

“Time to pay up.”

Rangobart froze halfway out of the door to his room. Lady Wagner stood in the corridor outside, adorned in her carnelian dress. The outfit suited her so well that he doubted that any but the wealthiest of noblewomen might question her unchanging garb.

“‘Pay up’ for what, my lady?”

Lady Wagner looked up at him, her topaz eyes going wide. Then, her gaze went to the stone floor as she covered her face in her hands.

“Did it truly mean so little to you, my lord?” She sobbed.

Nearby, a Maid and a footman whispered to one another with scandalised looks. Rangobart contemplated his options. He could fly out of his window, out of the city, and back to the Empire, but it probably wasn’t enough to escape.

“I fear to ask what I owe you, my lady...”

In response, Lady Wagner latched onto his arm with a pleasant smile and walked him down the corridor.

“Let’s begin with a meal, shall we?” She said, “I’ll introduce you to my favourite place in all of Feoh Berkana.”

*I hope my purse will survive this...*

Now that he was no longer a Third-class Imperial Knight, his resources would only dwindle until his new titles started generating revenues. Most Imperial Knights undergoing that transition borrowed money from any number of lenders. Rangobart, however, had been coasting along with his father’s party and the generosity of his hosts. Nobles were generally loose with budgeting petty expenditures, and it was a normal practice for aristocratic scions, but he was now in the awkward position of being a new landed lord trying to make an impression on potential business partners.

They emerged from their inn in the dwarven capital’s foreign quarter, pausing for a moment before joining the flow of traffic on the street. The sea of beards around them seemed to pay no special attention to the appearance of two Humans.

“This city never seems to sleep,” Rangobart said. “The streets are just as crowded as when I retired for the night.”

“A perk of having Darkvision,” Lady Wagner said. “The people here aren’t dependent on daylight for work like most Humans are. It makes their infrastructure utilisation that much more efficient, too. The city can have way more people when the burden’s spread throughout the day and taxes are doubly effective...well, more than that when you consider everything together.”

“Is that why Dwarves have the reputation of being industrious?”

“In part, maybe. They’re a hard-working, competitive people even without it...or at least they are now.”

“What do you mean by that?” Rangobart asked.

“Mmh...early on, just after the Sorcerer King established our relationship with the Dwarves, they just sort of...*existed*, if that makes any sense. Y’know, like an old, tired artisan who’s pretty much done. Who only works because they need to eat.”

“Well, from what you told us about them, they were in a rather hopeless situation.”

“Maybe. Anyway, it wasn’t until a few weeks after they started moving back to their capital that they seemed to wake up all at once. It was like their entire race was sleeping, and now they’re as you see.”

It was hard to envision what she was describing, especially when the Dwarves appeared to wear dour expressions out of principle. They generally weren’t very animated unless they were caught up in something they were interested in.

Lady Wagner brought them along the main street toward the city entrance until they came to the crowded junction to the Industrial Quarter. As with the previous day, a long line of ore wagons being drawn by Soul Eaters formed a queue that put the morning traffic at Arwintar’s gates to shame.

“How much ore do they process per day?” Rangobart asked as they walked past the line of stuck wagons.

“Uh...*lots*,” Lady Wagner said. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they’re refining more metal than the Empire and Re-Estize combined. They don’t burn fuel like we do: they use Heatstone and that puts their production on a whole other level. The thing is that it’s only a fraction of the city’s full industrial capacity. They can restart as many forges as they’d like, but they have nowhere near the skilled labour required to operate them all. It’s going to take centuries for Feoh Berkana to return to its former glory.”

“Even with the assistance of Undead labour?”

“Yup.”

“They seem undaunted by the prospect.”

“Comes hand in hand with being long-lived, I guess. A Dwarf lives four or five times as long as a Human. An Elf lives three times longer than a Dwarf. Can you imagine how a being like a Dragon thinks? I can’t.”

“The Sorcerous Kingdom has many immortal beings, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean you can understand how they think. When you speak with a Dragon or Demon or whatever, they always seem to make a point of underscoring the difference between themselves and you.”

“The legends do always seem to include that in their characterisations.”

Lady Wagner puckered her lips as she looked up at the cavern ceiling, cradling the back of her head with her hands. Rangobart looked up, as well, just in time to see the ghostly silhouette of a Frost Dragon glide silently by overhead.

