

When Frianne emerged from her lodgings the next morning, there was a fluffy thing outside.

*It's a fluffy thing...*

She stared at the fluffy thing that stood before her in all of its fluffiness. The fluffy thing stared back at her. It was so fluffy.

Seeing animals in rural territories was to be expected. Warden's Vale was on the frontier, so did that mean it was a wild animal? She hadn't seen any wandering around the villages or the harbour before.

Its thick coat of white wool made her think it was some sort of sheep, at first, but after she recovered slightly from its fluffiness, she saw that it clearly wasn't. It had three eyes on its black, sheep-like head and the eye on its forehead had a round pupil rather than a rectangular one. It had four legs, but its forelegs ended in three-fingered hands rather than cloven hooves.

"What are you, I wonder?" She murmured to herself.

To her delight, the fluffy thing walked up to her feet. It issued the most adorable bleat. Frianne knelt and tentatively held out her hand, and it sniffed at it for a moment before giving her fingers a lick.

*It doesn't have sharp teeth, so it's not dangerous...*

A gasp sounded from nearby.

"It's a fluffy!" Dimoiya squealed in excitement.

Frianne snatched the fluffy up into her arms before Dimoiya could. It had come to her, so it was her fluffy. Frianne's junior hovered before her with an envious look, making crooning noises while patting the fluffy's fluffy coat.

"What is it?" Dimoiya asked.

"I don't know," Frianne answered. "It's fluffy. Have you been out for long?"

"No," Dimoiya replied. "I wanted to, but I saw something scary and stayed inside instead."

Frienne looked around the misty square, hugging the fluffy to herself.

“Something scary?”

“A tree! A tree came out of the fog and stole my garbage!”

“...you’re not making any sense.”

“I know! But I saw what I saw. A tree walked up to my place and took the garbage crate! I didn’t know trees did that!”

She was fairly confident that they didn’t. The morning fog was thick in Warden’s Vale, so Dimoiya had likely confused a custodian or something for a walking tree in the gloom.

“Warden’s Vale is so well guarded that I doubt it’s anything dangerous. Are we ready for breakfast?”

“I don’t know. I think I had too much crab ice cream after we got back last night.”

“No one asked you to eat five bowls. Let’s go – I want something sour. Do you think they have pickles?”

It turned out that the restaurant had all sorts of pickled vegetables. The fluffy quietly sat on the chair beside hers while she had her fill. Since it was so docile, there was a good chance it was someone’s pet.

Once they were done with breakfast, Frienne picked up the fluffy again. They crossed the village square to meet with Ludmila and Rangobart for the day’s activities.

“Are you excited to visit Nemel?” Frienne asked.

“Yup! I still can’t imagine what she’s doing out there. She grew up in the city like us.”

Frienne couldn’t, either. Warden’s Vale was far more developed than she had thought before visiting – the ‘farming villages’ were some of the most developed rural settlements that she had ever seen. Nemel had just arrived near the beginning of spring, however, so all Frienne could think of was camping during the Promotional Exam.

“She hasn’t told you anything about her work here?” Frianne asked.

“Uh, not really. She just made vague statements whenever I asked. I bet she’s too embarrassed to say anything specific.”

“That’s understandable,” Frianne nodded. “Gran Barony is in the imperial heartland, after all. Life in her new home is probably nothing that people like us have experienced before.”

Ludmila emerged from her manor shortly after they arrived, followed by Rangobart and Miss Luzi. She idly wondered what they had been up to.

“Were you hiding from the village women?” Dimoiya peered at Rangobart suspiciously.

Rangobart didn’t answer. Dimoiya was probably right.

“It’s just the mages that come after him,” Ludmila said.

“They’re not going to leave him alone until they get his babies,” Dimoiya said. “He’s going to get a big head from being here.”

She wondered how the Court Council would react if Rangobart left thirty or so bastards in the Sorcerous Kingdom. It was highly doubtful that their suzerain would press any sketchy claims, but the mere thought of the possibility was a worry they could do without.

“Is that Necromancer still contacting you through *Message*?” Frianne asked.

“Yes,” Rangobart put on a hunted look. “Miss LeNez started doing it, too. I admit that they’re both attractive in their own way, but I’ve never seen women act so brazenly before. It was quite something to see them get a rise out of Countess Waldenstein. No one in the Academy would have dared cross her.”

“They’re both former shop owners,” Ludmila told them. “Master LeNez, in particular, was quite stubborn in her refusal to join.”

“How did you end up convincing her to join you?”

