

With a new set of troubles on her mind, Frianne followed Nemel out of the schoolhouse to continue their tour of her village. She was still wary of the Goblins that scampered about, but the Human residents – at least the ones that she could see – paid no special attention to them. Out of the members of her party, Rangobart looked like he was trying to emulate the aloofness of the men around them while Dimoiya seemed to be caught between trying to avoid the little Demihumans and thinking of climbing up into the trees to see what they were doing.

“How long does it take for the Goblins to learn stuff in the classroom?” Dimoiya asked.

“None of them have completed their basic education yet,” Nemel replied. “None of the migrants have either. It has only been a few months since we got here, after all.”

“Do you truly plan on educating all of them?” Rangobart asked, “You made it sound as if scores of new Goblins arrive every day.”

“I’m hoping that the way they pick up skills from one another will help speed things along. The most pressing concern right now is figuring out how to specialise their Sorcerers.”

“What do you mean by that?” Frianne asked.

“A Goblin’s advantages also become disadvantages depending on what they’re doing,” Nemel answered. “For instance, their penchant for spreading useful skills also applies to how they spread magic. Once one Goblin Sorcerer learns a spell, all of their Sorcerer friends learn the spell shortly after. This sort of dooms them to being generalists unless what they learn is strictly controlled...and that control is impossible to achieve because they learn by *feeling*. All they have to do is catch one of us or one of the Elder Liches casting a spell to begin figuring it out. I wouldn’t be surprised if a few of them started flying around soon.”

“It shouldn’t be that bad,” Rangobart said. “Imperial patrols rarely encounter Goblin Sorcerers. Those wielding Second-tier spells are nearly unheard of.”

“The unbridled way in which Goblins tend to learn should explain that,” Ludmila said. “Goblin Sorcerers may end up learning how to be Rangers, too, and those Rangers that they learn for might also be Leatherworkers. While this may be useful for survival as a Goblin in the wilderness, it isn’t so great when being pitted against specialists for specific tasks. General Ray’s Battalion was shocked to find out that most Goblins were more like simple villagers rather than the bloodthirsty marauders of their imaginations.”

“...I’m not going to discover that the Sixth Army Group is half Goblins, am I?” Rangobart asked.

“Probably not,” Ludmila said. “I brought all of the Goblins and Mountain Trolls that I recruited back home with me. Genera Ray will have to figure out how to get his own.”

Their next stop was a large lumber yard on the outskirts of the village. A well-worn road connected it to the nearby pier. Frianne frowned as she realised that several things were off about it.

“I don’t see any raw timber...”

There was plenty of lumber cut to different dimensions, but no trees in sight. Everyone in the yard was working on producing furniture, construction materials, and smaller pieces of woodwork. In one corner, a man watched a Goblin use a lathe to produce staves for spears.

“It isn’t processed here,” Nemel said. “Raw timber is shipped across the river and delivered to the dam. It’s cheaper to hire the mill than it is to build and operate our own.”

“Another practical demonstration of Undead labour’s applications, I suppose,” Rangobart said.

“Yeah,” Nemel nodded. “I still couldn’t quite believe it when I calculated everything out on paper. The economics of everything changes so much when animal feed and wages for transport staff are removed from the equation. Facilities can be built in previously unimaginable places.”

“Anyone who administers a territory on a navigable river understands that,” Rangobart said. “I’m already of the mind that the Undead can make this applicable anywhere.”

“It sounds like you already have something in mind for your new territory,” Nemel said.

Rangobart nodded.

“Constructing a mill that services the surrounding territories should be a safe and profitable bet.”

“You’re aiming straight for a town?” Nemel raised an eyebrow, “That’s very ambitious.”

“It should work out. I may not know what my territory contains, but I do know where it is and what’s around it. The Court Council stuck to a handful of simple rules in their rush to hand out those titles. One of those rules was to space out the unlanded scions serving in the Second Army

Group. I assume that the Imperial Administration hopes that we will seize the opportunity to spearhead the development effort, acting as an example for the regular Imperial Knights around us.”

“That much should be obvious,” Frianne said. “The scions in the Imperial Army will save the administration a lot of work simply by being themselves. Newly-landed commoners spend a lot of time agonising over what they want to do.”