“This might sound weird to you,” Lady Wagner said, “but those legends we hear are meant for Human ears.”

“...you’re right. It does sound like an odd thing to say.”

“Well, what I mean is that those characterisations seem to exist to soothe our egos. The Bards always play the bad guys up as monstrously strong or cunning or having magical whatever, then, *bam*, they have a flaw. A weakness. Vanity. Hubris. Ignorance. Soapy water. Something that the hero can exploit to prove that humanity can prevail against its enemies. After being around all that legendary stuff for a while, I can tell you it doesn’t work like that.”

“But many of those weaknesses described in the legends are real.”

“Sure, but expecting them to work as advertised is like expecting Humans to just run around naked because they don’t have natural weapons and armour. If something has a weakness, they’ll try to address those weaknesses if they can. In the worst case, a monstrously powerful opponent will still squish you despite your knowledge of those weaknesses. We’ve had to rejigger the way we see things in the Sorcerous Kingdom, even with other mortal races.”

“Is that a good thing, or a bad thing?”

“Dunno,” Lady Wagner held out her hands and shrugged. “It just *is*. Reality. I guess that makes it a good thing when you have to work with all sorts of people. If I got a bunch of Ogres, I can’t just throw up my hands and cry about how I’m surrounded by idiots. In the grand scheme of things, Ogres are actually more successful than Humans, which means that they’re smart enough to do what they need to do. I just need to figure out what they can successfully do. Dwarves are stubborn. Vampires are haughty. Demons suck at diplomacy. Just gotta figure out how to make it all work.”

“Doesn’t that mean you’re still exploiting those ‘characterisations’ in the end?” Rangobart noted.

“Not at all,” Lady Wagner replied. “Like I said, the old legends tell stories that stroke your ego. Never mind the old legends, news being spread about current events does the same thing. Don’t think we *haven’t* heard what they say about the Sorcerous Kingdom and how people are trying to figure out how to fight us. Not that they’ll succeed – they’re preparing for an imaginary battle that will never happen. Well, not unless they do something stupid, but *we’re* not starting anything.”

“Well, if I were in their shoes, I wouldn’t think it’s unreasonable. A lord’s responsibility is to protect their land and its people. Even if misguided, not making their best efforts to fulfil their obligations would be negligence that should disqualify them from their post.”

Countess Wagner scoffed.

“‘Best efforts’, huh. Even our *client state* doesn’t have a diplomatic mission in the capital and it isn’t due to a lack of volunteers for the assignment. The only country with something like normal diplomatic channels set up is the Draconic Kingdom. Well, I guess the Dwarves set up a tavern, but all everyone else is doing is making up their minds about us without bothering to open a dialogue.”

It was a difficult position to argue against. At the same time, it wasn’t as if he couldn’t understand their trepidation. That a country ruled by an Undead Sovereign was nothing but an existential menace to its neighbours was the rational conclusion nearly everyone would come to. In that situation, sending diplomats was no different than sending talented servants to a meaningless death.

Rangobart grew puzzled as they continued following the long line of ore wagons, leaving the Foreign Quarter to enter the Industrial Quarter.

“I thought we were going somewhere for breakfast,” he said.

“We are,” Lady Wagner replied.

Not long after passing through the gate, they stopped at the end of a long line of Dwarves in working garb. Rangobart leaned to the side to see where it led, but the line disappeared around a corner.

“So,” Lady Wagner said, “did you like what you saw yesterday?”

Rangobart stared blankly at her question, recalling the pale curve of her bare shoulder in the reflection of the carriage window. After several moments, Lady Wagner’s face turned red.

“Th-that’s not what I meant!”

She hit him so hard he went tumbling to the pavement. The Dwarves nearby shook their heads.

“Get some meat on them bones, lad,” one of them said.

*Are Merchant Nobles supposed to be that strong? Maybe she negotiates with Demihumans by fighting them.*

“Sorry!” Lady Wagner leaned forward and pulled him to his feet, “I meant whether there was anything on the tour yesterday that you liked.”

“There was a lot that I thought might be useful,” Rangobart brushed himself off. “House Gushmond will almost certainly give them plenty of business.”

Indeed, they had stayed the night because Frianne needed more time to sort everything out for her family. He wouldn’t be surprised if Dimoiya arranged for something, as well.

