

“I’m not sure how to say this,” Frianne said as her seat vibrated against her butt, “but the roads are quite different here.”

“Ah, that’s because we’re not travelling on a road,” Ludmila replied. “It’s just a path over stone. One might think that it would be similar to having pavement, but it’s not. At least it’s better than the usual rural road.”

Frianne wasn’t so sure about that. Travelling in the rural regions of the Empire inevitably saw one being jounced around by ruts in the road as they went from place to place, but it never felt like one’s carriage would be shaken apart.

“These carriages are quite different from the ones we’ve seen in other parts of the Sorcerous Kingdom,” Rangobart said.

“They’re locally produced,” Ludmila said. “I suppose you’ve become used to Wagner’s vehicles since arriving. The local artisans are far from being able to match that experience, which is probably most of what you’re feeling at the moment. We’re travelling ten times faster than a regular wagon, as well.”

That they weren't riding one of the carriages from before was abundantly clear. It was a carriage-like vehicle that had some sort of temperature control, but everything else seemed to be an antithesis to the luxury they had enjoyed before.

The vehicle and its furnishings were completely fashioned out of wood, with little effort made at making the interior comfortable aside from sanding down corners and edges. There were no cushions on the seats and the windows weren't covered by glass aside from the one at the front. The sound of the carriage rolling over the stone filled the air with a raucous clamour as they sped over a vast, barren landscape.

That landscape in itself was a mystery. It was as if someone had scoured the terrain of all soil and vegetation, leaving behind a lifeless plateau of granite on the western bank of the Katze River. She couldn't imagine that it was a natural occurrence, though she also couldn't imagine what had happened to cause it.

“Has Warden's Vale always been like this?” Frianne asked.

“No,” Ludmila answered with a shake of her head. “My demesne didn’t take on its current form until Lord Mare came along.”

Frienne swallowed, her hands going ice-cold as the Baroness’ words sunk in. If she recalled correctly, ‘Lord Mare’ was the father of Ludmila’s daughter. Was he some monster from the Sorcerous Kingdom who had left Ludmila’s land barren while leaving her with child? How could she remain so steadfast in the face of her unspeakable hardships?

She glanced at Ludmila’s Maids to see how they reacted to her story, but the both of them appeared to be just as unflappable as their mistress.

The first signs of life aside from themselves came into view as they approached a cluster of buildings roughly two kilometres from the waterfront. Through the spaces between the stone structures, she could see a few Humans moving in what appeared to be a village square. Their transportation slowed before reaching the perimeter of the settlement, eventually coming to a stop in a lot beside another, different-looking carriage.

A Death Knight stomped over to open the door of their vehicle and they found a set of men and women in

worker's garb gathered nearby. The group paid little mind to the Undead nearby, waiting quietly until Ludmila stepped out.

"How'd it go, m'lady?" One of the men asked.

Ludmila crossed her arms, her gaze going from the carriage to Frianne.

"Probably a failure," the Baroness said. "We were rattling around in there like dried peas."

"This is turning out to be harder than it looks," the man sighed. "We'll take her apart and keep working on it."

"I look forward to your report from the artillery range."

*Artillery range...?*

With no further explanation, the group walked past them and went to inspect the carriage. The commoners in Corelyn Harbour also seemed to care little for differences in social status, but, from that brief interaction, Frianne could already sense that Ludmila's people had a unique flavour of their own.

“I’ve taken the liberty of accommodating you next to one another,” Ludmila gestured for them to follow her. “Will there be any problems with that?”

“Dimoiya gets her own room?” Dimoiya asked.

“Dimoiya gets her own house,” Ludmila answered with a slight smile. “They aren’t as fine as the dwarven work you’ve seen in Corelyn Harbour and Zwillingstürme, but they’re still serviceable. Oh, before we continue, this is my Lady’s Maid, Aemilia Luzi. I believe everyone but Officer Roberbad has met her before. Wiluvien Linum is one of my chambermaids.”

While they had been introduced to Miss Luzi before, the Maid had changed quite a bit from the winter. She had a flanged mace clipped to her waist for some reason. On the opposite hip, two rows of three wands crossing over one another were neatly holstered. Frianne couldn’t recall her wearing such items before.