It was a very clever ploy on Rangobart’s part. While any scion would have recognised the intent of the Imperial Administration, most would have endeavoured to make their new demesne stand head and shoulders above their neighbours through traditional development. It was something that a scion knew they had an advantage in, as the seneschals provided by the Imperial Administration still relied on the input and approval of their respective lieges. With such an advantage, martial scions hoped to steadily build up their political and economic clout, playing the great game of houses in the straightforward way that the Imperial Knights did.

Rangobart, on the other hand, planned to skip that arduous process entirely. Building a mill powered by the Undead and foregoing traditional development would minimise his need for settlers. Combined with the judicious use of Undead logistics, the mill would become the most economical choice for regional processing. The seneschals in the surrounding territories would pick up on that cue and accelerate development with a confidence inspired by greater returns.

In other words, he wasn’t playing the same game as his neighbours. Instead, he was creating a catalyst for regional development and aiming to become the main urban centre in the area. With the profits from his mill, he would be able to subsidise other industries, unexpectedly snatching business away from the distant Imperial heartlands and transforming his territory into a centre of urban industry and commerce.

“Don’t you think someone else might be considering the same strategy?” Frianne asked.

“It matters little even if they did,” Rangobart answered. “I’ll be hiring the Sorcerous Kingdom’s Adventurer Guild to survey my holdings far ahead of the vast majority. I also have coupons to distribute to the neighbouring fiefs. I’ll have the full backing of the Imperial Administration because it will be clear that I’m using a superior model of development. Barring some catastrophe, I’ve already won.”

“But your territory sounds like it’s on fire,” Dimoiya said.

“Quiet, you.”

Aside from the lumber yard, the only other workshop in the village was a potter. Nemel also said that there was a tanner somewhere conveniently downwind of any residences.

“What are your long-term plans for this territory?” Frianne asked, “I don’t see any construction that suggests what might come next.”

“Everything you see now is just our preparation for the winter,” Nemel said. “I have another wave of migrants coming from Arwintar in a couple of months. Every imperial migrant living here will have a cosy home of their own by the time we get any snow...hopefully.”

“How about the Goblins?” Dimoiya asked.

“What they do will be up to them,” Nemel said. “I half expect them to do something crazy that we’d never think of. If they do end up needing shelter, however, it wouldn’t take much effort to build longhouses for them. Making sure there will be enough food for everyone is the more pressing concern.”

“So all of the industrial activity we see will continue over the winter?”

“It might slow down a bit. I’m actually worried about what might come down from Mount Verilyn. As you can tell, it’s much cooler here in the summer than in Arwintar. We might end up getting buried in snow or Ice Elementals. Actually, that might be good...”

Frianne tilted her head up to take in the ice-bound massif above them.

“How would that be ‘good’?” She asked.

“It has to do with our future plans,” Nemel answered. “Both Lady Zahradnik and Dame Verilyn prefer to keep things ‘natural’. My mother suggested that I take up the family business here and I agree that it’s one of the more promising avenues for development.”

“What’s the ‘family business’?” Ludmila asked

“They deal in *death!*” Dimoiya answered.

Nemel gave her friend a swat.

“Not precisely. We mainly sell wands and staves to the Imperial Army. Most of them are loaded with war magic.”

“That sounds very promising,” Ludmila said. “I wasn’t aware that you came from a family of War Mages.”

“It’s a quiet life, ironically. I don’t think my parents have been in a single battle.”

“It’s not going to be a very quiet life if you constantly get attacked by Ice Elementals,” Rangobart noted

“The Goblin patrols need more challenging fights,” Nemel said. “And a reliable supply of Elemental Ice would be great for advanced magic item production. It’s not like we would have much of a choice, anyway. Ice Elementals overrunning the lower valley would make winter unbearable and keeping them away might make things milder.”

“Won’t you have a problem with Nemel’s people fighting against nature, Zahradnik?” Frianne asked.

“It’s an overextension of the local ice gradient that must be addressed,” Ludmila answered. “Though...you probably shouldn’t tell Dame Verilyn about this.”

“Hmm...you’re right. She might freeze us solid hoping for more tax revenue. Urgh, my initial proposal for this territory was *normal*. How did it get like this?”

“I don’t think she’s *that* greedy,” Ludmila said, “but she could adversely alter your growing season by trying to get just a *little* bit more.”

