

Rangobart opened his eyes to find Lady Wagner and Dimoiya staring across the cabin at him. He yawned and stretched, looking groggily out of the windows, but the lack of any scenery showed that they were still travelling on the highway between Feoh Raizo and Feoh Berkana. Rather than return to the surface to resume their way to the Dwarven Kingdom's capital overland, the highway went underground, following the route of an old dwarven highway connecting the cities of their ancient realm. According to Lady Wagner, the route underground only needed a bit of a cleanup to make serviceable again, as Dwarven construction was built to last. Short of the Demon Gods or rampaging Dragons, not much could cause any real damage to it.

He turned his attention back to the cabin, where the two young noblewomen were still looking at him.

"What?" He asked.

"Loud!" Dimoiya said, "Your snoring is so *loud!*"

"Yeah," Lady Wagner said, "I thought the mountain might collapse on us. The carriage would've been fine, though. Frianne threw on eight blankets trying to absorb the sound."

On the far end of his side of the cabin, Frianne's head was sticking out of a pile of Lizardman blankets, her waves of golden hair draped over the patterned fabric. He was beginning to think that the imperial princess might pass for a Lizardman herself.

"How long until we reach Feoh Berkana?" Rangobart asked.

"Shouldn't be long, now," Lady Wagner answered. "Unlike Feoh Raizo, though, there are some procedures we have to go through. We'll at least have to meet with a representative from the Regency Council and do all of the stuff they have planned for us."

"What sort of 'stuff'?"

"Probably a banquet, plus whatever they want to show you. The city was just reclaimed a year ago so there are probably some ruined parts of the kingdom they don't want us to see. Not that they need to make any excuses for it, but you know how it is..."

"Does it have anything to do with the 'stiffness' attributed to imperial citizens that Guildmaster Granitshield mentioned?" Frianne asked.

"Probably. Once you start going down that road, you get caught up in all sorts of things that suck up your time. Most Dwarves are pretty to-the-point, but the Regency Council's concerned with the prestige of their kingdom and all that heady stuff."

“Is there something wrong with that?”

“No, but yes. Think of what you’re here for, I guess...or what comes to mind when the Humans around here think of Dwarves. I bet it ain’t anything about their fabulous parties. You’re here for their renowned metalwork and stonework. Everything else is pretty much a distraction, and a costly one when your time is limited. Formality for the sake of formality.”

“I’m sure that my Lord Father and the members of his party will appreciate such a welcome,” Rangobart said.

“On the surface, sure,” Lady Wagner shrugged. “But I sometimes wonder if other Nobles get impatient with it. I’ve always preferred it when people put their money where their mouth is. Maybe it’s my Merchant blood getting the better of me.”

“I think your mannerisms have their own charm,” Rangobart said. “Most of the Imperial Knights that I know would rather deal with someone like you over someone like my Lord Father.”

“Hehe, think so?” Lady Wagner scratched her cheek with a finger, “Maybe I should explore that avenue with everything the Empire’s up to these days.”

The highway suddenly opened up to reveal a massive underground chamber set aglow by countless lights. Rangobart leaned back so Frianne could see past him, looking down at the cityscape as the highway rolled down an incline cut into the cavern wall.

“Feoh Berkana, I presume,” he said.

“Yessir,” Lady Wagner replied. “Home to approximately eighty thousand Mountain Dwarves.”

Rangobart eyed the towering, multilevel structures that rostrated from the cavern floor and crawled up the cavern walls.

“This seems like it would house far more than eighty thousand Dwarves,” he said.

“According to what the Dwarves could recover from the city’s archives,” Lady Wagner said, “this city was once able to house over a million.”

“A million?” A furrow appeared on Frianne’s brow, “Arwintar barely has over a hundred thousand. How did they feed themselves?”

“Uh, have you seen what they *eat*?” Lady Wagner said, “You could probably knock Dragons out of the sky with the stuff. In all seriousness, it’s because of the way they develop their land. They build in three dimensions. If Humans have a farming village with fields all around it, Dwarves have a hundred farming villages and fields stacked on the same spot. It’s warm down here too, if you haven’t noticed. It’s growing season all the time. This city you see down there is the heart of a vast underground Kingdom...or at least it used to be.”

“What happened to them?” Rangobart asked.

“The Demon Gods. Frost Dragons. Quagoa. One thing after another that never gave them a chance to recover. When the Sorcerer King found them, they had one city left and that city was hours from falling to a Quagoa siege.”

Rangobart’s gaze sobered as he continued to take in the details of the city. An entire civilisation had nearly passed into darkness not a day from the imperial border.