*Well, at least the Elf seems to be a normal chambermaid.*

“I never knew that Re-Estize had any Elves,” Dimoiya said.

“She’s a Half-Elf who entered my service with her sister, Lluluvien. Lluluvien handles the night watch, so you’ll see her around in the evenings.”

*Did she just say the night watch?*

They walked north around the edge of a huge village square that was larger than most towns, eventually coming across a shophouse with the banner of House Zahradnik draped over its simple wooden door. In contrast to the stone building and its bleak grey surroundings, a snarl of greenery was growing out of the window. Frianne edged away as the plants turned to regard them.

“This is my official unofficial residence in Warden’s Vale,” Ludmila said. “As you might have noticed, it’s fairly easy to distinguish from the other buildings.”

As she spoke, more plants appeared from around the corners of the building. Dimoiya squatted to eye them curiously.

“I’ve never seen plants like these before,” she said.

“They’re the intelligent sort,” Ludmila said. “The sound of my voice usually brings them over if I’ve been away for a while.”

“Are they dangerous?”

“Most things can be dangerous in the right circumstances. If you keep in mind that they are plants and behave accordingly, there shouldn’t be any real problems.”

*What do plants behave like?*

“What are you doing with them?” Rangobart asked.

“They’re settlers,” Ludmila smiled, “just like the Humans you see walking around the village. I mentioned that they’re intelligent plants, yes?”

“Now I have to wonder what your tax policy is like.”

Ludmila continued walking, exchanging a casual greeting with a passing citizen before looking back at Rangobart.

“The answer to that is more complicated than you think,” she said. “I will try my best to explain, but I’m not confident that I can adequately do so before you return to

Corelyn Harbour. Wagner always looks like she wants to pull out her hair every time we broach the topic.”

“I get the feeling that she strongly disapproves of whatever it is you’re doing here,” Frianne said.

“Just strongly?”

“It seemed that she didn’t think we would come away with anything useful, at least,” Rangobart said. “She implied that you would discourage us from developing our new fiefs.”

“It isn’t as if I’m *not* developing my fief,” Ludmila’s voice took on a reproachful tone. “Our respective notions of development simply differ to the point where she is confident that what I am doing is wrong. My policies are foolishly wasteful, according to her. To be fair, her views are shared – in part, or in whole – by most people living in Re-Estize and Baharuth.”

They passed a stone house being dismantled by a team of workers. Undead placed debris into one of the ubiquitous containers that the Sorcerous Kingdom used to haul freight. Additionally, what Frianne assumed was the furniture from the house was arranged neatly nearby.

As far as she could tell, nothing was in particularly poor condition. If anything, it all looked rather new.

“What happened here?” Rangobart asked, “an eviction?”

“It was one of the first houses built in this village,” Ludmila answered. “Everything that you see around you is temporary – the city that will eventually stand here is something that will take shape over generations. While that happens, my people will be continually refining themselves for the future.”

That didn't make much sense to her. Cities did take shape over generations, but that didn't mean one regularly tore down perfectly functional buildings.

“How old was this house?” Frianne asked.

“It was built about a year ago,” Ludmila answered.

“Was there some defect that made it unsuitable for habitation?”

“No, it was just old. The residents moved into a new home on the other side of the square.”

“What will be raised in this building's place?”

“Another shophouse.”

“...then what was the point of the exercise?” Rangobart asked.

“The exercise was the point of the exercise,” Ludmila told them. “I said it just now, didn’t I? My people will be continually refining themselves for the future.”

“So you’re tearing down buildings to build new buildings,” Rangobart said slowly, “which are being built for the express purpose of giving those involved in the construction process work experience.”

“In part, yes. Industries as a whole are being cultivated through this process and others similar to it.”

“But isn’t it a colossal waste of labour and materials?” Rangobart asked, “It isn’t as if you’re wanting for space. I’m sure that spares from around the Sorcerous Kingdom would love for the chance to live here.”

Ludmila looked at Rangobart for a moment, then examined the half-filled cargo container before nodding silently to herself.

“I suppose you would see things that way. Let’s drop off everyone’s things before we explore that line of thought.”

Their accommodations were a set of three shophouses not far from a part of the square that was under construction. Frianne assumed that it meant the buildings were the newest in the village, but she didn’t have an eye for how they technically differed from the ‘older’ ones. She went and had her bags placed on the front counter before coming out again, wondering if it was the first time that anyone had ever accommodated aristocratic guests in a shop.