“Her workshop in E-Rantel just happened to explode. It’s an outlet for the companies here now.”

“...you’re a *bad woman*,” Dimoiya said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.”

Dimoiya prudently abandoned her statement. She was aiming for a consulate in E-Rantel, after all. It was for the best that it also just didn’t happen to explode.

They made their way to the wagon lot and boarded a passenger carriage that brought them south through the Citadel District. Frianne eyed the foundry as they slowed to make a turn out of the harbour.

“I still don’t think I can believe what happened in there,” she said.

“Why not?” Ludmila asked.

“Because it defies all common sense!” Frianne answered as she stroked the fluffy thing’s fluffy coat, “That little girl forged a masterwork dagger in less than thirty minutes! Not just the blade, the whole thing!”

She had ordered a dagger just to see what would happen, and the girl made it in front of her face. The weapon, complete with its ‘Meowmeow’ pommel, would be included in her report to the Court Council, but everyone would probably think that she was mocking them.

“It’s just that difficult to have outsiders believe what’s going on in the Sorcerous Kingdom, I suppose,” Ludmila said. “Purportedly, the people of Re-Estize still believe that our citizens are impaled on stakes every day or hunted by packs of ghouls roaming the countryside.”

“The Temples in the Empire still say things like that,” Frianne said.

“Do the people believe what they say?”

“I’m sure the more fervent followers do. For the most part, however, the citizens don’t care either way because it doesn’t immediately concern them.”

“That’s a rather troubling way to look at the world,” Ludmila said.

“It’s just the way that people are, isn’t it? The Sorcerous Kingdom may as well be a world away to most villagers. Even if they wanted to do something about what the Temples told them, they have neither the time nor the resources to do so.”

“And it’s a good thing they’re like that,” Rangobart said. “Can you imagine what would happen if it wasn’t the case? Half of the Empire would be whipped up into a frenzied mob to attack the Sorcerous Kingdom. Most of them wouldn’t make it a hundred kilometres before running out of supplies and pillaging the Empire instead.”

Ludmila frowned at Rangobart’s words.

“I’m sure that there’s a better way to direct resources and political will,” she said.

“Not in the Empire,” Rangobart told her. “The Imperial Administration’s generations-long effort at maintaining a secular state and paring away the influence of the Temples means that we don’t have a single holy order in the Empire. The closest group resembling a faith militant are the Clerics in the Imperial Army. Speaking of which, what’s going on with that here? I noticed that the Temples seem to be growing in the Sorcerous Kingdom. There are even Paladins and Squires running around.”

“The Paladins are from the Theocracy. A request for temple staff was put out through the E-Rantel Cathedral and three dozen Paladins came in response. It clearly wasn’t enough, so they started raising Squires.”

“That’s...curious. What Holy Order are they from?”

“They’re not from any particular Holy Order. If I understand things correctly, they were dispatched according to their adaptability and experience abroad. Since they’ve established themselves here, however, there’s been some talk about having a Holy Order for the Sorcerous Kingdom.”

“Oh, I’m sure the Temples in the Empire will simply *love* hearing about that,” Dimoiya said. “Maybe I’ll tell them myself to see how they react.”

“There isn’t an official Holy Order yet,” Ludmila said. “So I wouldn’t be so quick to make any claims.”

Their carriage’s course along the Katze River eventually ended at a cargo lot past the canyon south of Warden’s Vale. There were a few partially loaded cargo containers and a pair of Death Knights guarding the premises. Far beyond the pier jutting out into the river was what looked like a settlement obscured by the trees. Above it towered the icy heights of Mount Verilyn, home of the Frost Dragon who served as Ludmila’s Knight and battle mount.

*Both Rangobart and Dimoiya have seen her before. I wonder if she's around...*

She hadn't seen a single one during her entire visit. It was said that a few lucky mages greatly advanced their knowledge of magic by consulting wise and powerful Dragons for a greater understanding of the world, so Frianne thought it might be nice to have the chance.

"The ship isn't in," Ludmila said, "so we'll have to fly across."

"Would you like a *Fly* spell?" Rangobart asked.

"Thank you for the offer," Ludmila said, "but I have my own."

Ludmila swept Miss Luzi up in a princess carry and launched herself over the river. They stared as she became a dot in the distance and alighted on the opposite shore.

"Could Rangers always fly?" Frianne asked.

"It looked more like a *huuuuge* jump to me," Dimoiya said.

By the time they landed on the opposite shore, Nemel and her friends were already lined up to greet them. A single Goblin accompanied them.