“How come the Empire never heard about their plight?” Rangobart asked, “The Dwarves used to send Merchants in the past. Why not ask for help or send their people to safety? It wasn’t as if they had nothing to offer in return.”

“That’s something you’ll have to ask them,” Lady Wagner said. “When I did, they almost seemed content with the fact that they were in decline, which doesn’t make much sense at all to me. They were on the verge of extinction, yet only a tiny fraction of their total population was in the military. It’s as if they were just sitting there, waiting to die.”

“You’re right,” Rangobart nodded. “That doesn’t make any sense. You’d think they’d at least try to save who they could. But you did also mention that they were under siege...”

“They were under siege by the *Quagoa*. A subterranean race that’s dayblind. All the Dwarves had to do was walk up to the surface and stroll over to Oestestadt. It’s not as if it was inconceivable – they have some farms aboveground in the mountain valleys along the way.”

That was indeed strange. Why choose extinction over an easy, unchallenged escape on a path well-travelled? All he could think of was some racial attribute that precluded that sort of thinking and that didn’t bode well for the Dwarven Race as a whole.

Their carriage slowed as the highway brought them close to the floor of the cavern. There, they joined a long line of smaller vehicles all drawn by Soul Eaters.

“Looks like they got used to the Undead real quick,” Dimoiya said. “Where are all these wagons from?”

“Most are ore wagons lined up to enter the industrial quarter. You can tell which ones they are ‘cause they don’t use our new cargo containers. The rest should be divided into food shipments – mostly pickled greens and liquor – from the Sorcerous Kingdom and freight from Feoh Jura. We should get past most of it after this junction.”

“This is quite the snarl,” Frianne said. “It’s like the morning markets on Arena days.”

“A feature of Dwarven planning, I guess,” Lady Wagner said. “Or maybe defensive planning in general. They don’t like having any more ways in than necessary, so all of the traffic goes through bottlenecks like this road through their foreign quarter.”

“How is the rest of the city laid out?”

“There’s the Industrial Quarter, the Common Quarter, and the Palace Quarter. The Dwarves have homes in every part of the city, that huge pillar in the middle alone can probably house a quarter million. The members of the upper crust live in the Palace Quarter, of course. I’ll let our hosts fill you in on all of the details.”

As mentioned, once they got past the junction to the industrial quarter, most of the traffic disappeared. Though it was called a ‘Foreign Quarter’, there were still crowds of Dwarves lining the streets going about their business.

“It’s much brighter here than in Feoh Raizo,” Dimoiya said. “You can actually see stuff.”

“Well, it’s called the Foreign Quarter for a reason. The surface entrance was back near where we joined the traffic and most visiting Merchants do their business here. Dwarves can get around just fine without light, but not their guests from the surface.”

“How many people come from the Empire?”

Lady Wagner looked across the cabin at him. They could see Humans sticking out over the Dwarven crowds, but it was impossible to tell where they were from at a glance.

“To be honest, I’m not sure,” he said. “I know that Dwarf Merchants started coming down from the mountains shortly after the official creation of the Sorcerous Kingdom. Logically speaking, some of the Empire’s Merchants must have also started using the trade route.”

“I suppose that’s to be expected,” Lady Wagner shrugged and smiled. “Wherever you are, customs officers only care about collecting tolls from incoming Merchants. Where they leave to is the problem of the next set of customs officers.”

It was a flippant way to put it, but the Countess wasn’t wrong. Exported goods were money in one’s pocket, so to speak. He supposed that countries at war might inspect outbound caravans for spies, but the Empire wasn’t in any such situation. At best, there were spot inspections by the Imperial Air Service, but the frontier east of Oestestadt wasn’t the Empire’s jurisdiction.

“Wouldn’t the customs officers register returning imperial Merchants?” Frianne asked.

“It’s too soon for that,” Lady Wagner said. “It’d take an exclusive trade contract with an imperial house for imperial Merchants to edge out the Dwarves exporting the goods that they themselves produce. Setting up one of those takes *forever*, so you won’t have any goods coming through that route yet. The only feasible way to beat the Dwarves at their own game at this stage is to use Undead logistics to nullify feed and labour costs.”

*This woman is quite the fox. She even has no problems referring to herself as a Merchant Noble.*

Imperial Nobles might leverage Merchant connections as a way to display their influence, but saying that one was a Merchant was admitting that they were the lowest of the low. Merchants had no titles, no tenancies, and existed at the grace of those who issued their licences. Lady Wagner flaunted her Merchant background instead of hiding it as a normal person would. Methods that Nobles would turn their noses up at were no obstacle to her, and she presented her views with charming displays of confidence.

