

In the fiery light of the evening sun, a column bearing shields, spears, and shining steel sallets ascended the rocky slopes of Mount Verilyn. Ludmila, along with Raul, Olga, and three Elder Liches, floated in the skies behind a nervous-looking Nemel Gran, who was observing the troop movements below.

“This is a lot different when you have an audience,” the imperial scion said.

“Maybe you should join the league,” Ludmila said. “We have another class of Commanders starting in the Bronze League this coming season.”

“M-Me, my lady? I’m nothing like a Commander...”

“I believe Nobles are fundamentally a type of Commander,” Ludmila said. “It would be difficult to explain their skill set otherwise. Furthermore, if you’re one of the ‘Imperial Arcanists’ described in Countess Waldenstein’s treatise, you’re a type of ‘mage commander’ that I would love to have in the military academy.”

“Mmh...”

For some reason, Miss Gran seemed to easily digest the roundabout assertions about the Job Class System that Ludmila fed her. As far as she could tell, the reason was that her household education was quite different from those of the average imperial house. This was rather impressive considering the Imperial Administration’s aggressive drive to standardise everything according to their requirements.

“But doesn’t that mean I have to attend classes?” Miss Gran said, “General Ray is trying to get me to finish my education at the military university, too...”

“You’ve spoken with him recently?” Ludmila asked.

“Back when I picked up the last batch of migrants, my lady,” Miss Gran’s golden hair whipped in the chilly wind.

“How has he been doing?”

“Oh, you know him,” Miss Gran laughed weakly. “He’s thrown himself into whipping the Sixth Army Group into shape ever since the old General retired. The entire feel of their headquarters is different from the old days. It used to be a pretty laid-back place. Everything was slow and steady. Members of the air wing slept in a warm bed every night and got three hot meals a day.”

“I suppose I can’t imagine the man ever relaxing. For your part, I think you should take every opportunity to improve. Higher level education in the Empire isn’t restricted to semesters and you can participate in classes anytime you wish in Warden’s Vale.”

“I think my hair will turn white before I hit twenty, my lady. I still have Dame Verilyn’s territory to manage as well, you know?”

“You could hire an Elder Lich to do most of the data-related work. They love being useful and it will free up most of your time.”

“Maybe when we get a bit bigger. There are still plenty of things I’m not entirely confident about yet...speaking of which, have you spoken with Dame Verilyn recently, my lady?”

Ludmila turned her gaze eastward to the distant sensation that marked her companion’s location. She was too far to contact through their telepathic bond, so the last she had heard from her was when she left to investigate the jungles beyond the Draconic Kingdom.

“I haven’t,” she said.

“Oh. That’s strange. She’s contacted me three times via *Message* over the last month or so. Was she asking about her taxes?”

“Not exactly,” Miss Gran frowned. “She’s asking about taxes themselves. In addition to tax policy, I’ve also gotten questions about domestic security, common law, and trade. Dame Verilyn has never expressed an interest in how all that works before.”

“She must be trying to impress someone,” Ludmila smirked, then motioned to the slopes below. “The company is getting close.”

The Goblin company crossed the treeline, which abruptly transitioned to a treacherous, icebound landscape. The source of the anomaly was an Ice Elemental that had wandered down from the peak to propagate the powerful elemental influence emanating from Ilyshn’ish’s domain.

“They’ve entered the Elemental’s territory,” Raul said. “Why doesn’t it attack them?”

“We’ve found that they’ll only come from far away if there’s a significant enough elemental disturbance in their realm to warrant attention,” Miss Gran said. “The first patrol to encounter an Ice Elemental found that out the hard way when they tried to establish a camp somewhere along the treeline here. We can use that to our advantage...”

Miss Gran cupped her hands around her mouth.

“Elemental spotted! Form defensive lines!”

The sound of goblinoid voices issued from below and the company rapidly rearranged itself. Within a minute, a rank of shields three deep had formed in front of the lighter elements of the company.

“Light them up!” Miss Gran commanded.

Behind the heavy infantry, three Goblins set their torches ablaze. The Ice Elemental immediately ceased its placid wandering and tumbled straight down towards the company like a miniature avalanche.

“I didn’t know that they were that sensitive to elemental incursions,” Ludmila said.

