

“Perhaps we should have started from the beginning,” Frianne sighed.

“I know that it is a lot to take in,” Ludmila said. “Is there anything in particular I can help you understand?”

“Master LeNez is a bit...”

“Enthusiastic?”

“Perhaps. She reminds me of the researchers in the Imperial Ministry of Magic.”

“Is that a good thing, or a bad thing?”

“In my experience,” Frianne replied, “more bad than good. It may be that she’s genuine about her research, but I’m afraid she’ll betray your expectations.”

That was how it usually went in the Ministry of Magic. Project proposals weren’t approved haphazardly, yet nineteen out of twenty ended up going nowhere. It was accepted as a reality of magical research within the Ministry, but it always drew the wrong sort of scrutiny from the Court Council.

“And here I thought it was supposed to be that way,” Ludmila said.

“That’s what everybody in the Empire thinks,” Frianne sighed once more. “It’s a stereotype that I’m trying to correct.”

“Does it need correction?” Ludmila asked, “I’m of the mind that people should be passionate about what they do.”

“When it comes to magic,” Frianne said, “passion results in wasted effort. Magical research isn’t as simple or intuitive as mundane crafts. If left to their own devices, mages can conduct research until they expire from old age with no tangible results.”

“That’s what we’re for, isn’t it? Nobles exist to lead. We ensure that the efforts of our subjects don’t go to waste. Getting all sorts of different people to work toward a collective goal is a matter of course.”

“You have a very generous interpretation of our role.”

“Is it wrong?”

“Technically, it isn’t,” Frianne said. “But we must draw a line in how accommodating we should be. Noblewomen, especially, must be wary of this as we are raised to play a supporting role in house affairs and are thus more easily exploited.”

This was something that she herself struggled with, and she suspected that most women, never mind noblewomen, did. Accustomed to women being flexible and accommodating in a world dominated by men, most assumed that they could walk all over her and wouldn’t stop of their own accord. The problem was especially pronounced in arenas of political and financial power.

“The realms of the arcane aren’t well explored and what we do know is ill-defined,” Frianne said. “That makes it easy for mages to convince the uninitiated that they know what they are doing or that their theories have merit. Even with the guidance of Fluder Paradyne, the Empire’s advances in magical fields have been painfully slow and expensive. Many Nobles bemoan the fact that the resources poured into the Imperial Ministry of Magic could have instead been used to secure Re-Estize for the Empire.”

“By investing in conventional industry and the Imperial Army?”

“That’s right,” Frianne nodded. “The primary obstacle to the conquest of Re-Estize was insufficient forces for an occupation. We could have had two or three times the military might if we had focused on conventional means over the generations. Instead...well, I’m certain that you’re well aware of our strength and our forays into the ‘abyss of magic’ haven’t gotten very far.”

“Personally,” Ludmila said, “I find my current circumstances refreshing. Maybe it’s a consequence of where we stand in life. The Empire has been in a relatively comfortable position for generations while House Zahradnik has always been in a perilous one. All of our time and resources were dedicated to the defence of the frontier. Being able to finally see some real development feels like we’re finally having our long vigil pay off.”

“I can see that being a major factor going into our differences in attitude,” Frianne said. “Still, I believe what I mentioned remains relevant. It may be even more so as you’re at the beginning of a new chapter for your house. You have the opportunity to learn from the Empire’s mistakes, so to speak.”

“I am certainly interested in hearing what you have to say once we’ve finished our tour,” Ludmila said.

“Where are we going now?” Dimoiya asked from the seat behind them.

“We’re crossing the dam to visit the Human agricultural developments,” Ludmila answered. “I have roughly fifteen hundred Human subjects living on the terraces above the lake’s western shore.”

“I’ve noticed that you tend to stress whether something is Human or not,” Frianne said.

“It’s mostly for your sake,” Ludmila said. “The locals know who lives where, so there’s no need to differentiate between the various areas of my territory.”

The carriage accelerated as they left the Citadel District and entered a long stretch of perfectly straight road. On the northern side was the lake west of the harbour; on the other, a precipitous drop. Frianne eyed the latter nervously, a queasy feeling stirring her stomach.

