrance. Rangobart tried to imagine how imperial citizens would react if members of the clergy were casually assassinated in broad daylight like that. A sentry wouldn't be able to react in time to do anything unless they happened to be right beside the attacker.

A second arrow destroyed the Skeleton Mage opposite the first. Several Undead of various types came out the door and met a similar fate. Only a handful of Wights made it to the expedition's defensive lines.

『Keep them coming. I know I said to not get them all at once, but let's not leave our people standing around.』

“Uwah! What's that thing?!”

“We got the 'high priest'!”

The 'high priest' had been previously identified as a potential Vampire Spawn. Upon examining it up close, Rangobart couldn't blame the scouts for the tenuous label. The Undead Goblin that looked three times more savage than the other Undead it was outrunning, but it was hard to tell exactly what type of Undead it was.

“Who's catching this thing?”

“I got it!”

A woman – he believed her name was Kyla – intercepted the slaving Goblin mid-leap with her shield. Rather than bouncing away, it clung to her shield with its blackened claws.

“Why did I volunteer for this?!” Kyla cried as she tried to shake the thing off, “H-hello? We're Adventurers from the Sorcerous Kingdom...”

After dealing with their respective targets, the Adventurers watched expectantly as Kyla struggled with the Undead Goblin.

“If you can understand what I'm saying—argh, this sucks! Why are we trying to talk to things that just want to kill us? Shouldn't there be some easier way?”

“There are spells to control Undead,” Themis said. “Alternatively, we can have an Elder Lich come along to dominate Undead. I think that might defeat the purpose of the exercise, though.”

『Go ahead and destroy it. It’s probably a Great Wight.』

Kyla dispatched the Great Wight and gave its crumbling corpse a kick.

“We need to bring Merry next time,” she grumbled. “She’s the Undead specialist, isn’t she?”

“She didn’t come precisely because we need more than just one Undead-specialised Ranger,” Lady Zahradnik said. “If we left things to chance, our Rangers would tend to specialise in Beasts and Demihumans. It’s not so easy to pick up, though – we’re just getting a taste for the real thing to see if anyone likes it.”

The Adventurers entered the temple ruins, spreading out to investigate its interior. Its roof had caved in and all of its wooden structure had rotted away, but at least the walls were partially intact. Lady Zahradnik stopped at the base of a shattered dais. Rangobart traced her line of sight to the missing section of wall behind it.

“Did you expect to find something?” He asked.

“In a way,” Lady Zahradnik replied. “The layout of this place isn’t exactly the same as Human temples, but the architects faced similar realities. They needed space for their congregation and a place to address them from.”

Unlike the roughly rectangular temples that Humans built, the one they were standing in was a shallow, half-circular auditorium. The ruins of some offices or dormitories lay behind the missing wall, but the wall itself would be...

“You’re looking for a god,” Rangobart said. “A statue or a depiction on the wall behind the pulpit.”

“No,” the Baroness replied, “I’m digesting the fact that it’s missing.”

Lady Zahradnik turned away from the gaping hole, gesturing to the walls encircling the auditorium. They, too, had missing sections.

“If this was a Human temple,” she asked, “what would go into those holes?”

Rangobart frowned at the spaces. He felt that something should be there, but what it was escaped him.

“Murals!” Dimoiya said.

“Murals,” the Baroness nodded. “Carvings. Stained glass windows. We’ve determined that there are two main types of ‘temples’ in this region of the world. There are altars to the elements where people make offerings to natural spirits and receive temple services, and then there are the Temples that we’re more familiar with: facilities of an organised religion or philosophy. An altar to a force of nature doesn’t need seating like this because the priesthood doesn’t preach. Either way, both would have murals, carvings, and other forms of artwork that would help identify what the temple was, who frequented it, and what their values and history were like.”

He frowned as he tried to envision what was missing. It was quite annoying when framed in Lady Zahradnik’s terms. He almost felt like he was being denied information.

“Art is valuable,” Dimoiya said. “Whoever wrecked the place may have just stolen it all.”

“That might be the case for statues, pottery, and pieces of metalwork,” Rangobart said, “but entire walls? Maybe if the walls were inlaid with gold and encrusted with gems...”

Rangobart went to the closest standing stretch of wall. The grey stone didn’t show any signs of being stripped of valuable materials and the distinctly plain surface suggested that the temple’s builders weren’t particularly concerned about decorating the place. As with such structures in the Empire, artists were probably commissioned separately for that sort of work.

“So you’re suggesting that this is one of the ‘holes’ in the region’s history that you’ve mentioned before,” Lady Waldenstein said. “My grandmother kept me out of that discussion when you visited with her, so I can only believe that this...*erasing* of history is a purposeful act by powers that are still active in the present day.”

