

*13th Day, Upper Fire Month, 1 CE*

“I don’t see anything different…”

“The entire border is like this, esteemed brother,” Rangobart said. “Didn’t your vaunted information network mention as much?”

Rangobart’s brother didn’t dignify his sarcasm with a reply, but Rangobart was certain it was the case. About a year and a half had passed since the Battle of Katze Plains and the Empire’s spies – dispatched by its Merchants, aristocratic factions, and the imperial government – had long infiltrated the Sorcerous Kingdom. There were even spies from the Temples if he hadn’t misheard. Depending on who they went to, however, the intelligence reports differed somewhat.

Imperial Patrols went on as usual, keeping an eye out for tribal raids and monstrous threats from the frontier. Imperial Intelligence did what it could with its meagre numbers and the gist of its reports was that ‘major threats’ abounded in the Sorcerous Kingdom, but there wasn’t anything that they hadn’t seen already.

The Temples, being the Temples, looked into the same thing. The Undead that concerned them were the same military threats that Imperial Intelligence was sent to take a look at, so, when the Temples sent an endless stream of petitions to the Court Council upon learning what was across the border, the Imperial Administration found the information that the Temples shared with them matched what their own spies reported. However, as they implored the Empire to end its immoral association with the kingdom of darkness next door, they framed things in such dire terms that one might think that they were talking about something else.

Indeed, the Temples told everyone they could. The Second Army Group was informed just in case the Empire ‘hid the truth’ from them. Decrying the Sorcerous Kingdom as the blackest evil the world has ever known was a daily message delivered at every cathedral, parish, and temple school.

At a certain point, Rangobart grew concerned about the Temples’ activism and asked a Death Cavalier what they thought about their public awareness campaign. It gave the matter some thought, replied that it was ‘flattering’, and said that it would be nice if everyone feared them just as much. Rangobart could only be thankful that the Temples never considered interacting with the Death-series Servitors.

In hindsight, the forced integration of the Undead with the Second Army Group served as a preemptive counter to the Temples’ activities on top of everything else. The Priests could warn the people of the evils of the Undead as much as they wanted, but those very same Undead were

seen by the citizens every day participating in security patrols. The tactic only went so far, however, as faith and reason weren't always in alignment.

A crack in the pavement nearly bounced Rangobart out of his seat. Armando let out a worried sound and his bodyguards tensed. Beyond the carriage window, the ubiquitous imperial landscape of crops, pastures, and copses continued uninterrupted.

“Just what were you expecting, esteemed brother?”

“Oh, you know. Black clouds. Carrion birds. Fields of bodies impaled on spikes. It is a kingdom of darkness, after all.”

“We haven't crossed into that 'kingdom of darkness' yet,” Rangobart told Arlandor. “Just what have your spies been telling you?”

“There are several significant areas of concern,” Arlandor replied.

“Such as...?”

“Hmm...the most recent thing that's come to our attention is a program of forced relocations. The poor people are being ousted from land that they've lived on for generations'.”

“Is it something like what happened shortly after the annexation of E-Rantel? With the pauper's quarter being razed to the ground and its inhabitants relocated onto abandoned farmland along the imperial frontier?”

It was the first reported injustice that came from the Sorcerous Kingdom, and those in power saw it as a ploy to populate the border and make it seem like nothing was amiss. When he had asked Baroness Zahradnik about it, she confirmed that the quarter had indeed been levelled and repurposed into a 'Demihuman Quarter'. That information didn't sit well with the Empire at all and the Temples only used it as further evidence of the atrocities carried out by the Sorcerer King and his legions of darkness.

“No, this is something entirely new,” Arlandor said. “They're uprooting tenants from their land in the name of 'reorganisation'. The poor people have little choice but to comply, else they'd have their souls enslaved for eternity by the Undead.”

“It sounds like the Temples have filled your head with nonsense.”

“Nonsense? The Temples are the foremost experts on the Undead!”

“You people have been squeezing Miss Gran for information for the last two weeks,” Rangobart noted. “Does anything about your interactions with her suggest that the Sorcerous Kingdom is a land rife with injustice and suffering?”

“She’s obviously a minion of some sort,” Arlandor replied. “Picking out the truth behind her words was admittedly a challenge, but I believe I have the right of things.”

Rangobart turned his attention back to the window. There was little point in arguing when they were so close to the border. They would soon see what was going on for themselves.

A few minutes later, the carriage bounced again and went silent. He frowned at the strange sensation that filled the cabin.