“Crazy, huh?” Miss Gran said, “They’re just as bad as those Maids who can detect dust in the most obscure places.”

Seemingly all of Ludmila’s Maids could do that and it was a disturbingly accurate ability. They would even pop up the moment she tracked mud into the manor. Did that make them Elementals of cleanliness?

The Ice Elemental smashed into the Goblin lines, which buckled, but didn’t break. With a collective shout, the Goblins pushed back and enveloped the raging Elemental, which was still trying to get at the flaming torches. It wasn’t long until the Elemental was completely immobilised.

“That tactic is really handy,” Miss Gran marvelled. “You said that your people used this in the past?”

“It’s a countermeasure for strong opponents,” Ludmila nodded. “All else being equal, an Ogre or Bugbear can easily overpower a single Human, but they can’t overpower six at once. Immobilising them like this makes it trivial for supporting spearmen to take them down. The Goblin Army that invaded last year also employed the same tactic, so it’s probably a common one for the weaker races.”

On the slope below, light infantry armed with spears came forward to stab at the trapped Elemental through the gaps of its makeshift enclosure. The Ice Elemental roared and thrashed in vain until it ultimately collapsed into a pile of fragments. One of the Goblin mystics cautiously came forward, rummaging through the remains before straightening to hold up a glowing blue shard in a pair of wooden tongs.

“Good work!” Miss Gran smiled down at them, “Let’s go home!”

Ilyshn’ish’s seneschal watched the company return down the slope with a satisfied look.

“I hope this works,” she said.

“That’s what we’re trying to find out,” Ludmila said. “If it does, it will be another piece of evidence to support the validity of Miss LeNez’s theory.”

“What will it look like in the winter if we succeed?”

“Normal, I suppose?” Ludmila replied, “You’re on a south-facing slope, but you’ll still have snow for at least two months out of the year. If the Ice Elementals take over, your village is going to look like the ice house at the Faculty of Alchemy.”

“Dame Verilyn never mentioned any of this,” Miss Gran sighed.

“Well, Dragons seem to dictate the elemental balance in an area, so it is not surprising that she would think nothing of it. Rather than find faults with your circumstances, I think it would be far better to take advantage of them.”

In that aspect, Ludmila was similar to a Dragon, though her influence of the primal mana of the area was the result of her absorbing negative energy and thus allowing the life energy inherent to her territories to overflow. Unfortunately, it was very difficult to assert without revealing that she was the source of the anomalous conditions. She wasn’t sure that those studying the phenomenon would believe her even if she did.

“I admit that it has its perks,” Miss Gran said, “but I also understand why countries wouldn’t allow this to happen. It’s like sustaining a perpetual border conflict.”

“But it doesn’t seem *that* hard,” Olga said. “These Ice Elementals are supposed to be Gold-rank targets by old Adventurer standards. When I was a little kid, I thought that meant only armies could stop them.”

“I *did* use an army to stop it,” Miss Gran noted. “A small army. Only a single company was deployed, but it takes a whole army to perpetually maintain this kind of effort.”

“Wh-What I meant was that if Goblins can defend against them, so can Humans. In my old village, part of our taxes went to paying Adventurers in case something nasty came around. But Adventurers are *super* expensive! They keep all the loot from their commissions, too. Why didn’t the Nobles use the money to raise Knights and armed retainues, instead? They could even make money from the materials that they get.”

There were a few theories as to why that was. From an economic standpoint, maintaining professional armsmen was a continuous drain on a fief's finances. Adventurers could instead be commissioned in the brief periods that they were necessary, effectively turning them into a trained mercenary force that the hundreds of fiefs around each guild branch could rely on for security.

On paper, it was a sound idea as situations that required Adventurers were relatively rare. In practice, however, tribal raids and predation by monsters weren't the only threats to a realm. As more and more of the Nobility turned to more economical security options, their martial institutions decayed. The vast majority of Re-Estize and the Empire had forgotten how to fight and thus became vulnerable to those who still could.

Re-Estize experienced this in the form of unchecked criminal activity that crippled society as a whole. The Empire experienced it in the form of the Bloody Emperor and his use of the Imperial Army to establish and maintain his autocratic rule. Both countries relied upon – or formerly relied upon, depending on what part of the Empire one was in – powerful individuals like Adventurers and Workers who effectively held a monopoly on readily deployable strength above Mithril Rank.