"Welcome, Countess Waldenstein."

Nemel and her friends lowered their heads in a curtsy. The Goblin curtsied as well.

"Dimoiya is here, too!" Dimoiya raised her hand beside Frianne.

"Hello, Dimoiya," Nemel smiled. "I still can't get over how much your behaviour has changed since the Academy."

"I gave up!" Dimoiya said, "Acting all mature doesn't work for someone with my looks. I'm almost eighteen and people treat me like I'm twelve! It's easier to get by acting younger than I am."

"That makes sense," Nemel nodded.

“It does?” Frianne frowned.

Dimoiya and Nemel exchanged a look.

“Is it because she’s an imperial princess?” Ludmila asked.

“Probably,” Rangobart said.

“What are you people talking about?” Frianne asked.

“Tell her, Rangobart,” Nemel said.

“I have enough issues on my plate,” Rangobart replied. “Dimoiya can—”

“Dimoiya wants to return home alive!”

The group fell silent again, sending shifty glances at her.

“Someone tell me what’s going on,” Frianne’s voice quavered.

“Men and women are held to different expectations,” Ludmila said.

“I know that,” Frianne replied.

“You seem to, but you also don’t at the same time. I figured that it was your position as an imperial princess that was causing the issue. Most Noblewomen would never make the same mistakes.”

“*Mistakes?* What mistakes?”

“I suppose you could call it ‘betraying expectations’. That is, men and women are expected to behave in certain ways. Your position as an imperial princess probably makes you immune to any direct repercussions, but it doesn’t make you immune to people judging you for your behaviour.”

“I’m very well aware that people hold certain expectations of me due to my gender,” Frianne said coolly.

“You may be aware,” Ludmila told her, “but you don’t seem to be aware of the consequences of betraying those expectations. Simply put, a man and a woman behaving the same way are judged differently.”

“The Imperial Administration is a meritocracy, there’s no way—”

“The Imperial Administration is *not* a meritocracy,” Ludmila told her. “In this case, men and women are not judged by the same merits. For instance, the hard stance that you’ve taken as Head Court Mage does you absolutely no favours as a woman.”

“You’re going to have to explain that one to me.”

Ludmila sighed, her boots shifting slightly on the gravel of the riverbank.

“When a man takes a hard-line stance,” she said, “they are perceived as a strong leader. Someone with the focus, determination, and will to achieve the group’s goals. When a woman acts the same way, they are perceived as a *bitch*.”

“*Bitch!*” The Goblin said.

“But I’m doing what’s necessary,” Frianne protested.

“And you are punished for that behaviour all the same,” Ludmila told her. “Most people act according to their perceptions. Once you become an unpleasant woman in the eyes of others – both men *and* women – cooperation plummets, resistance to your efforts increases, and any number of absurd obstacles start manifesting. Beauty; intelligence; connections; wealth...all of the tools that once worked in your favour get *twisted* into reasons for resentment.”

“But if I don’t do my job—”

“You’re seen as a weak leader,” Ludmila shrugged. “Probably because you’re a woman.”

*Ridiculous.*

“That’s very nearly a tautology,” Frianne said.



“It is the reality of living in Baharuth and Re-Estize. Most likely Roble, as well. It also works the same way for men. Those who take up traditionally feminine roles are seen as effeminate and are subject to any number of injustices. Law, culture, religion, and economics essentially dictate what we can and cannot be, and it is a self-reinforcing aspect of society. Because image and reputation are so easy to destroy, it is a trap that must never be sprung...well, I suppose someone like Corelyn or Gagnier could pull it off, but most women who try destroy themselves.”

“Then how did you manage to fulfil your role as a liaison to the Imperial Army? It is almost wholly a culture of men. You should have faced these obstacles at every turn.”

Rangobart cleared his throat.

“She didn’t encounter any obstacles,” he said. “Lady Zahradnik acted as the ideal female officer in the eyes of the Imperial Knights and strolled through every potential barrier as if it wasn’t there. More than that, she exploited every preestablished shortcut in our martial culture. It was quite instructive.”

*And what is the ideal female mage in the eyes of the Empire?*

Probably a seductive, buxom Sorceress with a slit in her robe so high that it enticed observers with glimpses of her string undergarments. Frianne was confident about her appearance, but that was something she would never be able to pull off.

“I’ll give the matter some consideration,” Frianne said. “Actually, you’re leading your settlement here, Nemel. How did you manage this...social dynamic?”

“To be honest,” Nemel replied shyly, “I did the same thing.”

