

*They truly aren't scared of them...*

It was commonly said that seeing was believing. Except that she wasn't sure whether it was right to believe what she saw. People were averse to the Undead for a very good reason. It wasn't conducive to a long life to become comfortable with the things.

Friane watched in envy as Dimoyia went ahead of their group with Liane, running this way and that as she exclaimed her amazement over everything she came across.

"Ohh!!!" Dimoyia gushed, "The town has the same pavement as the highways!"

"Yep!" Liane smiled.

"But it looks so expensive! How can anyone afford to do this much?"

"Hehe, want it for your demesne? We can cut you a special deal..."

"I do! Oh, but I don't have my own demesne yet. Just give me a few years!"

To be certain, the ride into the Sorcerous Kingdom gave them much to admire, but all that seemed a small thing indeed now that they were walking through the bustling market plazas of Corelyn Harbour. For Friane's part, however, she couldn't keep her eyes off of the Undead. As they walked along, she did her best to stay as far away as possible from anything that she spotted but they would sometimes appear out of the crowd to give her such a fright that she found herself clinging to Ludmila's arm before she realised what had happened.

The townsfolk didn't seem to care at all about the Undead, however. Traffic flowed around the sentries and patrols as if they were no different than a patrol of Imperial Knights.

"Is Dimoyia still trying to join the diplomatic mission?" Clara asked.

"She is," Friane answered. "It's slow going, however. Not only is the Court Council being cautious about it, but they don't think a young woman should head the mission. Half because they think it's cruel to send her to the Sorcerous Kingdom and half because they want an older, experienced man running things. Not that there are any volunteers for the post."

"How is Dimoyia taking that?"

“Oh, you know her. She’s invincible when it comes to that kind of thing. Becoming an ambassador is an inevitability to her. At the rate that the Empire is adopting Undead labour, she may be the first to do it.”

Even if a few Nobles showed interest, the Temples still strongly opposed their implementation into civilian industry. Bringing in the Undead has proven far more difficult than it initially seemed.

“Speaking of posts,” Clara said, “did you receive any titles upon being appointed as Head Imperial Court Mage?”

“I did. I’m the Countess of Waldenstein, now. It’s a territory in the forest northeast of Arwintar. Even though it’s in the imperial heartland, it’s not a very impressive place. The forest was a part of the imperial family’s hunting grounds. A kingswood, so to speak.”

“Congratulations nonetheless, Countess Waldenstein,” Clara smiled. “You never mention these things in your letters. Does that mean you’ll be bringing back some friends from the Sorcerous Kingdom?”

“Honestly, I’m still undecided. I suppose that’s why I’m here. How long did it take for your citizens to return to...erm, resume their everyday routines?”

She couldn’t say ‘return to normal’ because what she witnessed couldn’t be considered normal at all.

“That depended on a variety of factors,” Clara said. “Ludmila’s demesne recovered and surpassed its former state less than a month after the official annexation.”

“Clara is framing what happened in the most generous of terms,” Ludmila said. “My fief was practically abandoned by the time I went to pay my respects to the new government in E-Rantel. It didn’t take much effort to ‘surpass its former state’.”

“But new settlers still came to your territory, yes?” Frianne said, “I’d like to know how you got them used to Undead. Our progress in the northwestern frontier and the Wyvernmark is slow, at best. Integration on the military end of things was swift, but we continue to face stiff resistance from the Temples and the civilian aristocracy to this day.”

“You will never bring the Faith of the Four to your side,” Clara said. “The root of their resistance is not economic or cultural, but religious.”

Frienne sighed. She suspected as much. The Baharuth Empire's struggle with the Faith of the Four far preceded the advent of the Sorcerous Kingdom. As a secular government, the Imperial Administration was relentless in its quest to assert total authority over the citizens of the Empire, but the Temples were steadfast in their resistance against anything that they saw as immoral, evil, or detrimental to the spiritual health of the citizenry and made sure the people knew about it.

Unlike the aristocratic establishment, the Temples couldn't be undermined by legislation, propaganda, or physical force. Pushing them too hard would plunge the Empire into domestic chaos as they had just as much, if not more, political clout over the people than the imperial throne. The fact that they usually didn't resort to violent methods made them that much harder to get rid of. Even if the Empire could get rid of them, it would implode shortly after because the Temples safeguarded the physical health of the country.

