

“Don’t look!”

“Wha–”

Rangobart’s head jerked back as Dimoiya reached up to clamp her hands over his eyes.

“Weren’t you just screaming at us to look?” Rangobart said.

“I asked the *Prez* to look,” Dimoiya replied. “You’re not allowed to look!”

“Someone please make some sense.”

Why wasn’t he allowed to look at a tree? Why was Lady Waldenstein allowed to? Weren’t they surrounded by other people who could also see the aforementioned tree? There hadn’t been any sign of a commotion before they arrived.

“Dimoiya’s right,” Lady Waldenstein said, “you shouldn’t look. Lady Zahradnik, is it appropriate for this individual to be walking around like this?”

“Glasir always walks around like this,” Lady Zahradnik replied.

“G-Glasir?”

“Hi.”

He turned his head slightly at the sound of a youthful, sweet-sounding voice. Dimoiya’s grip over his eyes tightened. Lady Waldenstein mentioned that Baroness Zahradnik’s daughter was named Glasir, but the child wouldn’t be able to talk yet.

“Introduce yourself properly,” Lady Zahradnik said.

The voice sounded again, accompanied by the rustle of countless leaves.

“Dame Glasir Gel Gronvidr, custodian of the harbour. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you as well, Dame Glasir. Frianne von Gushmond, Head Imperial Court Mage of the Baharuth Empire. If you don’t mind my asking, what is it that you do as custodian of the harbour?”

“Um...I manage the ecology of the area, I guess? Things are pretty barren right now, but they’re getting better.”

“I’ve been promoting similar approaches to urban management wherever I can,” Lady Zahradnik said. You’ve already seen a version of it in Corelyn Harbour. Dame Glasir is a Druid in service to the harbour and the future city that will rise here – hopefully one of many.”

“If one wanted to do the same thing in the Empire,” Lady Waldenstein asked, “What tangible benefits could be used to whet the Imperial Administration’s appetite?”

Rangobart was of the mind that the Imperial Administration would rather light itself on fire than have Druids have a say in how the Empire was run. Throughout imperial history, Druids resisted imperial policy at every turn, demanding unacceptable restrictions on territorial expansion and industrial development. They even interfered through third parties, as was the case with the Adventurer Guild turning or putting a premium on commissions that Druids insisted were harmful to nature. The most aggressive officials in every generation insisted on labelling them enemies of the state.

“That would depend on the situation,” Lady Zahradnik answered. “Things would be so entrenched in the Imperial Heartlands that introducing Druids for any government work might be impossible. An entirely unestablished territory on the frontier like Viscount Roberbad’s, however...”

“You make it sound as if the Imperial Administration is the only obstacle to their collaboration,” Rangobart said as he guessed at Lady Zahradnik’s location. “The Druids themselves are implacable when it comes to expansion and development.”

“I can see how it seems like that in the experience of the Empire,” the Baroness said. “But I doubt that’s actually the case. In fact, the seemingly hopeless resistance against imperial expansion over the past two centuries should weigh things in your favour. The region’s Druids should leap at the chance to preserve even a portion of your land. It’s exactly the sort of opportunity that you need to begin integrating them into the civil service and demonstrating their value to the Empire.”

“I hope I can strike a compromise acceptable to both sides,” Rangobart said.

“Since you proposed to focus on urban development, the Druids should have plenty of time to justify their demands. This is assuming that the Empire is satisfied with your plans as they stand.”

He couldn't imagine that they would. Never mind promising development or his new position in the Imperial Army, the Sorcerous Kingdom had clearly taken an interest in him. The Imperial Administration would step lightly around anything he did out of fear that they would run afoul of some inscrutable plan and draw the wrath of their suzerain.

"Not to sound rude or anything," Glasir said, "but is there something wrong with that guy?"

"I sometimes wonder about that myself," Lady Waldenstein replied.

"If he needs healing..."

Rangobart freed himself from Dimoiya's grip. His eyes took a moment to readjust to the bright afternoon sun...and then he found himself staring at a beautiful woman girded in a scant layer of red-gold leaves.

*A Dryad...?*

"I knew it," Dimoiya sighed. "He got charmed!"

"I-I didn't do anything," the leafy woman said in Glasir's voice.

"I haven't been charmed," Rangobart shot Dimoiya a look.

"That makes it worse!"