“Are the accommodations to your satisfaction, Countess Waldenstein?” Ludmila asked.

“It’s as large as a summer villa on the Golden Strand,” Frianne answered.

“I can’t believe you plan on knocking them down again,” Rangobart said as he came to join them.

“Nobles have a taste for old things,” Ludmila said, “but they’re not *that* old. Most of my subjects are all too happy to move into their new and improved homes.”

Dimoiya came out a few minutes later, accompanied by Wiluvien.

“Prez!” Dimoiya bubbled, “Did you see the lake?”

“There’s a lake?”

“You can see it from the balcony. It’s *huge!* There are thingies in it! I was totally right about the villa thing. I bet you could even get imperial Nobles to visit in the summer.”

“I don’t think many would be brave enough to cross the border just for a nice view,” Ludmila said. “Or even consider coming to the Sorcerous Kingdom for that matter. Besides, the Empire has natural beauty aplenty.”

“I wouldn’t mind vacationing here,” Frianne said. “There will always be something new if you keep knocking things down every year.”

“Surely, you’ll have to stop at some point,” Rangobart said. “It’s bound to get too expensive as the population grows.”

“The appearance of permanent structures will depend on this.”

Ludmila gestured to the ground nearby, where some grass and a few small plants struggled to grow in a thin patch of dirt.

“The city here will be unlike any other city in the region,” she said. “At least any city that exists at this moment. It will be built according to its unique ecology rather than any of what we consider conventional reasons.”

“This location is rather conventional, though,” Frianne noted.

“It is,” Ludmila admitted. “My ancestors settled in this vale because it has a river that is suited for transportation and is connected to the riverlands. It’s warmer here than up in the surrounding highlands. It is surrounded by seemingly inexhaustible natural bounty and sits in a strategically critical location. But it is also the will of those who came before me that this place remains a verdant jewel nestled in the wild, and so I shall endeavour to respect their wishes.”

“Does that mean it will be similar in appearance to the residential district of Corelyn Harbour?” Frianne asked, “I recall that you were heavily involved in its design. You had a hand in Zwillingstürme’s creation, as well.”

“It won’t,” Ludmila said. “The best way to describe it would be a city the size of a small barony that looks more like a forest than a city. Its communities will be spread throughout that forest – on the surface, underground, underwater, and in the canopy above. The only districts of the city that may resemble conventional urban spaces will be the harbour and the citadel.”

Frienne frowned at the tiny patch of dirt. If they were waiting for nature to return to the barren plateau before committing to any permanent structures, it would indeed take generations for Ludmila’s vision to manifest. She could only hope that her descendants didn’t decide that it was a terrible idea and do something else instead.

“There’s that container from before,” Ludmila said. “Let’s see where it goes, shall we?”

Out in the square, four Death Knights carried the cargo container from the demolished house like a group of servants carrying a litter. They ended up at the construction site nearby, where a strange sight awaited them.

About a dozen masons were visible on the premises. This wasn’t strange in itself, but even more magic casters

than masons were present. Five were Lizardmen dressed in shamanistic garb. Three were Humans adorned in brown robes. One was an Elder Lich with a clipboard and three Humans in black robes stood in a row behind it. Standing off to the side were two more Humans wearing the unsettling vestments of Surshana's adherents.

“What's going on?” Dimoiya whispered, “Who are these people?”

“The Lizardmen are Druids from the colony on the lake. The mages in the brown robes are from our Faculty of Alchemy. The black-robed mages are from the Faculty of Necromancy. The two Acolytes are staff at the local shrine.”

*Faculty...? As in a university?*

A roar filled the air as the container was emptied into the yard. Once the wind whisked the dust away, the Lizardmen gathered around the pile of broken stone. They knelt on the ground and a magical formation flashed into existence under them.

*Wait. Waitwaitwaitwaitwait. Why are tribal Demihumans conducting a ritual?*

Ritual Magic was one of the pinnacles of spellcraft, known only to the Empire's upper echelons and those who employed it at the behest of the state. Of course, it existed as a rumour and fanciful element in folklore, but its existence as a practical skill was considered top secret by the Baharuth Empire.

