

Pandora's Actor sifted through the cacophony of thoughts that came with the Baroness' party. The locally-made public transportation carriages were nothing new to the Adventurers, but the individuals who emerged caused quite the stir.

*He's so handsome...*

*That girl with the glasses is just my type!*

*Eh? They're making us escort a pregnant woman through Undead-infested woods?*

Once the storm of thoughts and body language that could only be described as 'Human', Pandora's Actor took a step forward and offered a slight bow.

"Welcome to our expedition camp, Baroness Zahradnik. Though I suppose the greeting might be strange, given that you drop by every few days."

"It would never cross my mind to turn down words of welcome," Baroness Zahradnik replied. "I have the pleasure of introducing three important guests from the Baharuth Empire. This is the Head Imperial Court Mage and the Countess of Waldenstein, Frianne von Gushmond. Beside her is the Mage Captain of the Imperial Army's Sixth Army Group, and the Viscount of Brennenthal, Rangobart Roberbad. Beside him is an officer from the Imperial Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dimoiya of House Erex."

*What the— that pregnant woman is Head Imperial Court Mage?*

*I wonder if Lord Brennenthal is taking concubines. He looks young, so maybe I have a chance at first wife?*

*Stupid Rangobart. Just wait until we get back...*

A chill ran up Pandora's Actor's spine as he read the bespectacled girl's thoughts. Women were terrifying creatures.

"I never realised our guests occupied stations of such high esteem," Pandora's Actor said. "My name is Momon. You may know me as Momon the Black of *Darkness*. This is Themis Aspasia, a Cleric of Surshana. Beside her is Alessia di Altamura, a Paladin of Surshana. Both are Orichalcum-rank Adventurers and well-suited to oversee our expedition here."

*Heh...so that's the famous Momon?*

*I wonder how many Demihumans, half-breeds, and heretics she purges a week...she's so pretty that it must be at least in the double digits.*

Pandora's Actor blinked at the stray thought from Dimoiya Erex. Was there something about Alessia's activities that he wasn't aware of? No, security was peerless in the Sorcerous Kingdom.

They started their tour of the expedition camp, though Pandora's Actor felt that there wasn't much to it. It was basically a fortified encampment with two layers, consisting of the 'work' area in the middle and the Adventurer's tents and personal facilities on the outside. There was also a small lot with crates and pallets of samples that were delivered daily to Warden's Vale.

"This isn't too dissimilar from the camp of an imperial patrol," Rangobart noted.

"That shouldn't be surprising," Baroness Zahradnik said. "There are only so many options to establish a camp for a small group in the wilderness, and any experienced group will tend to devise the same configuration. The main difference here is how this camp will eventually house civilian experts who will analyse the expedition's findings once they are secured."

"Wouldn't it be better to keep vulnerable personnel at home or at least in a fortified location nearby?"

"It depends on the circumstances. Some things simply can't be moved and people have to come out to study them. Other things can be moved but it's probably not a good idea to do so. The most frequent issue we've run into recently is that *too many* things get moved that aren't important enough to move, but the Adventurers had no idea that they aren't. Having an expert on hand reduces the clutter."

*This fellow seems to be more interested in mundane processes rather than any exciting episodes...*

Viscount Brennenthal was difficult to read. He was aloof inwardly as well as outwardly most of the time, then became sharply focused whenever he had something to say. Nothing in the way of stray surface thoughts offered themselves to Pandora's Actor thus far.

Was the high degree of mental discipline a result of some sort of special training, or was it merely a coincidence? There were very few people who could confound him like that, so Pandora's Actor couldn't help but worry that training existed against his abilities that didn't rely on raw resistance or immunity.

Themis led them around the camp, eventually bringing them to the aforementioned work areas for their civilian specialists. Each space consisted of a modest tent that functioned as an office and living space, a pavilion that sheltered a makeshift workshop, and a smaller tent for storage.

“In a more established expeditionary camp,” Themis said, “this is where the on-site civilian analysts would usually be.”

“That reminds me,” Ludmila said. “The Faculty of Necromancy would like to get started on their studies as quickly as possible. I’m not sure how the Adventurer Guild wants to navigate that headache. Everyone wants to be first and insists that everyone else will ruin everything if they go around touching the sites.”

