

“Well,” Frianne said, “this wasn’t at all what I expected.”

Since Corelyn Harbour had something like a temple university, she expected the public school to have similarities to the temple schools that educated the lucky few villages that were blessed – or cursed, as Jircniv would say – with them. Indeed, even the Imperial Magic Academy and the Empire’s universities took many inspirations from the educational institutions of the Slane Theocracy, albeit thoroughly scrubbed clean of any religious influence and further altered to suit the Empire’s needs.

They stood at the entrance to one of the classrooms, much as they once had during their visit to the Imperial Magic Academy. Rather than classrooms filled with the best and brightest young minds that the Sorcerous Kingdom had to offer, however, the classrooms in Corelyn Harbour were filled with adults. The subjects being covered wouldn’t place them in the highest echelons of the bureaucracy – they were simply learning how to read, write, and perform basic arithmetic.

“Apologies for being somewhat underwhelming,” Clara said.

“I sense a healthy dose of sarcasm in your words, dear Countess,” Frianne replied.

Needless to say, it was the exact opposite of underwhelming. She was beginning to think that the word ‘impossible’ was not something that the Sorcerous Kingdom applied to itself.

When it came to what the Merchant Guild considered professionally viable literacy, the average rate across Re-Estize and Baharuth was somewhere under ten per cent. A tenth of that number was what the Imperial Administration considered the bare minimum for employment in its civil service, and the vast majority of those who met that standard were members of the imperial establishment.

As stringent as the Empire was, however, it never seriously considered educating the general public to raise the number of qualified citizens. One was either suitable or they weren’t, and education was considered a private affair in the Empire. Its costs aside, education was as potent a weapon as one could arm oneself with in civil society, so it was jealously guarded. The Temples, Guilds, and the Empire itself saw fit to regulate both its availability and content. It wasn’t out of the realm of expectation for unwanted scholars and ‘rogue’ artisans to be driven out of towns and cities, have their property and possessions burned, or just outright assassinated.

“To what extent do you plan on educating your citizens?” Frianne asked after they withdrew from the door to walk down the hallway.

“For the time being,” Clara answered, “achieving what the Guilds consider suitable for a professional career, with the eventual goal of every citizen in possession of a basic universal education.”

“I can tell you with near certainty that the reaction of the Imperial Court Council to your stated objective would be ‘preposterous!’,” Frianne said. “Matters of cost aside, where do you find the staff to instruct so many pupils? What practical end does doing this serve when that level of education is unnecessary for the daily lives of most?”

“That assessment is understandable, as it reflects the practical realities of the region. At the same time, this ‘realism’ is possibly the greatest obstacle in understanding what the advent of the Sorcerous Kingdom brings. I can’t call it stubbornness—”

“Yes, you can,” Liane said.

“—but it’s a sort of inflexibility that I often see plague mediocre Merchants. Changes and trends wash over the markets, but they cling to their holdfasts as if weathering a storm. This same problem can become orders of magnitude worse when dealing with well-established Noble houses, as they are tied to their land and that land has become a constant for them. This sort of conservatism does often win out over temporary fluctuations in one’s situation, but the Sorcerous Kingdom is not a temporary thing. In their attempt to anchor themselves against what they imagine to be a rough current, those who resort to familiar methods will drown themselves in a flood.”

Frianne understood what they were saying, but, if she were to use the same analogy, the Baharuth Empire was the one used to being the ‘flood’. Few understood and fewer still accepted the Emperor’s sudden and unprecedented capitulation over a year previous, and he wasn’t in any way inclined to make himself look weak attempting to explain his position.

“Then how would you explain what you’re doing here to the Court Council?” Frianne asked, “Or any Noble of the Empire, for that matter? To them, the sheer logistics that must be involved with your efforts would be dismissed as the folly of an ignorant and naïve girl. Everything flies in the face of what they know.”

“It doesn’t take a genius to grasp how my methods are accomplished,” Clara answered. “Once again, the problem is that certain connections aren’t made due to both preconceptions of practicality and attitudes toward the Sorcerous Kingdom.”