Thus, the only way to deal with the Temples was through often fruitless negotiation. The Temples would never endorse the Undead as a matter of faith, and so they had come to an impasse.

"What happened to the Temple of the Four in E-Rantel?" Frienne asked.

"They're still around," Clara answered with a shrug. "And they are every bit as obstinate as their counterparts in the Empire."

"Then how does the Sorcerous Kingdom deal with them?"

"They don't. Matters of religion have nothing to do with the government. So long as the law is observed, people are free to practise their respective faiths."

"If only we had the luxury of taking a similar stance."

"What would happen if you did?" Ludmila asked.

Frienne fell silent for several moments to ponder the question. It wasn't an avenue that the Imperial Administration would ever consider.

"I'm not certain," she said. "The relationship between the Imperial Administration and the Temples is akin to a struggle for ideological dominance. If we do not make a continuous effort to counter religious propaganda with government propaganda, I suspect that we may wake up one day to find the Empire transformed into a de-facto theocracy."

"How come that hasn't happened to Re-Estize? Institutionally speaking, their government is weak."

“I believe it has to do with the Kingdom’s decentralised nature,” Frianne replied. “Ironically, the strength of the Temples in the Empire is directly linked to the success of the Empire as an increasingly centralised regime. The Temples do not hold any land as they do in the Theocracy and the Holy Kingdom, and they similarly have no say in the governance of the realm. Thus, their strength waxes and wanes according to the strength of the Empire.

“In Re-Estize, the fabric of society is very *local* in its scope. You have – on paper – extremely powerful aristocrats ruling over what is effectively a collection of thousands of petty kingdoms, clans, and tribes. Any friction that occurs between the Temples and the government happens on that same, local level. It is to the degree that I wouldn’t be surprised if the Faith of the Four in Re-Estize differs in character depending on what region of the country one is in.”

She nearly bumped into Dimoiya as spoke. The bespectacled young woman had stopped in her tracks, staring wide-eyed at something ahead of them.

“What’s wrong?”

“Lookit there, Prez!” Dimoiya pointed.

Frianne frowned, wondering what had caused the noblewoman to cease speaking properly. When she figured out what she was pointing at, she didn’t think she could speak properly herself.

A small column of men, women, and children came in the opposite direction. Each was fully armed and armoured, cloaked in black temple vestments with silver trim. Despite the friendly look that each member of the column sported, Frianne involuntarily shuddered.

“Nothing will come out,” Ludmila said, “no matter how hard you squeeze me.”

Frianne released the taller Noblewoman.

“Those...those are adherents of Surshana, aren’t they?”

“They are,” Ludmila replied.

As the column passed, one of the men noticed them standing there. He smiled and waved and soon the entire group was doing the same. Clara and Ludmila returned their greeting. Like the rest of the townsfolk, they completely ignored the Undead.

“Hey, Dimoiya,” Liane said.

“Yeah?”

“I have a thing to show you.”

“A thing? *Really?* Let’s go!”

“What are they doing?” Frianne asked after they disappeared behind the crowd.

“If you meant the temple staff,” Clara said, “they’re going on a field trip.”

“I’m sorry, I’m not familiar with that term.”

“Ah, sorry about that. There are probably hundreds of terms we’ve picked up from His Majesty, his court, the royal household, and the new administration. A ‘field trip’ is essentially a journey that apprentices go on for vocational experience.”

“In that case, where were they going?”

“There are two parts to their field trips. The first is helping out with the rural ministry in one of Corelyn County’s constituent baronies. The second is combat training in the Katze Plains.”

“C-Combat training?” Frianne’s eyebrows rose in alarm, “There were children in that group, weren’t there? Many of them couldn’t have been older than ten.”

“Well, they *are* Squires and Acolytes. It’s to be expected, yes?”

Frianne glanced at Ludmila. She didn’t seem to have any problem with what Clara said and neither did their maids. Liane was already long gone with Dimoiya again.

Life in the Sorcerous Kingdom had been described in mostly unassuming terms when they visited the Empire. Now that she was here, she found that everything she had heard was *technically* correct, but also fell woefully short of imparting the reality of things. Reports from Imperial Intelligence could scarcely be believed by anyone who read them.