“But they’re already in ruins...”

“Didn’t you face the same issues during the Azerlisia Expedition?”

“Only when we were in Feoh Teiwaz. The Dwarf Sages were insistent on being there to see every little thing the moment we uncovered it. We settled on establishing guidelines for future expeditions after that, but it’s barely been a month since the expedition ended.”

“Is there any threat to their safety here?” Pandora’s Actor asked.

“There aren’t any *apparent* threats to their safety,” Themis replied. “But this *is* a negative energy zone. I already have my misgivings about camping here – there’s no telling when a Skeleton might spawn in someone’s tent or some spectral-type Undead floats in from the surrounding forest. My recommendation is that we hold off on bringing in research teams until we move our base camp to the other side of the river once the bridge is complete.”

He turned his head to regard the construction in the distance.

“How long will that take?”

“The Ministry of Transportation’s schedule states that the bridge should be traversable in two weeks,” Lady Zahradnik said. “It won’t be ready for vehicle traffic until the end of the month.”

“In that case,” Themis said, “they’ll have to be based in the southern port. It’s a lucky thing we’re operating where we are.”

“How would you approach the issue in more remote locales?” Viscount Brennenthal asked.

“That depends on the locale,” Themis answered. “This ‘haunted forest’ presents unique challenges due to its supernatural nature. We can create a perimeter to dissuade wild animals and even Monsters from encroaching on the camp, but beings like the Undead and Elementals function

according to a different set of 'rules'. The Azerlisian Expedition didn't face many supernatural challenges and we expect that most wilderness areas would have issues of the more conventional sort. In those situations, we can more reliably protect our analysts."

"How often do Undead spawn here?"

"They haven't yet in the camp's location," Themis replied, "but that's no guarantee that they won't. According to our information, a Goblin army moved through the area and they are as much living beings as we are. The only locations that have begun to 'recover' from their presence are the ruins scattered across the forest. Of the seventy ruined settlements we've identified so far, all of them are haunted and nine out of ten contain lesser Undead. Mostly Skeletons and Zombies."

"Would it not be for the best to keep those sites clear while they're still manageable?" Countess Waldenstein asked.

"If Adventurers were an army patrol tasked with domestic security, sure," Themis answered with a shrug. "But these Undead are far too weak to threaten our expeditions. Anything that isn't trivial to us has a chance of having intelligence, so our approach changes with them."

"So you mean to say that you attempt to engage in non-violent discourse."

"It hasn't happened so far, so I can't say exactly how things would go. We could at least send an Elder Lich to speak with an Elder Lich we find out in the world somewhere. The Sorcerous Kingdom already has a handful of what we consider 'wild' Undead leading lives...unlives? As productive citizens, so it's an avenue worth exploring."

*Are Clerics allowed to say such things?*

Pandora's Actor held in a snort at the Countess' thoughts. Granted, even in the Sorcerous Kingdom, the majority of people would react the same way. Even so, it never ceased to amuse him how they could conveniently rationalise or outright deny their rapidly changing reality.

"We may yet get a chance to see how things play out," Momon said. "I mean no disrespect, but will you be able to travel through the forest? Our target site is roughly an hour by foot to the southeast."

"Countess Waldenstein is the equivalent of a Mithril-rank Adventurer," Lady Zahradnik said, "so she isn't as frail as she may appear."

*Mithril? I should be at least Orichalcum...*

He glanced out of the side of his visor as the Countess shifted slightly at the assessment.

“Lady Waldenstein,” Pandora’s Actor said. “Similarities between our Adventurer Guild and the one you’re familiar with may have caused some confusion. The region’s Adventurer Guilds rank teams according to the commissions that they can complete. A member of a team that can complete a Mithril-rank commission is a member of a Mithril-rank Adventurer party. A Mithril-rank member of the Sorcerous Kingdom’s Adventurer Guild, however, is capable of completing a Mithril-rank commission on their own.”

“I see.”

He could sense each of their imperial guests taking a mental inventory of the Adventurers around them...or, more specifically, their tags. Team Four was a Platinum-rank team, which made it a high-Mithril or even low-Orichalcum team by regional standards. At least one of the Mithril teams in the expedition would qualify as a low-Adamantite team. It was a complete inversion of the structure of the Empire’s Adventurer and Worker teams, which tended to rely on large or highly specialised teams of members to tackle jobs.

