

“It’s *huuuuuge!*” Dimoiya exclaimed, “I can’t even see the top!”

“Pretty neat, huh?” Lady Wagner said, “What do you think’ll happen if I stick my hand in?”

“Your hand will fall off—*AHH!!!* Stop!”

Dimoiya jumped forward and grabbed Lady Wagner, pulling her away from the waterfall’s roaring torrent. Rangobart watched them from their carriage, which was parked on the highway nearby.

*Dimoiya cast Endure Elements on herself, but I don’t think Lady Wagner is a mage. Does she have a magic item?*

They were deep in a valley below the icy peaks of the Azerlisia Mountains, surrounded by a wilderness infused with the scent of conifers and mossy earth. Even at the height of summer, the incessant winds blowing down from the glaciers above made it feel like it could snow at any time.

Rangobart shivered despite his own protective enchantments and retreated to the warmth of the carriage. Lady Wagner and Dimoiya joined them a few minutes later, dripping from head to toe. The Countess leaned toward Dimoiya, speaking in a low voice that was clearly meant to be heard.

“He’s staring at us.”

“Kyaa! Even though you’re just a Rangobart!”

Dimoiya snatched a Lizardman blanket from the table and covered herself, letting out a high-pitched sneeze.

“Ugh, I should have learned a water removal spell. Rangobart, do you have one?”

“Sorry, I’m just a Rangobart.”

Their carriage resumed its course up the highway, steadily climbing the northern side of the valley. Lady Wagner rummaged through her bag for a few moments before producing a small, blocky object.

“Whas that?” Dimoiya sniffled.

“A dryer,” Lady Wagner answered.

“Aren’t those illegal?” Lady Waldenstein frowned.

“They are in the Empire,” Rangobart said.

Dryers were items that could remove water and were useful for drying soaked objects, be they clothing, carpets, or furniture. The problem was that they usually cast some sort of water destruction spell, which could be used against people. The careless or ignorant could turn their targets into desiccated husks with the spell and thus dryers were outlawed in the Empire for public safety.

“Do you know how to use that item, Lady Wagner?” Rangobart asked.

“I think so...” Lady Wagner answered absently as she fiddled with the thing.

“I strongly recommend that you remove whatever you want to dry before using the item on them.”

The three women in the cabin turned their heads to stare at him.

“As a safety precaution!”

“Sure,” Dimoiya peered at him. “*Safety.*”

Lady Wagner reached under her seat and pulled out a metal bar. She stood to fix it across the ceiling of the cabin and pulled a curtain across it.

“Peeking will cost ya,” Lady Wagner told him before closing the gap on her side.

“Wow, your underwear is so classy!”

“Hehe, think so? I gotta say it’s something else.”

“Where did you buy it from, E-Rantel?”

“It was a gift.”

Dimoiya's voice lowered to a whisper.

"From a lover?"

"It was from my liege."

Did lieges bestow underwear upon their vassals in the Sorcerous Kingdom? If he recalled correctly, Lady Wagner served the same liege as Baroness Zahradnik. Someone whom she referred to as Lady Shalltear. Maybe it was because they were women...no, that didn't make any sense.

An annoyed sigh escaped Rangobart's lips. Why was he even thinking about it? He watched the scenery fly by as he did his best to ignore the continued chatter issuing from behind the curtain. That proved to be a mistake, as he caught a glimpse of Lady Wagner in the window's reflection. Rather than alert the rest of the cabin to his indiscretion, however, the reflection of the Countess winked mischievously back at him.

"You can pay in instalments," Lady Wagner said.

He quickly turned his head from the window. Frianne glowered at him for the next ten minutes.

Their carriage ascended the mountainside, eventually taking them above the treeline. The voices in the cabin stilled as the highway brought them through an alpine valley carpeted with wildflowers.

"Dimoiya was born for this very moment."

"This scenery is breathtaking," Frianne said. "Are there any artists who paint this landscape?"

"I don't know about paintings," Lady Wagner said, "but I do know the composer of *Winter's Crown*."

"Truly?" Frianne ripped the curtain aside, "Do you know if they take requests for private concerts?"