“We’ve crossed over into the Sorcerous Kingdom,” he said.

“How do you know that?” His brother looked out of the window, “Nothing’s changed.”

“Look down, esteemed brother.”

Arlandor glanced at the cabin floor, then half-rose to look out of the window. The reason for the silence was not because they had stopped, but because the road they were travelling on had changed.

“What sorcery is this?”

“It’s dwarven stonework,” Rangobart said. “The Mountain Dwarves fixed up their old road coming down to Oestestadt and it looks just like this.”

“Preposterous,” Arlandor sniffed. “The Empire is supposed to have the best infrastructure in the world! This was a part of Re-Estize just last year, wasn’t it? That damned Bloody Emperor has squandered so much of our tax revenues on the Imperial Army and all of that magical nonsense that we’ve fallen behind! What a travesty.”

He could imagine the same discussion happening in every one of the delegation’s carriages. For better or worse, Nobles were proud of their land and competitive when it came to matters of prestige. Rangobart would have felt the same way had he still considered himself an agent of House Roberbad, but, now that he was the lord of an undeveloped wilderness of questionable naming, pretending to compete would be a laughable effort.

An hour later, a large walled town near one of the old towers bracketing the highway appeared on the horizon. He couldn't recall there being a town on the maps that he had last seen of the area. Rangobart examined its blocky architecture as they turned off the highway and slowed to a stop. In a word, the fortifications looked very *solid*. Everything was cut from dark grey granite in the same seamless fashion as the pavement of the highway. It was as if someone had somehow fashioned everything out of a single piece of perfect stone at a scale that wouldn't be out of place for a major city.

The parapets crested at over ten metres and every tower was half again that height. Here and there, he could see the heads and shoulders of a Death Knight as it made its rounds atop the wall.

"You'd think they're preparing to attack the Empire," Armando said.

"I'm reasonably certain that the Sorcerous Kingdom doesn't require a forward base to launch assaults against the Empire with, esteemed brother."

"Then why would anyone go through so much effort and expenditure to build this?"

"Why don't you ask once we arrive at our destination? I'm sure our hosts will be more than happy to provide an answer."

"Our hosts, huh..." Arlanro murmured. "That part just makes it even more confusing. They're noblewomen, right? Bereaved widows and daughters who were supposed to be marrying into other houses. Why would someone like that build something like this? Wouldn't it be more appropriate for her to create a garden? Or perhaps the Sorcerous Kingdom mandates the construction of this joyless-looking Façade."

The carriage darkened as they entered the town gate, which fed into a cavernous tunnel over thirty metres in length. It was a bit concerning that a town in the unfathomably powerful Sorcerous Kingdom would need walls so thick. When daylight returned, they were greeted by another strange sight.

"It looks like she created a garden, after all," Rangobart said. "A walled garden."

"Is the entire town a solarium?" Arlandor breathed.

Rangobart twisted his neck to look up at the sky. As his brother implied, the town had a ceiling fashioned from panes of glass. The streets were paved in the same manner as the highway, but, unlike most towns that only had the occasional tree in a courtyard and weeds struggling to grow on their beaten roads, care had been taken to ensure that there was greenery wherever one looked.

“Where did she get all of the iron?” Rangobart eyed the lattice supporting the glass, “You could probably arm the entire Imperial Army twice over with this.”

“It stinks of a trap,” Arlando said.

“A trap?” Rangobart frowned.

“Oh, don’t feign ignorance, dear brother. It all fits in nicely with the Emperor’s plans. He’s blatantly colluding with the Sorcerer King, trying to tempt the nobility into feeding the growing imperial war machine. What better way to facilitate things than to have us use our lands to build up industries for their purposes?”

“I can’t say that I agree with you on that point,” Rangobart replied, “but even if it’s true, would it be such a bad thing? The Empire only stands to gain.”

Arlandor snorted.

“Oh, yes. The ‘Empire’. Perhaps we should be thankful that the Imperial Army hasn’t brainwashed you to the point where you can’t even remember your own name.”

“Do you have anything meaningful to say, esteemed brother?”

“We are the Empire, Rangobart,” Arlandor told him. “The Empire is composed of the people and those who represent their livelihoods and interests. Without us, there *is* no Empire. The ‘Empire’ you refer to is simply a faceless creature that exploits us all to suit its self-serving appetites.”

“Many improvements to the situation of the people have come to the Empire in our generation,” Rangobart noted. “The removal of incompetent Nobles, for instance.”

