

After taking them back to Zwillingstürme, their carriage went north along another highway. It sped up immensely, conveying them to the fringes of the Great Forest of Tob within a half-hour and arriving at the southern shores of a large lake ten minutes later. Lady Wagner referred to it as the 'Great Lake', so Rangobart had expected something similar to the larger lakes in the Baharuth Empire, but it was small enough that he could see the forest on the other side.

The Soul Eaters pulled them into the lot of a stone building that stood in stark contrast to the wood-and-thatch structures on the shores below. Rangobart wrinkled his nose slightly at the odours of the nearby marshes on the cool wind. Looming over the forested foothills to the northeast were the snow-capped peaks of the Azerlisia Mountains.

"If they filled in that marsh," Dimoiya said, "a place like this would be ideal for a bunch of summer villas. It's cool and has a nice view and everything."

"Maybe the Demihumans living here thought the same thing," Rangobart said.

"Yes, but no," Lady Wagner said. "They might hold that sentiment, but tribes at this level of civilisation have more practical concerns...like having a reliable source of food and clean water."

"Lady Wagner speaks truly," a throaty voice came from the direction of the nearby building. "Countless wars have been waged over the ages for our Great Lake. Not only between different races, but between tribes of the same race, as well."

They turned to find a reptilian creature the size of a Death Knight walking towards them. An entourage of its lessers came in two rows behind him.

"Welcome to the Lizardman Alliance Village," its thick, black scales shone in the sunlight as it spoke. "I am Shasuryu Shasha, High Chieftain of the Lizardman Alliance."

*High Chieftain...I thought the Sorcerous Kingdom used normal court ranks. Where does this guy fit into all of it?*

According to the Imperial Army, large Demihuman tribes could occupy the territorial equivalent of a Barony. That, however, varied widely depending on the race of Demihuman and Rangobart wasn't familiar with Lizardmen at all.

"This Frianne Gushmond, Countess of Waldenstein and Head Court Mage of the Baharuth Empire."

“It is a pleasure to meet you, High Chief Shasha,” Frianne lowered her head in a curtsy.

The Lizardman’s pointed snout came down to Frianne’s height as he regarded her.

“Hmm...is this what a Human looks like when they’re carrying eggs?”

“Guess how many?” Lady Wagner asked.

“Three...no, four!”

“The average Human household has five children,” Lady Wagner told him.

“Huh. I never realised that Humans laid such large clutches.”

“It’s hard being a Human. Out of those five children, three are usually lost to predators, starvation, or poor health.”

“I see,” High Chief Shasha bobbed his head. “Such is the way of the world. I hope for the best for you and your family, Lady Waldenstein.”

“Thank you, High Chief Shasha.”

Apparently, the Lizardman had been instructed in Human customs, but not Human biology. Countess Wagner took a step to the side and gestured to Rangobart.

“This is Rangobart Roberbad, Viscount of undecided.”

“It’s good to meet you, Lord Undecided,” the Lizardman Lord said. “To father such a large clutch – you must be a mighty Chieftain indeed!”

“Eh?”

“Rangobart isn’t my mate,” Frianne said.

*Why are you so quick to cut in on that part, but not the other?*

“I-Is that so? I was told each party would be a Human Lord and their family. In that case, this one...”

The Lizardman’s reptilian gaze went to Dimoiya.

“Ew, no!” Dimoiya cried.

“Muu...Humans are complicated.”

High Chief Shasha gave Rangobart what he thought was a look of sympathy.

“Don’t let it get you down, Lord Undecided. I’m sure there’s a fine woman for you out there somewhere.”

“...just Rangobart is fine.”

Once introductions for both sides were completed, the Lizardmen led them into the stone building. What he could see of the interior was a clean-looking office that wouldn’t seem out of place anywhere in Human society. Behind the front desk stood a pale beauty whose voluptuous body filled out her dark blue uniform.

“Ah!” Dimoiya said, “There’s a Vampire here, too!”

