

The anatomy of humans and dwarves is very similar in children, the only difference is that dwarven children start developing beards at a much younger age. When human children start producing stubble, dwarven children are already being taught proper beard management.

But, the major differences start during the puberty stages. Whereas humans grow taller, dwarves grow stockier and more dense. By the time both species are considered adults, A dwarf is at least a foot shorter than a human, but at a similar or greater body weight. Another difference between the species is age. Dwarves live twice as long as humans, albeit at a far lower fertility rate, which is the reason that their population struggles to expand and form more kingdoms.

All this Jessica knows and understands from her studies when she'd lived at the monastery. But, those same teachings were nowhere enough to prepare her for a real dwarven city. A literal city of stone and metal built into a mountain. An age-old city where every piece of stone and metal is decorated to exacting detail. Just leaving the docks and entering the city proper, she is met with soft but vibrantly enchanted lights, all illuminating a stone path of grand artistry and design. Every street carries rich history, every intersection has intricately designed sculptures, every building is unique from the next, anything and everything reveals a vibrant artistry that no nation can truly ever rival.

Her revelry is unfortunately broken as an armed passerby walks up to her. "This your first time at Svartalfheim, lass?"

"Um," she looks at the armored dwarf.

Khereth Broadbender

Level 89 [City Guard]

"It is. I came from the docks"

The Dwarf nods, "Figured as much, what with you standing in the middle of the street."

"Street?" she glances around, finding that she'd mindlessly walked through the city a decent bit. It is here that she also notices that dwarves are all walking near the building and leaving the center street clear.

"Yes. Traversing the center areas of main streets is only for vehicles. All others are to use the side paths."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't know." Jessica blushes. She rushes to the side of the street so as to not be a burden.

The [City Guard] follows her to the side of the street. He reaches into his pocket and retrieves a small scroll. He hands it to her. "This scroll contains the most common laws and guides for those entering the city. Usually, it is provided at primary entrance inspection, but since you came from the docks, then no wonder you'd be ignorant.

"I'm sorry." she says again.

The dwarf waves his hand, "It's fine. I'd rather have someone ignorant causing problems than someone malevolent. Anyhow, I'll leave you to your sight seeing."

"Wait," Jessica exclaims quickly, "I'm also looking for an inn, preferably your best."

The dwarf raises an eyebrow. He strokes his long light-brown beard. "Well, if you want the very best, then you'll want to travel to the Bards' District." he points in a direction, "Just head that way and you'll be in the area. The Inn is called *Bearded Goodtime*. It's costly, but you'll never find a better Inn anywhere within the city.

Jessica nods to the dwarf. She reaches into her pocket to retrieve a coin for his time, but the dwarf waves his hand. "Lass, you're in Svartalfheim, not some back-alley kingdom. No dwarf worth their balls would ever charge you for such simple information."

"But..."

"Just go on your way, lass, and welcome to Svartalfheim." Without saying anything more, the dwarf starts walking away, leaving Jessica surprised and impressed.

Before wandering farther, Jessica unrolls the scroll he'd given her.

Most of the laws are straightforward and simple. No killing or fighting, avoid skill usage and activation in public areas, keep street centers clear at all times, and many others.

But, at the bottom of the scroll are some interesting ones:

Non-lethal combat under the influence of alcohol is only allowed inside establishments that provide alcohol. All parties will be fined only for the damages inflicted to the establishment and/or individuals. Punitive damages will only be assessed in the event one party gets maimed.

Intentionally cutting or removing another's beard is grounds for immediate execution.

If you are found knowingly fornicating with another's wife, the husband can request to have you excommunicated from the city for a minimum of ten years.

If you are found to have intentionally harmed a child, you will be arrested, publicly castrated, and then tortured until you beg for your death.

“Heh, Quasi would agree with that last one,” Jessica comments. The laws read, she refolds the scroll, puts it in her pocket, and then looks up at the entrance to the Bards' District.