“Oh, grow up,” Arlandor rolled his eyes. “It’s very clear what was actually going on. *Undesirables* were being targeted, as determined by that dictator’s objectives. Half of those who were purged weren’t anywhere remotely incompetent – they were merely obstacles to the absolute rule that the Bloody Emperor wished to enjoy. The incompetent only remain fresh in the peoples’ memories because they are maintained as *exhibits* for one and all to see. At the same time, the imperial propaganda machine rewrites the sins of the past into virtuous deeds for the ignorant masses to adore.

“We are here to seek advantages in our endless battle against the tyranny of the imperial throne, Rangobart. Against the soulless bureaucracy that grows with every passing year. I would like to think that the former would be the first thing on your mind, especially since you have a completely undeveloped parcel of land to manage now.”

“You’re not wrong…”

Rangobart purposely left his response on an uncertain note. His brother looked away, satisfied that he had scored a point against him. As a newly landed Noble, the territory that he had been granted was an ever-present concern. He wanted to explore his options, but the thing was that House Roberbad and its allies were well-established houses of the interior and were out of touch with the realities of frontier development.

His new seneschal, a recently graduated scion from a minor house, was similarly ill-prepared for the task. The Imperial Magic Academy, much like the Empire itself, looked to success for its examples. This had the unfortunate side-effect of ignoring failure and many of the challenges that led to it. Everyone could be successful if only they worked hard enough, and failures were victims of their own incompetence...or so they liked to claim.

As a result, consulting with the other Imperial Knights who had gone through the same experiences that he would in the future was the obvious choice. However, Rangobart didn’t consider his family’s stance on imperial propaganda without merit – only the truly ignorant could do so – so he would also be seeking the opinions of those outside of the Empire. Conveniently, he had an acquaintance in the Sorcerous Kingdom who was also managing a mostly undeveloped fief.

“I wonder what sort of inn we’ll be staying at, I can’t recall any reservations being ma…”

Arlandor’s voice trailed off as they passed the town’s central plaza. Mixed into the crowd were the members of several Demihuman races, a few of which Rangobart had never seen before.

“Is that an *Ogre*?” The corner of Arlandor’s eyelid twitched, “How dreadful! I suppose that the citizens are being forced to suffer its presence.”

It took Rangobart a moment to find the Ogre in question. The towering Demihuman was standing by a cart filled with faggots. Their carriage went by too quickly to see how the pedestrian traffic reacted to it, but it wasn't as if it had suddenly appeared the moment they passed.

"I'm not an expert on Ogres," Rangobart said, "but I'm pretty sure that one was selling firewood."

"Preposterous. How much of the poor Human population have they replaced with these creatures? The townsfolk must be quaking in their boots."

As far as he could tell, the townsfolk weren't doing anything particularly noteworthy. It wasn't much different from any other town in that respect.

"If anything would set them quaking in their boots," Rangobart said, "it would be the Undead."

"Quiet, you! I'm trying my best to ignore them."

Rangobart obliged his brother and turned his attention back to the town. People weren't being butchered in the streets or impaled on spikes, but the fact that Arlandor's fears had proven to be unfounded didn't seem to change his attitude about the Undead. If anything, the Sorcerous Kingdom had become worse in his eyes because it was populated by the Undead *and* Demihumans.

The carriage took a turn shortly after leaving the plaza, bringing them to what appeared to be a warehouse district. Arlandor's bodyguards fingered their weapons as they rolled into a wide lot between the buildings. Rangobart's brother eyed their wary reactions nervously.

"What are we doing here?" He asked, "This doesn't look like an area that would have any accommodations."

"I don't believe we're staying in this town..."

Rangobart's gaze was drawn to the window to his right, where a line of carriages was parked parallel to their route. At least they *looked* like carriages. Each was far larger than any he had seen before.

They rocked slightly in their seats as the footmen disembarked from the back of their carriage. One came to open the door, and Arlandor silently willed Rangobart to get off first. Rangobart eyed the two Workers with a slight sense of annoyance.

*What are you two even being paid for?*

In a dark corner of his mind, he quietly wished that he would catch them doing something illegal on a patrol in the future. Then, he realised that was probably impossible with his transfer to the Sixth Army Group.

Rangobart laced up his boots and stepped out onto the pavement. Unsurprisingly, he was the first Noble out. Footmen were spread out all along the line of his party's carriages, looking somewhat lost with the occupants not emerging from their respective doors. Rangobart scanned the surroundings and, upon finding nothing threatening, he turned back to address his Arlandor.