"Why do women always go in that direction? She's not even a Human!"

"There was also that Alraune last winter," Lady Zahradnik noted.

"...I'm telling your mother," Dimoiya said.

"You know my mother?" Rangobart frowned.

"Not yet."

Rangobart tore his gaze away from the Dryad. His mother had warned him about Vampire women in the Sorcerous Kingdom; hearing about a Dryad might also send her into hysterics.

“So,” he cleared his throat, “are there any specific examples of Dame Glasir’s work in Warden’s Vale?”

“I’m right here, you know...”

Lady Zahradnik hugged the sullen Dryad around the shoulder affectionately.

“She’s still attending classes, but she’s growing quickly. How close are you to obtaining Second-tier magic?”

“Based on the spells that I’ve timed,” Dame Glasir replied, “it shouldn’t be long now. My First-tier spells are useful, too! Work around the village uses about half of my mana, even after the temple staff moved in. If you’re looking for stuff that you can see, I’m making dirt for the village.”

“Dirt?”

“Yup, dirt. Haven’t you seen the little patches of grass and other plants around the square?”

He had, but he hadn’t given any more thought to them than he would a tuft of grass growing out of a crack in a city street. Were they truly so significant?

“If you need dirt,” Dimoiya said, “why not cart some in from the surroundings?”

“I could,” Dame Glasir said, “but it’s not so simple as that. The ultimate goal is to create a system that can absorb and convert waste as quickly as the people can generate it, and it has to be done in such a way that it doesn’t disrupt the harbour’s functions. I have to figure out the right mix of critters, plants, and other things to accomplish that.”

“Do you mean to say that the harbour will process its own waste?” Rangobart asked. “In such a way that there isn’t any excess?”

Waste was an ever-present issue that few gave much thought to. Every village, town, and city had a dump tucked away as far as feasible for its population. Those who were fortunate enough to have rivers could dump everything into the water, while land-locked places periodically burned their trash piles once they grew to the size of small hills. The ashes were spread over the fields as fertiliser, but the results never made up for the costs of waste management.

“There will always be excess,” the Dryad said. “Especially since the harbour relies on imports to exist. Crafting materials are recycled whenever possible while the rest is turned into dirt. Once we get to the forest city stage, the city will produce specialised raw materials of its own for processing and export. We need to build the foundation for that production now in order to benefit from it later.”

Urban centres were always considered centres of specialised production, but he had never heard of a city that produced raw resources in any significant quantity. They simply imported resources and food for their specialists and churned out the results.

“Glafir!” A girl called out from the rows of summons, “Are you going to help?”

“Coming!”

With a bob of her leafy head, Dame Glafir excused herself to join the children equipping summons. A Death Knight stomped after her, cradling a potted tree in its arms.

“I can’t say I’ve ever heard of such a mobile Dryad,” Rangobart said. “I didn’t even realise it was possible.”

“She’ll put down her roots once she’s ready,” Lady Zahradnik said.

“And so you’ll have an eternal custodian for the harbour. That’s quite the convenient arrangement.”

“Rather than a ‘convenient arrangement’, it’s something like a natural one. A Dryad always tends to the area around her tree. The area around Dame Glafir’s tree will be the part of the city she’s responsible for.”

“I suppose that’s one thing I can’t bring back with me,” Rangobart said.

“Pervert,” Nemel said.

“Not you, too,” Rangobart sighed.

He turned around to find Nemel and her friends standing behind him. Beyond them was a crowd of Goblins disembarking from a line of wagons.

“I saw you ogling Dame Glasir on the way in,” Nemel said. “Noble or commoner, you men are all the same. She’s not even Human! You know, she probably regards you as a tree would a sparrow.”

“It’s not *quite* like that,” Lady Zahradnik said. “Miss Gran has the right idea, though. Dame Glasir doesn’t see things as a Human does.”

“Doesn’t that cause problems?” Rangobart asked.

“It’s mostly the harbour’s citizens treating her as if she’s a Human. She understands what they’re doing so nothing major ever happens.”

It was a wonder that it didn’t. Dryads were powerful Heteromorphs that were notorious for attacking and abducting frontiersmen. One would usually never allow anyone near their tree if they could help it, never mind putting it in a pot.

“Nemel,” Ida said, “the Sergeants are waiting for you.”