“Is this the dam you mentioned?” Rangobart asked.

“This is it,” Ludmila replied.

“But...erm, how large is this thing?”

“It’s two kilometres long and twenty metres high,” Ludmila said. “Building it this way allowed us to ease the grade of the route leading to the main road on the other side. The top of the dam is fifty metres thick, while the base is ten times that.”

“Is this some construct left behind by an ancient civilisation?”

“No, it was raised after the Lizardman colonists arrived from the Great Lake in the Great Forest of Tob.”

*The ‘Great Lake’ must not seem so great to those Lizardman anymore...*

According to High Chieftain Shasha, the Great Lake covered an average area of twenty square kilometres. The lake in Warden’s Vale must have been well over ten times the size.

“So this dam was constructed to create the lake for the Lizardmen to live in?” Rangobart asked.

“The entire Vale was reshaped for Human habitation,” Ludmila answered. “Our Lizardmen were an unexpected addition, but they conveniently occupied space that wasn’t inhabited by Humans. They brought some more new industries and a population of Druids, as well, and they’re already proving to be a beneficial addition.”

“Was Warden’s Vale reshaped using the same magic that shaped the foundations of Corelyn Harbour?” Frianne asked.

“Yes.”

Frianne stared mutely out of her window at the waters stretching beyond the northern horizon. Dams weren’t an alien concept to the Empire, but the Empire didn’t have any remotely near the size of the one they were currently travelling on. Small dams were usually built to power mills and redirect water, not create huge lakes.

“Is that a mill on the western end?” Rangobart pointed over their shoulders to the front window.

“Yes,” Ludmila replied. “It ended up being far more powerful than expected, but it runs off of the same principles as any other water mill. Access to dwarven steel allowed us to house the wheel itself in a pipe at the bottom of the dam to turn the shaft. We’re trying to figure out what to do with all of the excess power. it goes through timber, stone, grain, and whatever else we throw at it with astonishing speed.”

They zipped by the massive mill and its mostly empty cargo yards past the western end of the dam. The road turned north into a gentle slope that scaled the hillside through an avenue formed out of sparse windbreaks.

“Why not increase the rate of land clearance if that’s the case?” Rangobart asked.

“Aside from a few minor projects,” Ludmila answered, “Warden’s Vale has already reached the extent of its intended land clearance.”

“It has? Are these highlands unsuited for agricultural development?”

“No, the land above the Vale was once farmland, as well. When the houses that once ruled there failed, the wilderness reclaimed it.”

“Then why not claim it back?” Dimoiya asked.

“There are a few reasons,” Ludmila said. “The first is that I felt it wasn’t necessary. This also happens to be in line with the will of my ancestors. Secondly, most of the capital duchy has been set aside for Human habitation and my territory has more subjects belonging to other races than it has Humans. The current total population of Humans in all of my territories combined is less than three thousand. That’s less than a tenth of the total population of citizens...at least as far as the Elder Liches can count. Most of my subjects are happy with their land as it is.”

“I knew that Frontier Nobles tended to have extensive territories compared to their inland peers,” Frianne said, “but I haven’t seen anything other than Humans and Undead yet.”

“There were the plants.”

“And the plants. That begs the question of your territory’s size.”

In response, Ludmila reached into the satchel at her waist.

“I suppose the maps that the Empire has access to don’t really do anything to represent the borders of my fief,” she said.

Ludmila pulled out a large scroll and unfurled it over her lap, revealing an intricately detailed map. As detailed as it was, someone saw fit to mark additional details upon it.

*This can't be right...*

The map displayed the southern duchy of E-Rantel, ending at the border of the Slane Theocracy. Frianne's eyes went back and forth between the map's features and the measure provided in the corner.

"Why is everything so *big*?" Dimoiya asked.

"E-Rantel was always something like a 'frontier duchy'," Ludmila said. "It never had the tight organisation of the heartlands."

"That's just a bit of an understatement," Frianne said.