"I'm not dead yet, esteemed brother."

"Are you sure nothing is wrong? What does it smell like?"

He took an obligatory deep breath, then realised something.

"It doesn't smell like a town..."

"Wh-what do you mean by that?! Did they put something poisonous into the air? Is that why we've been brought to this vacant lot?"

"I meant that it doesn't have the odours you would expect from a town. There's no scent of horse or horse manure. There wasn't any refuse lying around in the streets and no pools of standing water."

He never thought that one of his first personal observations of the Sorcerous Kingdom would be about its lack of a *smell*. If anything, he figured it would be just a bit Undead-ish.

Despite receiving Rangobart's report, Arlandor still refused to leave the cabin. As the awkward impasse between the two lines of carriages stretched on, he busied himself by trying to make sense of their situation.

The vehicles across from theirs had windows, but they were shuttered so he couldn't tell who was aboard them. Externally, they were detailed in a tastefully ornate fashion that would appeal to aristocrats and wealthy private citizens alike. The only odd thing about them was their size, as they were roughly four times larger than the carriages that had conveyed Count Roberbad's party and its entourage to the Sorcerous Kingdom.

As for the town itself, there was nothing special nearby aside from the dwarven pavement and the plain, blocky structures. He supposed that the entire town may have been built by the Mountain Dwarves, as legends claimed that their architecture was utilitarian and made exclusive use of stone.



The glass ceiling above them was a distinctly Human feature, however. Glass-covered market lanes and plazas that provided pedestrians and shop employees alike with pleasant ‘outdoor’ conditions were becoming increasingly popular in Arwintar. He had never heard of an entire town being covered by glass, however, nor did he think that anyone could afford such an extravagance.

Did the entire town stay green all winter? It would be quite the attraction if it did. Combined with the stone construction, the place gave off the feel of the frontier along the mountainous borderlands, and having the Azerlisia Mountains stretching across the northern horizon lent weight to that notion.

A shift in the nearby footmen’s disposition alerted Rangobart to movement from one of the carriages across from them. The door swung open and a Maid stepped out, followed by a young Noblewoman with shoulder-length locks of light blonde hair. Her topaz eyes scanned the line of imperial carriages before fixing on Rangobart. A charming smile lit up her face and she came over to greet him.

“Welcome to the Sorcerous Kingdom,” she spread out her pleated carnelian skirt in a graceful curtsy. “I am Countess Liane Loretta Dale Wagner.”

“Rangobart Eck Waraiya Roberbad,” he bowed deeply in return. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Countess Wagner.”

“Roberbad...” Lady Wagner placed her index finger against the point of her chin as her eyes turned up in a thoughtful expression, “As in the mage officer who acted as Baroness Zahradnik’s liaison?”

“The very same, my lady,” Rangobart nodded. “I hope she hasn’t shared any compromising tales about me at home.”

“The Baroness is not one for gossip,” the Countess’ smile returned. “Or much talk at all, for that matter. I would love for the opportunity to rectify the matter by personally getting to know you better.”

“Of cou—”

“Rangobart,” Arlandor’s voice came from behind him, “who is this *absolutely* captivating young lady?”

*Oh, sure, now you come out...*

After Rangobart introduced Arlandor to the Countess, his brother took over the conversation. That, in turn, didn't last long as their father appeared with several other Nobles. Arlandor obligingly introduced the Countess to them, which took a good fifteen minutes.

"This town is quite the marvel, Countess Wagner," Count Roberbad said. "I don't recall its existence on any of our most recent maps."

"Zwillingstürme was chartered not long after the official establishment of the Sorcerous Kingdom, Lord Roberbad."

"Zwillingstürme...? Ah, you named it after the old towers straddling the highway. Now that you mention it, you do bear the features of the classical eastern beauty..."

"Thank you, my lord," Lady Wagner nodded. "My family is indeed from the imperial east, north of the Wyvernmark. They settled here before..."

"Of course," Rangobart's father nodded in understanding. "Still, it is good to see strong imperial stock here. Might I ask what our itinerary is now that we've arrived, my lady? It's nearly nightfall and the arrangements that we received didn't list our accommodations for this evening."

Countess Wagner tilted her head curiously.

"Is that so? It should have listed Corelyn Castle as your destination once my lord's party arrived at the border..."

"...yes, that is correct," a hint of confusion put a slight tremor in Count Roberbad's voice. "If I'm not mistaken, however, Corelyn Castle is just past Corelyn Harbour, which is nearly two days distant."