*That’s a Vampire?*

She did possess the otherworldly beauty attributed to Vampires that had evolved into more powerful forms. He supposed the glowing crimson gaze should have been a dead giveaway that she was Undead.

“Yup,” Lady Wagner said. “The local Vampire Post office is in this building. It used to be out on the water, but we moved it over to the highway once it was done. The central administration has their office upstairs.”

“How do they fit in with the local administration?” Lady Waldenstein asked.

“Every tribe still rules itself,” Lady Wagner said. “The staff from the central administration helps to transcribe their business into formal records. They’ll also advise each tribe on official procedures and identify services that they might want to take advantage of.”

“It is quite the boon,” High Chief Shasha said. “The Sorcerous Kingdom has adopted the ways and language of the Humans, which my people are unfamiliar with. At the same time, they do not force us to live according to those ways.”

They came out the opposite end of the building, which put them at the top of a long path leading down to the marshes along the shore. He couldn't make much sense out of what the Lizardmen were doing aside from the ones carrying goods around in wicker baskets. His eyes followed a few of them, trying to see if they would help him identify warehouses and workshops based on what they were carrying.

“Since these two are wearing such long garments,” High Chief Shasha gestured to Frianne and Dimoiya. “We'll use the boardwalk to get around. Is there anything you'd like to see first?”

“It's their first time in a Demihuman settlement like this,” Lady Wagner said. “Imperials don't get out much.”

“We've been to Karnassus before,” Lady Waldenstein said defensively. “But you're right that they aren't in any way similar.”

The paved walkway was replaced with a wooden one partway down to the settlement. Lizardmen stopped to watch them curiously as they entered through its wooden gate.

“The five Lizardman tribes that dwell here once lived in their respective villages along the south side of three Great Lake,” High Chief Shasha said. “It was only after we were conquered by the Sorcerer King that our populations were consolidated into this single village.”

Rangobart scanned the surroundings for signs of past battles, but saw none. The vast marsh probably swallowed any evidence of a conflict within a few seasons.

“How long ago was this conquest?” Rangobart asked.

“Over two winters back,” the Lizardman's thick tail snaked back and forth as they walked along. “All five tribes joined forces to fight. We thought we were doing well for a while, but then we were thoroughly squashed.”

“You don't look squashed,” Dimoiya said.

“I don't?” The tail stopped, “Then I must be recovering faster than I thought.”

A rasping laugh slid through the air and the tail started swaying again.

“Baroness Zahradnik was right,” High Chief Shasha said. “The ‘civilised’ concept of war is not the same as ours. She told us that it is excessive in its impersonality.”

“Demihuman raids against the Empire can be quite brutal,” Frianne noted.

“I have no grounds to agree or disagree on that point, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it were true. Neither would I deny it – raiding others and being raided in return was a normal thing for us not long ago. That is not what I speak of, however.”

They stopped at the shore of the lake, where rows of wooden poles were sticking out of the water.

“This fish farm is a technique of raising food introduced by my brother a few years ago. Over the years, it has seen constant improvement and through it, I believe that I can understand what the Baroness spoke of. The ‘wilderness tribes’, as I’ve heard the Humans like to call us, live close to nature. We feed on it and it feeds on us, and this applies to all of the tribes that live at this ‘level of civilisation’.

“For us, there is always a very reachable limit to what is possible, and that limit is defined by the daily realities that we face. If a tribe goes to war, any losses it sustains affect its chances of survival. A hunter may make for an excellent warrior, but hunters becoming injured or even dying in war means that the people that they supported as hunters will die of starvation. Our lives were balanced on a knife’s edge where what you consider minor things may have spelt the end of our people.”

The Lizardman Lord gestured to the fish farm.

“This,” he said, “ends that way of life. Instead of hunters, you have Farmers and food can be far more reliably produced by anyone without any of the risks that hunters face. With this new, reliable source of food, those who spent all of their time trying to survive can do other things. They can become weavers, potters, warriors – anything that their society has a demand for.”

“That is essentially the tale of any civilisation’s rise,” Frianne nodded. “But you speak of it as if it’s wrong.”