“Let's explore that, shall we?” Ludmila said, “We can even have Miss Gran help out.”

“Me?” Miss Gran squeaked.

“Of course,” Ludmila smiled. “It's something you're already doing here, so you can serve as a practical reference. We should return to the village first, however. I don't want to waste any more of your mana than necessary floating up here.”

“Ah, yeah,” Nemel sighed. “I need to be more aware of that these days.”

They went back down the mountainside, steadily picking up speed as they skimmed over the treetops. The development of Miss Gran's first village progressed to the point where a noticeable clearing had been created in the forest. For the time being, they were preparing permanent dwellings for the coming winter, so it had the characteristic look of a frontier lumber camp. Plus Goblins.

“Miss Gran, Ludmila asked, “will you be going ahead with your development plans in the spring?”

“Hmm...that's a good question,” the seneschal answered. “I originally wanted to farm potatoes, but we've been farming Elementals instead. Honestly, the latter is more lucrative while we're still small.”

“I'd hardly call fifteen thousand subjects 'small',” Ludmila smirked.

“You’re right, of course. It just doesn’t *feel* that way. The Goblins are so low-maintenance that I hardly have to think about how they fit into the grand scheme of things.”

A single circuit over the village decelerated them to an acceptable landing speed and they alighted on one of the village centre’s wooden balconies.

“Welcome back,” Ida rose from her desk. “How did everything go?”

“We managed to beat the thing without any casualties,” Miss Gran replied, throwing her mantle over a chair. “It dropped a piece of Elemental Ice, as usual.”

“Did anything change?”

“Change...? Oh, no. I don’t think it’s supposed to warm up right away or anything like that. Well, maybe it did, but it didn’t suddenly transform into a blossoming alpine meadow.”

Miss Gran went to clear away her tools from the office’s central table. Ludmila eyed the unfamiliar contraptions as they were carefully placed into a wooden case.

“Your wands have caused quite the stir,” she said.

“They have?” Miss Gran looked up from the table, “I didn’t think Second-tier wands would be considered all that special here.”

“It’s not so much the tier of the wands as it is the spell you’ve been charging them with.”

“Ah, that makes sense. They’re one of House Gran’s most popular products, so I figured I’d see how well they’d do here. How many of them sold?”

“All of them,” Ludmila replied. “I mentioned that you put some wands up at the magic shop and she went to take a look. Within minutes, Nabe teleported over and cleaned them out.”

The wands in question were loaded with *Jolt*, an evocation spell that inflicted lightning damage. Apparently, it was a spell unknown to the Sorcerous Kingdom.

“Nabe?” The seneschal’s eyes grew wide, “As in the famous Wizard from *Darkness*?”

“The very same,” Ludmila nodded. “Out of curiosity, why are the wands so popular?”

“It’s because *Jolt* can’t be dodged,” Miss Gran idly fidgeted with an unenchanted wand. “The majority of evocation spells can be avoided if the target is nimble enough. Sneaky types are especially good at it. I used to hear horror stories all the time from my air wing’s veteran War Wizards about it. They’d drop a *Fireball* on a cluster of Goblins only to find out that most of them managed to dodge the explosion somehow. It even happens with *Lightning*.”

“I see. What’s the tradeoff for it being undodgeable?”

“Tradeoff?” Miss Gran frowned, “Magic doesn’t work like that, my lady. The spell does what it’s allowed to do. *Jolt* will unceremoniously fry most targets on the spot, but a powerful monster would be able to withstand enough punishment to reach the caster. I think most of my family’s customers use the wands to quickly deal with Demihuman mystics from a distance or as an emergency sidearm just in case something manages to sneak in close.”

“It seems like an extraordinarily practical spell,” Ludmila said. “How come I don’t see other mages in the region use it?”

Miss Gran put the wand away and placed her crafting kit on a nearby shelf.

“*Jolt* is an heirloom spell,” she said. “One of my ancestors developed it a long time ago. The spell itself is much older than the Baharuth Empire.”

“If that’s the case, how come someone hasn’t researched something similar since then?”