Frianne cast a critical eye at her junior. Her bust was average and she couldn’t tell if the woman was wearing string panties, but she certainly didn’t have a precariously high slit in her dress.

“So you became the ideal female mage?”

“N-No? I became the ideal Hobgoblin.”

“What?”

“I-I mean hobhuman—er Human Lord. The female kind. That casts magic.”

*That doesn't explain anything...*

She would have to puzzle things out. Maybe Nemel would provide some clues as she showed them around.

“I look forward to seeing what you've accomplished,” Frianne smiled.

“Wow, no pressure...”

Nemel turned and led them up the steps of a wooden boardwalk. Frianne shivered and hugged the warm ball of fluff as they entered the shadows of a canopy that offered only the smallest glimpses of the icebound peak above.

“Didn't you mention that most of your settlers from Arwintar are foresters?” Rangobart asked, “The vegetation is surprisingly dense here.”

“I did,” Nemel replied, “but...well, look up.”

Frianne struggled to make anything out in the darkness. Rangobart cast a spell.

“[Darkvision]. Oh, I see. How did this happen? You never see this on patrols.”

“I know, right?” Nemel laughed nervously, “Goblins are pretty scary. They're not particularly smart, but that may as well be an advantage. They'll try unimaginably stupid things, but there are so many of them that one will eventually figure out a stupid thing that works. Some of the Goblins learning carpentry eventually learned how to build platforms up in the trees after breaking their necks like five dozen times. Once they learned how to employ the mill to mass produce wooden planks, they used the materials to build the most precarious-looking tree village. Well, it's growing into a tree city with how many Goblins live here.”

She hoped that a Goblin wouldn't fall from the darkness to land on her.

“How do they poop?” Dimoiya asked.

Frienne picked up her pace. The stairs ended at a levelled section of land where a Human village was built – thankfully, on the ground. If not for the rickety construction of the Goblin dwellings in the trees, the place would have looked like the very image of a frontier settlement in the minds of most imperial citizens.

“This is quite picturesque,” Frienne said.

“Except for the Goblins?” Nemel asked.

“Well...”

Nemel let out a self-deprecating laugh.

“I just had a new wave of migrants come in, Prez,” she said. “They react plenty to what’s going on here, so you don’t need to hold back.”

“But you’ve seen enough success to start bringing in women,” Frienne offered diplomatically. “Surely, you’re on the right path.”

“I wonder about that sometimes. Well, all the time. Life out here isn’t much like I imagined aside from being surrounded by nature.”

“How are your people adapting?”

“They’re mostly foresters,” Nemel said. “They seem happier here than they were in the Empire.”

“It looks like there’s plenty of work to be had for them, so it’s no wonder.”

“It’s not just that,” Nemel said. “It’s...well, they’re *Rangers*. They like being out on the frontier. This place is like a combination park and garden for them. The tradesmen are filled with enthusiasm over the potential of their new home. The women...well, they get used to how things are.”

“I still think you should encourage them to take up a profession,” Ludmila said. “This isn’t the Empire.”

“I’m hoping that they’ll get interested after they get used to how things are here. For now, they’ve signed up to basically be housewives. Anyway, hmm...”

Nemel scanned the surroundings before leading them to an open pavilion in the centre of the village. They ascended to the second floor, which housed a spacious, temperature-controlled office.

“This is a unique structure,” Rangobart said. “What possessed you to build it?”

“There’s never a dull moment here with so many Goblins,” Nemel said. “I used to work in my tent, but something would happen every five minutes and I’d come running out to see what was going on. Here, I can just look in the direction of the screaming.”

“...I see.”

They were led to a table on a balcony that still smelled of freshly-cut pine. Ida served tea as they settled into their seats. Frianne examined the curiously warped clay cup set in front of her.

“A Goblin made them,” Nemel said. “They pick up skills before you know it.”

“I’m amazed you’ve managed to integrate them so quickly,” Frianne said. “Didn’t you just move in this spring?”

“I did,” Nemel nodded. “You’re giving me too much credit, though. The Goblins sort of self-integrate when they join.”

“How does that work?”

“It just *does*. I wasn’t sure what was happening, at first, but I eventually realised that they wandered around for a few days before deciding where they could best help.”

“...were Goblins always that helpful?”

“Haven’t you heard the saying ‘those who don’t work, don’t eat?’” Ludmila said, “On the frontier, those who don’t work are meat.”

Frianne furrowed her brow at Nemel, clutching the warm fluff nervously to her breast.

“You *eat* your Goblins?”