"That's a good question," Lady Wagner said. "I never thought to ask."

"Then, is it possible to meet them?"

“Unfortunately, not right now. She was originally from Feoh Berkana, but she’s gone off to see the world.”

A disappointed sigh filled the cabin.

“She’s the only artist that my grandmother has shown any interest in for as long as I can remember,” Frianne said. “I hoped that I could surprise her.”

“I’m sure she’ll be back eventually,” Lady Wagner said. “I’ll let you know when she does.”

“You’re so lucky,” Dimoiya pouted. “You know so many famous people! First, The Dreamer, now, a Bard that creates original compositions! Do you know *Darkness*, as well?”

“Yup! I speak with Momon the Black on a semi-regular basis.”

“No fair!”

“If you land a post on that diplomatic mission,” Lady Wagner said, “I could introduce you to all of them.”

“I’m working on it! I have to turn my experiences here to my advantage somehow...”

*Wouldn’t she be introduced to most of them anyway?*

Ambassadors got to know all of the movers and shakers in the country where their mission was based as a matter of their profession, so Lady Wagner’s offer shouldn’t have been very enticing.

“How long until we arrive in Feoh Berkana?” Rangobart asked.

In response, Lady Wagner produced a map and laid it out on the table between them.

“The waterfall just now was the halfway point,” she pointed to a spot under the southern ranges. “It’ll be less than an hour before we arrive at Feoh Raizo.”

Rangobart examined the map, taking the time to note features that didn't exist to imperial knowledge. In most of their maps, the Azerlisia Mountains and the forests that covered its slopes were depicted by a highly stylised representation that didn't accurately portray anything at all. At best, the maps indicated the general area where Feoh Jura should be.

Lady Wagner's map, on the other hand, was detailed beyond the exhaustive official maps of the imperial heartland. Seemingly every crag and ravine was documented and a complex, overlapping web of territories, settlements, and notable features was overlaid atop the topography.

"I can't decide whether to be amazed or confused at this map," Rangobart said. "How in the world did you manage to compile so much information?"

"This is the map created by the Adventurer Guild's Azerlisian Expedition," Lady Wagner told them. "Pretty crazy, huh?"

"It's an uncomfortably high level of detail," Rangobart said. "Countries would usually execute people as spies for possessing a map like this. Does the general public have access to this information?"

"I'm not sure that the 'general public' even knows or cares that this exists. The tribes of the region all have their little pieces of it, though."

"You mean there are maps of even greater detail than this?"

"Yep. If you hire our Adventurer Guild to survey your land, this is the quality of work you can expect."

Lady Wagner pulled out another map. This time it was one of the alpine valley they were traversing.

"It even has mineral veins and horticultural resources," he murmured. "I didn't know Adventurers did this sort of work."

"Plain old Adventurers don't," Lady Wagner said. "Our Adventurer Guild is a different organisation entirely. They're a government institution dedicated to exploration and cultural exchange."

Rangobart pored over the details of the map, mulling over the possibilities it presented. Even without the discount rate offered by the Sorcerer King, it would be foolish not to take advantage of their services.

"Are you considering hiring them?" Frianne asked.

“I don’t think I have much of a choice,” Rangobart replied. “Speaking of which, that letter you delivered to me, Lady Wagner...why did it have the Sorcerer King’s seal on it?”

‘Ah...I wouldn’t overthink it if I were you,’ Lady Wagner said. “His Majesty just does that sort of thing once in a while.”

“...what did you do, Rangobart?” Frianne’s accusatory gaze bored into his temple.

“Nothing!” Rangobart protested, “I was speaking with Lady Wagner about all of the new titles being handed out and the burden it placed on the Imperial Survey Corps. She suggested that I commission the Sorcerous Kingdom’s Adventurer Guild instead of waiting however many years it takes for the Empire to get around to me. The next morning, I received an offer that included all of their expeditionary services. The cover letter was a bit strange, but it implies that it’s from the Sorcerer King himself.”

“It is,” Lady Wagner said.

“Are you certain, my lady?”

He still couldn’t believe that the Sorcerer King would do that. Not that he personally knew him or even had some idea of what he was like, but it didn’t fit the image of a Ruler of Death at all.