“Not wrong,” the High Chief shook his head. “It is natural to desire the prosperity of one’s people, after all. What she warned us about was becoming ‘detached from reality’ as that would in turn lead us to those excesses of impersonality. I admit that I do not wholly understand it. She is a far wiser being than this simple Lizardman Chief. By the way, would you like to buy some fish?”

“Eh?”

“It’s their main export at the moment,” Countess Wagner said.

“Yes,” the Lizardman said, “we would like to raise funds to develop new industries and find new ways forward for my people.”

*What sort of dirty tactic is this?*

It was a very difficult approach to deal with as a Noble. Simply put, a lord was asking another lord for a trade agreement that would help develop their demesne. Not only did it tug on their sense of empathy, but it also set off the myriad of complex political, social, and economic calculations that Nobles were raised to consider, as well.

“I wouldn’t mind,” Lady Waldenstein said. “But my fief doesn’t have a very large population. The volume of trade between us probably won’t be as large as you’d probably like.”

“Not at all! In fact, I was worried that we wouldn’t have enough. Hey! Someone bring out the liquor!”

“I’m pregnant, so I really shouldn’t.”

“Is that so? What about you, Lord Undecided?”

“I’m sorry,” Rangobart said, “my land hasn’t undergone any development, nor does it have any inhabitants.”

High Chieftain Sasha’s visage shifted into an unfamiliar expression.

“I see. So that is why this one rejected you so vehemently just now. You must become a greater man to attract the females that you desire. This is an ironclad rule of the world. Work hard, Lord Undecided.”

*This damn savage...*

“Work hard, Lord Undecided,” Lady Wagner said.

“Work hard, Lord Undecided,” said Lady Waldenstein.

Rangobart sighed.

From the fish farms along the lake shore, they went to the village's central cluster of buildings. As with the other locations in the Sorcerous Kingdom that they had visited, the Undead were present but the people seemed to pay them no mind.

"This is where most of everything happens," their host told them. "Our means are nothing compared to the great Human settlements in the plains, but we make do with what we can. Over here is the market..."

They were led to a walkway that was lined by rows of thatch-roofed stands on either side. Rangobart supposed that some things would look the same no matter where they were or who was doing the selling. Frianne picked up a patterned blanket woven out of unfamiliar fabric.

"I see many goods that could be sold in Human villages," Lady Waldenstein said. "Have you considered exporting them?"

"We already do," High Chieftain Shasha replied. "Our village is an, ehm, *industrial centre* in this part of the Great Forest of Tob. Well, I say that, but it is as you can see. Our production is limited and trade consists of Merchants from the forest tribes exchanging raw resources for finished goods. Levels of prosperity similar to that of the Human lands is still a far-off dream for the tribes of the Great Forest."

"The forest tribes have *Merchants*?" Rangobart frowned.

"It wasn't always so," the Lizardman replied, "but a Human Lord came some time ago and set up trading outposts across the area. Every tribe has a Merchant, now. Some of the larger ones have several."

Rangobart glanced at Countess Wagner, who was smiling off to the side. Was she the one responsible for integrating the tribes of the Great Forest into the economy of the Sorcerous Kingdom? 'Human Lords' didn't usually promote trade with wilderness tribes for obvious reasons. Lady Wagner was a Noble, but she also gave off the distinct air of a magnate's daughter.

"You mentioned that you plan on developing new industries for your people with your trade surplus," Rangobart said. "Was there anything particular that you had in mind?"

"That is still something that we're exploring," High Chief Shasha said. "But that exploration in itself requires resources. For now, we've managed to set up basic versions of the industries that our people have seen elsewhere. Some are familiar to us, such as weaving, but the tools that the Humans employ are very different. Others we were surprised were possible in our marshy home, such as blacksmithing. Speaking of which, that one has become quite popular."

“Why is that? Are Lizardmen naturally inclined towards blacksmithing?”