Wagner County stretched from E-Rantel to the Imperial border, which meant that it was also large enough to cover most of the land between the Imperial border and Engelfurt. Corelyn County was half again as large as Wagner County and occupied an area equivalent to Gushmond Duchy. Ludmila's 'barony' was large enough to swallow both twice over: it looked like it was about half the land area of the Duchy of E-Rantel.

Some Nobles exaggerated the size of their territories to make them seem more important or to support territorial claims. Ludmila was clearly not such a person, however.

"I assume it wasn't always this large," Frianne said.

"Upon the annexation of E-Rantel," Ludmila told them, "House Zahradnik's territory was only Warden's Vale. That was the limit of our power projection. The Sorcerous Kingdom's ability to project power is far greater and I was the only Noble with the legal right to expand the borders. At first, I only reclaimed the old frontier border. Then, a Goblin Army showed up and threatened to invade us from the south. That campaign ended with me taking the Upper Reaches. In recent months, I took the western side of the mountains here to connect to the Theocracy's river transportation network and the Great Forest of Evasha further south. There should be a functional port on that river by this spring."

"And now you have a barony the size of a mark," Frianne said.

"Well, it would be a march in Re-Estize. I assume that the Sorcerous Kingdom will name things accordingly."

“...you know, I’ve come to realise that you have quite the sadistic streak. Are you in reality hiding behind one of your baronial titles just to see how people behave around a minor Noble? Are you and Wagner just waiting for some annoying Count to dig themselves a deep enough grave to have you say ‘Surprise, I’m actually a Marchioness!’”

“Lady Zahradnik has always had a talent for understating things,” Rangobart said. “Even moreso than our martial Nobles. I’m surprised that you only recently noticed.”

It was probably because her friends were more than happy to make up for her highly reserved behaviour. At times, her presence could vanish entirely without Frianne noticing.

“It’s my only title, so no,” Ludmila said. “Posing as one of my lower titles would be in extremely poor taste.”

*At least that’s something normal about her.*

A Noble was technically all of their titles, but they usually styled themselves using the highest one.

“In that case,” Frianne asked, “why haven’t you been promoted yet?”

“The qualifications for promotion are different in the Sorcerous Kingdom,” Ludmila answered. “Corelyn was promoted to Countess upon being granted the riverlands. The reason behind her promotion was that her old title wasn’t in line with her expanded demesne. I reclaimed the old frontier after that, but nothing happened. Then Wagner was granted her new lands, which are roughly the size of the old frontier that I reclaimed.”

“So titles are tied to land development or economic contribution?”

“That’s the assumption.”

“Assumption? Why not ask?”

“It’s not important,” Ludmila shrugged. “The Royal Court will promote me whenever they see fit to do so and remaining a Baroness doesn’t affect my ability to carry out my duties. Lady Shalltear doesn’t care much for Human titles, so Clara suspects that the promotion will come whenever the Prime Minister is annoyed enough about something where having a Marchioness on hand would be useful.”

*How do I even respond to that?*

In the Empire, Nobles fought for every advantage they could gain. Clara, Liane, and Florine had similar sensibilities, making Ludmila the odd one out. She did things because she felt like it and accepted things for what they were, yet, it was evident she had ambitions that drove her. One would think that she would do everything possible to achieve those ambitions, but no behaviour to that effect ever manifested. Ludmila Zahradnik was simply an enigma that common sense didn't seem to apply to.

A strange object sticking out over the surroundings grew on the horizon, quickly resolving into some sort of fort. It was roughly the size of a town with a small tower near its centre. Frianne's lips turned downward slightly when she saw that it was cut in half.

"Did you find this rock and decide to build on top of it?" Frianne asked.

"No," Ludmila answered, "we raised this rock and built on top of it."

"It looks extremely defensible," Rangobart said. "I've noticed that you've influenced many things in that direction."

"This is the earliest one," Ludmila said. "Well, it used to be. It was partially destroyed a few days before Frianne arrived."

"Partially destroyed? Was it attacked by a Dragon?"

"No, it was subjected to some structural tests. We wanted to see how hard it would be to shake everything apart."

"...is this area prone to earthquakes?"

