

With lunch long over, they returned to a much more lively village. As Rangobart had noted, it more resembled an urban centre than a farming community. Most of the population worked in the settlement's workshops rather than out in the fields and most of the industries present couldn't usually be found in a rural village.

"It's harder to tell what's missing from a regular town than what's out of place in a regular village," Frianne said.

"I don't see any inns," Dimoiya said.

"Transportation around my territory is fast enough that all guest accommodations are in the harbour village," Ludmila told them. "Not that we have an inn there..."

"I'd say that our current accommodations are superior to anything short of the most luxurious of inns," Rangobart said. "Even then, we get far more space. Do you receive many visitors?"

"We don't," Ludmila said. "Despite all that's changed in recent times, this is still very much the frontier. Even if the usual dangers no longer exist, it's still an uninteresting place to most. We export a few resources and import specialised tools that can't be produced here yet. Our exports are spoken for by commodity contracts, so visiting Merchants are rare. Aside from that, we get the occasional migrant."

Frianne looked around the village square, gauging the expressions of the residents. There was no hint of uncertainty, fear, or deprivation. For the most part, they looked rather content with their lives.

"I find it difficult to believe that you'd have difficulty attracting migrants," Frianne said. "The quality of life here seems to be peerless, at least as far as what commoners have access to goes."

"Does the Empire not have difficulties encouraging migrants to their frontiers?" Ludmila asked.

"Our domestic ministries are responsible for ensuring that the frontier has enough settlers," Frianne answered. "It's a matter of necessity since most of the landlords are Imperial Knights and they hardly have the time to recruit people. There are dozens of initiatives running at any given time encouraging the citizens to take advantage of new opportunities."

"I see. We don't have anything like that here. Nearly all of our immigration has been made possible by the assistance of the Temple of the Six in E-Rantel. Not that I'm complaining. There are many advantages to having a small population that shares common values, especially in a place

where cooperation is so important. The same can be said for Miss Gran's efforts. She's running things according to her imperial education with imperial settlers."

She stared blankly across the square as the latter statement slowly sunk in. Was that the true reason why Nemel had ended up in the Sorcerous Kingdom? Ludmila had a vested interest in how the Empire intended to approach its expansion into the frontier. Now, she had a student of the Imperial Magic Academy running a settlement in her frontier territory who would provide insight into the Empire's approaches to development. It was difficult to believe that the sequence of events wasn't planned.

They stopped for lunch at the village's restaurant, enjoying their meal on a sun-warmed patio as they watched the activity around the square. Many Undead could be seen assisting with various menial tasks, from transporting goods as she had seen before to powering machinery.

"It seems like everyone has a Skeleton of their own," Frianne said.

"Every Human household in Warden's Vale has a Skeleton, yes," Ludmila said. "The workshops usually have several. I thought it would be a good way to accustom the people to the use of Undead labour."

"Was it?"

"I would consider it a success. Unfortunately, the demand for Skeletons is too high these days to implement this idea anywhere else."

"They probably wouldn't be well-received in the Empire anyway," Dimoiya said. "The Temples would gain a hefty amount of support from all of the people perceiving a threat to their livelihoods."

"That would be quite the headache," Rangobart agreed. "I can see why Lady Zahradnik chooses to focus on the Empire's expansion rather than its developed territories. The Nobles may be able to get away with replacing draft animals with the Undead, but civil unrest would undoubtedly rise if people realised that the Undead were stealing their jobs. It's better to keep them from trying to migrate than displacing them through impoverishment. If we halve the demand for labour on the frontier by utilising the Undead, it should reduce the burdens on the Imperial Administration, as well."

"But that approach isn't without its problems," Frianne noted. "The rates for Undead labour are so low that any new frontier territory that employs it will have a distribution of wealth that's entirely different from the rest of the Empire. Not only will you be facing opposition from the Temples, but you will also be facing opposition from the current establishment. That includes the Imperial Administration. It will not tolerate the existence of a new class of ultra-wealthy frontier lords who also happen to form the bulk of its military power."