“Of course I’m certain!” Lady Wagner told him, “I delivered the thing myself, y’know?”

“You did?”

“I did! After we spoke, I rode over to E-Rantel to rustle up what you were looking for.”

“You rode all the way you E-Rantel to, erm, ‘rustle this up’ from the Sorcerer King?”

“No, from the Adventurer Guild. E-Rantel’s only ten minutes from Corelyn Harbour by Soul Eater. Anyway, after I picked up the details, I figured His Majesty would want to know, so I walked over to his place to tell him about it. He was understandably excited about your interest and that resulted in the letter.”

*Why would he get excited about something like that? What’s his objective?*

Try as he might, he couldn't think of anything. He could only console himself over the fact that he was naturally no match for the vast intellect of the Sorcerer King.

"I think you're right, Rangobart," Frianne said, "you don't have a choice. This is an offer you can't refuse. Still, Wagner, I never realised you were so close to the Sorcerer King."

"Eh...I *do* speak with him once in a while, but it's not so much a matter of being close as it's just the way that the Sorcerous Kingdom works. It's an absolute monarchy. Like *absolute* absolute. It's not like the Empire where the Emperor maintains the power required to act as an absolute sovereign through all sorts of political machinations. The Sorcerous Kingdom is a place where the boss is the boss because he's supposed to be the boss, and no one disputes that. This totally changes how things are run and how the rules work. What one is and what they're supposed to be doing is everything. Personal, political, and economic clout that other places are accustomed to juggling to maintain power don't matter."

Rangobart exchanged looks with Frianne and Dimoiya. They appeared to be just as confused as he was.

"I don't understand this at all," Frianne said. "For simplicity's sake, what does this mean for you?"

"Uh...Countess Wagner is Countess Wagner because she's Countess Wagner, and Countess Wagner does Countess Wagner things. That's an absolute within the absolute hierarchy of the Sorcerous Kingdom, and those within that hierarchy consider Countess Wagner being Countess Wagner perfectly in line with the natural order of things."

"...now I'm even more confused."

"I know right?" Countess Wagner said, "Don't worry about it, though. As long as Countess Wagner is Countess Wagner, everything is fine as far as Countess Wagner is concerned."

Even if she said not to worry about it, Rangobart couldn't help but try to make sense of what she was saying. It didn't seem like any recognisable framework for a working system of governance. *Existence* wasn't enough to create order and enforce hierarchy. Some sort of power had to back it up.

"So, you mean to say that the Sorcerer King is such a powerful existence that everyone submits to his absolute rule?" Rangobart asked.

"No, I meant what I said. The Sorcerer King simply is what he is and that's enough for anyone that matters. Again, it's better not to think about it because Humans can't help but think like Humans."

“...you *are* a Human, right?”

“Sure am!” Lady Wagner smiled.

Did Countess Corelyn and Baroness Zahradnik share the same understanding? There wasn't any hint of what Countess Wagner just went over at all.

“Does this logic apply to the Baharuth Empire?” Frianne asked.

“Yes and no,” Lady Wagner answered. “They don't expect Humans or mortals in general to understand why they do what they do. Hmm...let's see, do you recall the amendment to imperial law emphasising the absolute nature of the Sorcerer King and his agents?”

“Of course.”

“There's a reason why it's so vaguely worded, and it has to do with what I talked about. Everyone who qualifies for a certain level of authority in the Sorcerous Kingdom acts as an agent of the Sorcerer King's will. There are different levels, of course, but, overall, the dynamic is treated as absolute and incorruptible. An agent of the Sorcerer King acting in the Empire is doing what they're supposed to be doing, and they don't do what they aren't supposed to. To us, that law isn't vaguely worded at all: it is supremely flexible and specific to every situation.”

“That's a difficult thing to digest...”

“You learn quickly if you live here. It's just the way things are.”

Thirty minutes later, their carriage rolled up through a stretch of windswept moorland where a lone stone building stood. Just past it was what Rangobart could only describe as a crack in the mountain face. They went straight in without slowing down and the world was engulfed in darkness.