"Not in my recollection," Ludmila replied. "Only a few buildings collapsed before we decided that it was too mana-inefficient to destroy the village in that manner."

"What happened to the villagers?"

"They watched from the other side of the village square. Area of effect spells only produce their associated phenomena within their radius, yes? It was quite surreal to watch."

Frianne looked up for signs of damage to the walls, but she didn't have an eye for it.

"So you have some homeless people now?"

“No. Buildings are destroyed and rebuilt in the villages, too. The buildings in this village were due to be dismantled anyway. Additionally, we were able to widen the village’s foundations a bit and implement some design changes to the sewer system.”

The sheer amount of labour consumed by the strange practices in Warden’s Vale would surely drive any administrator or bureaucrat in the Empire mad. Frianne wasn’t sure whether she would escape unscathed.

Their carriage slowed as it approached the town-sized fortress village and entered via a ramp that branched off from the road cutting through it. They rolled into a rather normal-looking square and parked in front of the tower-like structure straddling the road below.

“There weren’t any structures like this in the harbour village,” Frianne noted.

“We call it a ‘lichtower’,” Ludmila said. “Every farming village has one. It functions as a combination administrative centre, post office, mage tower, and government warehouse.”

“A mage tower? How many mages dwell here?”

“About ten per cent of the village population is composed of arcane casters,” Ludmila said. “Mostly children we’ve identified with arcane potential and enrolled as Apprentices. They work in the morning and attend classes in the afternoon. It’s close to lunch right now, however, so we might be able to catch them doing something...”

They disembarked from the carriage and Frianne exchanged looks with Dimoiya and Rangobart as Ludmila padded into the front door of the lichtower. The Death Knights standing guard seemed to pay her absolutely no mind.

“Oh,” Ludmila said, “looks like they’re at it.”

Friane followed Ludmila inside, finding a group of children eating lunch around some tables in the office lobby. The tables not only had their meals, but dozens of tiles scattered upon them. Each child had a line of tiles placed in front of them and they seemed to be taking turns claiming the loose tiles for themselves. For some reason, an Elder Lich was watching them while taking notes.

“What are they doing?” Frianne asked.

“Playing a game called *Axis*,” Ludmila answered. “Have you heard of it?”

“Dimoiya has!” Dimoiya raised her hand, “It was something I played at Nemel’s house!”

“Do you still know how to play?” Ludmila asked, “You can join them if you’d like.”

“Mmh...I forgot how,” Dimoiya said. “I played it all the time as a kid with Nemel and Arche until my parents told me to stop wasting my time and study instead.”

Unlike the children of great houses, scions of minor ones living in the city were quite mobile and mingled with one another readily. Frianne, on the other hand, could only interact with those her parents approved of – which was barely anyone her age – so she was often jealous of the other children’s freedom.

“It seemed like you wanted to show this to us,” Frianne said. “Why is that?”

“Miss Gran introduced the game to Warden’s Vale,” Ludmila replied. “I was hoping you would be familiar with it.”

Frianne looked at Rangobart. Rangobart shook his head.

“As Dimoiya mentioned,” Rangobart said, “most scions didn’t have time to waste with games. Every hour at play was an hour one lost to their competition.”

“I see,” Ludmila said. “How unfortunate.”

“Why do you say that?” Frianne asked.

“Axis is a game through which anyone can learn about the Elemental Axis,” Ludmila said. “I figured it was something like the many games and songs from my village that taught children critical skills and information.”

“Such as?”

“Let’s see...Hide and Seek showed people where the best places to conceal themselves during a raid were and how to avoid detection. We had songs that taught us what was safe to forage from the forest and what wasn’t. Goblin Raid taught us how to defend ourselves as a group, while Ogre Ball showed us how we could gang up on single powerful opponents with ranged weaponry. You didn’t have anything similar?”

Frianne, Dimoiya, and Rangobart shook their heads. Frontier folk were truly built differently from the ground up.

“So you’re promoting this game to help your subjects learn about the Elemental Axis,” Frianne said. “To what end?”

“It seems like essential basic knowledge,” Ludmila replied, “especially with the direction my fief is taking.”