“Ah, no,” the Lizardman Lord rubbed the back of his head with a clawed hand. “It’s something of a selfish reason. We Lizardmen are cold-blooded, and forges are nice and warm. Ah, but it is not as if we haven’t found things that we are well-suited to. For instance, while we may not excel at metalwork like the Dwarves, we’re well-suited to mining in marshlands like this. In the winter, especially, our people go out to find ores just so they have an excuse to sit near the forge fire.”

“Mining? In a marsh?”

“It surprised us, too. Our colony to the south learned it from the Humans there. We have been using wood and bone tools for countless generations, never realising that we trod upon mineral wealth every day. I was shocked when my nephew came to visit one day and declared that half of the stones I used to ring my fire pit were actually iron ore! After that, well, we turned up a small mountain of the stuff. Those who became particularly adept at this new form of mining are even able to discover gemstones and precious metals.”

“I see,” Rangobart nodded. “But what about fuel? Don’t tell me you’re also mining something like Heatstone.”

“Hah! Wouldn’t that be nice? We could have, erm, what did they call it again? A hot spring? Anyway, we normally burn peat for our fires here and that seems to do well enough for the clay bloomeries we use. We’ve got an endless supply of it here. There’s some trick to turn it into charcoal, which they say is better, but we’re still figuring that out.”

“Does the Sorcerous Kingdom not offer you technical assistance?” Lady Waldenstein asked. “They set up all of those trading posts and built this highway, didn’t they?”

High Chief Shasha turned to address Frianne’s question.

“They helped us with all sorts of things,” he said. “At first, it was covering our people’s food shortages and building this new village for our tribes. After that, they made some improvements to the fish farms, taught us how to create a proper village economy that was compatible with far-off places, and built the highway that you used to come here. At the same time, however, our elders worried that it was too much.”

“What do you mean by that?”



“Muu...this may sound silly to you, as what we have been introduced to is considered commonplace to your people, but the best way I can put it was that we were receiving things without deserving them. Gaining new power without understanding it. Learning new techniques without learning of their effects on our home. When we were conquered, our people were promised prosperity, but, after seeing some of the world beyond our humble village, many believe that too much prosperity at once may ruin us instead. We must learn as only we can learn, for no one else can teach us how to be Lizardmen.”

“That sounds like something that Baroness Zahradnik would say,” Countess Waldenstein said.

“If she has, I have not heard it. She only pinned the tongue of one of our warriors to the ground after visiting us and then left. Lord Cocytus gave us an earful after that and we had to reflect on how things were going.”

Dimoiya’s mouth fell open, forming a large ‘o’ the size of her spectacle lenses. Having seen her fight in person, Rangobart did not doubt that the Baroness was capable of doing what the Lizardman claimed.

“Our experience with the Sorcerous Kingdom has been that they...” Frianne paused for a moment. “Well, I suppose one could say that they insisted that we *optimise* how things were done in the Empire. I thought we would see something similar in the Sorcerous Kingdom.”

“Perhaps our situations are different,” the High Chief said. “Did they teach you Humans many new things?”

“I can’t say that they have. The best way to put it is that they did some things to stabilise the Empire, which allowed us to reallocate our available resources.”

It was a *very* loose way to phrase things, but perhaps it was for the best. Lizardman civilisation was clearly not advanced enough that their common sense was similar.

“Then maybe there is a lesson involved in there, as well,” the Lizardman Lord said. “The Sorcerer King is as wise as he is mighty.”

When they were done looking around the village – or, more accurately, when the women were done with their shopping – they made their way back up to the office by the highway. Rangobart frowned as he examined the attendants attached to Frianne. Three of the footmen from the Wagner Household that had accompanied them were bearing large wicker baskets filled with tribal goods. She brought one of the baskets into their carriage, emptying it out onto the table between them once they got underway again.

“What in the world are you going to do with those?” He asked.

“I thought they’d make for interesting gifts,” Frianne replied.

He tried to imagine the Emperor wrapped up in a Lizardman blanket.

“You had better not start any weird trends,” Rangobart said. “The Empire has more than enough changes to deal with on the horizon.”