“What's going on now?” Frianne's voice was uncertain.

“This is the entrance to Feoh Raizo,” Lady Wagner told them. “The building we passed just now was the post office.”

“Shouldn't it be in the city if that's the case?”

“More people live outside. Feoh Raizo used to be a small city before the Demon Gods came along. Nowadays, most of the Mountain Dwarf population lives in Feoh Berkana. This place was originally founded as a mining outpost and it’s gone back to being just that.”

“What do they mine here?” Rangobart asked.

“Every metal that I can think of,” Lady Wagner said, “in various quantities. The outpost was originally set up to mine something called ‘White Iron’, though.”

“Is it related to Whitesilver?”

“No idea. I haven’t been able to get my hands on any.”

Their carriage finally slowed, following a route that only had the occasional Torch lighting the way. He couldn’t make out any details in the dim lighting. If they passed any Dwarves, he didn’t spot them.

“It doesn’t seem very lively here,” Dimoiya said.

“It’s more lively than it looks,” Lady Wagner replied. “We’re just not very good at seeing in the dark. Even with Darkvision items, the Realms Below take some getting used to. Speaking of which, does anyone need one?”

“Dimoiya has her glasses,” Dimoiya said.

“If you don’t mind,” Frianne said.

“I’d appreciate one, as well,” Rangobart nodded.

Lady Wagner activated the cabin lights and placed a pair of rings on the table.

“Hmm, I guess this means that the other guests won’t have them.”

“For the most part, no,” Frianne said. “Footmen on night patrols sometimes have Darkvision items, but they’re not common.”

“It’s a good thing we packed a bunch. We’ll be stopping by the Mining Guild here to take a look at their operations. House Gushmond’s still interested in that, I assume?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Rangobart slipped the ring onto his middle finger, but it didn’t seem to improve the view outside. It wasn’t until the carriage was nearly stopped that he could make out the details of the building that they were pulling up in front of. It was a blocky, imposing structure reminiscent of what he had seen in Zwillingstürme. Lady Wagner opened the door and hopped out, casually waving at a trio of squat, bearded humanoids lined up on the curb.

“Countess Wagner,” the Dwarf in the centre inclined his head.

“Heya, Guildmaster. Here’s the first round.”

The Guildmaster peered at them from behind his bushy beard.

“That’s them, huh? They don’t look any different. Some of the boys from the Merchant Guild say that imperials are a stuffy lot, though.”

“I’m sure they’ll consider it flavour if you act dwarfy enough.”

*We’re standing right here, you know?*

With a swirl of her shortened skirts, Lady Wagner spun around and gestured toward them.

“This is Frianne Gushmond, representing her family’s silver mines. She’s here to take a look at your operations. The one in the glasses is Dimoiya. She works for the Empire’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Rangobart is Rangobart.”

“It’s good of you to stop by,” the Dwarf stroked his braided brown beard. “Name’s Hobar Graniteshield, master of the Feoh Raizo Mining Guild. This is my son, Hobar, and my niece, Bren.”

*Niece...?*

He couldn't figure out how to tell Bren apart from the others. They all had beards and resembled lumps of weathered stone. After a moment, he realised that she was staring back at him.

"How do the Guilds work in Dwarven society?" Rangobart asked.

"Hm? What do you mean by that?"

"The Empire has mines and guilds, but there is no Mining Guild. I was wondering how it compares to what we're familiar with."

Guildmaster Hobar's face crinkled to the degree that it looked about to implode on itself.

"No Mining Guild? The life of a Miner is filled with dangers. Who looks after them if there's no Guild?"

*I have no idea...*

Rangobart glanced at Frianne. Frianne cleared her throat.

"Much like our farming villages, which also have no 'Farming Guild', our mining villages are managed by chiefs. Priests visit semi-regularly to tend to the villagers' health."

"What about daily operations? What sort of mining do you do?"

"It depends on the site, but it's mostly open pit mining."

"Open pit mining...and you say you mine silver?"

"That's right."

The Guildmaster exchanged a look with his companions.

"Is something the matter?" Frianne asked.