He wasn’t sure if she would carry herself in the same manner with the other houses in his father’s party, but her tactics were made plain to everyone in the carriage. If the Empire wished to compete with its neighbours in the region, then they had to use the Sorcerous Kingdom’s Undead. Every display of economic and industrial might was a fruit to tempt the Nobles of the Empire with, and the first to fall to temptation would kick off an unstoppable cascade of ambition, desperation, and greed.

Indeed, it seemed that they had little choice in the matter. As demonstrated with the Azerlisian Mountain Dwarves – and purportedly the Draconic Kingdom – the lease of the Sorcerous Kingdom’s Undead was not limited to its client states. They could very well move on to Karnassus and they didn’t need the Empire’s permission to do so.

The scenes beyond the window darkened as they crossed into the city’s Common Quarter. Not only had the lighting dimmed to something not much better than Feoh Raizo, but the way buildings were fashioned had changed. Everything was crafted with dwarven frames in mind, from the quarter’s side streets to its apartments to the businesses on the cavern floor.

“Pretty insular, huh?” Lady Wagner said, “Corelyn asserts that art and architecture is the fastest way to understand a society, and I’m inclined to agree.”

“Does that mean you also agree with her assessment of the Baharuth Empire?” Frianne asked.

“I’d be an idiot if I didn’t,” Lady Wagner answered. “I think the issues are pretty plain to see as an outsider. As a citizen of the Empire, however, all of the feelings and experiences and ‘normal’ get in the way.”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow,” Rangobart said.

“Countess Corelyn has an overarching theory about how culture acts as a protocol between a race’s nature and the realities that it sees around itself,” Frianne said. “She asserts that true civilisational mastery lies not in having people adhere to the requirements of any particular societal framework, but instead engineering all aspects of a civilisation to generate a societal framework that its members naturally fit into.”

“I’m afraid I still don’t follow.”

“It’s a monstrously complex subject,” Frianne admitted with a sigh. “I was always hailed as the genius of the Academy, but even after being in Corelyn’s company for weeks, I find myself no closer to grasping what she speaks of than when I first arrived. All I know is that there’s something to it and one can only see the result that manifests in Corelyn County.”

“That’s pretty normal,” Lady Wagner said. “Geniuses pick up on things that most people aren’t even aware of, but they have a heck of a time explaining that understanding. I think the only people who seemed to have at least *some* idea of what she was talking about were some of the members of the Royal Court, and that’s only because they’re ridiculously smart and know a bunch of stuff themselves. As far as experts go in the Sorcerous Kingdom, however, Corelyn towers above everyone else in her own field. The only thing she can do is create examples for others to analyse at their leisure because talking mostly doesn’t work. We can have a little exercise of our own though...”

Lady Wagner’s attention went to the window, where the overly cosy structures of the city were passing by.

“Just from the design of this city,” she said, “what can you infer about its people?”

“That they’re short,” Dimoiya said.

“Sure,” Lady Wagner said, “let’s categorise that as a reality of their physical forms. What else about the city stands out to you that might suggest something about the character of its citizens?”

“That they desire stability, maybe,” Rangobart said. “Everything about dwarven architecture that I’ve seen so far is very *solid*. You mentioned that thing about their infrastructure earlier, as well – they’re willing to suffer everyday inconveniences for the sake of overall security.”

“How does that compare to common imperial perceptions of Dwarves?” Lady Wagner asked.

“It’s...not that far off. What people believe to be customary dwarven behaviour is pretty much in line with what we see in their architecture. The question is whether one causes the other or not.”

“It doesn’t have to necessarily be one thing or the other,” Lady Wagner said. “What about now?”

Their carriage passed through another gate, which opened up into a far more spacious environment. His mind made an immediate connection to the spacious layouts of the Empire’s wealthy districts.

“Rich people are the same wherever you go,” Dimoiya said.

“You *suuuure* about that?”

Rangobart leaned closer to the window, trying to figure out what Lady Wagner was getting at. They crossed a landscape of stone plazas, sculptures, fountains, and canals that were unlike anything in the other parts of the city. It certainly seemed like the telltale trappings of a wealthy neighbourhood.

“I see,” Frianne said. “Their values aren’t exactly the same as what one would consider ‘Human’. It might be difficult for us to tell because we grew up in Arwintar, which has many works of monumental architecture. What the design of the district is in service to is key: everything is built to frame *history*.”