“I’ll be right there,” Nemel replied. “Please excuse me, everyone.”

Rangobart’s gaze followed Nemel curiously as she went to address a line of Goblins standing with their wolves nearby.

“Three skewers each,” she said as Fendros, Ida, and Liz handed out small coin purses. “Make sure you spread them out between matches. Remember that it’s alright to get excited, but make sure you behave yourselves.”

The Goblins saluted and led their troops to the row of colourful tents, leaving a small group of nervous-looking Humans behind. Nemel followed the Goblins, flirting back and forth between the queues making sure that the Goblins were buying their food properly.

“It looks like Nemel is going to have the biggest showing,” Lady Zahradnik said.

“When you said that it was an ‘event’,” Rangobart said, “I didn’t expect something on the order of a major town fair.”

“We have a high participation rate,” the Baroness said. “It isn’t the Grand Arena yet, but over half of my Human subjects have been attending them. I’ve been talking with Corelyn about encouraging her people to take the trip upriver for them as well.”

“How often do these ‘league matches’ happen?”

“Once a week.”

*Once a week?*

Rangobart’s gaze passed over the ever-increasing activity at the stands. Wagons were now arriving regularly, offloading groups of gaily-dressed citizens. The Grand Arena of Arwintar was supposedly a profitable operation that gleaned the riches of the imperial capital, but he couldn’t figure out if the league matches in Warden’s Vale did the same.

“I can’t imagine what this will be like in the future,” he said. “This is a literal battlefield – how do people follow the action?”

“The stands are purposely widened to allow spectators to stay close to the fighting. The matches are still small due to their low rank, but we’ll have to figure out a better way to spectate the matches before they get too large and complex.”

“Low rank...are they in any way similar to Arena leagues?” Lady Waldenstein asked.

“No, they’re tied to how we rank Commanders. “Each rank has its accompanying ‘budget’ for both army size and season funding.”

“...season funding?”

“Yes, that’s right. A season is essentially a campaign where each Commander has to manage their ‘armies’ within the bounds of a budget. Copper and Iron-rank Commanders run squads while Silver and Gold-ranks run companies. We’re still adjusting things from season to season – the campaign in the Draconic Kingdom showed that our two Silver-rank Commanders can easily direct entire army fronts with a proper officer structure under them. The problem is that Warden’s Vale doesn’t have the industrial output to accommodate an army-sized budget. Anyway, we should return to our seats before things get started.”

They rejoined Lore Mare at his place on the top tier of seating. Another Elf stood beside him, a mirror image aside from the fact that he was wearing pants.

“Good Afternoon, Lady Aura,” Lady Zahradnik said.

“Heya.”

*The one in the skirt is a boy and the one in the pants is a girl?*

“...could it be that you’re the Dark Elf twins mentioned in that one report?” Lady Waldenstein asked.

“What report?” Lady Aura frowned.

“The one that...on second thought, forget that I asked.”

Lady Waldenstein went to stand on the far side of Rangobart, and then Dimoiya seemed to recall something and went to stand on the far side of Lady Waldenstein. Rangobart considered resetting their order for a moment before Dame Glasir appeared and went to stand between Lord Mare and Lady Zahradnik. He pondered the arrangement, recalling Last Waldenstein’s whisperings.

*So Lord Mare is rumoured to be Lady Zahradnik’s consort. Is that why she didn’t seem to fancy anyone while she was in the Empire? She prefers much younger partners...or is it older? He may look like that, but he’s probably older than my father’s father.*

To be fair, it wasn’t uncommon for women to be taken by boyish ‘flavours’. Lord Mare may very well be a deadly combination, possessing youthful looks while avoiding the pitfalls of mental immaturity...except he wasn’t sure how it worked for Elves. At the least, distinct age gaps between partners were probably common given their longevity. A century or three of difference may have been perfectly acceptable.

But then there was the matter of Dame Glasir. Half-elves were the result of a union between a Human and an Elf, not a Dryad. At first, he had thought the Dryad’s name a clear coincidence, but...

“Lady Zahradnik.”

“Yes?”

“Is Dame Glasir your daughter?”

A strangled noise came from Lady Waldenstein. Lady Zahradnik’s lip twitched slightly.

“We don’t mind the association,” she said. “My subjects always refer to us in those terms.”

“I see.”