Rangobart sent a pointed look in Ludmila's direction. She was the very image of what might eventually manifest in the Empire. In fact, one could say that she was the ideal that the Empire attempted to portray in its propaganda. The Empire knew that this ideal was impossible in the past, but, once they realised that it was achievable, the Imperial Administration would take measures to prevent the possibility of it ever coming to pass. Unlike the Sorcerous Kingdom, they couldn't afford to allow the rise of a powerful faction of new warrior elites in the political arena.

"How would the Imperial Administration even stop it?" Rangobart asked, "If newly-landed Imperial Knights choose to employ Undead labour, it isn't as if the Empire can outlaw the practice in retaliation. I also doubt that the Emperor will levy 'special taxes' against them as he does with civilian aristocrats who oppose his reforms."

Frienne considered his question for a moment. If one looked at things from a different angle, the Imperial Administration could make the very problem that Rangobart presented work to its advantage.

"The Imperial Administration will employ existing systems – in particular the way that they've restructured and redistributed lands seized from the attainted. Broadly speaking, the fief of a Second-class Imperial Knight is currently rated at fifty hides: basically a village's worth of land. What will probably happen is that they will use the latest round of awards to assess the value of land if one employs Undead labour."

"...so titles granted from now on will be smaller? If the Undead halve the labour requirements of an agricultural development, Second-class Imperial Knights will receive twenty-five hides instead of fifty?"

"I can't say what the final calculation will be, but that's the gist of it. Taxes will see adjustments across the board to equalise revenues across the Empire."

"And the Empire would be able to support twice as many Imperial Knights in that case," Rangobart rubbed his jaw, "giving them that much more military might to expand with. How much of a reduction in labour costs do the Undead amount to, Lady Zahradnik?"

"It depends on the industry," Lady Zahradnik said. "Technology is a factor, as well, since machines can transform raw power into work. How many hectares are there to a hide in the Empire?"

"The average hide is eight hectares," Frienne told her, "making the current average fief of an Imperial Knight four hundred hectares."

"So this village we're in manages five Imperial Knight titles' worth of land."

“Well, their villages wouldn’t be the same as...oh, I see what you mean. If we use Undead labour, our villages may end up looking like this one instead. Not only will our calculations have to account for revenues from agriculture and forestry, but also the industries that we’d normally find in a town. This complicates things greatly...no, if the Empire administers new urban centres directly, then...”

*This change is unprecedented. Our current economic models are practically useless in the face of it.*

Thinking further on things, they already knew that a single farming tenancy in Warden’s Vale was a hundred hectares of land. That meant that the Undead were reducing agricultural labour requirements by over ninety per cent. The village they were dining in could support at least ten Second-class Imperial Knights if one went by land area alone.

Never mind doubling the manpower of the Imperial Army, they could increase it tenfold. The coffers of the Empire would be filled to bursting through the direct administration of the thousands of new urban centres that were created with their conquest of the Frontier. Perhaps achieving similar levels of education, urbanisation, and industrialisation as Warden’s Vale wasn’t as impossible as it initially seemed.

“I must admit that the possibilities are exciting,” Frianne said, “but the Imperial Administration will have to be very careful about how to proceed. They’re sure to regret promoting so many Imperial Knights before being made aware of what you’re doing here.”

“What would they have done instead?” Ludmila asked.

“Developed the territories before handing out the titles,” Frianne answered. “A village like this, for example, could be split between ten Second-class Imperial Knights. Only half of the administrative staff would be required to manage the village and its land, and the direct administration of the village would provide the Empire with lucrative urban revenues. The Empire could masterplan entire regions before distributing its lands.”

Ludmila sighed.

“Well, that just went in an undesirable direction.”

“What was wrong with what I said?” Frianne answered.

“If the Empire ‘masterplans’ development, it most likely means that they will try to turn every square metre of new territory into farmland. It has every incentive to do so since it will increase its economic and military might, which will, in turn, allow it to expand even more. Countless people will be killed or displaced at the cold stroke of a pen in the distant imperial centre. I suppose Nonna was right in her assertion.”

“Nonna?”