*Only in the Sorcerous Kingdom would they speak so casually about altering the seasons...*

Then again, the Empire might have as well if the former Head Court Mage had cared enough to learn *Control Weather*. At least they were talking about a Dragon here.

The fluffy thing nuzzled Frianne’s arm, and her hand came up to respond to its insistence. She idly wondered if it was possible to get one of her own.

“So,” Nemel said, “where is everyone going next?”

“The southern port for lunch,” Ludmila said. “After that, we’ll be going over the ancient pass to observe the expedition.”

“Have they watched a league match yet?” Nemel asked. “I know for a fact that Dimoiya and the Prez love that sort of thing.”

“The official league match is in two days,” Ludmila answered, “so I figured I’d save the experience for then. You should try and bring your people too – they’re starting to become a small event in themselves.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Nemel replied. “Most of the new migrants won’t stray too far from their homes yet, though.”

Nemel accompanied them back to the pier. Frianne, her eyes long grown accustomed to the gloom of the forest, squinted in the light of the midmorning sun.

“Thank you for coming to visit, everyone,” Nemel smiled. “With luck, I’ll see you all at the match.”

“I was hoping that we would be able to see Aszasza before we left,” Ludmila said.

“He left five days ago,” Nemel said. “The river trade is doing well, so don’t expect he’ll be back for a few days yet. If you’re lucky, he might still be at the south port.”

They flew back to their carriage in the lot across the river. Frianne shifted in her seat as they continued south down the road following the river. A kilometre of forest was cleared to either side of the road, offering travellers a magnificent view of the surroundings. Frianne focused her gaze on the Katze River as it collected its tribute from the highland basin.

“Nemel mentioned that there was trade along the river,” she said, “but I haven’t been able to spot any settlements along the way so far.”

“Expecting camps of intrepid frontier folk collecting meat and furs?” Ludmila asked.

“Well, yes, now that you mention it.”

Beside her, the Frontier Noble smiled slightly.

“They’re there,” she said. “You’re just looking on the wrong side of the river. Aszasza’s river trade primarily deals with the tribes encamped on the eastern banks of the river.”

“The tribes? What do they trade?”

“Meat and furs?” Ludmila replied, “Herbs and other alchemical reagents that they’ve been able to identify, as well. Aside from a few things, they export the same things that my people did before the Battle of Katze Plains.”

“And what do they import?” Frianne asked.

“The same things that my people did before the Battle of Katze Plains,” Ludmila replied. “Aside from a few things.”

The sense of fond reminiscence in Ludmila’s voice sent a disturbing chill down Frianne’s spine, but she couldn’t pin the source of the feeling.

“Exports to a frontier territory,” Rangobart. “Without Imperial Knights. Does that mean you’re arming these tribes?”

“Ultimately, yes. Aszasza may be the one trading with them, but many goods come from Warden’s Vale.”

Frianne’s mouth fell open, aghast.

“But they’re your subjects!” She said, “Do you mean to say that you’re profiteering from the raids that they conduct on one another?”

“From a certain point of view,” Ludmila said. “The intent, however, is to observe how the tribal societies here evolve as they are increasingly exposed to our economy and culture.”

“Observe…”

She had been exposed to many bizarre things during her visit to Ludmila’s territory, but this was perhaps the strangest of them all. Was Ludmila ruthlessly pursuing the doctrines of the Six Great Gods by accelerating the butchery that occurred between her Demihuman subjects? No, considering that she expressed the desire to integrate the wilderness tribes, it might have been that she was imposing the other thing that the Faith of the Six was infamous for. The weak would be culled; the strong would form the foundation of new ‘bloodlines’.

“Learning is important, is it not?” Ludmila asked, “To you and I, Human behaviour is well-documented. There is little material to be had on tribal Demihumans, however. Frontier folk are considered experts on them, but I’ve only ever learned how to deter and destroy my neighbours. In particular, I’m curious how they’ll adapt to monetisation and commerce.”

“The Sorcerous Kingdom has already done something similar in the north, haven’t they?” Rangobart said, “Countess Wagner mentioned that a trade network was already set up there.”

“That was the tribal Demihumans being coaxed into integration,” Ludmila said. “What I wish to know is what they’ll do on their own.”