*That's right, I'm here to investigate things for myself. Even if I'm among friends, I can't just let the day go by gawking at everything...*

“Back to what I originally asked about,” Frianne said. “What else factored into the rapid adoption of the Sorcerous Kingdom’s new methods, Ludmila?”

“Once again, the progress achieved in my demesne was framed in the most generous of terms. I met with little resistance because I was the sole occupant of the territory when I started. My tenants fled to the Theocracy, fearing what would happen after we learned what happened in the Battle of Katze Plains. Even I was swept up by the overall sentiment in the village. By the time I snapped out of it, it was too late to do anything. As the remaining member of House Zahradnik in Warden’s Vale, I should have understood that the outcome of the battle meant a drastic shift in E-Rantel’s political situation. My responsibility was to find out what it meant for the land and its people. In the end, His Majesty had to send someone to retrieve me, and I was the last Noble in the entire duchy to learn what had happened.”

Ludmila’s cheeks coloured slightly while she spoke, as if she was still mortified over those events. Frianne, however, couldn’t blame her or her people for acting the way that they did. They were dealing with the Undead, after all.

“Half of the duchy’s population fled,” Clara said. “My entire county is made up of the titles that the southern Nobles abandoned out of that same fear.”

“That doesn’t make my actions excusable,” Ludmila replied. “I’m a Frontier Noble and my tenants were frontiersmen descended from lines that defended the border for generations. The first line of defence isn’t supposed to flee at the first sign of danger. I *still* can’t figure out where everyone went, so they may not have stopped running for all I know.”

“Is that why you adopted the new ways so quickly?” Frianne asked, “Because you’re expected to be invulnerable or something?”

“No. It was because of my new liege. Lady Shalltear personally took the time to set me on the right path. I would be the most reprehensible of ingrates if I hadn’t put in the requisite effort to reciprocate her.”

Friane idly wondered what a Noble from the Sorcerer King's side was like. The Prime Minister of the Sorcerous Kingdom was reportedly an in-the-flesh Demon and Jircniv always referred to the Sorcerer King and his inner circle as 'monsters', but it was difficult to imagine monsters acting in ways that Humans could understand. Ludmila's account made them seem much more personable.

"Then what about your subjects? I can't imagine they received the same treatment."

"They did," Ludmila replied.

"They did?" Friane frowned.

"I said as much, didn't I?" Ludmila told her, "I put in the requisite effort to reciprocate my liege. Just as she took the time and effort to ensure I had everything that I needed to succeed, so, too, did I do the same for my tenants."

*A chivalrous woman, huh...*

True chivalry was rare in the Empire, as the Imperial Administration went to great lengths to eliminate it. Chivalry built up the relationship between liege and vassal and thus interfered with imperial policy. What the Empire desired was loyal, productive citizens who adhered to the laws and standards set forth by the central bureaucracy.

"Now that I think about it," Ludmila said, "shouldn't it be the same for the Imperial Knights? They share a roughly similar background and the titles granted to newly-promoted Imperial Knights are mostly created through imperial expansion, effectively making them Frontier Nobles."

"I can see how you'd think that might be the case," Friane said, "but there are vast differences – especially with Imperial Knights raised in the last two generations. The older houses should be as you say, however."

"What are those 'vast differences'?" Ludmila asked.

"Foremost would be the fact that most don't personally administer their territories. The vast majority of Imperial Knights come from common backgrounds, after all. They neither have the education nor experience to do so."

"But their children inherit the title, don't they? You mentioned the last two generations..."

“I did,” Frianne nodded. “It’s a relatively new initiative introduced by the Emperor before the last. Since a good Imperial Knight does not necessarily become a good administrator – they rarely do – the Empire saw fit to provide seneschals for them. The seneschals are graduates from the Imperial Magic Academy, and most of them are spares from the civilian aristocracy. In all, I believe it’s an elegant arrangement that benefits all involved.”

“I assume that the children of those seneschals go on to attend the Imperial Magic Academy,” Clara said.

“Yes, that’s right,” Frianne replied. “It serves to incentivise performance. The seneschals will put their education to good use if they wish to ensure a livelihood and future for their families.”