*She’s right...*

In Arwintar, the estates of the elite took up a great deal of space. What was taking up all of the space in Feoh Berkana’s Palace Quarter, however, was the monumental architecture that told the story of the Dwarves’ past. The stone plazas, fountains, canals, and most of the lighting were built around statues, murals, and other monuments. Even the works that looked like they had been eaten down to their foundations were

treated with the utmost reverence. In contrast, the ‘manors’ of the dwarven elite and the businesses that serviced them didn’t look too much different from the structures in the Common Quarter...at least from the limited perspective of the carriage window.

“This seems simple enough,” Rangobart said, “it’s not that much different from our training as Nobles.”

“It is, and it isn’t,” Lady Wagner told him. “Understanding that something is important doesn’t let you know how you should behave. Humans are used to dealing with other Humans and we tend to frame other people in familiar terms even if they’re not the same race as us. That’s a big no-no. You only know when you *know*. Assuming that you do is just setting yourself up for trouble.”

The carriage rolled onto a wide promenade, at the end of which was a massive palatial structure set aglow in ice-blue light. If one followed the logic presented by the rest of the quarter, the Royal Palace of Feoh Berkana wasn’t merely the headquarters of the Dwarf Kingdom’s government, but the heart of its culture and history.

*Maybe that’s why they never asked for help. Pride over their history, and shame over losing it.*

That reason, at least, was somewhat understandable.

They stopped alongside the broad curb before the palace. Rangobart was the first to step out of their carriage. Roughly fifty metres away, a line of Dwarves stood at the bottom of the palace steps. From his place much closer to the street, a single Dwarf with a combed black beard came forward.

“Yo, Khardir,” Lady Wanger grinned. “They still using the Merchant Guild to do this?”

“Eh, you know how it is,” the Dwarf replied. “Everyone’s still occupied by reconstruction and recovery. Practical matters.”

“And the only thing practical about foreign affairs is trade. I gotcha.”

Dimoiya stirred, but Lady Wagner plopped a hand atop her head. It was an inexcusable approach by the standards of Human diplomacy, but they weren’t dealing with Humans.

“This is Khardir Silvershield,” Lady Wagner said. “A deputy of the Merchant Guild. Khardir, this is Frianne Gushmond, Head Court Mage of the Baharuth Empire. She’s mostly here for personal dealings as Countess Waldenstein and a member of House Gushmond, though. Dimoiya Erex



here's a member of the Imperial Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Say something mean about foreign affairs and she'll bite ya. Rangobart is Rangobart."

"A pleasure to meet ya," Khardir nodded. "So, no one's officially here as a representative of the Empire, right?"

"Yup," Lady Wagner nodded. "Like we said before, it'll all be personal business. Actually...why are you here, Dimoiya?"

"Uh...*technically*, the Ministry let me come as a part of work..."

"Oh. That's too bad. I guess you'll get a lonely cold room in the palace while the rest of us enjoy ourselves in the city."

"*No!!!* Forget I said anything!"

Frienne cleared her throat.

"Are there any customs we should be aware of before greeting our hosts?" She asked.

"No. To be blunt, they'll only stick around for as long as you have business with them since it isn't a state visit. As far as outsiders are concerned, the only part of the Regency Council that's guaranteed to be doing that is the Merchant Guild. The rest depends on what you're here for."

"...the Merchant Guild is a part of the Dwarf Kingdom's government?"

"It's better to treat them as a sort of Ministry of Trade," Lady Wagner told them. "No commerce happens without their approval. There are other positions that you won't find in the Imperial Court Council, but they're understandable enough."

*I sure hope so...*

At least he was just Rangobart. Any mistakes would be Frienne's to make.

Khardir Silvershield led them to the line of waiting ministers, who almost seemed ragtag in their appearance. Some were finely dressed while others were adorned in occupational garb...assuming that it wasn't ceremonial. As they were introduced to each in turn, he couldn't decide whether the positions – which each correlated to an industrial field – were indicative of a primitive political system or simply the remnants that they could cobble together out of their former government.

*In any case, what's the point of having a minister for beer?*

He tried to imagine an entire arm of the Imperial Administration dedicated to liquor, but the concept was so alien that any coherent ideas about the institution failed to coalesce.

As Khardir suggested, the members of the Regency Council only stayed for long enough to figure out whether they had anything to do with the visit. They peeled away with their attendants until only the Master of Caves and Mines, the Forgemaster, the Director of Food Production, and the Master of the Merchant Guild remained.

“Let’s take our discussion to a more suitable location, shall we?” The Master of the Merchant Guild said, “I believe we’ve just missed the lunch crowd at the *Diamond Plate*. It’s just this way.”