“That’s a complicated question,” the seneschal took a seat at the table. “I’m not sure how much you understand about arcane research, but it’s an inherently selfish activity. A mage’s knowledge of magic is reliant on what they practise, so any research that they do will always be related to themselves. Arcane casters also tend to guard their magical knowledge jealously, so magical research is a very exclusive field where prospective researchers nearly always start from scratch. I think most people are familiar with this: civilians tend to see it in the form of Alchemists having secret formulas or other arcane artisans’ proprietary magic items. Many of those items will literally blow up in the face of people who try to investigate their secrets.”

“Surely there must be mages who consider the greater magic community,” Ludmila said. “What you’ve described sounds like magical research is a mostly stagnant field...or at least one that treads the same ground ad nauseam through countless parallel efforts.”

“That’s pretty much what it is,” Miss Gran shrugged and laughed weakly. “Even in the Empire, they only teach you the basics of magic in the Imperial Magic Academy. I hear that the Imperial Ministry of Magic isn’t much better: everyone’s research is their own and they mostly keep to themselves even amongst their peers. They’re invested in themselves and they compete for the investment of the Imperial Administration. I don’t envy the Pr–Countess Waldenstein for her new post as Imperial Head Court Mage.”

She would have to keep an eye out for that. Independent research was encouraged at the magical academy in Warden’s Vale, but she never intended for it to stifle the sense of community she wanted to foster in every professional field.

Ida came around with tea, placing painted clay cups around the table. Ludmila pulled out several sheets of paper from her *Infinite Haversack* and set them down in front of her.

“Let’s speak about what Olga mentioned before,” she said. “I believe it’s been touched on here and there in past conversations, but we’ve never thoroughly explored the topic. As officers in the Sorcerous Kingdom’s Royal Army, we enjoy some very unconventional advantages compared to our neighbours and I suspect this will continue to be the case going forward when we work in other theatres of operation. First of all, how does a fief in Re-Estize raise its armed forces?”

“Through levy obligations,” Raul said.

“That *is* probably the most commonly known method,” Ludmila nodded, “but levy obligations aren’t indefinite. Once they’ve served their time, levied men will return to their regular occupations. How would a lord go about raising a retinue of professional men-at-arms?”

“They’d look around for big, strong men,” Raul replied. “That can probably be done while the lord’s going from village to village holding court.”

“Alright,” Ludmila said. “Say our lord finds some big, strong men. How does he secure them for his retinue? Those men have no legal obligation to work for him as armsmen. Many people would rather not risk themselves in combat and it’s often the case that the most hale and hearty individuals are heirs to a tenancy or workshop.”

Raul looked down at the table, drumming his fingers against its polished surface.



“Getting an heir to join would probably be impossible,” he said. “I guess you’d have to make the position attractive enough that the other people you find would want to join.”

“And how would the lord do that?”

“Pay them enough money,” Olga said.

“Providing them with a comfortable standard of living is a good start,” Ludmila said. “What else?”

“Special privileges,” Raul said. “But wouldn’t some people want to work as a retainer anyway? For prestige or connections or whatever.”

“That would depend on both the person being recruited and the lord,” Ludmila replied. “For instance, would you have taken an offer to become an armsman for your former lord, Raul?”

“No,” Raul made a sour face, “that guy was a jerk. His retainers were bullies, too.”

Ludmila frowned, trying to recall which territory Raul’s family came from. If she wasn’t mistaken, it was one of the baronies east of the city near the imperial border. That Baron had fled to Re-Estize with his family, however, and his land was now a part of Wagner County.

“That wouldn’t be a deal breaker for some people,” Nemel noted. “In fact, there are plenty of Imperial Houses with a reputation for being bad that end up being attractive to equally terrible people.”

“In the end,” Ludmila said, “a lord can only leverage things like prestige and connections – good or bad – if their house has cultivated those things in the first place. That, in turn, affects what sort of people come to work for them. In the case of a civilian Noble in the heartlands of Re-Estize, they have little to no martial reputation and likely none of the required institutional development to train decent armsmen. This, in turn, doesn’t inspire much confidence if said Noble comes up to someone and asks if they want to fight Demihuman tribes for them.”

“But most Nobles are like that, aren’t they?” Raul asked.