“You mentioned silver mining, but surely there are *other* things that come along with all that silver you dig up...well, Humans supposedly breed like Goblins, so I guess it’s not a problem. Let’s start our tour, eh?”

They were led past the guild office, following a narrow set of iron rails that led to a cavern wall. The trek was rather disorienting, as their Darkvision range was limited and all they saw aside from the ground was pitch black until they drew within twenty metres of something. That something, in this case, was another building seemingly cut out of the stone. Rangobart ducked under the doorframe as he entered behind their guide.

“Greymantle! The hell are ya?”

“Right in front of you, you hairy old bat!”

Rangobart started as the Guildmaster suddenly shouted, then started again as a Dwarf behind a nearby counter shouted back. He looked just like the first three Dwarves, except he had a black beard.

“Some of the Humans they talked about showed up,” the Guildmaster jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

“That so? Try Berkana Three.”

The Guildmaster grunted and walked by, gesturing for them to follow.

“What’s Berkana Three?” Dimoiya asked.

“Nothing special,” the Guildmaster answered.

“The Mountain Dwarves are sort of practical,” Lady Wagner said.

“What do you mean, ‘sort of’?” The Guildmaster snarled.

“By sort of, I meant sort of,” Lady Wagner smiled pleasantly. “Berkana is a letter. Three is a number. We’re going to the third branch of the Berkana sector.”

“Isn’t their capital named Feoh Berkana?” Frianne asked.

“Yep. Berkana, Jura, Raizo, and Teiwaz are all letters. So the capital is something like ‘City A’. Or maybe City A of Country A. It’s so plain that it’s forgettable.”

“Says Miss Model R.”

“Hey! The Model R has a respectable history!”

“Hmph, you can’t claim that till it’s been around for at *least* two centuries. I bet my beard that you have a Model S already.”

The tunnel they were following led them to a dimly lit chamber furnished with rows of stone lockers. Another Dwarf was seated on a stone stool behind a stone desk. It looked like everything had been fashioned out of the very same material that the tunnel was carved out of.

“Who’re they?” The Dwarf at the table frowned up at them.

“Some Humans come to see the mines. We got a crew in Berkana Three?”

“Yeah. They should be working on that flooded section.”

The Guildmaster kept going. Rangobart glanced at the Dwarf sitting behind the table as he walked past.

“A mage...?”

“A Priest,” the Guildmaster said. “Every crew coming in from a shift gets their health checked. Mines are filled with hazards. There’s dangerous dust and gas that Miners can breathe in and the water isn’t safe. Some minerals are poisonous to the touch and there are creatures in the stone that can invade the body. Oh, and there are plenty of monsters in the Realms Below, but at least we got that part covered with the Sorcerous Kingdom’s help.”

The tunnel widened into another chamber where the familiar tread of Death Knight boots sounded rhythmically over the stone. When they reached the source, the rails ended and they found a group of Death Knights going in circles around an unfamiliar device.

“This here’s a pump manufactured by House Wagner’s workshops,” Lady Wagner said. “It turns out that there’s water everywhere underground.”

“We cut our shafts so they won’t easily flood,” the Guildmaster said, “but there are isolated caverns in the earth and the earth itself never stays still. These pumps are handy for reclaiming all the old networks around here.”

“What are the pipes made out of?” Frianne asked.

“Lead. Not the greatest material, but it’s plentiful and easy to work with. The water we pump out can be pretty nasty stuff – some bodies can eat through the piping in less than a week. It gets dumped into the tailings channel and ends up in the magma chambers north of here. From there, it goes out the gates.”

“The gates?”

“Yeah. The magma chamber’s an artificial one. Accessing a natural one would be catastrophic. It comes through a magical gate from somewhere and flows out a different one to elsewhere.”

“That seems awfully convenient...”

“Well, one can only assume that it’s there to get stuff in and out. Not that we Dwarves have the artifice to craft gates like that, but it’s a big world.”

“Where do they go?”

“We don’t know. There aren’t any active volcanic areas in the Azerlisia Mountains, so...”