The *Greybeards* are a nickname given to the major leaders of Svartalfheim, the most politically powerful entities within the city. It is a well deserved nickname, one fully on display when Molucca strolls into the throne room. Eight aged elders, all with long gray beards that have survived the test of time. They look at him with aged eyes that have seen and experienced much of the world.

With a gesture, one of the greybeards directs him to a seat right across from the [King]. When Molucca sits, a [Servant] rushes and places a goblet of beer in front of him. As is customary, the invited partakes in drink first, followed by all others. With a single gulp, half the contents are emptied before he sets the mug down with a hearty sigh. The elders do the same, eventually stopping with the [King], who completely finished his goblet before yeeting it across the table and forcing Molucca to dodge the projectile.

“You damn idiot! What in Thor's gargled ballsacks happened? I sent you to protect that shithead from Testudo, and instead you fail miserably and even bring him to our goddam city. What fucking happened?”

One fact that very few people know about [Mountain Archking] Hreidmar is that he can throw anything and everything with such precision and speed so as to be near impossible to dodge. If he'd been angry, there would be no chance of Molucca being able to dodge the goblet. If the King was furious? Well, there are stories of deaths caused from a goblet dismembering heads.

“Tell me,” Molucca grins to the silent elders, “do you remember the ship known as the *Haven*?”

“Here's your copy of documentation and agreements, dickwad.” Velika growls defeatedly as she pushes a stack of papers in my direction.

I take the stack of papers and do a full check onceover. This time, there is no invisible ink, vague wording, loopholes, or, thankfully, skills, just boring legal bureaucratic mumbo-jumbo.

“Perfect.”

I reach into my shadow and produce the payment for parking my ship and the expenses involved. Which, once you take into account all normal costs, is a rather reasonable sum. A far cry from the sum she'd attempted to make me pay.

She snatches the payment, checks it, and grimaces at the crystals used for payment. An accepted payment method, albeit an annoying one that needs to be tendered.

"Are we done here?" I ask.

"Yes. Now get the fuck out of my office."

I stand up off my seat and move to the door. I turn the brass, detailed, dick handle and exit the office.

"Testudo, you know you didn't have to wait for me."

Testudo folds his arms, "I'm your [Vassal] now, so waiting for my [Emperor] is expected," he explains. He then glances at the document in my hand, "I was going to offer my [Lawyer] to help you deal with Velika, but it seems you've handled it on your own."

I shrug, "Honestly, I can deal with normal bureaucracy so long as it's not some magic reinforced verbal agreement bullshit from an over leveled [Empress]."

"[Empress]?"

"I'll tell you later. Let's get out of here. I'm tired of seeing dicks everywhere." I point at the decorated statues and portraits of dicks. Yes, dicks. The Damn woman has a dick fetish.

Testudo chuckles, "She grew up near the Bards' Guild, so that's kinda to be expected."

Me and Testudo exit the penis shaped building and are met with a slightly dimmed light. A casual glance reveals that it is night outside, so there's no sunlight streaming onto the port from the cave opening.

"Damn, how long did that take?" I ask.

"A good four hours."

"Shit. You waited for me for four hours?"

Testudo grins in reply.

I shake my head at the man. Four hours of waiting is too much. Hell, even an hour of bureaucratic crap is too long.

I yawn. “Well, I’d better go find Jessica. Hopefully she found a good Inn. I’m feeling a bit tired.”

“I’ll go with you. [Summon Royal Beverage].” Testudo activates a skill that causes a steaming enchanted mug of coffee to appear in his hand. He extends the beverage, which I accept appreciatively.

I drink the divine liquid and nod at the earthy taste. “So, new skill? I like it.”

“Upgraded skill,” he explains as we start walking. “I stopped at a world stone to see if anything’s changed. Well, it was a bit of a surprise but I leveled quite a lot, including a change in my class, new skills, and upgraded ones.

“Leveled, eh.”