“To what end?” Frianne said, “It isn’t as if there *aren’t* other countries out there with Demihuman populations. If you’d like to save some time figuring out what Demihumans will do with civilisation, just pay Karnassus a visit.”

“There is little justice in that,” Ludmila replied. “How would you feel if the Sorcerous Kingdom made a study of the Slane Theocracy and then told the Baharuth Empire that their way was the right way to do things? My people will decide who they are, and I’m doing everything within my power to ensure that each individual will be able to make an informed choice.”

*And while they figure out who they are, she lets them kill one another? Fight over territory like savage tribes? I suppose that’s what they are...*

The vista of the river valley subtly shifted in her mind, the shadow of unseen threats falling over the flowering meadows. Was it even safe to be travelling through a place where violence could erupt without warning?

“Is that a recommendation for imperial policy?” Rangobart asked.

“I’m not recommending anything,” Ludmila answered. “I’m doing what I think is right and it does not fall out of line with my rights and responsibilities as a Noble of the Sorcerous Kingdom. I also highly doubt that the Court Council would appreciate my approach. The Sixth Army Group is primed to spark a golden age of Imperial expansion and, considering the character of the Imperial Administration and the Empire’s history, they will hardly spare any consideration for the conquered.”

“That’s Ludmila-speak for ‘you’re probably going to regret it’,” Rangobart said. “But you’re also right that imperial policy will be difficult to change in this regard.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” Ludmila said. “The seeds have already been planted. All we need now are hands patient enough to cultivate the fruit.”

“Wait a minute, you *planned* all of that?”

“I only played my part.”

Rangobart leaned back in his seat, blowing out a long sigh.



“I suppose you were also involved in my reassignment to the Sixth Army Group.”

“I wasn’t, but it’s good to know that you’ll be out there with them.”

*I’m going to end up just as paranoid as my cousin.*

Jircniv commonly remarked that everyone was merely a puppet dancing in the palm of the Sorcerer King’s bony hand, but it was impossible to believe that claim. As time passed, however, so many things went in his favour that it was impossible *not* to believe there was the master plan of some unfathomable intellect.

They rode in silence until they reached an island in a lake. A long bridge connected it to the shore on both sides. The island was divided into three tiers, with the highest section occupying its southern end. Their destination, however, brought them to the northern edge of the island where a small settlement overlooked a port on the island’s lowest tier.

“Another terraformed locale?” Frianne asked.

“That’s right,” Ludmila replied. “This island is meant to become the urban hub for the Upper Reaches.”

Frianne eyed the passing buildings warily, but the place appeared to be wholly populated by Humans. Like the farming villages in Warden’s Vale, it had all of the amenities of a town with only the population of a village. They stopped at a restaurant built in the all-too-familiar architectural style of Ludmila’s territory and settled down around a simple wooden table while they waited for their meal.

“Which way is the ‘ancient pass’ that you mentioned?” Frianne asked, “I noticed that the road is built out in both directions from here.”

“It’s up the valley to the west,” Ludmila said. “The road southeast leads to the Slane Theocracy.”

“Do you get any traffic from them?”

“No,” Ludmila replied. “This route isn’t worth it for Merchants, yet. From what I hear about the Theocracy, the presence of Demihumans will make it an unattractive route even when we’re finally connected to the Holy Kingdom. I’m not sure how many generations or even centuries it will take for their cultural views to transform into something more amenable.”

“You seemed to come around in no time,” Rangobart noted.

“I used to think the same,” Ludmila said. “It wasn’t until the Paladins from the Theocracy came over that I learned just how different it is down there. We may be of the same faith, but nearly two centuries of being apart have created vast differences between us. In many aspects, they are as foreign to me as they probably are to you.”

“I’ve been there once,” Rangobart said. “They seemed normal enough...aside from the religion thing.”

“That’s what Clara said, as well,” Ludmila replied. “Aside from the religion thing. As far as I can tell, they seem normal enough because they assume that you’re on humanity’s side and they aren’t exactly wrong. It is only when one distinguishes oneself as different that the rumoured...*behaviour* of their citizens comes out.”

“So even if you share the same faith, you’re opposed to their ways?”

“The people of Re-Estize and the Empire share the same faith,” Ludmila noted. “That didn’t stop them from going to war every year. Not that we intend to wage war against the Theocracy. Corelyn has been working hard to maintain cordial relations with them. Not only is she working to restore commercial ties, but she also supports charitable causes across the border.”