The Guildmaster led them onward into a tunnel marked by an unfamiliar sign. He followed the lead piping, going through a maze of several dozen forks before the sound of metal periodically striking stone could be heard in the distance. By the time they came within sight of a well-lit tunnel, Rangobart’s back was sore from being half-bent. A Dwarf garbed in some sort of leather outfit turned at the sound of their approach.

“Guildmaster,” she nodded.

“I brought guests. Everyone, this is Greda Redstone, the shift’s tunnel doctor.”

“A magic caster?” Frianne said, “Some variant of Druid, perhaps?”

“No, Dwarven Druids are extremely rare,” Greda said. “‘Tunnel doctor’ is just local slang. We’re Geomancers.”

“Ah...that’s interesting. The Empire has always categorised Geomancy as an eastern discipline.”

“I can only assume it’s a common enough profession in the Realms Below,” Greda gestured loosely over her head with a gloved hand. “For obvious reasons.”

“What’s the role of tunnel doctors in the mining industry?” Frianne asked.

“Divination and structural engineering, mainly. Well, there’s not much divination going on here. We’ve been going through all of the old records and reclaiming shafts that haven’t been mined out yet.”

The Guildmaster cleared his throat.

“How’s that coming along, by the way?”

“We’ve drained out enough water to expose the fringes of the vein. The crew’s taking samples now.”

They shifted their way forward to where the shaft was submerged in ominous black water. Four Skeletons were lined up at the edge while a pair of Dwarves chipped away at a rust-coloured section of tunnel wall. Behind them was a minecart half-filled with the aforementioned samples.

“What do you have here?” Rangobart asked.

“Iron ore,” the Guildmaster answered. “It’s nothing fancy, but the Sorcerous Kingdom has an endless appetite for steel. Undead labour is ideal for it, too. Once the shaft is drained and Greda figures out how to proceed, we’ll set a bunch of them to digging.”

“Are you implying that Undead labour isn’t ideal for some tasks?” Frianne asked.

“It’s ultimately a cost-benefit analysis,” the Guildmaster gestured to the Skeletons, “these fellows can’t match an experienced miner and mining more difficult materials is out of the question. Mundane metals that we mine in bulk, however, are perfect for ‘em. The way we have things set up now frees up our experienced members to go for all the precious lodes while the Undead handle everything else.”

“In your opinion, are they suitable for silver mining?”

The Guildmaster raised a hand to stroke his beard in thought.

“That would depend on how valuable silver is in the Empire,” he said. “It also depends on what else those mines produce. Silver is usually the byproduct of mining something else – say, lead or copper. It’s entirely possible for Undead labour to pull up more total value in common metals than your veteran miners can of silver in the same time. And it’s not as if you won’t get *any* silver, you’ll just get a bit less with a Skeleton.”

“I-is that so?”

“It’s not?”

Friane and the Guildmaster stared at one another for a moment. Then, the Guildmaster shrugged.

“That’s my professional assessment based on our results with the Undead so far. It’s always better to send your best miners into your best mines. The silver comparison is a pointless one when your veteran miners shouldn’t be wasting their time on anything less than mithril anyways.”

“I see...”

Rangobart wasn’t a mining expert, but, as far as he knew, it didn’t matter who dug up what. The Guildmaster’s claim was reminiscent of the Empire’s early past where Nobles claimed that their farms produced more than the imperial standard. Those claims were dismissed as irrational interpretations of natural fluctuations in crop yields and the Imperial Magic Academy made sure that its students no longer believed such nonsense.

“What other benefits would you say come with employing Undead labour?” Friane asked.

“Not that tireless workers aren’t a ‘benefit’ enough,” the Guildmaster answered, “but there are the alterations in mining strategy that I mentioned just now. Mitigating deadly risks to your Miners is also a major benefit – especially over long periods – but I’m not sure if Humans care about that sort of thing.”

“We most certainly do, Guildmaster,” Friane said. “I don’t think anyone in the Empire would disagree that ensuring the safety of experienced and talented individuals is a desirable thing.”

“Does that mean you’re ready to rent some Undead?” Lady Wagner leaned in.

“I will deliver my findings to my Lord Father when I return to Arwintar,” Lady Waldenstein replied. “Let’s see what else the Dwarven Kingdom has to offer, shall we?”