“Yeah, that trip to the Empire was a huge disappointment,” Liane said. “Somehow, *Ludmila* of all people managed to get them to visit when all of our faffing around in Arwintar barely got us anywhere. I thought our presentation would have everyone banging on the gates to get in on the deal.”

“House Gushmond thought they might be able to employ what you offered in its silver mines,” Frianne noted.

“Yeah, then they ditched you at the border,” Liane said sourly. “Don’t tell me they dumped all of their stuff on you.”

“They did, in fact...”

She had come not only to visit her friends, but also to see what could be done with her new title. Now, she had all of House Gushmond’s business to take care of at the same time.

“Since the Empire is more familiar with what magic could do for a country,” Clara said, “we thought that what we had to offer and its ramifications on imperial society would be self-evident...don’t tell me *that* was the reason why?”

“I’m fairly certain that it wasn’t,” Frianne replied. “I believe the Empire’s reputation abroad combined with what most visitors see in Arwintar has painted an exaggerated picture of magical integration in our country. The percentage of Wizards in the population is still minuscule and most of them go to the Imperial Army or work in the Imperial Ministry of Magic.”

“What about all of the graduates from the Imperial Magic Academy?”

“It pains me to say this,” Frianne said, “but those who don’t graduate from the magic stream to enter service as professional mages slowly forget what they’ve learned. I have a colleague in her forties and she can’t recall much from her academy curriculum. I’m of the mind that the entire Court Council is in a similar situation. My cousin doesn’t even bother trying to think about it – he just turns to me whenever there’s some magic-related thing he wants explained.”

Her three friends from the Sorcerous Kingdom frowned at her response. She did her best to mask her embarrassment. Most of the time, people made excuses about forgetting about one thing or the other until they got old enough to use a variety of age-related excuses instead. Frianne was reasonably certain that they were excuses for their lack of diligence – her grandmother was four times her age and she remembered *everything*.

“That academy education sure seems useful,” Liane said.

“What about the scions who go on to lead their houses?” Ludmila asked.

“If you’re asking about territorial development,” Frianne answered, “the best way to put it would be that they go with what’s popular. There are some bits and pieces that have embedded themselves in our common knowledge, such as contracting the Army Corps of Engineers to lay down

infrastructure or perform flood control. I wouldn't expect them to remember the intricacies of the magical side of things, however. Ordering magical lighting or building levees amount to little more than numbers on a page."

"I suppose that's one of the things that drove you to write that treatise."

Frienne nodded. Most people knew as much about blacksmithing or sailing as they did magic, so it wasn't anything out of the ordinary. Still, she wanted *more* for the Empire as a society, and so she doggedly pushed for the spread of magical knowledge and the slow process of reform that it made possible.

"Then, if we go back to your original question," Clara said. "Does the Empire employ Golems in any fashion or at least know of their industrial implementation?"

"I have some knowledge on the subject," Frienne replied, "but Golems aren't used in imperial industry. For the most part, they're valued for their military applications."

"I see. In that case, one of the first challenges that we must address in light of our changing reality is the concept of the 'spare'. With the plentiful supply of food and other necessities, increased effectiveness in health care, better security against deadly threats, and obsolescence of the levy, the Sorcerous Kingdom is facing an impending population explosion. An average rural household in the region has five children and rural households make up ninety-five per cent of the Human population. Thus the number of Humans in the Sorcerous Kingdom will more than double with each generation.

"The conventional 'use' for spares in the region is menial labour in towns and cities. They are also employed seasonally in the country if there is a need for them. In the Sorcerous Kingdom, menial labour is a role fulfilled by the Undead, and they do so far more cheaply and quickly than Humans. As a result, not only will spares find that they don't have work, but the entire web of industries that exists to service them will cease to be. Within the next four years, the full implementation of Undead as menial labour will be in place. Spares will not be able to survive as they do elsewhere.