“It’s consistent with what I’ve observed elsewhere,” Lady Zahradnik nodded. “The distant past is something we barely have any knowledge of and someone is trying to keep us ignorant of it. It’s an injustice that must be corrected.”

Ah...

Now that they were standing in the ruins of a temple, the main source of Lady Zahradnik’s interest in the region’s ‘lost history’ was suddenly made apparent. She was a staunch adherent of a god of justice. Naturally, she wouldn’t suffer any injustice if she could help it. In hindsight, it

also explained much about what they had seen in her demesne. Religion factored little into imperial rule and Rangobart wasn't very religious himself, so the idea that religious tenets influenced Lady Zahradnik's work as a Noble was outside his usual realm of consideration.

『Anyone find anything interesting?』

A chorus of negatives sounded from the surrounding Adventurers. Using the ruined temple as their new stronghold, they prepared to clear what was left of the town.

『The town hall is next. None of our Fighters should have issues holding off the 'mayor'. Remember to disable its regeneration once its turn to go down comes around.』

With their clearing routine already well established, Lady Zahradnik's touch was light as the Adventurers' 'captain'. It felt a bit like a routine highway patrol in the Empire – at least if the average Imperial Knight was as strong as the expedition's members. Lady Waldenstein and Dimoiya hovered ever closer to the action, their classically imperial taste for spectating violence slowly, but surely, getting the better of them. He hoped that they wouldn't start displaying their bloodthirst like members of an excited audience at the Grand Arena.

“If you don't mind my asking, Lady Zahradnik, how much does it take to train individuals of this calibre?”

“How much?” Lady Zahradnik put on a thoughtful look, “I suppose the better answer to your question is that how you can train your people is based on the means that you have available. Many methods used by the Sorcerous Kingdom cannot be emulated by the Empire because it requires talent and infrastructure that the Empire hasn't developed yet.”

“But these Adventurers are locals, right? That means the training itself isn't so advanced that it can't be understood.”

“Yes and no,” the Baroness replied. “I'm not trying to speak down at you from some high place. It's just how things are, isn't it? The Imperial Army is a complex machine that allows the Empire to maintain a standing army of over sixty thousand strong. Re-Estize may have faced the Imperial Army every year in the Katze Plains, but there is no realistic way that they could create their own version of the Imperial Knights. The closest they could get was Marquis Boullope's highly trained force of Knights and professional men-at-arms. They have no Ministry of Magic to produce War Wizards with, no Imperial Air Service, no Military Academy to produce career officers, and no militant Clerics. The bureaucratic and logistical apparatus that supports the functions of the Imperial Army simply does not exist.”

Rangobart nodded along as Lady Zahradnik spoke. It was the truth, but a dissatisfying one in respect to his question.

“Are you worried about your new company?”

“How could I not be?” He snorted, “I’m starting from basically nothing. I had hoped that our visit to the Sorcerous Kingdom would offer some avenues to explore, but, so far, it seems like it amounts to ‘we have all these advantages that allow us to do what you can’t’.”

“It’s unfortunate that you’ve interpreted things that way. I was hoping that your time in the Sorcerous Kingdom would send you home with all sorts of useful ideas.”

“When it comes to industrial development, yes. I was just thinking that the Sorcerous Kingdom would have more, well, *magic*.”

As far as perceptions of the Sorcerous Kingdom went, it was far overshadowed by it being a ‘kingdom of darkness’, but it felt like an obvious attribution. It was right in the name of the place, after all.

“Wagner agonises over that every day,” the corner of the Baroness’ lip twitched. “The fact of the matter is that the Duchy of E-Rantel was, until recently, part of the Kingdom of Re-Estize. It will take us generations to look and feel anything like a ‘Sorcerous Kingdom’.”

“Warden’s Vale seems to be coming along well enough,” Rangobart noted.

“That’s because a series of unfortunate events that I can’t be pleased about allowed me to start from scratch. I have a liege who appreciates my qualities and friends who are experts in the fields that I’m weak in. Old laws graciously retained by our new sovereign allow me to expand my territory without limit and the majority of the Royal Court’s most prominent members support me in my ventures. In Warden’s Vale, I have power, land, resources, and freedom that any Noble would be envious of. I am under no illusion that another Noble could achieve an even greater degree of ‘success’ in the same circumstances, though the direction of things would almost certainly be different.”

Of that, he had no doubt. All of the other Nobles in the Sorcerous Kingdom displayed a close, if not identical, frame of thought to that of their imperial counterparts. Lady Zahradnik’s influence on the work of her friends could be construed as either wasteful luxury or gross inefficiency. If she were a Noble in the Empire, she would have been branded as incompetent, though she would have never had the chance to do what she did in the Sorcerous Kingdom.

The ground shook lightly as the ‘mayor’ thumped its way out of the town hall and cut across the plaza to reach the Adventurers. It took a ponderous overhead swing that might have instantly crushed a veteran Imperial Knight, but Henrich received the blow against his shield with nonchalant ease.