“It’s a sensible change, I think,” Viscount Brennenthal nodded. “The way that the Adventurer Guild rated their members always put individual strength in question. My comrades tended to argue endlessly about which Adventurer from what team was stronger and the loose way in which the Adventurer Guild issued commissions was a continual point of annoyance for the Imperial Administration.”

“Annoyance?” Pandora’s Actor asked, “In what way?”

“Well, it won’t be an issue much longer with the integration of the Sorcerous Kingdom’s Undead into the Imperial Army,” the Viscount said, “but you could say that it’s a matter of accounting. The Imperial Administration prefers to operate with standardised measures wherever possible. When it comes to security, the organisation of the Imperial Knights offers that standard, and then the jump to hiring Adventurers for high-threat tasks introduces a...*variance* that can often exceed the extrapolated cost of security by three times or more.”

“Shouldn’t that be considered an issue of scarcity? Security is a ‘market’ like any other.”

“That is how the Guild presents it. Most of my acquaintances in the Imperial Administration see it as nothing more than thinly veiled profiteering. The security of the realm should not hinge on the whims of an organisation that always proclaims its independence from the realm and its troubles, selectively choosing which tasks can and cannot be done.”

“This seems to be a common sentiment even amongst administrators in many countries.”

“And rightly so,” the nobleman said. “Their safety and livelihoods are at stake, after all. I can’t imagine what it’s like in Re-Estize where most Nobles rely on Adventurers for anything but the least of threats.”

The Viscount seemed genuine in his sentiment, but Pandora’s Actor lacked the relevant experience to gauge its broader veracity. By the time he had taken over the role of Momon the Black, he was already a celebrity who enjoyed the unassailable reputation built up by his Master. Few ill thoughts directed toward his person outside of a natural sense of envy or jealousy ever entered into his psionic awareness.

They conducted a last-minute check for supplies before departing from the expedition base down a well-worn trail. The Adventurers from Team Four divided themselves into forward and rear parties while Team Six – namely, Momon, Themis, Alessia, and Lady Zahradnik – stayed close to their guests.

“I’m surprised that one can find animal trails in a haunted forest,” Viscount Brennenthal said.

“An animal trail wouldn’t be this large even if the forest wasn’t haunted,” Lady Zahradnik said. “This is probably the work of patrols from the Goblin army.”

“There aren’t any left over, are there?” Miss Erex asked.

“They were fleeing from the Fiend known as Jaldabaoth,” Lady Zahradnik answered. “Any survivors would have dispersed into the Upper Reaches.”

“You mean the Goblins that attacked you are still around?”

“At least some of them. Once the Goblin Army was shattered, the survivors either joined the local tribes or formed new ones. I suppose they’re my subjects now.”

“That’s weirdly flexible of you,” Countess Waldenstein said.

“Is it? The contest was already settled. Would the Empire butcher the citizens of E-Rantel if they had managed to score a decisive victory against Re-Estize?”

“No, but they wouldn’t have eaten us if we lost. Not that we would have lost.”

“That may be true,” Ludmila admitted, “But I doubt that’s the Empire’s true reason.”

“The Temples would complain!” Miss Erex said.

“It would be a waste of manpower,” Viscount Brennenthal said. “Would your Demihuman subjects complain like the Temples?”

“No more than a Farmer in the Empire would care about the fate of a Farmer in Re-Estize.”

Pandora’s Actor silently pondered the exchange. How the natives reacted to the actions of others was still something of a conundrum to Nazarick’s denizens.

To the NPCs, it was a simple matter. There was Nazarick, and then there was everyone else. An attack on even the lowliest POP was an attack on Nazarick. If a theoretical Doppelganger country was razed to the ground somewhere, neither Pandora’s Actor nor Narberal would care. Those who might intervene on behalf of outsiders didn’t do so out of any sense of kinship, but because they were created to do so. The territory under Nazarick’s control was considered the property of their Supreme Overlord, Ainz Ooal Gown. The natives dwelling in those lands occupied a spectrum that ranged from honorary Area Guardians to semi-autonomous sources of revenue.