Testudo Shell

Level 281 [Royal Merchant Admirlord]

Testudo is the lord and leader of the Navis Archipelago and captain of the Navis’ flagship. He is a master in administration, mercantilism, and the seas. Of the ten most powerful living sea captains, he is easily the wealthiest thanks to his ability to bring an island's worth of trade to entire cities.

“Over ten levels. I’m surprised it was so many levels, though I guess it would make sense considering how much of a risk I’d taken.” He raises his hand as though he were holding a cup, “[Summon Royal Beverage]”. Another drink pops up in his hand, the same as the one in my own.

“Now this,” he takes a sip, “is probably the best skill upgrade out of all of them. [Summon Beverage] was useless since it summoned a random drink that I own. That includes water, coffee, alcohol, and oddly enough, the disgusting tea. But the royal upgrade now only summons the best pre-prepared drink fit for royalty. Which, thanks to some preparations aboard my castle, is perfectly brewed coffee.”

I nod, finding the skill almost superior to my shadow. I could summon coffee as well, but it would have lost its heat... actually, now that I think about it, what exactly is the ambient temperature in my shadow dimension?

“Any other skills?”

“Just the usual [Royal Merchant] skill line upgrade... though, I did get a Legendary skill called [Raise Undead Ship].”

I perk up, “Sounds like you can create an undead fleet. Have you tried using it yet?”

He shakes his head, “I tried, but it feels like I’ll need resources.”

“Probably a broken or damaged ship with some corpses and an albatross, then.” I tap my chin in thought “If you ever go to the south side of the continent, there’s a hell of a lot of old shipwrecks. You can try raising up a navy with the skill. Hell, might as well start up a port. My city should be rather close for trade and the shipwrecks alone would be more than enough to pay for everything.”

I take a gulp from my coffee. “Actually, you know what, I’m going to make that as an order. Testudo, I order you to head south and set up a port.”

Testudo grins, “Understood. Let me just get some preparation and I’ll get on it before the end of the week.”

I wave at him “Take your time. No need to rush. This isn- HOLY SHIT.” I halt completely at the exit to the port and the entrance to the city proper. My gaze focuses on the extensively decorated stone floor.

Testudo smirks when he notices what I’m looking at. “Svartalfheim is an old city filled with impeccable art. Everything and anything that can be crafted is going to be crafted with the truest of art.”

I shake my head, “No, I’m not talking about the art. I’ve seen far greater works before. No, what I’m curious about is that the entire stone floor artwork is a dormant enchantment.

The [Lord] frowns, “You sure? I’m not sensing anything magical about it. It just looks very artsy.”

I lick my lips as I continue tracing the clearly connected lines. I continue walking further into Svartalfheim and staring at the art as it changes but flows. Like cursive, there is no break as one image flows to the next. This enchantment structure is old and inefficient. It takes an extraordinary amount of time and skill to produce several feet, let alone what seems to be entire miles. But, such enchantments tend to be the most resilient to the ravages of time and are capable of accepting enormous stores of mana to power effects. The only other times I’ve seen such enchanting was inside the city Muspelheim, Davy Jones ship, and Mimir’s tower.

I’d tried reproducing the enchantments and found it took much too long for my purposes.

“Quasi, please move off the central street.”

Breaking me out of my revelry, I look away from the floor and find myself in the midst of a very modern looking street with sidewalks, of which I am not on.

“Right.”

I walk to the sidewalk and then take a good long look at everything. Indeed, everything is artsy and everything is detailed and impressive. But, it doesn't compare to the floor. Sure, it lacks detail if all you do is look at it. But, if you know enchanting, specifically the old forgotten versions of enchanting, you'll find that whoever created all this artwork did it with extraordinary skill and purpose.

Unfortunately, like a puzzle, I've only gazed at a small piece, and so far, the purpose eludes me.

“Quasi, should we not look for Jessica? Do you know where she's at?”

“Hmm? Oh, yea. She's wearing one of my rings.” I raise my hand and point in the direction, “She's thataway. Let's go.”