

“Woo, what a view!” Dimoiya exclaimed.

A gust of cool wind tossed Frianne’s golden locks as they stood atop the village’s lighthouse. While the view of the Vale was indeed breathtaking, she wasn’t focused on the lake or the distant peaks to the east.

“How far is it to that strip of forest up the road to the northwest?” Frianne asked.

“Four kilometres,” Ludmila answered. “If you’re wondering how much land each village manages, it’s twenty-five square kilometres.”

Friane silently scanned the fields on the terraces around them.

*That’s far too much...*

At least by the Empire’s standards, it was. As far as she knew, Re-Estize was no different.

Each farming village in the Empire managed about ten square kilometres of fields and copses. The allocation was something like a hard rule, as it was determined by how far the villagers could walk and move equipment and still get a good day of work in.

“This is possible because of Undead labour?” Rangobart asked.

“That’s right,” Ludmila answered. “Speaking of which, I’ve spotted them. Let’s go and take a look, shall we?”

They descended the tower and boarded their carriage, riding a kilometre southeast along the main road connecting the farming villages. The vehicle stopped on the shoulder of the road, but there were no Undead to be seen.

“The team I spotted is two kilometres that way,” Ludmila pointed to a distance terrace further up the valley. “Can everyone fly? Walking out there would take a Wizard an hour.”

“Does it take non-Wizards less time?” Dimoiya frowned.

“It varies depending on vocation. For instance, a decent Ranger could cover the same distance in five minutes if they run straight there.”

“...through the mud?”

“Mud doesn’t matter to a Ranger.”

Dimoiya gave Ludmila a dubious look.

“Are you a bad woman like Wagner?”

“It’s true,” Rangobart said, then cleared his throat. “About the Rangers, I mean. I could scarcely believe it when I saw them in action during my first month running patrols with the army. My company’s best Rangers could traverse a muddy farmer’s field just as quickly as we could ride our horses on the road beside it. Actually...shouldn’t you have seen something similar with your escort on the Promotional Examination?”

“No, I didn’t pay attention to any of that. I was paranoid about a Goblin jumping out from behind a rock and slitting my throat!”

“It’s more likely that they’d put an arrow in you. Even a Wizard can kill the average Goblin with a good whack and the Goblins know it.”

Dimoiya gave Rangobart a good whack.

“Ow!”

“Why do you have to be like that?” Dimoiya fumed.

“Like what?”

“I was scared! Who cares about being rational when they’re scared?”

“...everyone can fly, right?” Ludmila asked again.

Frienne floated slowly into the air after casting her spell. Ludmila eyed her curiously.

“How does carrying a child interact with flight magic?” She asked.

“It factors in as additional encumbrance,” Frienne answered, “so I fly as if I’m carrying a good-sized book around.”

“What happens if you cast a *Fly* spell on the baby?”

“...please don't propose unsettling ideas like that.”

They flew low over the freshly tilled ground, following Ludmila, who ran ahead of them. The uneven, muddy soil that should have probably sucked her boots off of her feet didn't seem to affect her mobility at all.

“You're a Ranger?” Frianne asked.

“House Zahradnik is a line of Rangers...haven't I mentioned that before?”

“I think so. I suppose I'm used to martial Nobles being cavalrymen.”

She soon spotted a team of Death Knights ploughing a field on the terrace above theirs. Ludmila stopped at the windbreak beside the field, where a pair of Farmers were having lunch on the grass. They didn't stand upon Ludmila's arrival, instead offering friendly nods in greeting.

“Afternoon, m'lady,” one of them said.

“Good afternoon,” Ludmila replied. “What's for lunch?”

“Crab salad with crab rolls and a crab sandwich. I suppose I should be thankful that they haven't figured out a crab dish that goes with the fruit.”

“Maybe I should have the restaurants change things up a bit,” Ludmila said. “I know I instructed them to use crab with the meals, but I never thought they would go to such extremes.”

“Well, I heard someone say that crab's a luxury, so I figure I shouldn't complain. Especially not in the Chef's face. Who's that you got with ya?”

“Some acquaintances from the Empire. They wanted to see how things worked here.”

“Work, eh...now I'm feelin' all guilty.”

Indeed, the farmers hardly looked like they were hard at work. While they ate, the team of Death Knights made their way up and down the field with their ploughs.