The line shifted forward, taking them around the corner. To Rangobart’s surprise, the line didn’t lead to a restaurant, but a stall on the street.

“What are they serving?” He asked.

“Nuk bowls,” Lady Wagner answered. “They’re *super* popular!”

“I can see that, but I would’ve never thought this was your favourite place in the city.”

“It’s not, but it’s near my favourite place in the city.”

When it came their turn, Lady Wagner pulled two containers out of the satchel at her hip. The Dwarf working the stand unceremoniously ladled a steaming stew into both. Lady Wagner flipped a few copper coins into a stone bowl before picking up one of the containers.

“I thought I would be paying...”

“There are more important things than money,” Lady Wagner told him. “Let’s go.”

He picked up the second container and followed the Countess deeper into the Industrial Quarter. They arrived at some sort of yard shortly after, where Lady Wagner seated herself at a row of stone benches.

“*This* is my favourite place in Feoh Berkana,” she said.

There wasn’t anything noteworthy about it...at least from what should have been a noblewoman’s perspective. The yard lay between two forges and the air was filled with the sound of bellows and ringing hammers. A Dwarf walked past them, carrying a crate of metal bits, upending them into a half-filled wagon. The Dwarf left without so much as a glance at the strangers along the way.

Rangobart walked over to join Lady Wagner. On impulse, he ran his fingers over the surface of the bench, then frowned when they came up blackened with soot.

“Oops,” Countess Wagner said.

Lady Wagner rummaged around in her satchel and produced a white towel. A swirl of magic erased all traces of dirt from the bench. Then, she used the item on herself.

“There,” she patted the bench beside her, “all better!”

“I didn’t know you had *Trooper’s Towels* in the Sorcerous Kingdom,” Rangobart said as he sat down to join the Countess. “We got our hands on a bunch of surplus when the Imperial Army was reorganising.”

“I see.”

*That might explain a few things...*

More than a few Imperial Knights eagerly waited for the prices of certain items to drop so they could get them at bargain prices, but they didn't budge a single copper. The Sorcerous Kingdom had apparently foiled their plans.

"So, this is your favourite place in the city, huh."

"Yup," Lady Wagner nodded. "I guess I live up to my family name. Forges, workshops, and horses were what I grew up around. Here, I get to watch the Dwarves make all of their things."

"Do you do any smithing yourself?" Rangobart asked.

"Nah," the Countess waggled her spoon in the air. "I'm just a Merchant Noble, just like my lord father and his father and his father and his father before him."

"You were Merchants before that?"

"Pretty much. Just before the Empire split, House Vaiself was looking for people to help develop the area around E-Rantel and my family jumped at the chance."

"And that's how you became Merchant Nobles."

"Yeah, E-Rantel ended up with a bunch of them due to how things played out back then. Only three of us are left, though. How'd you think that affects our chances with the imperial nobility?"

Her question gave him pause, which in turn caused the Countess' expression to wilt.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Honestly, it's a mark against you. Most will believe that your ancestors didn't earn their titles through legitimate means."

"I wonder how long that will be a thing for," Lady Wagner sighed. "Maybe forever, I guess. I tell ya, it was a lot easier when it was supposed to be me being married off. Most Nobles are all too happy to collect a big fat dowry through their spares."

“You haven’t considered marrying a Merchant’s son?”

Lady Wagner gave him a funny look.

“That’s not something I expected you to suggest.”

Rangobart laughed despite himself. She was right. He knew very well that women rarely, if ever, wanted to marry *down*.

“Then you are in a most difficult position, my lady,” he said.

“I know, right? Y’know, I was actually considering you. Florine was, too.”

*Wait, both Lady Wagner and Lady Gagnier? Are they from Karnassus or something?*

The wild imagery associated with women from Karnassus threatened to push all other thoughts out of his mind. He didn’t know what Baroness Gagnier looked like, however.

“Neither of our ‘big sisters’ disapproved,” Lady Wagner continued, “so we figured it might work. Then you went and got yourself promoted.”

For some reason, Countess Corelyn and Baroness Zahradnik entered the developing picture in his mind. He fought to regain his mental composure.

“It wouldn’t have worked even if I hadn’t,” Rangobart said. “A War Wizard in the Imperial Army is bound to be granted land at some point, so the Empire would reject the union.”