"Ah..." Countess Wagner nodded, then lowered her head apologetically, "Forgive us for our presumption. The journey from Arwintar must have been long and tiring, so we thought to expedite your trip. The carriages you see before you will convey everyone the rest of the way."

Count Roberbad exchanged a look with his allies.

"Are they so large because they have beds in them?" One of the other Counts asked, "I admit the quality of the road is quite extraordinary – I didn't feel a single bump between here and the border."

"There are no beds, my lord," Lady Wagner replied. "One of the most notable benefits of our new infrastructure is that they allow vehicles designed for them to travel at great speeds with much heavier loads. We will arrive at Castle Corelyn in less than two hours."

“Less than *two hours*? Are these carriages some sort of magical device?”

“They come with a number of enchantments. You will be able to travel in luxury rarely experienced outside of the Sorcerous Kingdom. Unless you end up like House Gushmond’s party, of course.”

Everyone’s expression sharpened at the last.

“House Gushmond?” Count Roberbad said, “We’re aware that they came ahead of us, but...what happened?”

Lady Wagner shifted in place with a slightly scandalised look.

“They...they fled.”

“*Fled*?”

“Yes, my lord. They couldn’t bear the terror you see around you and returned to Arwintar.”

Count Roberbad scanned the surroundings with a furrow on his brow. His cheek twitched once before he and the other Nobles burst out into laughter.

“Fled? *The* House Gushmond? Didn’t one of their daughters write that absurdly huge treatise about magocrats?”

“Indeed, my lord,” Lady Wagner said, “In fact, she and one of her companions – who is also a mage – were the only ones able to tolerate the journey to its conclusion.”

The Countess pressed the tips of her fingers lightly together, gazing down at them with an uncertain look. Rangobart’s father tugged on the lapels of his coat.

“Rest assured, Countess Wagner,” he said. “My party and I are made of sterner stuff than that.”

“Oh, wonderful!” The Countess beamed, “In that case, how would you like to be organised? Each carriage can convey a dozen passengers, though I would personally recommend six. We have enough vehicles that even your attendants may enjoy a ride inside.”

“Hmm, in that case...”

Each house took its own carriage, presumably to make last-minute preparations for their arrival. Rangobart’s father, of course, insisted that Countess Wagner ride with them. A pleasant coolness washed over them when they entered the spacious cabin.

“This carriage has a temperature control item,” Rangobart examined the lacquered wooden interior.

“That’s right,” Lady Wagner said. “The temperature in here will remain consistent through every season.”

In addition to the temperature control, the interior was magically illuminated and no expense was spared for the furnishings. His family voiced their appreciation of what they saw and felt as they seated themselves around an oval table that had plenty of legroom beneath.

“This is very nearly a room in itself,” Arlando said. “Work around the fief would be extraordinarily comfortable with one of these carriages.”

“There are plenty of features to enjoy,” Countess Wagner grinned. “For instance, the cupboards under the seats are all set to various temperatures and enchanted with preservation magic. You can store several days’ worth of cold drinks and hot meals in them. The stowage overhead is perfect for storing office supplies and you can access the rear baggage by folding down the seats here.”

The door shut behind them. Count Roberbad ran his hands appreciatively over the polished surface of the cedar table.

“I’d rather work and sleep in here than stay overnight in a village chief’s room,” he said. “What about these windows? I see that they’re glass on the inside, but how do you open the shutters?”

Rangobart was pressed slightly into his seat as the carriage started to roll forward. There weren’t horses or any other beasts hitched to them, so he wondered how they were moving.

“There’s a panel flush with the door that you can open to access a hand crank.”

“...here?” Rangobart’s father leaned forward.

“Closer to the centre.”

“I can’t...ah, how clever! This design is quite elegant.”

Rangobart watched, bemused, as his father transformed into any other man as he focused on figuring out the device. A few minutes later, he rolled down the metal shutters, revealing the pastoral landscape of E-Rantel going by as the carriage hurtled down the highway.

“By the gods,” Count Roberbad breathed, “we’re going as fast as you claimed! I can’t feel the road under us at all – this vehicle may as well be floating on air.”

“It’s just one of the many innovations that the Sorcerous Kingdom has to offer, my lord,” Lady Wagner smiled. “I’m sure you love everything we’ve prepared for you.”

There was something else behind the young Countess’ smile, but Rangobart couldn’t figure out what it was. At least his family’s apprehension over their visit to the Sorcerous Kingdom had vanished as if it had never existed in the first place.