The pile of stone seemed to melt into a single blob that reformed into a huge block of unblemished granite. Then, the light of the ritual formation faded and the Lizardman Druids stood, tails slowly waving back and forth. The brown-robed mages came forward to examine the result, casting appraisal spells and chipping off small samples while the Elder Lich went around asking questions and taking notes.

“See?” Ludmila smiled, “We're not wasting any materials.”

It was rumoured that the greatest mages in the history of humanity performed rituals to obtain immortality. In Warden's Vale, they performed rituals to refurbish construction materials for buildings that would be destroyed shortly after. It was just wrong on too many levels.

“Wh-what happened?” Dimoiya asked.

“A ritual was conducted to fuse the stone into a single block,” Ludmila said.

“Eh? A ritual? Like the rituals in the stories that summon Demons?”

“A ritual isn’t necessary to summon Demons,” Ludmila told her.

*How do you know that?!*

People in the Sorcerous Kingdom had a talent for casually speaking about the most absurd things. Frianne eyed the stupid number of magic casters standing around the construction site. Maybe absurd things were simply considered normal in the Sorcerous Kingdom.

“There’s still the question of labour,” Rangobart said. “In fact, adding magic to the equation compounds the issue. This entire region is mountainous. You’re using precious mana to transmute stone that can be cut from quarries nearby. If this was the Empire, one might argue that the cost of transportation would justify the use of mana – assuming one even had mages on hand – but those

costs in the Sorcerous Kingdom are negligible if I correctly understand what we've been shown so far.”

“If I did that,” Ludmila said, “there would be that much less stone in the mountains.”

Frianne's gaze went to the mountain range that stretched across the eastern horizon. Even one of the peaks could build a thousand Arwintars – building a few houses would surely go unnoticed.

“That is the crux of the matter, I suppose,” Ludmila sighed in the face of their silence. “I often wonder if it will always be like this.”

The Baroness turned away from the construction site, cutting across the corner of the village square as she headed toward a line of storefronts.

“Like what?” Rangobart asked.

“Many living things are driven to compete in order to survive,” Ludmila said. “Humans are no exception. Our civilisations are built with the state of weakness relative to our competitors in mind. We seek advantages to cover for those weaknesses and learn how to exploit the world

around us in a bid for life. One could say that this is what lies at the core of Human nature.”

“I don’t find any fault with that assessment,” Rangobart said. “By and large, we are individually weak and must resort to those means.”

“And what happens if we no longer need to resort to those means? What will the Empire do now that its existence is guaranteed by the Sorcerous Kingdom?”

“Security isn’t our only concern,” Rangobart said. “We have a growing population to feed.”

“I see,” Ludmila’s boots clicked to a stop. “We must eat. Is everyone alright with crab?”

Frienne blinked at the question, then nodded when she realised they were standing in front of a restaurant.

“I’m fine with it,” Rangobart said.

“Dimoiya loves crab!”

Inside the restaurant, a waitress greeted them cheerfully before guiding them to a cosy booth. Frienne slid in first to get a seat by the window.

*Magical lighting and temperature control, again. Does every building somehow have it?*

Shortly after they were seated, the waitress arrived with a huge bowl of crab soup, placing it in the centre of the table and ladling out a portion for everyone. Two platters of warm rolls were placed on either end of the table. Frianne peered at the lumpy objects.

“What kind of bread is this?” She asked.

“Buttered crab biscuits,” the waitress answered with a bright smile. “They’re the most popular item on our menu these days.”

“Mmph momph mmh hpm!” Dimoiya said.

Out of habit, Frianne used the silver ring on her left pinky finger to check her food for poison before breaking off a piece of biscuit. Having crab biscuits with crab soup was a questionable menu choice, but both dishes were still delicious.

“At any rate,” Ludmila said once they settled in comfortably, “why do you suppose that the Empire’s immediate impulse is to expand once they realise that

they have the capability to do so? In the past, it was acting to ensure that it had the industrial and military might to secure the country against internal and external threats. Now, you say that you have people to feed. Why is population control seemingly not an option? Urban populations already average two children per family and rural populations no longer need to have five to remain stable. The Empire faces a similar population explosion as the Sorcerous Kingdom will in the future. Unlike us, however, you have the means to curb your growth.”