“What’s left for you to do with the Undead working out there?” Rangobart asked.

“When we’re ploughing? Not much. We have teams of Death Knights plough the fields. Teams of Skeletons and Bone Vultures pick through the fields for stones and other unwanted debris. We give everything a once-over before sowing the crops...well, we use some new and improved seed drills that the Death Knights also handle. After that, the real work begins.”

“How do the Undead compare to conventional methods?”

“Hmm...it’s hard to even compare. A village doing things the old-fashioned way shares teams of draft animals, taking turns with their tenancies. Here, our ‘draft animals’ are the local security, so we can whistle up as many teams of Death Knights as we have ploughs. They can handle ploughs with six blades, too. The smiths are working on a twelve-blade plough that we can use with Soul Waters next spring.

“Anyway, the Undead go faster; they don’t have to rest every few hours like a team of horses does. They don’t need to eat and there’s no stables to muck out. They can work all day and night so things ploughing gets done quick. Compared to the old days...yeah, no one in their right mind would want that after doing things the way we are now. Growing season’s shorter up here than in the lowlands, too, so the speed’s appreciated.”

*Improvements in efficiency all around, then...*

Listening to the Farmer pointed out a few ‘small’ things that hadn’t registered before. Clara and Liane focused on the many applications of Undead labour, but what happened when they *weren’t* working was an important factor, too.

While the need wasn’t as severe as in Re-Estize, having a constant security presence was useful since army patrols couldn’t be everywhere at once. Even if they were shared between the entire village, Draft animals still needed to be fed and cared for even when they weren’t being put to work.

“Corelyn and Wagner don’t seem to push Skeleton labour for agricultural applications,” Frianne said. “Why is that?”

“The demand for Skeleton labour is much higher,” Ludmila replied. “We’re facing a shortage even within the Sorcerous Kingdom.”

“They appear to be plentiful in your demesne.”

“The benefits of early adoption, I suppose.”

“Will there be a similar shortage of Death-series Servitors and Soul Eaters in the future?” Rangobart asked.

“That remains to be seen,” Ludmila answered. “If the entire Empire suddenly decided to lease our Undead as a result of the trade talks, there might be short-term supply issues.”

*Might be?*

That implied that the Sorcerous Kingdom had thousands of Death Knights and Soul Eaters to casually lease out to random Farmers. Was their raw power practically limitless?

“So you say that your real work begins after sowing,” Rangobart said. “Is that the usual maintenance of the fields?”

“Uh, I think we call it ‘managing secondary crops’ here. Can’t rightly call ‘em weeds anymore if we can sell ‘em. We let them grow along with the crops, but they grow faster so we harvest ‘em all season.”

“Won’t allowing the, erm, former weeds to grow negatively affect the main crop?”

“That’s what we figured at first. Turned out that it didn’t. Something to do with the magic that they cast on the fields.”

*“Plant Growth?”* Frianne asked.

“Yes,” Ludmila answered. “Is it employed in the Empire?”

“Rarely,” Frianne replied. “There aren’t many Earth Priests capable of casting it. The compensation scheme that they use is also...well, rather than charge mana rates, they demand ten per cent of the harvest, which comes out to far more than it would at standard mana rates.”

“Does anyone take them up on the offer?”

“Oh, yes. People fight over the opportunity, but the fact remains that there are very few Priests capable of casting Third-tier magic. The Temples take advantage of the demand to make it a major affair to promote the Faith of the Four. Who provides the service here?”

“Druids do,” Ludmila said.

Frienne recalled the Lizardman Druids performing the ritual in the harbour village. If knowledge of rituals was widespread, all it took was a single Druid with the *Plant Growth* spell and enough volunteers to provide the mana to enchant every acre of agricultural land.

“Out of curiosity, is that a service that can be provided to the Empire? I don’t recall it being present at the exposition in Corelyn Harbour.”

“Considering that the spell would come from a Druid, no. Enchanting the entire Empire with *Plant Growth* would be catastrophic for the natural balance.”

“But they did it for you,” Dimoiya said.

“The one who originally enchanted my fields doesn’t anymore. That task is now the responsibility of the local Druids, who do so because I am a Ranger.”

“Do Druids and Rangers belong to some exclusive club? How much do you pay for membership?”