“The Elder Lich that you saw in the office at my manor. She once told me that ‘the bureaucracy must expand to meet the needs of the expanding bureaucracy’. By all appearances, the Empire appears to do just that.”

“What did you have to say about that?”

“I asked if she was trying to crack a joke. Bureaucratic procedure is no replacement for leadership and vision. A bureaucracy that exists to serve itself should have been purged long before it reached that point. Any country that exists in that state is essentially ruled by a faceless monstrosity with no public accountability.”

“My family says that from time to time,” Rangobart said.

“They’re not wrong,” Ludmila shrugged.

Once they settled their meals, they continued their tour of the village. Dimoiya looked over her shoulder at the now-empty restaurant.

“That place seems way too big for this village,” she said. “The food was super cheap for the quality, too. Do they get enough business?”

“It’s large enough to feed the village,” Ludmila replied.

“Huh?”

“Cooks do the cooking in Warden’s Vale,” Ludmila told her. “That restaurant serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner to the entire village. That’s why it seems so large to you.”

“Isn’t it cheaper for the people to make their own meals?”

“No. Cooking for many is more efficient and cost-effective than a household cooking for itself. My people eat better food and have better things to do with their time.”

“Even the Farmers?”

“Even the Farmers.”

Ludmila led them across the village square and back into the Lichtower. They went to stand on the metal elevator at the base of the tower, which had conveyed them to the top earlier that same morning. This time, however, it unexpectedly lowered them into a shaft. Frianne grew a bit claustrophobic as the light from above slowly faded into the distance.

“Is this a mining village as well as a farming village?” She asked.

“No,” Ludmila answered. “My territory’s stone quarry starts one hundred metres below this village. I was entertaining the idea of using it as an additional warehouse, but the Sorcerer King once mentioned to me that indoor farming is possible with a bit of innovation.”

The elevator clanked to a stop in a cavernous chamber roughly three metres high. Between the rows of pillars supporting the ceiling were plots of soil framed by raised stone beds. Magical lighting hung from the ceiling at regular intervals, turning the space as bright as day. The sight stretched into the distance, creating a somewhat dizzying experience.

A hooded figure separated from a group taking notes nearby, her black robes sweeping ominously over the stone as she slowly approached. Dimoiya clutched at Frianne’s sleeve with an apprehensive expression.

“I-Is that a Necromancer?” She asked.

“Yes,” Ludmila answered. “This is Isabella Aguado, a member of the Faculty of Necromancy.”

She still had no idea what Necromancers had to do with farming. Were they growing some sinister plant related to death underground? Frianne and Dimoiya shifted back a half step as the blood-red lips visible in the shadows of the Necromancer’s cowl stirred.

“Hi,” the Necromancer said.

“Someone mentioned that the installation for the facility was complete,” Ludmila said.

“The installation for this section of this facility is complete, my lady,” Isabella replied. “The Farmers damn near stepped all over us the moment they heard that it was ready. I don’t recall ever being so enthusiastic about sowing crops back when I was on the farm.”

“I hope they’re logging their progress properly...”

“Oh, the Elder Liches will make sure of that,” Isabella grumbled. “They nearly trampled us too on their way to collect ‘data’.”

“I see. This is Frianne, Dimoiya, and Rangobart. They’re guests from the Empire that I’ve been showing around.”

Isabella’s cowl bobbed in greeting at each of them in turn, then stopped at Rangobart.

“Are you seeing anyone?” Isabella asked.

Rangobart blinked silently at the question, then took a step back. The Necromancer advanced.

“If you don’t mind,” Ludmila said, “could you show them around the place and explain what’s going on here?”

Isabella pulled back her cowl, revealing a youthful, attractive face that didn’t in any way suggest that she was a practitioner of the dark arts. Then, she latched onto Rangobart’s arm and led him down the aisle with a pleasant smile.

“This state-of-the-art facility is a collaboration between the local Farmers, Masons, Carpenters, and arcane artisans,” Isabella said. “Experiments over the winter have proven that it’s possible to grow various crops indoors, and now we’re scaling up our trials.”

“You mean to say that you used magical lighting in conjunction with temperature control items to grow food indoors,” Rangobart said. “Much as one would grow plants in a solarium?”