The other ministers seemed disinterested in the fact that the Merchant Guild had taken the lead. Such a development would be unthinkable in the Empire. If it *did* happen, an assassination or two would have undoubtedly followed as a gentle reminder to any upstarts to know their place.

They were led to a dining establishment several blocks from the palace gate. Rangobart took his seat at a table that was far less cramped than expected. He tested the stony furnishings and found them astonishingly comfortable, then looked up to find the Forgemaster and the Merchant Guildmaster looking at him.

“As strange as this might sound,” Rangobart said, “this doesn’t feel like stone at all.”

The two Dwarves exchanged a glance. He had no idea what it meant.

“I hope you don’t mind us asking,” the Master of the Merchant Guild said, “but...what’s a ‘Rangobart’?”

“Ah, that has a bit of a story behind it. But it’s not complicated.”

As he spoke, a waitress – or maybe a barmaid – slid a half-dozen foamy mugs over the table. One of them stopped directly in front of him and he leaned forward to take a whiff.

*Alcohol for lunch? I hope it's not too strong...*

The two Dwarves waited expectantly behind their foamy beards. Rangobart took an experimental sip out of his mug.

“Simply put,” he licked the spicy foam off of his upper lip, “I was granted my title just recently and the survey results aren’t in yet. I’d like to take advantage of what you have to offer, but, without knowing what’s on my land, I can’t even decide what title to use or what I need.”

“A window shopper, huh?” The Forgemaster crossed his arms.

“That’s as good a way to put it as any,” Rangobart smiled slightly. “I apologise for any expectations I’ve betrayed.”

“No, there’s no harm in it,” the Forgemaster waved his hand dismissively. “It isn’t as if I throw my hammer at everyone that pokes their head into my shop and doesn’t buy anything.”

“You have your own shop?”

“Of course! Does the Empire have a Forgemaster that doesn’t run their own forge?”

*Sorry, we don’t have a Forgemaster...*

“Our Empire’s Court Council is composed of administrators that oversee the direction of the state,” Rangobart replied. “They don’t directly participate in industrial activities.”

“Hm...is that so? You Humans are strange fellows. How do you know how things work if you don’t do it yourself?”

“We sometimes get complaints like that from the common folk,” Rangobart chuckled. “But being an administrator is a vocation in itself. I would return your question by asking how your administration works without proper administrators.”

“Hmph, if the Regency Council was filled with Cabinet Secretaries, we wouldn’t get anything done. So, what’s the usual process of land development in imperial territories?”

A platter of thinly sliced cuts of meat appeared before them, followed by bowls of thick stew that gave off the musty odour of fungus. The stew was unflavoured, creating an earthy counterbalance to the cured meats and spiced ale.

“Arable land is identified and cleared for agriculture,” Rangobart replied to the Forgemaster’s question. “Woodlands growing in areas unsuitable for agriculture are managed for what they’re worth.”

“What about mineral wealth?” The Master of Caves and Mines leaned in from his side of the table.

“That has always been a challenge for the Empire,” Rangobart said. “The Imperial Ministry of Magic has mainly focused on arcane magic over the generations and divination has never been...*fashionable*. Most of our mines begin as veins of ore exposed on the surface. I *am* considering commissioning the Sorcerous Kingdom’s Adventurer Guild to see what they turn up, however.”

“The Adventurer Guild, huh...well, they did a passable job in Feoh Teiwaz. I suppose they’d naturally beat us out at surface work.”

“No matter what they find,” Rangobart said, “I’ll still be interested in hiring your people. The infrastructure we’ve seen on our visit surpasses imperial engineering by far.”

“That so?” The Forgemaster said after calling for another round of drinks, “Well, we have a whole slew of up-and-coming companies that are itching for the chance to show their stuff...”

Rangobart reached into his coat, producing a quill and a bottle of ink. He summoned several sheets of paper, listening intently to the Forgemaster as he recorded the details of the Dwarves’ offerings. As he flipped over the first page, he sent a glance at Countess Wagner, who was happily chatting away with Frianne, Dimoiya, and the Director of Food Production.

*This is just too convenient.*

Baroness Zahradnik’s letter of introduction. His promotion to Viscount. The Adventurer Guild’s offer, followed by a visit to the Dwarven Kingdom. He didn’t know what would come next, but he could only imagine that it would be yet another beneficial offering.

His upbringing as a member of the imperial establishment caused him to question the entire course of events. There had to be a hidden price for everything, and it seemed that he could only wait for his benefactors to collect their dues.