“There is an intrinsic understanding that Rangers and Druids act as nature’s custodians. There are notable exceptions, of course.”

“Like Rangers in the Imperial Army,” Rangobart said.

“It depends on the situation. Imperial patrols do utilise Rangers in a manner that isn’t out of line with their calling. It is when they are ordered to act in ways that disturb that natural balance that they become a problem. Of course, Rangers and Druids are people, too, so those acts may forever paint them as traitors in the minds of other Rangers and Druids.”

“Do you believe that the Rangers in the Imperial Army are traitors for their recent campaigns?”

“I believe that they are in an unfortunate position – one that can hopefully be corrected over time. Anyways, you may submit a request to the Royal Court of the Sorcerous Kingdom about the use of various magics, but it’s not anything that I have control over.”

“You could use your super secret Ranger Club powers,” Dimoiya said.

Ludmila gave Dimoiya a reproachful look.

“The Empire may believe this to be a quaint relationship or perhaps a minor annoyance,” Ludmila said, “but I suspect that it will learn how serious it can be as it steps out into the world. Is there anything else you’d like to ask about our farms while you’re here?”

“Yes,” Rangobart said. “I believe we didn’t fully explore the utilisation of the Undead. How is the harvest conducted? Do you use another type of machine to quickly reap everything?”

“Not unless someone comes up with a new contraption,” the first Farmer said. “We equip the Undead with scythes and have them go at it. The Death Knights make a mess of things, though, so we stick to Skeletons. Sheaving the windrows is still done by Human hands, though – it’s too complex for the Skeletons for some reason. After the stooks dry, they go into a wagon and one of the Soul Eaters brings everything back to the village warehouses. Oh – are you going to show them the other thing, Lady Zahradnik?”

“Is everything already set up?”

“Yeah, the Necromancers said so.”

*The Necromancers...?*

What did Necromancers have to do with agriculture? It felt like a stupid question given that they were farming with the Undead, but she couldn’t shake off the notion that something sinister might be afoot.

Ludmila thanked the two Farmers before they returned to their carriage on the road. Frianne eyed the empty fields on either side as they made their way back to the fortified farming village.

“I understand that the Undead are being used to simplify many aspects of the agricultural industry here,” Frianne said, “but it still feels like there are far too few Farmers.”

“It should feel that way to you since you’re accustomed to nearly every household in a farming village being a Farmer’s household,” Ludmila replied. “In these farming villages, however, there are only twenty Farmer households.”

“But...but doesn’t that mean each agricultural tenancy is roughly a hundred hectares?”

“Once copses and common land are accounted for, yes.”

*That's too much!*

It was over ten times what the average farming household held in the Empire. Frianne sat mute as she struggled to extrapolate all of the implications.

“That explains why your villages are more like towns in character,” Rangobart said.

“In certain ways, yes,” Ludmila nodded. “My circumstances allowed me to structure everything according to the new realities that came with Undead labour. The population of each of these farming villages is effectively urban and mostly works in what Human societies in the region would recognise as urban industries. This has brought with it several unprecedented boons.”

“Such as?”

“Probably the most important among them is that the classical divide between rural and urban society doesn't exist in Warden's Vale. Everyone is an urbanite and those in traditionally rural vocations live in urban centres.”

“That's...”

Rangobart frowned and fell silent. Frianne's already overtaxed mind fell into chaos from the unexpected attack. It was truly as unprecedented as Ludmila said.

The divide between rural and urban society was a core reality of Human civilisation. One was either a member of the rural elite and thus also a component of the aristocratic establishment, or they were an urbanite. The Empire did not care to address this divide. One could say that the Imperial Administration was a manifestation of urban society that exerted control over rural society. Turning the entire population into urbanites was not only considered impossible, but an entirely alien concept.

Now that Frianne was aware of it, however, she immediately understood its ramifications for governance. The foundation for a unified urban culture was being laid in Warden's Vale, and its tiny population made it easy for Ludmila to shape it as she saw fit. It was something that the Empire couldn't achieve even in its wildest dreams because the window of opportunity to do so only existed at a very early stage of development where it should have also been impossible.

“I'm beginning to understand why Liane says that you're a cheater,” Frianne said.