“Weren’t you trying to seduce Ludmila last winter?”

Rangobart coughed around his spoon. Who else knew about that?

“My family instructed me to court her,” he said after he caught his breath. “They figured a connection to the Sorcerous Kingdom would give them an insurmountable advantage over their rivals; perhaps even the Emperor. The idea was that she would wilfully marry me into her house and not even the Emperor would be able to say anything about it.”



“Hmm...”

“Hm?”

“Hold on,” the young noblewoman held out her hand, “I’m thinking...”

*Am I in danger?*

“...you think that would work?” Lady Wagner asked.

“Would the Sorcerous Kingdom even care about something like that?”

“I guess you’re right. Well, no, actually, our liege would reject the union.”

“Yours? Why?”

“Oh, you know. *Reasons.*”

Were they ending the Noble lines of E-Rantel by arbitrarily rejecting every proposed union? If so, it was tyranny beyond even the most villainous fiends in history. He considered asking her about it, wondering if it was a plea for help, but decided that was probably too sensitive an issue to casually discuss.

“Are you going to take the same approach with the rest of my lord father’s party as you did with us?” Rangobart changed the topic.

“I doubt it,” Lady Wagner said. “This trip was to test the waters for various things and I can’t say they won’t be insulted if we don’t observe the formalities that they expect. Clara and I will have to counterbalance the Dwarves’ mannerisms to make things work out smoothly.”

She probably had the right of things. It wasn’t simply a matter of personal pride, but also the impression that the Nobles would take back with them to the Empire. Despite being so warm and friendly on their tour, Lady Wagner clearly understood what she was doing. Even with Rangobart, everything that had happened covered exactly what the Imperial Knights that might ask about the Dwarves’ services wanted to hear.

Once they finished their Nuk bowls, they went to take a closer look at a few of the things Lady Wagner had noted from afar. Rangobart circled a strange iron container roughly the height of a Dwarf as the Countess chatted with one of the foremen.

“How’s the new cable car network comin’ along?” She asked.

“You say that as if it can be replaced overnight,” the foreman huffed. “Those damn Quagoa nibbled everything down to the anchor bolts and we’re still running the numbers on the test systems.”

“What’s a ‘cable car network’?” Rangobart asked.

“It’s like a clothing line,” Lady Wagner answered. “Except instead of hanging clothing, they hang buckets full of ore to transport to the Industrial Quarter. You didn’t think they just settled for traffic jams every day, did you?”

*You don’t know until you know.*

Lady Wagner’s point about the pitfalls of Human presumption was made abundantly clear. The Dwarves may have been so stubbornly defensive that their attitude created infrastructure bottlenecks, but it didn’t mean that they left it at that. They simply came up with a solution that facilitated their stubborn stance. Not only did they have a solution, but the solution was older than the Baharuth Empire.

“Will this system improve the Industrial Quarter’s output once it’s operational?” Rangobart asked.

“No,” the foreman said, “it’ll just clear up the damn traffic. Soul Eaters drive the wagons themselves, so it doesn’t free up any more of our people than before. You a new customer?”

“This is Rangobart,” Lady Wagner said, “a Viscount of the Empire. He’s got an empty piece of land that he’s trying to figure out what to do with and he doesn’t have a single tenant.”

“And I thought we had it bad. Well, a venture like that is something the Merchants in the Foreign Quarter can easily figure something out for. Anything special about that land of yours?”

“A few of the dwarven representatives that I’ve spoken with suggest that my land is in a volcanically active area. They were surprisingly excited about that.”

“It’s not surprising at all,” the foreman said. “You probably have all sorts of goodies on your land.”

“I guess we’ll see what the Adventurer Guild turns up,” Lady Wagner said.

Rangobart followed Lady Wagner around several other foundries, most of which were refining steel for the Sorcerous Kingdom. They eventually came across Frianne and Dimoiya, who were being led around by the Forgemaster and the Master of the Merchant Guild.

“Figure it all out yet?” Lady Wagner asked.

“I think we’ve settled on a decent start,” Frianne answered. “I’ve decided to award several Dwarven companies two dozen public works projects that the Imperial Administration has categorised as ‘low priority’. I don’t see my lord father rejecting the decision.”

“What does ‘low priority’ translate to?”