“I think this Blood Meat Hulk is weaker than the ones we train against,” the Fighter said.

“Great, then you can hang onto it until we’re done with the rest.”

“Tch, I need to buy a fire-enchanted weapon from somewhere...”

Henrich obligingly brought his Blood Meat Hulk away from the main battle so its sweeping attacks wouldn’t inconvenience the others. The Fighter focused entirely on defence as his opponent’s regeneration would make offence a pointless effort.

“Have you considered that you might be looking too far ahead?” Lady Zahradnik asked.

Rangobart turned his attention back to the Baroness.

“What do you mean by that?”

“You’ve been tasked to create something that the Empire has never had before,” Lady Zahradnik said. “Both the Court Council and – more importantly – the Imperial Army look to you as an officer with the expertise necessary to deliver what they want. The reality, however, is that your career as an officer has been expedited due to army traditions and it’s only been about a year since you entered service. While I may not be an officer in the Imperial Army, I do believe that you’ve found yourself in a position similar to my own as an officer in the Royal Army of the Sorcerous Kingdom.”

“Forgive me for my ignorance, my lady,” Rangobart said, “but I’m not exactly sure what your position in the Royal Army of the Sorcerous Kingdom even *is*.”

Before coming to the Sorcerous Kingdom, he only knew her as a liaison officer. After visiting Warden’s Vale, her place in the grand scheme of things was clouded by the variety of things that she was responsible for.

“On the field,” Lady Zahradnik said, “I’m a Captain. What I’m referring to in this case is the fact that we’re both responsible for raising special forces for our respective militaries. That part of the tour begins tomorrow, but I will say that your work should become much easier once you start setting expectations on your own terms. Pursuing the nebulous desires of your superiors who have no real idea of what you’re supposed to be doing probably isn’t very productive and you will be held entirely responsible for not meeting expectations which you haven’t set boundaries for.”

“Is this something you’ve experienced before?”

“My superiors have a habit of both overestimating and underestimating things at the same time. Fortunately, improving themselves and the organisations that they are responsible for to better serve His Majesty the Sorcerer King lies foremost on their minds at all times. I cannot say whether the Empire will provide you with the same experience.”

Rangobart snorted. Most likely not. Even when they agreed on something, the different factions of the Empire all wanted things to go their way.

Lady Waldenstein saw the War Wizards as a cultural pillar in the magocratic society she envisioned for the Empire’s future. The Imperial Army wanted a unit that could facilitate new operations, especially with the coming expansionary drive. Efficiency was ever the mandate of the Imperial Administration and the War Wizard company was a way to optimise the Empire’s human resources. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know what his new subordinates expected.

As for himself, his conversation with the Baroness made him realise that he didn’t have any expectations of his own. All of the legwork he had done so far was in service to the desires of others. His life since childhood followed similar patterns, so maybe it was just a frame of mind that he was accustomed to slipping into.

“Zahradnik, can we do this keep/barracks thing next?”

“I wanted to save it for last, but not for any real reason...”

“If we’re going to find something,” a Rogue named Mag said, “it’s going to be there! It has the strongest packs of Undead and the inner structure is still intact.”

A good half of the Adventurers turned pleading looks up at the Baroness. Rather than their Captain, she now felt more like their mother.

“Fine,” Lady Zahradnik said. “Have we noticed anything new in there?”

“If we clear out the entrance,” Mag said, “us Rogues can take a peek deeper inside.”

『You heard her. We’re picking off the sentries at the front. Expect them to bring friends.』

In addition to the two Skeleton Warriors guarding the entrance to the half-ruined building, six more came from just inside the doorway. The Undead squad was powerful enough that an imperial patrol would avoid engaging it and call for an air strike instead.

『Alessia, grab three. Destroy them first.』

The Adventurers smoothly reorganised themselves to carry out the Baroness' orders. Lady Zahradnik didn't spare the battle anything more than the occasional glance, instead peering up at the skies over the plaza.

“Do you think we'll be attacked by Wyvern riders again?” Rangobart asked.

“I've yet to figure out that aspect of this location's 'logic',” Baroness Zahradnik replied. “But the patrol back there called for air cavalry. It's not unreasonable for the town's stronghold to do the same.”

“What if they are being coordinated by an unseen Elder Lich?”

“That's part of the reason why we're attacking this building now. We've been clearing the town methodically; abruptly switching to the 'end' may cause an unseen controller to panic or at least throw off their preparations.”

“...can the Undead panic?”

“Of course,” Lady Zahradnik replied. “The difference is that they can separate themselves from the physiological consequences of it.”

Rangobart eyed the stronghold and its sentries. Aside from the ones that had been attacked, it didn't look like any of them had moved from their posts.