Did non-casters need to know about such things? She supposed that there were a few vocations where it would come in handy, such as ones that brought individuals into combat with mystical opponents. How a Farmer or Tailor would benefit from it, however, she couldn't figure out.

“Are you teaching the Elemental Axis in your schools, as well?” Frianne asked.

“I am,” Ludmila nodded. “This game seems to do most of the work, though, so it allows our teachers to use the time saved to focus on other subjects.”

“I still don't understand why you place so much importance on it,” Frianne said. “It seems like a substantial investment for something that is at best a suggestion as to how the primal forces of the world are configured in relation to one another. The Unified Mana Theory that Master LeNez is proposing is still in the nascent stages of exploration, yet you seem convinced that it's valid and frame your observations according to them. It's a colossal leap of faith to believe in these supposed primal energies that we cannot even see.”

The only plausible reason she could think of that could back their investment in the theory was that it was ancient wisdom shared with them by the Sorcerer King or one of his cadres. Maybe they were testing what Humans would do with the knowledge or setting some inscrutable plan into motion.

*I suppose it's something that I should investigate...or maybe that's part of the plan?*

“How did you identify so many children capable of casting arcane magic, anyway?” Rangobart asked.

“We have a Talent holder who can gauge the magical potential of an individual,” Ludmila answered. “It doesn't work all the time, but, over the course of days and weeks, it will eventually activate. Every time we identify a child, I discuss their options with them and their families.”

“How do they decide if their child should learn magic?”

If it were up to Frianne, she would have every child with arcane aptitude do so. Fluder Paradyne had a powerful Talent similar to the one that Ludmila described, except it worked at will. Even so, he only took interest in those with the greatest potential, seeing anything less as dross. This amounted to an infuriating waste, but Frianne had no say in how the Ministry conducted its affairs at the time.

“Several factors are weighed,” Ludmila said. “The first is the child's vocational aptitude in their family's trade. If it is exceptional, then we encourage them to keep pursuing it. If it isn't, then arcane studies offers them a promising avenue to a different trade with extremely high demand. Of course, if the child displays extraordinary arcane potential and only middling aptitude in their family trade, we encourage them to pursue arcane studies.”

Frienne shifted uncomfortably at the clear influence of the Faith of the Six in Ludmila's decision-making process. It was her demesne to rule as she saw fit, but the superstitious element to Ludmila's otherwise level-headed rationality made it all the more disturbing.

"I suppose that you encourage spares to take up magic, if possible."

"Within reason," Ludmila said. "We still need to keep a diverse selection of strong bloodlines and it isn't as if the harbour *only* needs magic casters. Overall, however, the system that I've implemented here endeavours to ensure that everyone has a basic education and spares that go to the harbour will always find that they have a place as productive members of society. It's far better than the old system where spares were nothing more than, well, *spares*. In Warden's Vale, there is a real investment in every child to ensure that they can live a dignified life as adults and I hope to eventually be able to create a similar life for all of my subjects."

"You mean to say that you'll have the different races under your rule live in the same settlements?" Frienne asked.

"That's their choice, but I will try to facilitate them however I can. Certain races prefer certain conditions, so it would be wrong to try and make them live in dwellings designed for Humans. Places like this village will likely retain their Human populations, though individuals of other races will still visit and conduct business."

*How do I even report this?*

If one were to describe Ludmila's policies, the programs that attempted to carry them out, and their eventual goal the Imperial Court Council would dismiss it all as the whimsical foolishness of an empty-headed idealist. Yet, by all appearances, Ludmila was well on her way to achieving her goals.

"If you don't mind," Frienne said, "can you tell us how it's possible to afford everything that you've implemented here? You must understand that, in the minds of most, everything you've shown us is absolutely impossible for a mostly undeveloped fief on the fringes of civilisation. Never mind that, it would be impossible for a fully-developed fief in the imperial heartland."

"I intend to," Ludmila said. "We'll be spending all day on the western bank of the lake where you'll see many of the different mechanisms that you've only heard described working in practice. Hopefully, I'll be able to make a convincing case as to how you might be able to approach your own territorial development."