“And one of those changes is rewriting our perception of Demihumans, is it not?” Lady Waldenstein said, “Besides, these aren’t *that* bad. A Merchant wouldn’t be ashamed to use one in the cold months, nor would any one of us in private.”

As if to make her point, she unfolded one of the blankets to cover her lap, then draped another one over her shoulders. Dimoiya picked one up and pressed it against her nose.

“What’s this made out of?” She asked.

“Fibres from marsh plants,” Lady Wagner answered. “It’s a weirdly common material. The tribes pick the stuff from ponds, streams, and lakes. I got no idea how they learned how to make it when it starts out as a plant stalk. It’s the most common type of cloth in Zahradnik’s territory, as well.”

Rangobart reached out to rub the fabric of one of the blankets on the table between his fingers. The Empire primarily relied upon wool, flax, and cotton for its cloth materials. Silk came from across the great steppe, but not in any great quantity. Anything better was notoriously difficult to import.

“Could you answer the questions I posed to High Chief Shasha any better, Wagner?” Frianne asked, “I don’t mean to look down on the Lizardmen, but he himself admitted that his perception of things is probably not on the same level as ours.”

“Sure,” Lady Wagner answered, “what do you want to know?”

“In particular, I’d like to know how the tribes are governed. To be honest, many aspects of the Sorcerous Kingdom’s domestic policy are a mystery to me. Sometimes, I start thinking that it’s something familiar, but then we have cases like the Lizardmen that definitively prove me wrong.”

“It’s pretty simple,” Lady Wagner leaned her elbow on her armrest. “The only thing that’s really applicable to every subject of the Sorcerous Kingdom is ‘follow the rules’. Most people are content to live their lives in peace, and the tribes in the Great Forest of Tob are mostly those types of people. They usually go on as they always have and the government doesn’t care what they do as long as they don’t break the laws that apply to them.”

“Are the laws applied to them different from the laws applied to Humans?”

“They weren’t then they were and then they sort of weren’t again. The tribes in the Great Forest of Tob were actually under the Sorcerous Kingdom’s control before the Battle of Katze Plains. Back then, all that was required was that they recognise the Sorcerer King as their ruler and they were pretty much left alone aside from that. In the case of the Lizardmen, Lord Cocytus – the Grand Marshal – took an interest in them and became their liege. That didn’t change much about their culture, though. He just helped them out here and there and tried to encourage them to do a few things. Even after all that, though, they still live as they did before.”

“And the rules that they were subjected to changed at some point?”

“Yeah,” Lady Wagner nodded. “When E-Rantel was annexed, the Sorcerous Kingdom was made an official country, His Majesty decided to adopt the laws of Re-Estize. Those laws are laws for a Human society, though, and the Royal Court had a heck of a time trying to figure out how to make it work for everyone.”

“I can imagine,” Frianne said.

Rangobart could, as well, but what he couldn’t imagine was why they bothered trying in the first place. Was it simply a case of willfulness on the Sorcerer King’s part with his vassals doing their best to see what could be done? Or was there some far-reaching objective spawned from the endless depths of his unfathomable intellect?

“Anyway,” Lady Wagner said, “most of it actually worked out pretty well in the end. There were just a few sticking points, like His Majesty pledging that our citizens won’t eat their fellow citizens.”

“Why would that be a sticking point?” Lady Waldenstein asked.

“Because many of the tribes’ primary source of food was each other,” Lady Wagner answered. “We had to scramble to work out a solution for that. All said, it was pretty fun.”

“What was the solution?” Rangobart asked.

“Sell them food. That was the primary purpose of those trading outposts that we put up. After we got a good look at what everyone had to offer, it became a lot easier to figure out.”

“It always seems that you have far more interesting tales to tell than us,” Frianne said. “I couldn’t picture myself in your shoes. What sort of story does the Dwarf Kingdom have?”

“You’re probably better off hearing that one from them,” Lady Wagner said. “At least their side of it. Not that it isn’t plenty enough. Just like the Empire, they’re still a sovereign country, so I’m sure you’ll be keen on hearing what they have to share.”