“At a glance,” Frianne said, “the first of them is due for completion a dozen years from now, but higher priority projects will always appear to push that timeframe back. In short, it will never get done.”

Rangobart nodded silently. In the eyes of the Imperial Administration, how critical any public project was depended on how much it potentially gained or lost the imperial economy. Frontier territories with vast reserves of untapped wealth and tracts of agricultural land unconnected to the Empire’s transportation network were prioritised over well-developed fiefs that at least had dirt roads connecting all of their villages. With the recent expansion of the imperial frontier, he doubted that the imperial heartlands would get any attention in the near future unless some natural disaster destroyed their infrastructure.

This, of course, was one of the many grievances that the civilian aristocracy had with the Imperial Administration and a common example that they pointed to when labelling it as a faceless monstrosity that only served its selfish appetites. Even members of the imperial dynasty were only shown any favour if the work was necessary for propping up the power of the imperial house. Rangobart supposed that, too, was becoming increasingly unnecessary due to the Sorcerous Kingdom’s involvement in imperial affairs and its results.

“You’d think that some companies would’ve long popped up to offer an alternative to the Imperial Army for this kind of stuff,” Lady Wagner said.

“That thought crosses everyone’s minds at least once,” Frianne said. “The fact of the matter is that no one can match the Imperial Army in civilian engineering and anyone aspiring to the field goes to the Imperial Army. They have all the expertise, manpower, and experience, plus they end up with all of the work.”

“What will happen when Dwarven companies start competing with the Imperial Army?”

“The Empire ultimately profits off of their efforts at no cost to itself. So long as the balance of power stays in the Emperor’s favour, I doubt anything will happen. As far as House Gushmond is concerned, we’ll finally be able to address various issues with our internal infrastructure.”

“Have you given the bypass idea any more thought?”

“What’s that?” Rangobart asked.

“An evil plot,” Lady Wagner answered.

“It’s not *evil*,” Frianne frowned.

Lady Wagner smiled an evil smile that made Dimoiya back away a few steps.

“The gist of it is to wrangle up enough Nobles to create a new road network that’s better suited to our advances in logistics,” Countess Wagner said. “For instance, it takes about a week for a regular, horse-drawn wagon to go from E-Rantel to Engelfurt with perfect weather. The imperial Nobles between us and the border can commission the Dwarves to build new roads in their territories. Soul Eater-drawn wagons can then deliver freight from E-Rantel to Engelfurt using those new roads in six hours. The Nobles can charge tolls for the use of those roads, which any rational Merchant would pay so long as it’s cheaper than the week of operating costs they’d have to pay otherwise.”

“What if the Empire commissions the Dwarves to pave the main highways in response?”

“Then the Nobles still have Dwarven road networks for their fiefs,” Lady Wagner shrugged. “Those pay themselves off in the long run anyway. When it comes to dealings between multiple parties, you imperials are used to having winners and losers. Our proposal offers a choice between winning and winning bigger.”

Though she said so, Rangobart could think of a few losers resulting from the proposal. In particular, he dreaded to find out how the Temples would react. Maybe Countess Wagner wasn’t entirely wrong in calling it an ‘evil plan’.

It took a few more hours for Frianne to finish settling her family’s business. After that, their dwarven hosts insisted on lunch. By the time they were waiting to get out of Feoh Berkana, it was well past noon. The three noblewomen were quick to don their Lizardman blankets after seating themselves.

“So,” Lady Wagner asked as their carriage started and stopped for the fifth time, “How was Feoh Berkana?”

“Too much to see in such a short span of time,” Frianne said. “I’m sure I’ll be paying them another visit, however. Next time, I’d like to explore more of their culture and history. Actually, I didn’t get to see any of their magic at all.”

Rangobart silently agreed. A day and a half was too little. Unlike Frianne, however, he doubted that he would have the time to visit again.

“Are we seeing anyone else on this tour?” Dimoiya asked.

“Unfortunately,” Lady Wagner answered, “we have to haul ass back to Corelyn Harbour. Gotta bring the next set of Nobles on their tour.”

“We have our visit to Warden’s Vale, as well,” Frianne said.

“Oh, yeah!” Dimoiya said, and then her look turned serious, “Do you think we’ll have to fight?”

Frianne and Dimoiya looked over at Lady Wagner, but Lady Wagner left their question unanswered.