“I must admit that there is a fair bit of ambition involved,” Frianne said.

“But is that wrong?” Rangobart said, “Ambition drives many Imperial Knights. Every recruit dreams of one day having a plot of land to pass down to their sons. As a Noble, you must surely see the value in this.”

“Of course,” Ludmila replied. “It’s not even thinking limited to Nobles. Holding a title, tenancy, or licence is a crucial component of personal dignity. Without them, one cannot reliably live off of the fruit of their labour, raise a family, or exercise control over their lives. The problem is that the Empire appears to be trapped in an unnecessary spiral of growth due to its past needs. It is the same problem that we in the Sorcerous Kingdom face, but we

do not turn to conquest as a measure to address it as it is ultimately an act that makes the problem worse in the long run.”

“Population control still isn’t perfect,” Frianne noted. “There will always be families that have many children. When we account for economic and social dynamics, having more children is in itself a competitive edge. The largest dynasties will have an easier time holding the most influence. Opting to limit breeding carries a very real risk of fading into irrelevance. If the revolution in industry and logistics brought by the Sorcerous Kingdom plays out as Clara projects, limiting population growth is counterintuitive on many levels.”

She knew that she was arguing from what Ludmila would probably consider an archaic worldview, but she couldn’t find an easy way out of it. As she had asserted, their discussion revolved around a core component of Human nature and it existed for a very good reason. Doing something that went against it would normally result in being outcompeted not only by other races, but also by fellow Humans.

“That is an artificial problem, is it not?” Ludmila said, “One created by the laws and customs that evolved alongside our civilisation out of necessity. If that’s the

case, does it make any sense to keep them if they are no longer necessary?”

“The backlash to any measures to change those laws and customs that I can think of is incalculable,” Frianne replied. “Imperial citizens—no, every Human society that I have a working knowledge of would react the same way. Those changes would be seen as wrong according to our common sense. Immoral, even.”

The waitress reappeared, bearing platters of steamed crab accompanied by servings of flatbread and fresh greens. Frianne stared down at a red shell that was larger than her head.

“Is there a reason why every course on this menu is some sort of crab dish?” Frianne asked after the waitress disappeared again, “I know you asked if we were fine with crab, but...”

“We’re dealing with the aftermath of an ecological disaster,” Ludmila said.

“Crabs are a disaster?” Dimoiya said before sucking the meat out of a leg.

“It was quite catastrophic,” a rare embarrassed look appeared on the Baroness’ face. “The Lizardmen got a bit overzealous with their fish farms. They overfed the fish *and* started using ritual magic to encourage plant growth in the marshes, which in turn led to an explosion in the population of various species that dwell in the lake. The Mud Crabs were especially successful and now we’re trying to eat our way out of the problem.”

“That’s a rather fortunate problem to have,” Rangobart said. “Why not export them?”

“We do export a reasonable amount,” Ludmila replied. “But sending massive amounts of food anywhere can have undesirable side effects. It creates a temporary input that the receiving system will adjust to. When that input ends, the result can be tragic. Tragedy can even occur before it ends.”

“I’m lost.”

“It’s similar to having a period of economic prosperity. When that period ends, hardship results from the shortfalls. In the case of food, a population starves. Never mind countries, even tribes will try to take advantage of their temporary ‘boost’ and attempt to conquer more territory to avert undesirable outcomes.

Wars happen and the balance of power in an entire region may be upset.”

“...just how many crabs do you have?”

“A lot. For the time being, we’re placing most of them in frozen storage. Still, it may take years to bring the lake system back to the desirable balance. We can only consider it a lesson learned in blindly optimistic efforts to ‘improve’ the land. Well, the lake, in this case.”

“By imperial standards,” Frianne said, “it would be considered a wild success. A major new industry could arise from it, bringing prosperity to many.”

“By imperial standards,” Ludmila said, “but not by mine. The ‘economy’ of Warden’s Vale is fundamentally dissimilar to the Empire and most of the Sorcerous Kingdom. Places like this village act as points where our economic output is ‘converted’ into something recognisable by outsiders that interact with us.”

“But how can that be?” Frianne asked, “We all exist as part of the same world, do we not?”

“We don’t,” Ludmila answered with a smirk, “not as you understand it, anyway.”