Lady Zahradnik dispatched her scouts halfway through the ongoing battle. They returned not long after the last Skeleton Warrior fell.

“More Skeleton Warriors,” Itzal reported. “The inside's unnaturally clean.”

The Adventurer turned their heads at the Rogue's report.

“How clean?” Lady Zahradnik asked, “It might be from that Goblin army looting the place.”

“Looks like someone had the corridor swept a while ago,” the Rogue replied. “As in with a broom. No sign of any furnishings or decorations and it hasn't been ransacked.”

“How far were you able to get?”

“Just to the ends of the corridors. More Undead are blocking the way beyond that.”

“Does that mean someone’s home?” Kyla asked.

“It’s worth a summon to find out.”

Lady Zahradnik gave Themis a nod. The Cleric held her palms out toward a clear spot nearby.

“[Summon Undead I].”

Rangobart frowned as a Skeleton rose in front of them. He wasn’t sure whether he should be shocked that a Cleric had summoned an Undead being or whether it should have been expected for an adherent of Surshana.

The Adventurers said nothing, watching expectantly as the Skeleton walked into the empty doorway and turned the corner.

“Nothing’s happening to it,” Themis said. “Does that mean no one’s inside?”

“Or they could be smart enough to see what we’re doing. Attack something with it.”

“Okie...”

A crunch heralded the summon’s demise, followed by the tread of skeletal feet and a variety of angry noises. Among them was a thin, eerie wail.

『Wraith. Keep an eye out for it.』

Undead appeared a moment later, flowing out of the entrance to head straight for Themis.

“It’s weird how they always know who the summon belonged to,” Henrich said.

“Wraith coming through the pack,” Pool called out. “Three of ‘em.”

Aside from the three Wraiths, there were over a dozen Skeleton Warriors and scores of lesser Undead. Still near the front, Lady Waldenstein and Dimoiya took an involuntary step back.

『Burn them down. Double barrage.』

“「Grease」.”

“「Grease」.”

“「Grease」!”

As with their attack on the gatehouse, the swarm of advancing Undead piled up as they stumbled and slowed on the magical oil slick. The expedition’s mages unleashed two sets of *Fireballs* from their positions atop the overgrown temple walls. An orange glare lit the surroundings as the resulting conflagration scoured the broken stones of the plaza. By the time the flames subsided, only a few Skeleton Warriors in the rear fringes survived. They continued charging forward through the remains of their fellows, crushing charred corpses and kicking up piles of ash.

“It doesn’t seem like anyone’s home,” Lady Zahradnik said.

“What makes you say that?” Rangobart asked.

“If they were under the control of an Elder Lich, they wouldn’t have reacted like that. The Elder Lich would have taken some time to digest what was going on before issuing orders to its dominated Undead.”

“What if it was having its dominated Undead act as if they were mindless?”

“Then it would be throwing away its army. There *is* a possibility that it did so to distract us while it escaped, but the Royal Army has orders to intercept unauthorised flyers outside of the expedition area. Let’s take a look at our prize, shall we?”

*Our prize?*

Out in the plaza, the Adventurers had already dispatched the remaining Undead. The scouts had already left to investigate the building again. Howe signalled to the expedition from the front entrance.

“There’s an intact basement,” the Rogue said as they came up to him. “The others are already poking around down there.”

“Is it cleared of Undead?” Lady Zahradnik asked.

“The basement isn’t too big,” Howe answered. “About what you’d expect for a building this size.”

Lady Zahradnik nodded to Alessia, who led a vanguard down a set of narrow stone steps. Her voice drifted up the stairwell, sounding the all-clear, and the rest of the group joined them in a well-kept chamber lined with small rooms. Furniture that looked like it was hewn from the nearby mountains was arranged in an eerily similar manner to a laboratory at the Imperial Ministry of Magic.

As time passed, the Adventurers’ excited expressions faded into disappointment. While neatly furnished, furnishings appeared to be all that the underground space had to offer. Themis came around to deliver her final report.

“I think it’s obvious by now,” the Cleric said, “but someone used to live here. Probably an Elder Lich, going by the look of things. They’ve either moved away long ago or they were destroyed and the place looted by the Goblin army last year.”

“I see,” Lady Zahradnik said. “That’s disappointing for us, but, even as empty as it is, this town is still a valuable site for our researchers.”

“Will they even be able to work here?” Alessia asked, “Given how quickly the Undead reappeared after being wiped out last year, new ones may show their faces at any moment.”

“That’s something I’ll have to figure out for the next expedition group,” Lady Zahradnik answered.

The Cleric and the Paladin gave Lady Zahradnik a questioning look. The Baroness offered them a slight smile.

“The Adventurer Guild has a new commission,” she told them. “Let’s head back to Warden’s Vale – we can discuss the details over dinner.”