*Well, whatever.*

As they waited for the armies to take the field, Rangobart listened to Lord Mare and Dame Glasir discuss druidic magic. Could he entice Druids to his new territory as easily as Lady Zahradnik asserted? The longer he stayed and learned, the more he itched to get started with his fief.

“I think they’re coming,” Dimoiya said.

“They’re assuming their positions,” Lady Zahradnik told her. “This is a Silver League match, so they have roughly company-sized contingents to organise.”

While the battlefield was long, it was also narrow enough to see everything that was going on. Lines of Undead soldiers adorned in equipment and tabards in the colours of their respective teams – Red for Raul and Blue for Olga – took positions out of sight of the opposing army. Neither assumed the bold formations that the forces of the Empire or Re-Estize always used, instead opting to deny as much information to their opponent as possible.

“Is this positioning due to your influence?” Rangobart asked.

“Yes and no,” Lady Zahradnik answered. “I’m almost certain that this is the result of the training itself. The objective of these matches is to defeat the other side and they train in similar battles every day. Superfluous strategies and tactics that were conceived as a means to convey national and martial prestige are quickly cast aside. They stopped using the traditional formations employed in the region by the time the first season ended.”

“Ah—they’re starting!” Dimoiya pointed, “There wasn’t even an announcement!”

Even if there wasn’t, the crowd hushed as the different formations went into play. Rangobart focused on two groups of armoured Wights that seemed to be trying to flank their unseen opponents. He looked at the distant towers with a frown.

“It looks like they know what’s on the other side,” he said.

“Look up,” Lady Zahradnik said.

He immediately spotted two flights of winged creatures similarly trying to outmanoeuvre one another.

“I see,” he nodded thoughtfully, “that’s something the Imperial Army seldom has to worry about.”

The Imperial Army enjoyed air supremacy in nearly every operation. The only time he could think of where that didn’t was during the Blister Campaign, and that was only in the brief period that the Viridian Dragon Lord was active.

“What happens now?” He asked, “Do they try to dominate the air before moving on the ground?”

“It’s never so clear-cut these days,” Lady Zahradnik said. “If they commit too many resources and attention to the air battle, they’ll lose on the ground. Essentially, the skirmish phase of a battle has been extended to the air.”

“How does a single Commander manage the sheer complexity of everything happening at once?”

“They don’t. Just like any army, they have subordinates. The Sorcerous Kingdom uses Elder Liches as ‘sergeants’.”

As they spoke, the swirling dance above them grew in intensity and dove toward the field. Excited shouts rose as the winged swarm resolved into dozens of Bone Vultures. The dive angled ever so slightly, sending them straight at a group of blue team’s ground skirmishers.

“This is crazy,” Rangobart breathed. “The attackers might take out their ground targets, but their pursuers will tear them to shreds.

Just as he said so, the skirmishers on the red team’s side charged over the central ridge. Olga’s skirmishers smoothly shifted to respond to the new threat. Before they could take two steps, however, four Large Earth Elementals erupted from the ground behind her skirmishers. The Elementals snatched up the Blue Team’s ground troops and hurled them into the diving Bone Vultures. Red Team’s wing scattered, leaving Blue Team’s wing to be blasted out of the sky. A wild cheer filled the air in response to the Red Team’s devastating opening.

“How are they going to recover from that?”

“Blue Team’s air wing is hurt,” Lady Zahradnik said, “but they’re far from out of the fight. Their controller was deft enough to get away with only a handful of losses.”

Blue Team’s surviving Bone Vultures scattered, flying low over their own side. Not willing to risk a pursuit, the Red Team shifted their momentum up the line, heading to flank the next group of skirmishers with their overwhelming advantage. The Blue Team wasn’t content to wait for the inevitable outcome, however. Their side of the field was teeming with activity as they reorganised to counter the fresh breakthrough.

“How does anyone keep track of this?!” Dimoiya held her head in her hands.

“I think most people are content to wait for significant developments,” Lady Zahradnik said.

“I know plenty of officers who would love to watch this,” Rangobart said. “No, pretty much any Imperial Knight would. This is entirely different from the Grand Arena.”

“They’re welcome to visit. Once the Empire upgrades its infrastructure and starts using Soul Eaters for transportation, Warden’s Vale will be less than a day away from Arwintar.”

On the field, the Red Team’s advance slowed noticeably. Puzzled, Rangobart looked around for the cause.