“They are,” Ludmila said, “which has become a huge problem for Re-Estize. Their Nobles may be capable administrators and politicians, but strength can steal away any order and prosperity that they manage to build. Things have degraded to the point that it’s said that criminal gangs effectively run at least half of the country. Let’s ignore that unfortunate fact for now and continue building our army, shall we?”

“What about Knights?” Olga asked.

“Knighting someone doesn’t guarantee an effective security force,” Ludmila answered. “In many ways, it may hurt more than help. Knights have responsibilities beyond being combatants and not everyone has the character or education to be a proper Knight. Additionally, it doesn’t magically solve all of the logistical issues in raising and maintaining an army and a single Knight doesn’t have the power projection of a regiment of armsmen. A lord is better off raising a Knight *after* they have a functional regiment of armsmen. That way, the Knight can act as the commanding officer of that regiment.”

“This is harder than I thought it would be,” Olga pouted.

“I’m sure that many Nobles in Re-Estize feel the same way,” Ludmila said. “A title means little without the de facto power to exercise all the authority it grants.”

“So if our lord is in that situation,” Raul said, “the only thing they can really do is pay people more. If they hand out too many rights and privileges, a single bad guy who joins up can make a huge mess of things.”

She uncapped her pen and set it to the paper.

“Paying an armsman not only means providing a living wage for an individual,” Ludmila told them as she listed some figures on the sheet, “but also their families. If a rural household is frugal, a family of four in Re-Estize can survive on the equivalent of twelve silver per month. To entice someone to work for our lord, we’re looking at triple or quadruple that amount depending on whether they are supplied with equipment. This brings us to the next expense: arms and armour. Most Blacksmiths do not fashion either, so our lord will probably have to import everything from the nearest city. Training equipment is necessary, as well.”

“This is getting expensive.”

“It’s not as expensive as living in the city,” Nemel said. “I guess that’s why most of the Imperial Knights and their families live out in the country.”

“Olga was wondering why Nobles in Re-Estize opted to rely on Adventurers,” Ludmila said. “This is probably the biggest reason why. A single armsman with the capabilities of a Copper-rank Adventurer costs roughly four gold a month. A company of a hundred armsmen costs the lord forty platinum per month. When a lord’s territory is attacked by something that requires Adventurers perhaps once every two or three years, the Adventurer Guild becomes the more economical choice by far.”

“But what about that other stuff you brought up?” Raul asked, “Armsmen aren’t just for fighting raiders and monsters. They’re there to keep all of that other trouble under control, as well. Re-Estize’s Nobles should realise that.”

“I’m sure that they do,” Ludmila replied, “but criminal elements are a different sort of beast. Tribal raiders come around for food. A criminal organisation is a parasitic entity that subverts authority as it grows. Re-Estize’s criminal underground has grown to the point that I believe most Nobles have simply given up trying to fight them.”

“*Given up?*” Raul’s expression twisted in confusion, “How can they just give up? Shouldn’t the Nobles want to be in control?”

“According to a report from a few years ago, the criminal syndicate infesting Re-Estize had significantly more military power than Re-Estize itself. The only way any of its Nobles might be able to pull themselves out of that predicament is to lease a Death Knight from the Sorcerous Kingdom.”

“Then they should,” Raul grumbled.

Ludmila let out a short laugh, but the plight of their western neighbour was far from humorous. It was truly a case where imprudent decisions that had been made decades or even generations in the past were now visiting any number of difficult woes upon the country. One could say they had gone in the exact opposite direction as the Empire in terms of policy.

“Anyway,” she said as she flipped to a fresh sheet of paper, “let’s take a look at our practical reference now. Miss Gran, what...is there something the matter?”

Ilyshn’ish’s seneschal shifted slightly in her seat with an expression that was a cross between discomfort and embarrassment.

“It’s erm...I’m not sure how to put this, my lady,” she said, “but all of these budget calculations have left me feeling just a bit guilty.”

The statement caused Ludmila to examine the imperial scion through every measure available to her. Despite her scandalised look, she wasn’t any more out of line with her sovereign’s will than usual, which was to say not much at all.

“Guilty about budget calculations?” Ludmila sent a calm look across the table at Miss Gran, “Would you care to explain what you mean by that?”

Miss Gran squirmed for a few moments before finally providing a reply.

“Um...” she said, “it’s just that I’m probably not a very good case study. I haven’t been paying my Goblins anything at all.”