Frienne supposed that was how it had to be done. The Theocracy wouldn’t tolerate any diplomatic efforts directly spearheaded by the Undead. Still, she doubted that Clara would get anywhere far given the dogmatic, Human-centric nature of their southern neighbour.

“How far is the Theocracy from here, anyway?” Dimoiya asked.

“From this spot? Over fifty kilometres to their frontier. Nearly twice that if one takes the road. We’re far enough apart that our border patrols never come close to seeing theirs.”

“What about the expedition?” Rangobart asked, “Are your Adventurers allowed to get close to foreign countries uninvited?”

“That’s a somewhat complicated question,” Ludmila answered. “One of the purposes of the expeditions is to meet new people, after all. If a foreign power demands that our Adventurers stay away, they will. Otherwise, they’ll attempt some sort of friendly exchange. In the case of the expedition on the other side of the ancient pass, they’re a hundred kilometres upriver of the Theocracy’s frontier. The chances of running into the Theocracy’s forces are slim to none.”

They quickly finished with their meals and their carriage doubled back on their route, heading east at a junction they had passed before turning onto the bridge to the island. Frianne eyed the freshly cleared route as they steadily made their way along a rapid-infested river flowing into the lake behind them. Far ahead was a wide saddle between two modest ridges that stuck up above the treeline.

“You referred to this as the ‘ancient pass’,” Frianne said. “Is it in any way related to the ancient empire that you’re learning about?”

“I have no idea,” Ludmila replied. “We excavated the old road leading to the ancient pass, but the pieces give no indication of what they were beyond being the remains of an old road. The haunted forest on the other side hosts a multitude of overgrown and buried ruins, so I’m hoping that we’ll have better luck there.”

“A lost country?” Dimoiya asked, “Elves, maybe?”

“It takes a calamitous event to create a persistent negative energy zone of that scale,” Ludmila answered. “So I wouldn’t be surprised that a country formerly stood where the haunted forest is. The location seems ideal for any number of races in the region, however.”

“Have you found any powerful relics?”

“The reports haven’t indicated anything of the sort,” Ludmila replied, “but we’ve just gotten started and a thorough investigation might take years. I’d consider the discovery of an intact historical record the greatest treasure.”

Cresting the top of the pass revealed a gentle, forested slope that ended at a small river. Beyond it was a vast grassland that stretched beyond the horizon. The sight of it was entirely unexpected of what the region termed a ‘wilderness’.

“Who lives in that plain over there?” Frianne asked.

“It’s a hunting ground for the Monsters and Magical Beasts that live in the mountains nearby,” Ludmila answered. “Primarily Wyverns and Manticores.”

“Are there any Dragons?” Rangobart asked.

“No. For various reasons, this area has been inhospitable to Dragons in the past.”

Frienne clutched the fluffy thing on her lap, wondering what could possibly be so dangerous that Dragons considered the area hostile to habitation.

“This forest doesn’t look very haunted,” Dimoiya said.

“Have you been to a haunted forest before?”

“No...”

“Well, this is what they look like,” Ludmila said. “The forest is a source of positive energy that constantly cancels out the negative energy. Undead and negative energy-related phenomena only manifest where the concentrations of negative energy can overwhelm what the forest can produce. Presumably, those locations are where the greatest atrocities against the living were committed.”

Their passenger wagon went all the way to the riverbank, where inventories of construction materials were arranged along the shore. The road itself ended at a partially constructed bridge and it took Frienne several moments to spot the fortified camp that served as the Adventurer base.

“It doesn’t feel very ‘adventurous’ when this expedition is sitting right next to a construction site,” Rangobart said.

“We needed them to survey ahead of our highway construction for important ruins,” Ludmila said, “so this is how it turned out.”

As they made their way toward the expedition base, the fluffy thing in Frienne’s arms started to squirm. She tried to calm it down by petting it, but it eventually escaped her grip. Instead of falling to the ground, however, it floated into the air. Frienne, Dimoiya, and Rangobart gaped silently as it receded into a white dot against the cloudless sky.

“Is something the matter?” Ludmila asked.

“The...the *fluffy!*” Dimoiya pointed, “It flew away!”

“It happens,” Ludmila replied. “Let’s get you introduced to the expedition, shall we?”