“What’s going on?”

Lady Zahradnik gestured to their left. A group of thirty or so summons from Blue Team – including its scattered air wing and two Earth Elementals – charged east toward enemy territory.

“Olga consolidated her right flank for a counteroffensive,” the Baroness said. “Raul wasn’t aggressive enough.”

“That seemed plenty aggressive to me!” Dimoiya said.

The detached force smashed Raul’s left flank right in front of a hundred screaming Goblins. The little green Demihumans jumped up and down in excitement, wildly waving their fists in the air as the summons charged by.

“If Raul had committed more forces to his breakthrough, they would have been too great of a threat to Olga’s headquarters for her to try something like this. It seems that his experiences in the Draconic Kingdom are still affecting him – he’s usually far more aggressive than this.”

“What happened?”

“He skirted too close to an active front,” Lady Zahradnik said. “His Skeletal Dragon was taken out of the sky by a Beastman hunter and he fell into the Oriculon River. It made him miss a good part of the largest battle in the campaign. He’s been a bit wary ever since.”

“But you still won, right?” Dimoiya asked.

“We did,” the Baroness answered, “but he still blames himself for being heedless.”

Another cheer rose as Olga’s detached force trampled one of Raul’s hastily established defensive positions. Out on Olga’s side of the field, Raul’s offensive was being worn down by small teams of ranged attackers harassing it as it tried to make headway.

“It looks like Olga’s better at defence, too,” Rangobart noted.

“She always has been,” Lady Zahradnik nodded. “Olga tends to let people move against her first and conduct a counterstrike based on what it looks like they’re doing. Raul used to be able to win anyways half of the time.”

“How do you plan on having him overcome the problem?”

“It hasn’t been long since it started. I’m hoping that he’ll overcome it on his own, but I’ll see what I can do if it drags on for too long.”

With the bulk of the action shifting toward Raul’s headquarters, the crowd moved east along the stands to get a better view. Near the Commander’s tower, a more robust defensive line had been set up. Four Skeleton Warriors stood alongside ranks of Wights supported by a troop of Skeleton Mages and Archers.

Undaunted by the superior forces arrayed to end their advance, Olga’s forces charged headlong into them. The fight was incredibly messy, with the attackers seemingly intent on doing as much damage as they could with no regard for their own preservation. Rangobart shook his head at the grisly result. While the Skeleton Warriors survived while suffering a bit of damage, the rest had been thoroughly mangled.

“Some question whether suicide charges like that should be allowed,” Lady Zahradnik said.

“They’re being done with summons, no?” Rangobart said.

“Well, the argument is that one wouldn’t do something like that with real troops. We *can* use summons the same way in real combat, though.”

“After seeing this, I wonder if the Empire would have been better off raising Conjurers rather than War Wizards.”

“I thought you mentioned that you were going to expand beyond the War Wizard company concept.”

“I am,” Rangobart nodded. “Seeing this has given me all sorts of additional ideas, though.”

“Where are the Skeleton Warriors going?” Dimoiya asked.

Rangobart turned his attention back to the battlefield. The four Skeleton Warriors defending Raul had abandoned their positions, following the invading detachment’s path back to Olga’s territory.

“It’s his last viable strategy,” Lady Zahradnik answered. “His forces have suffered far too many losses to stand a chance against Olga’s final offensive. All he can do is hope that he can hit her headquarters with his own detached force while her forces are committed to capturing his base. I highly doubt it will work, however.”

It didn’t. Olga took her time scouting Raul’s base and, noticing that the Skeleton Warriors were gone, she went out of her way to find and destroy them. A white flag was raised over Raul’s base immediately after. Applause rose from the stands for both Commanders’ performances.

“And that’s the first match,” the Baroness said. “The next match should start in roughly half an hour when new armies are resummoned and equipped.”

“Will it be the same army?” Rangobart asked.

“Unlikely,” Lady Zahradnik answered. “They’re allowed to make changes to their army composition, but it comes at the cost of not being able to use the equipment they’ve prepared if they deviate too far from their original plans. We’ll likely see minor changes here and there.”

“How many matches will there be?”

“Three,” the Baroness said. “After that, the post-match festivities will be held in the village square. This is your last day in Warden’s Vale, so please enjoy everything we have to your heart’s content.”