"We are in a race against the future, and we are currently losing. Worse yet is the fact that, out of all of the territories in the Sorcerous Kingdom, Corelyn County is by far the furthest ahead."

"Except for Ludmila's place," Liane said. "But she's a cheater."

"In that case," Frienne said, "why not employ contraceptives to control population growth?"

“That may be an option for some,” Clara said, “but we are short of temple staff for the task. It will take decades before we have the capacity to see to the needs of the entire population.”

Frienne pondered Clara’s words. Most saw the Sorcerous Kingdom as not a functioning country, but as the ‘lair’ of the Sorcerer King. The first thing that came to mind was Ainz Ooal Gown and his endless legions of Undead and the idea that the country had a population at all was only represented in the idea that countless people were suffering under his rule.

“So, rather than a luxury,” Frienne said, “you consider education a necessity.”

“That’s right,” Clara replied. “The classes you’ve seen so far are students being educated so they can be educated. The conventional methods used by the Guild System cannot hope to keep up when apprenticeships take six to eight years to complete and the population doubles every year. Director Alpha proposed that we switch to a system that is admittedly more impersonal, but far better suited to dealing with large numbers of people. For that system to work properly, literacy is a must.”

“But how will they gain practical experience?” Frienne asked.

“They’ll have to take turns, for now,” Clara answered.

They went to her ground floor, where Clara led them deeper into the school grounds. She opened one of the doors of a warehouse-like building to reveal a large workshop where rows of men and women toiled away at their stations. A few men walked up and down the rows, occasionally stopping to observe one of the students or address some aspect of their work.

“Much like the Imperial Magic Academy,” Clara spoke of the ring of hammers, “the day is divided into periods. Students are rotated between classes for basic education, theoretical vocational training, and practical work similar to what an apprentice of their level does.”

“Do you recoup your costs with this work?”

“I wish,” Liane snorted. “You’re more likely to get a bent nail than a straight one out of these guys. I didn’t even know that was possible.”

Frienne wasn’t sure how nails were made so she couldn’t say how difficult it was to produce straight ones.

“The results are mixed, at best,” Clara said, “but they will get better. Director Alpha told us that students should advance by ‘grades’ – each lasting a year each – and those grades should be standardised according to the average student’s rate of learning...but it’s far more difficult than it sounds.”

“How so?” Frianne asked, “Classes in the Imperial Magic Academy are identical in that aspect.”

“It’s easy to advance students who learn quickly,” Clara said, “but what do you do with students who are slower than average? Apprenticeships have a range for that reason.”

“Those students fail and are expelled,” Frianne replied.

“Which is terrible,” Clara told her. “The only reason the Empire can do that is because education is not something it truly invests in. Aside from the rare scholarship which is meant to secure talented individuals for the Empire, the Imperial Magic Academy is run as a business and its customers pay for their terms in full and in advance. They have no obligation to see students succeed. Furthermore, students must qualify for admission, which requires a personal or family investment in *that* education. After all that, the Imperial Magic Academy can simply ‘fail’ them.

“Compare that to an apprenticeship under the Guild System. A master is both invested and obliged to see the apprentice succeed because the apprentice is paying for their education through labour in the workshop. It is illegal to ‘expel’ an apprentice without suitable justification, so the student is practically guaranteed an officially recognised education in their trade so long as they are earnest about their studies. Once they fulfil the terms of their indenture, they are free to pursue their own careers. By comparison, an imperial scholarship indentures the student for life. In certain ways, it is better to be a slave in the Empire than it is to be a scholarship student.”

“It’s pretty clear which system is designed to be mutually beneficial and which system is made to exploit the population for the benefit of its master,” Ludmila said.

“Do to mean to say that this new system of education favours the ways of the Guilds?”

Most of her peers in the Imperial Administration would say that the Imperial Magic Academy’s system stood at the forefront of education in the region. The Guild System was considered an antiquated and inefficient, but necessary evil. Of course, every official in the administration was a graduate of the Academy.