“I don’t think that’s an adequate comparison. You’re *sort of* right about what’s happening, but you’re wrong at the same time. It’s more like we’re growing stuff in a mineshaft with some magical lighting. That’s not to say what we’re doing here *isn’t* revolutionary, though. Simplicity is strength, so to speak. We don’t have to worry about the weather and it stays warm enough down here even in the middle of winter. With widespread adoption, we may be able to match subterranean civilisations.”

“Subterranean civilisations?”

“Yeah, like the Mountain Dwarves. We Humans think we’re doing great with eight or nine million in a country, but a major subterranean civilisation might have *billions*. Maybe trillions if they’re insectoids or something along those lines. Anyways, yeah, we grow food down here. Look at the potatoes: aren’t they great?”

They stopped to look at a plot of dirt.

“I don’t see any potatoes,” Dimoiya adjusted her spectacles.

“It says potatoes right there,” the Necromancer pointed at a sign at the front of the plot.

“We should pick something that has had time to sprout,” Ludmila said.

“Fine...”

They followed Isabella as she led Rangobart away, walking past several dozen plots with ‘potatoes’ signs before stopping again. Dozens of green sprouts suck out of the dirt before them, planted in rows along a set of trellises.

“Let’s see,” Isabella leaned forward to read the sign for the plot. “These ones are peas.”

“...do you really work here?” Frianne asked.

“I do!” Isabella replied, “But I’m responsible for setting up the magic items, not planting stuff.”

“Oh. I suppose that makes sense.”

“You *suppose*? What did you think I was doing down here? Growing Zombies? I can already tell you that it doesn’t work.”

“How do you know that?” Rangobart asked.

Isabella squeezed herself against Rangobart’s arm.

“Oh, you’re interested?” She answered coyly, “Well, it primarily has to do with the concentrations of negative energy in the area. Or, rather, there doesn’t seem to be any at all, but we don’t know why.”

“I’ve heard this mentioned before,” Rangobart said, “but how does one measure concentrations of negative energy?”



“There are many observable indicators. As far as I know, all Humans react to the presence of negative energy when it gets above a certain threshold. Most relate it to an unsettling feeling similar to walking into an old cemetery...or maybe that has always been the feeling and we make that association because that’s what we know. There’s also the ‘smell of death’ akin to untended mausoleums and old tombs. Once that threshold is crossed, you get the usual hauntings and possessions and such.”

“And before that?”

“It’s more subtle,” Isabella replied. “Certain plants or variants of plants start growing. Other vegetation exhibits what we call negative energy entanglement – what are popularly known as ‘spooky’ characteristics. Corpses linger and signs of violent death like bloodstains and damage to the surroundings seem to enhance the ‘character’ of a place.”

“But that just sounds like how Bards try to describe Undead-infested places,” Dimoiya said.

“No, that’s just how Undead-infested places actually *are*,” Isabella said. “It’s not something that requires embellishment. Anyway, last autumn, we went to investigate the operations area in the Upper Reaches where Lady Zahradnik massacred over a hundred thousand people. We figured there’d have to be *something* to work with there, but there wasn’t anything at all. It would have been devastatingly disappointing if the phenomenon itself wasn’t so damn interesting.”

Frienne wasn’t sure she wanted to know what would happen if the Necromancer *had* found something to ‘work with’.

“Oh, speaking of which, Lady Zahradnik.”

“Hm?”

“Chandler heard from some Adventurers picking up supplies in the harbour that they found a big fat negative energy zone on the other side of the ancient pass. Do you know anything about it?”

“I’ve known about it since that Goblin Army invaded the Upper Reaches,” Ludmila replied.

“What! Why didn’t you tell us?!”

“Because it was an ideal location for a training expedition. I didn’t want any overeager Necromancers trying to sneak in some ‘research’ or give the Adventurers foreknowledge of the area by issuing ‘side-quests’.”

“Tch. But they’re still going to bring the Faculty of Necromancy in as civilian analysts, right? They’re not going to do something dumb like have the Temples mess the place up, *right?*”

The Necromancer’s increasingly feverish pitch caused Frianne to eye her nervously. Annoyingly, Rangobart seemed either uncaring or oblivious to the danger.