Clara and Ludmila exchanged a silent look. Frianne glanced back and forth between them.

“Did I say something strange?” Frianne asked.

“No,” Ludmila answered. “What you described is characteristic of the Baharuth Empire.”

“...is there something wrong with that?”

“As far as short-term solutions go,” Clara said, “it’s well-suited to the Empire’s institutional framework. As you mentioned, it’s an elegant arrangement that uses what the Empire has on hand.”

“And for the long term...?”

“I can immediately see that it will create a militant culture with a ravenous appetite for conquest,” Ludmila said. “The Imperial Knights will raise their children to be Imperial Knights, while the seneschals managing their territories will raise their children to be seneschals themselves. This will result in a political faction that sees conquest as the way to secure a future for their families, and that faction will grow with every new conquest. The Imperial Army will go from its traditionally defensive stance to an overwhelmingly offensive one. Is that what the Empire wants?”

“I believe you know the answer to that already,” Frianne replied. “The Empire was chipping away at Re-Estize all these years before the appearance of the Sorcerous Kingdom, after all.”



“And the Empire was offered a sampling of what it will be like now that you don’t have a Re-Estize to chip away at,” Ludmila told her. “To be certain, the capabilities and sheer inertia of the Imperial Army – along with the industrial might behind it – will facilitate the rapid expansion of the Imperial Frontier, but the world is an unforgiving place for those who don’t follow its rules.”

“There will be the domestic ramifications, as well,” Clara added. “As Ludmila mentioned, this will result in the creation of a class of martial elite distinct from the one you’re familiar with. Since imperial culture idolises success, they’re bound to be tremendously influential at all levels of society. They will be seen as harbingers of a new era of prestige and prosperity for the Empire, and the Empire will be reshaped in their image.”

“At least until a Dragon eats them,” Ludmila said.

“Jokes aside—”

“It wasn’t a joke.”

Clara cleared her throat.

“The realities of that future still stand. What does the Empire plan on doing about it?”

“Conceptually speaking,” Frianne said, “the Court Council is well aware of what may happen. We plan on adapting our current methods as the situation demands. Rest assured, the Emperor has every intention of keeping things firmly in hand.”

“I wasn’t referring to the new faction that would arise,” Clara said, “or anything the Empire would recognise as a faction at all. I was asking about this.”

With a sweeping gesture, Clara indicated the crowded plaza before them.

“What of the *people*, Frianne?” She said, “A period of drastic change is coming to the Baharuth Empire, yet it seems that the situation of its citizens will stay the same. The Imperial Court Council plans on adapting its current methods as the situation demands – that means that the Empire is content with how things currently are with the common folk, yes?”

“Is there something wrong with encouraging the people to strive for excellence and earn the acclaim of their peers?”

“Earlier, you mentioned that many important aspects of the Empire had been left behind or damaged severely. I must wonder what you meant by that, given your apparent stance. I thought we were on the same page back when I mentioned this during our time together in Arwintar, but...”

Frienne took in the activity of the market and its surrounding shops. The scenes around them wouldn't be out of place in the markets of Arwintar's Second-class district. Aside from the presence of the Undead, of course.

“Do you mean to say that things are done differently here, Clara?” She asked.

“I'm not the only person who does things differently,” Clara answered. “Take the Temples, for instance.”

Clara stopped to indicate a set of buildings that Frienne had been trying very hard not to look at. On the western end of the plaza was a huge complex that must have occupied as much space as the Imperial Palace. It was rather spare in its trappings, but the appearance of the staff made it plain that it was a temple of the Six Great Gods. For some reason, the Undead sentries were placed at regular intervals there, too. Were Undead allowed to be that close to a temple? They were supposed to be holy sites.

“The Temples – neither those of The Six or The Four – do not discriminate in the way that the Empire does. Those who seek a man or woman of the cloth or wish to join the faith militant are provided the same opportunity as anyone else.”

“The Imperial Administration is much the same,” Frienne said.

“That's clearly not true,” Clara told her. “Acolytes and Squires are taken in as children and taught everything they need to know to become a Cleric, Paladin, or Priest. Can you claim that the Empire does the same for its bureaucrats?”