“It’s a compromise for both practical reasons and the sake of experimentation,” Clara admitted. “I prefer the Guild System, but, as I mentioned, it’s impossible to implement in its conventional state. Director Alpha insists that the system of mass education she proposed is ‘supreme’ – whatever that means. With what few instructors she has in training, however, it cannot be implemented to its full extent.”

“Then who are the instructors here?”

“They’re from the Guilds,” Clara said. “They were understandably horrified upon being shown the unmodified system of mass education proposed by Director Alpha and insisted on having their members instruct classes in this school. At the same time, they never enjoyed teaching apprentices how to read and write so they were more than happy to concede that portion to Director Alpha’s methods. I suppose that rather than a scholastic academy like the one you attended, the institution here is a school that advances its students into their respective trades.”

“But can so many students find work?” Frianne asked.

“Oh, most definitely. The Sorcerous Kingdom’s economy is almost entirely fuelled by its primary industries. We have far more resources than we can process, as do most of our allies.”

“Out of curiosity,” Frianne said. “Since this institution uses something like the Guild System, does that mean its graduates are free to pursue their new careers wherever they please?”

“They are,” Clara said. “Profit is not everything, after all. They’ll need to comply with the regulations of wherever they choose to move, of course.”

“But aren’t you worried about losing your investment in those people? If I understand it correctly, they are the recipients of a fully-subsidised education.”

“They are, initially,” Clara said, “but the goal is for our students to graduate as grandmasters in their craft according to Guild standards. They’ll have long paid off their debt by that time and will already be earning an income through their production during their master years.”

Clara’s statements took a sharp turn into ludicrous territory again. Grandmaster artisans were both rare and renowned. It was to the point that the rich and powerful would travel to other countries to commission their talents. Yet, Clara implied that she would mass-produce them with her new school.

“...assuming that it’s even possible,” Frianne asked, “wouldn’t you be averse to losing a grand master artisan?”

“Not in the sense that you are implying,” Clara said. “Even if they move to another country, they still aid in our cause. If enough of them do, the Sorcerous Kingdom will become renowned for producing grandmaster artisans. Every graduate who puts their roots down abroad is a seed planted that will help counter the unfounded rumours about our country.”

Was it remarkable ingenuity or heedless optimism? The Empire would be loathe to let anyone of talent go as it meant strengthening other countries at the expense of itself. The realities of the Sorcerous Kingdom, however, were as Clara stated. The loss of a handful of grandmaster artisans – or even hundreds of them – still couldn’t strengthen a country to the point that it could effectively resist the Sorcerous Kingdom.

Since the Sorcerous Kingdom refrained from rampant violent conquest, it actually put itself at a disadvantage due to its image as a country ruled by the Undead and all other manner of dark creatures. Yet, Clara chose to fight that battle.

After observing several other workshops of different vocations, Clara led them back out into the town’s eastern plaza.

“I know you said not to treat you like an invalid,” she said, “but I don’t want to push you too hard. Let’s retire to the castle for a late meal, shall we?”

“Of course,” Frianne nodded. “I’m not feeling strained at all, but you’re probably right. What you’ve shown us so far gives us much to discuss.”

Frianne idly watched their surroundings as they strolled along. The plaza was still quite busy despite the late hour. She idly wondered how many of them were students or their families.

“Do you plan on expanding this new system of schooling to other parts of your demesne?” She asked.

“Once we get through a semester or two and work out the most glaring issues,” Clara answered. “We should have complete coverage by the end of next year.”

“Complete coverage?” Frianne frowned, “That’s including the rural regions?”

“Absolutely,” Clara said. “I can show you a map of how everything is laid out after dinner. It wasn’t terribly difficult to figure out.”

“She says that,” Ludmila’s voice came from the other side of Clara, “but she’s been planning this out for a long time. She was already starting to build all of the necessary infrastructure less than two months after the annexation of E-Rantel.”



“Every village in the County is an hour or less away from the nearest town by Soul Eater,” Clara said, “so it was simply a matter of making sure that the roads and facilities were ready in each town.”