“The Temples of the Four still don’t want to have anything to do with us, so it will just be the Faculty of Necromancy and some adherents of Surshana. Still, don’t go over there unless you’re called for.”

“Wahoo!” Isabella beamed.

“I never realised that the expedition was so close,” Rangobart said. “When you mentioned that they were in the Abelion Wilderness, I figured they were far from the borders of the Sorcerous Kingdom.”

“I did say that I should see about familiarising you with their work,” Ludmila said. “We’ll be visiting the expedition area in the days to come.”

“Your consideration is greatly appreciated, my lady.”

“So,” Frianne turned her attention back to the rows of pea sprouts, “you mentioned that there were experiments carried out over the winter related to this underground farm. How will the yields here compare to conventional farming?”

“That’s what we’re trying to find out with these first few harvests,” Isabella said. “Well, at least the Farmers are. We arcane artisans, on the other hand, are working on a device that will change the world of magic items forever.”

“Is that so?” Rangobart looked down at the Necromancer on his arm, “What might that be, Miss Aguado?”

Isabella looked up through her long lashes at Rangobart, a blush colouring her cheeks.

“That’s, um...a switch, maybe? Or something like that...d-do you know how many magical lights are down here? It takes an *hour* to turn them all on, then another to turn them all off! And that’s just for this one section! Imagine when we’ve covered the same amount of land as the fields above? Er...anyway, I should get back to work. I’ll *Message* you later this evening!”

With that, the Necromancer fled to the lift and disappeared up the shaft. Ludmila released a small sigh.

“One of my Necromancers developed a case of stupid,” she said.

“Stupid Rangobart,” Dimoiya grumbled. “Making other people stupid.”

“Is what she said true?” Frianne asked, “You plan on making this underground farming operation just as extensive as the fields above?”

“That depends on the results of our experimentation here,” Ludmila answered. “The Farmers say that it’s more complicated than growing crops in regular conditions, plus we have several other systems undergoing testing as well...I suppose Isabella got too distracted to explain much.”

“What else are you doing down here?”

“It’s not so much that we’re doing something entirely separate as we are tying several things together. Since these chambers are tunnelled into the bedrock, we must devise a working water management system. There’s also Sophie Noia’s Slime concept that we want to put to the test.”

“You mean the Slimefinery?”

“That’s right,” Ludmila nodded. “We’ve been keeping Slimes in the sewers here, but we’ve just left them alone to do their thing so far. The first thing we need to do is find a Slime ‘rancher’, but the one Ranger we have who has tamed any Slimes so far wants to join the Royal Army.”

Frianne recalled their visit with the ‘monster researcher’ during the winter. She was honestly surprised that Ludmila fully intended to try out her idea.

“How long until you believe you’ll have some conclusive results on your experiments here? There are solariums and such in the Empire, but no one has ever tried to conduct indoor agriculture at this scale before. As simple as it may seem on a conceptual level, the truth is that succeeding here will drastically alter food production in the region. You’ll be doubling your agricultural output and adding a third growing season besides.”

“Even if they succeed,” Ludmila said, “it will take a long time to produce the magic items required to equip the entire facility. Also, I believe that nearly all of the candidate crops for this underground farm are vegetables and fruits rather than staple crops.”

“That still means you’ll be the region’s sole provider of fresh fruits and vegetables during the winter,” Frianne noted. “I understand that you don’t put the same importance on exports here as others might, but there would be many people who would appreciate the produce.”

“Clara and the others mentioned as much,” Ludmila said. “I’m not averse to the idea, but how these new farms affect the region’s balance is still my primary concern. Also, it should provide some much-needed experience for my farming tenants.”

“Your farming tenants?” Frianne furrowed her brow, “They seem capable enough of growing crops as it is. Not that I’ve ever heard it to be a difficult task.”

“There are certainly important nuances to growing even the most common crops,” Ludmila said. “That’s not why they need to experience, however. We can have that discussion when we head south tomorrow.”