“It is what it is,” Ludmila smiled slightly. “I saw little reason to imitate lands developed under an obsolete paradigm and absolutely no reason to adopt the systems that create all of their problems.”

“But you must surely have some problems...”

“Of course,” Ludmila replied. “But they’re good problems to have. We are investing our resources to answer questions posed by the future rather than spending them fixing the mistakes of the past. No other territory in the Duchy of E-Rantel is in my position, but many territories in the Empire are...and many more will be.”

It was a pointed remark that required no effort to interpret. Both she and Rangobart had just been granted fiefs in the wilderness. Thousands of Imperial Knights had similarly been granted land, as well. With even more imperial expansion slated in the decades to come, those thousands would become tens or even hundreds of thousands.

“So your objective is to influence the Empire’s new developments rather than the existing ones.”

“Simply put, yes,” Ludmila replied. “The Empire is set on a course for expansion and they will succeed so long as they pick their fights carefully. With General Ray now in command of the Sixth Army Group, the Empire will soon find itself in a golden age fuelled by its new territorial acquisitions. With this in mind, I would like to see that success take a more healthy form, from a cosmopolitan standpoint.”

“Considering that the Empire already considers itself the pinnacle of cosmopolitan society,” Frianne said, “you may have some trouble convincing them.”

“It’s still more effective than standing on a box in Arwintar and trying to convince the citizens to change their ways. I don’t expect anyone to copy what I’m doing here – it’s impossible to do so. What I’d like to see is the principles employed in my territory being adapted to fit the unique properties and situation of any given fief. I suspect that most of the resistance to this will come from the Imperial Administration rather than the frontier folk.”

“I think I can see why you would say that,” Frianne said, “but how would you define the problem?”

“Hmm...I do not know if there is any formal terminology for it,” Ludmila said, “but the two major factors are ‘distance’ and ‘control’. I think you understand the control issue well enough. What I mean by distance is not physical distance, but the degrees of separation that any individual has from any given process. If one has too many degrees of separation from a process, one loses touch with the realities of that process unless one makes an active effort to understand it. Not many people care enough to do so or have the time to even if they did.”

“Of course,” Frianne nodded. “That is why regulatory bodies such as the Guilds exist. They ensure that the general public has access to products and services that meet acceptable quality standards.”

“But what defines those standards? I can guarantee you that the Guilds in the Empire do not care how many Goblins are killed or displaced to procure their lumber shipments. The Imperial Administration is even worse because they consider security an investment and the lumber as a ‘return’ that the Empire is entitled to. Tenants who receive the right to harvest lumber treat it as such and their landlords see it as a source of revenue that they deserve because their taxes pay for infrastructure and fund the Imperial Army.

“In every single case, no consideration is made to what exists outside of the imperial economy. At best, a forest is simply a prize to be won from its inhabitants and exploited for the benefit of the Empire while it is being converted into farmland. The gods forbid that the inhabitants resist or retaliate: that only somehow proves that the Empire is on the side of justice and now all manner of assassins and armies can be dispatched to deal with the ‘problem’.”

“Assassins?”

“I believe you call them Adventurers and Workers. At any rate, the problem I foresee is that the Imperial Administration will impose ‘imperial standards’ on its newly-acquired territories much as it has in the past. Am I correct in assuming this?”

“That should be the case,” Rangobart said. “Once my land has been surveyed, the Imperial Administration will make an assessment and issue recommendations to my seneschal about how to make the land as productive as possible.”

“For the Empire.”

“Right.”

“What if Brennenthal is as inhospitable for Human habitation as it sounds?”

“Then I will have some choice words for the Court Council. In all seriousness, I assume that some effort will be made to tame the land.”

“And thus the Empire remains forever mundane,” Ludmila sighed.

“I lost you,” Rangobart said.

Their carriage stopped at the 'outskirts' of the village, which consisted of the common land around the walls. A few villagers could be seen here and there, tending to their livestock.

"What do you think the yield of the fields that we just visited is? Of the principal crop."

"What do you grow here?" Frianne asked.

"The latest harvest was oats."

"If it's oats and you're using *Plant Growth* to enchant the fields, it should be just under seventy-five bushels a hectare."