“Clara thinks that most people somehow masterplan everything over breakfast,” Ludmila said, “and then she has people and resources moving all over the place the moment she finishes her meal. Even people from other countries aren’t safe from her.”

They left the plaza, walking up the ramp leading to the pedestrian route overlooking the highway. Frianne placed a hand on the railing as they made their way to the castle gazing down at the massive harbour that was the town’s namesake. Magical lighting illuminated a row of drydocks where a handful of barges were being assembled.

“Those barges are *huge*,” Dimoiya said. “Even the Death Knights look tiny beside them! They don’t look like they’re made out of wood...”

“They’re made out of *steel*,” Liane told her.

“Hah? But...”

Dimoiya adjusted her glasses looking back and forth in confusion.

“How do you people have so much steel?!” She asked, “Just one of those barges should be enough metal to fully arm and armour an entire Imperial Army Group!”

“It’s *enchanted steel*,” Liane added.

Frianne gaped silently at the claim. There was little reason for Liane to lie, especially since they would have plenty of time to thoroughly investigate everything they were shown over the next week or so.

“Where do these ships sail to?” She asked.

“Throughout the Katze River Basin and out into the Syrellian Way,” Clara answered. “Most of this port’s trade is with the Draconic Kingdom, but we plan on steadily expanding our network of routes. For now, we’re focusing on helping with their economic recovery.”

“Oh, oh!” Dimoiya turned around with a little hop, “I heard about that! The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was in an uproar when the news was delivered.”

“How did the Empire react?”

“It didn’t,” Frianne said. “The Court Council was convinced it was some sort of scheme, so the news was never released to the general public.”

Clara turned to look at her with a furrow on her brow.

“A *scheme*? Why would they think that?”

“Word of the Sorcerer King’s death in the Holy Kingdom arrived a few weeks before,” Frianne replied. “Half of the Court Council suspected it was a test to see how we would handle major events. The other half suspected it was a test to see if we would undermine the previous ploy with the new information.”

“What did the Emperor say?”

“He only snorted and said that Queen Oriculus was better off eaten.”

“Why would he say that?” Ludmila frowned.

“He greatly dislikes her for various reasons. How much freight would you say goes back and forth between the Corelyn Harbour and the Draconic Kingdom? I’m not familiar with what’s going on down there.”

Liane pointed over the railing to one of the barges sitting under the harbour’s gantry cranes.

“Each of those boxes can carry up to twenty tonnes of freight. One barge can ferry a dozen containers. That’s about as much as a small galleon can hold, but, as you can see, we load and unload ridiculously fast. A round trip between here and the Draconic Kingdom takes anywhere between two and three days depending on where it’s going. It’s mostly grain these days.”

“That’s fast,” Frianne said. “How do you manage sailing upwind that quickly? Is it part of the enchantment on those barges?”

“Nah,” Liane said. “We just use Undead to propel them. These ships don’t rely on the wind at all.”

“...and how many vessels make this journey to the Draconic Kingdom?”

“Three dozen,” Liane said. “It’ll be four come autumn.”

A sense of alarm rose within Frianne as the last piece fell into place. The Sorcerous Kingdom was perceived as a clear and present danger in a military sense by every country in the region. What no one understood, however, was that they would soon be an economic one, as well. They would feed their exponentially expanding manufacturing base with their cheap and plentiful resources. Combined with the near-zero cost of their Undead logistics, they would rapidly dominate any country that kept its borders open through trade.

Liane grinned irreverently at her silence. For all of their tentative talk of experimentation and new frontiers, there was no way they didn't know what they were doing.

*Willhem was more right than he knew. The Empire has been overtaken in the blink of an eye. By the time the citizens notice it happening, it will be far too late to react.*

“So,” Clara smiled, “how do you think we should approach the visiting Nobles?”

Frianne smiled back despite herself. Everything they had seen and discussed was probably for the express purpose of wrangling her into their schemes. They appeared to be benevolent schemes, but they were schemes nonetheless.

“That,” Frianne replied, “is a discussion that can wait until dinner.”