“In a way, it does,” Frienne replied. “The Empire's Nobles manage titles granted to them by the Empire, and through the incomes and experience from managing those titles, they facilitate the education of their children. Those children then go on to attend the Imperial Magic Academy and are all held to the same standard.”

“That only underscores what I'm trying to say. The Temples take anyone and provide room, board, and tuition. The Imperial Magic Academy has entrance requirements that essentially bar more than ninety-nine per cent of the population from attending. It makes *exceptions* for those of talent who wouldn't otherwise be able to attend. The Empire espouses meritocratic ideals, but it is far from it. Not unless you consider wealth and privilege merits in their own right.

“If there is no equity in education, then there is no equity of opportunity. A Farmer will always be a Farmer unless they are sent to the local town or city as a spare, and it is very rare indeed that a spare finds success in the Empire. The Empire holds itself above the other Human countries in the region, but the reality is that it’s not much different when it comes to the disparity between its social strata. You have the martial elite, the administrative elite, the clergy, and then there’s everyone else. Nothing is being done about the systems of education and vocational association that entrap everyone in their respective worlds.”

“‘Worlds’ may be a bit of an exaggeration...”

“I don’t think it’s an exaggeration at all,” Clara said. “The conceptual and philosophical framework through which a Noble, Merchant, and Farmer interpret the world around them are so far removed from one another that it may as well be. To bring all of those worlds together, the root cause of that division must be addressed.”

Frienne eyed the temple complex warily as they turned and walked by. It looked menacing just by *existing*.

“Quite frankly,” she said, “I believe what you’re suggesting is impossible. This ‘alignment’ you’re proposing would bankrupt the Empire before it got anywhere with it. Are you implying that you’ve achieved it in your county?”

“Not entirely,” Clara said, “but we are taking decisive steps toward implementing standardised universal education. Ludmila is the only one that has managed to get there so far.”

“It was a short-term achievement,” Ludmila said. “I have thousands of Goblins to educate now. Ogres, Trolls, and several other Demihuman races, as well.”

*Is there a point to educating Goblins?*

The little green Demihumans were notoriously stupid, so it felt like Ludmila was embarking on a futile venture. What would she even do with them if she did?

Liane and Dimoiya reappeared when they turned the next corner and headed back east along the north side of the plaza. Frienne frowned at an odd piece of paper stuck to Dimoiya’s forehead.

“There’s something up here, Dimoiya,” Frienne pointed at her forehead.

“We went to the *Vampires*, Prez,” Dimoiya’s glasses gleamed in the sunlight.

“Th-the Vampires?”

“The post office,” Liane threw her thumb over her shoulder. “Each of the major branches is staffed by at least one Vampire. There’s three in this one.”

Frienne looked past the two noblewomen to the storefront behind them. What appeared to be an envelope with bat wings sealed by a pink heart was carved into the sign above its open door.

“This is a ‘postage stamp’,” Dimoiya looked up cross-eyed at her forehead. “It’s supposed to pay the fee for delivering parcels. I tried mailing myself back to Arwintar, but the Vampire lady at the front desk said that they didn’t have that service yet.”

“Why would you mail yourself back to Arwintar?” Frienne asked.

“Uh...it seemed like a good idea at the time,” Dimoiya answered. “The rates are *super cheap*. They said it’d only take three hours, too. Totally worth it.”

“What if they actually *did* deliver you to Arwintar?”

“There’s a Vampire Post office there, too! I didn’t know that. Did you know that?”

“I didn’t.”

“The office is in the aviary,” Liane said. “They wouldn’t let us put it anywhere else.”

*For obvious reasons...*

If people discovered Vampires in Arwintar, the city would lose all of its commercial traffic.

“We’re going back already?” Liane asked.

“We’re going to the eastern plaza,” Clara answered.

“*Ehhh?* I don’t wanna go to school...”

“We were just discussing education,” Clara said, “so paying a visit would be...educational.”

“You have a school in this town?” Frianne asked.

“Two schools,” Clara answered. “The temple complex we just walked by has a temple school. The other is for the townsfolk in general. I suppose you could say that it provides a secular education.”

Emulating the Temples was absolutely out of the question for a proper imperial education, but the other school sounded like it might contain some useful hints.

“Is that so?” Frianne said, “Then I’m most curious to find out how your system differs from ours.”