It was a frightening amount, especially considering that each of Ludmila's Farmers managed a hundred hectares of land. Oats were a popular crop in cool, wet regions and produced two harvests a year. That meant a single farming household in Warden's Vale produced enough food to feed eleven hundred adult Humans for an entire year after seed stores were set aside.

*And this single village is exporting enough food to feed twenty-two thousand people. These Farmers must be ludicrously rich.*

"That was the same thing that our central administration's almanac listed. The actual harvest was one hundred bushels per hectare."

"Hah? But *Plant Growth* already guarantees one hundred and fifty per cent of the maximum yield of any plant under its influence."

"You would make a good Elder Lich," Ludmila smirked. "They said the same thing, then checked the numbers and remeasured the harvest ten times over. The result was the same, however. Since that was the case, they tried to destroy the 'erroneous' harvest since it was clearly in violation of the mandated amount. I had to get the Sorcerer King to stop them."

"I thought Elder Liches are supposed to be smart," Dimoiya said.

"That may be so, but they're also very arbitrary in the way that Undead can be."

"And here I thought that the ones working with the Second Army Group were just admirably austere," Rangobart muttered.

Frianne eyed one of the chickens blithely pecking away in the field nearby. Did it lay bigger than average eggs?

“So you attribute this to the effect of primal energies proposed in the Unified Mana Theory that Miss LeNez brought up,” Frianne said. “The abundant positive energy present in Warden’s Vale results in higher yields.”

“Higher *maximum* yields. We assume that Plant Growth still applies because yields are still uniform. The difference created by the spell made it much easier to notice. Also, this phenomenon and many others like it in Warden’s Vale led to the creation of Unified Mana Theory and its effects are being researched all over my territory.”

“So you propose that we leave our territories relatively untouched to take advantage of these effects.”

“That is your decision to make, but justifying it to the Empire will be difficult in most scenarios.”

“Why is that?”

“Clara once told me that the only way to keep a tree from being harvested is to convince those who would harvest it that it is more valuable to them if it is left standing,” Ludmila said. “This is nearly impossible when there is always someone out there who prioritises personal material gains and the Imperial Administration champions that way of thinking. Leaving a regular forest standing in the Empire is not as valuable to the Empire as the agricultural development that it stands in the way of. Harvesting that forest for valuable materials is merely a bonus obtained along the way.”

Frianne’s gaze went out to the fields being prepared for sowing.

“Assuming your theories lead somewhere,” she said, “I would say that the results achieved by your agricultural efforts would be quite convincing.”

“The effects of elemental gradients are subtle,” Ludmila told her. “What you see here would be considered extreme – just as extreme as Undead manifesting in the Katze Plains. Life generates positive energy, just as death generates negative energy. Normally, the balance between the two swings back and forth, but only slightly. Warden’s Vale is a ‘crucible’ because the regular balance doesn’t exist here. Negative energy is being siphoned away, causing the positive energy that it usually cancels out to overflow.”

“That’s an interesting hypothesis,” Frianne said. “Could it be that the Katze Plains and Warden’s Vale form two poles of an elemental conflux?”

“You are welcome to contribute to our research if you wish,” Ludmila said. “Just don’t *Fireball* Master LeNez if you lose your temper. That aside, it wouldn’t help any case for conservation of elemental gradients in the Empire because there is no known way to replicate the effects of what is going on in Warden’s Vale...though I suppose that Humans are quite good at replicating the effects of the Katze Plains.”

“We are?”

“Consider graveyards through the lens of Unified Mana Theory. Collecting ‘death’ in one place has the effect of engineering an artificial negative energy gradient, just as leaving some Elemental Ice lying around creates a tangible ‘ice’ gradient in that alchemical workshop. Re-Estize and the Empire chose to fight every year in the Katze Plains, effectively ‘dumping’ the resulting negative energy in a convenient place. If I recall correctly, there were rumours that the Katze Plains has grown over the past few years...”

“...those rumours are true,” Frianne shuddered. “The northern fringes of the Katze Plains have advanced by a few metres over the past few years. Some of the researchers at the Imperial Ministry of Magic postulate that the growth will stop now that the annual skirmishes have stopped.”

“So it appears that the Ministry of Magic *does* have some sense of what we’ve been researching here.”

A sigh escaped Frianne’s lips. She was so sure that she had everything sorted out before coming to the Sorcerous Kingdom.