“No! Lady Zahradnik, please don’t make unsettling suggestions like that!”

“It wasn’t a suggestion.”

For some reason, the image of Ludmila roasting a Goblin on a spit rose in Frianne’s mind. She shook her head free of the thought.

“Have they caused any problems?”

“It depends on what you mean by problems,” Nemel replied. “I think the only major problem is the idea of taxes.”

“They refuse to pay their taxes?”

“It’s more that they don’t *understand* taxes. Which is weird, because they understand tribute. Maybe it’s because they don’t commoditise anything. If a Goblin is hungry, they grab something to eat from the nearest cookfire. If a hunter needs arrows, then they take them. Whoever is making arrows makes more when they notice their stores of ammunition need refilling. Goblins don’t keep track of stuff like we do. What matters is that there’s *enough*, if you know what I mean.”

“I believe you’ve mentioned something similar when we travelled from Arwintar,” Rangobart said. “The thing with the equipment.”

“Yeah, like that. It’s just *weird*. I don’t know how everything doesn’t just devolve into chaos. They don’t know who does what or who takes what, but they’re entirely unbothered by it.”

Friane nodded in agreement. She could envision how the same lack of proper procedure and accounting would play out in the Empire. Corruption would run rampant and people would be pointing fingers every which way while making any number of claims about personal contribution or the lack thereof.

“Waldenstein has made similar comments on the way things are run in Warden’s Vale,” Ludmila said.

“I don’t recall offering any commentary of the sort...” Friane said.

“Just yesterday, you questioned whether the education offered here was worth the investment.”

“I don’t see how that’s in any way related,” Friane said.

“The preservation of our culture here was stated as one of my main objectives,” Ludmila told her. “These Goblins are frontier folk, too, though most don’t usually think of them in those terms. You don’t understand what we’re doing because our economies are structured differently from the one you’ve been raised in. The Imperial Magic Academy instils the principles of the imperial economy in its future administrators.

“Frontier territories are inherently unstable. Thus, we must build robust economies that can withstand that instability. Economies in developed territories assume that stability is a constant. Thus, businesses and administrations strive for what they consider ‘efficiency’. *How do we maximise profit? How can we reduce administrative overhead? Can we make do with fewer employees? How little can we pay them?* This sort of thinking leads to systemic fragility. With even a bit of stress, it breaks. You can’t do that on the frontier. If you offer ‘just enough’ in the interests of ‘efficiency’, the entire settlement collapses due to a single raid.”

“But the Sorcerous Kingdom offers as close to a guarantee of safety as conceivably possible,” Rangobart said.

“I don’t see stability as a reason to adopt an inherently brittle system. I also don’t think countries at peace are immune to instability. Consider the Empire in the years following Emperor Jircniv’s consolidation of power. He purged so many administrators that he had to stop because the Empire would cease to function if he got rid of any more. What would have happened if, say, Re-Estize hired Ijaniya to assassinate a few thousand more officials at that point?”

“...the administration would have collapsed,” Frianne said. “Do you know that you think of the most terrible things?”

“A good tactician does exactly what their opponent doesn’t want them to do. The Empire is extremely lucky that Re-Estize didn’t seem to have any at the time. At any rate, I don’t see why any aspect of society couldn’t be subjected to the same sort of stress. Assuming that it won’t is simply tempting fate.”

“Out of curiosity, can you think of any other vulnerabilities that might lead to catastrophe for the Empire?” Frianne asked.

“Off the top of my head...considering the effects of imperial policy on the Temples over the generations, the priesthood could be neutralised. They don’t even have a Holy Order to defend themselves with. The Empire would have a lot of fun dealing with disease, injury, and death after that. Also, since the Empire would be the go-to culprit for an attack of that scale, it would be a bonus if the Temples turned the people against the Imperial Administration on their way down.”

*But we can’t do anything about that...*

Had the Empire created such a critical vulnerability for itself without realising it? Had the pursuit of administrative 'purity' blinded them to any pitfalls produced in the process? The way things were, the Empire had no way to remedy the problem unless they walked back generations of reform and correcting the vulnerability would take generations of institutional growth for the Temples.

"Um...so should I just leave the Goblins alone?" Nemel asked. "Dame Verilyn might not like that."

"I believe you've been around long enough to understand what you must do," Ludmila said.

"Figure out an acceptable 'output', huh..."

Ludmila smiled at her response. Nemel leaned back in her seat and scratched her head.

"I came here to grow potatoes," she said. "Now, I've become a Hobgoblin."