Outside of the Sorcerous Kingdom, nay, even within it, the people were fragmented. Family; religion; guild; community – many different factors tugged at one’s allegiance and those factors went into an often fickle calculation as to whether intervention in another’s troubles was warranted.

On one hand, it allowed Nazarick to operate with laughable ease, hatching whatever schemes they pleased. On the other hand, the citizens of the Sorcerous Kingdom possessed the same behaviours. Though the Supreme One had already given them the solution to that problem, enacting that solution was a long and arduous process filled with countless unknowns.

They reached the first checkpoint without hearing so much as a peep from the surroundings. Reaching the second checkpoint offered just as little fuss and they arrived at their destination not long after. Both the Adventurers and their guests tensed as the subtle scent of undeath abruptly thickened in the air hanging over the vine-choked ruins.

“「Reinforce Armour」, 「Shield Wall」, 「Lesser Dexterity」, 「Stoneskin」, 「Displacement」, 「Fire Shield」.”

Countess Waldenstein cast a long line of defensive enchantments. Her two companions followed suit.

“Ah! Wait!” Penn twirled on the spot, flashing a glimpse of her string undergarments through the slit in her robe, “Dammit, I missed the *Stoneskin*.”

“You’re a Sorceress?” Countess Waldenstein asked.

“Yeah,” Penn nodded. “It’s rare to see Fourth-tier magic being cast. That *Stoneskin* came out of the blue.”

Equal parts curiosity and defensiveness emanated from Countess Waldenstein.

“Sorceresses are quite rare,” she said. “I imagine you’ve learned much with so many Elder Liches present throughout the Sorcerous Kingdom.”

“Some might think that, but they’ve got a certain *theme* if you know what I mean.”

“I see,” Countess Waldenstein said. “What’s your speciality?”

“I’m working toward becoming a Fire Elementalist. Still need defensive spells in this line of work, though.”

“Can you scribe scrolls? Perhaps we could settle on a trade...”

“A trade...? Ah, sorry, I never learned how. I don’t think it’s a common skill for Sorcerers in general.”

The sliver of Countess Waldenstein’s goodwill cultivated through the exchange evaporated at Penn’s reply.

*Well, that was a blind spot if there ever was one. I should encourage her to learn how to scribe scrolls.*

Sorcerers did not exist in *Yggdrasil*, and Penn was the only known Sorcerer in the Sorcerous Kingdom. In *Yggdrasil*, every Player selected its spells and skills upon levelling, so a class that learned magic the way that Sorcerers did didn’t exist. He supposed that a Sorcerer might appear as a thief to a Wizard, lying in wait to copy the fruit of years of hard-earned study and costly research.

“How is it looking in there?” Pandora’s Actor asked.

“We just scouted the perimeter,” Howe, a Gold Rank Rogue from Team Two replied. “Skeletons and Zombies just inside the fringes. We spotted some Wights further in.”

“Any sign of the sneaky types?” Alessia asked.

“Specs? Not yet.”

“What race are they?” Pandora’s Actor asked.

“Race?” Howe looked over his shoulder, “It’s a mix. Nothing Human, as far as I’ve seen.”

The man looked to the other scouts, who confirmed his findings.

“How is the place laid out?”

“Um...townish? Anything that wasn’t stone’s long rotted away. Most of everything that’s left is inside that ridge encircling them – we figure it’s the remains of the town wall.”

“Did anyone get a closer look at it?”

The scouts shook their heads.

“The place is big enough that we’re not sure how many Undead are in there. Didn’t want to start something messy.”

“A prudent choice,” Pandora’s Actor nodded. “Now that we’re all here, let’s see what this place has to offer. Be careful not to damage the ruins.”

“We going in or pulling?”

“Draw out our first set. An abrupt increase in difficulty could be somewhat unpleasant for our guests.”

Four Rangers stepped forward, lining up along the bank of the dried brook between the Adventurers and the ruins. One sent a blunt arrow sailing through the air to shatter the skull of a Skeleton near the ruined wall. Several dozen Undead turned and clambered in their direction. The other Rangers let loose, felling Skeletons and Zombies with every attack.

A single Skeleton reached Henrich in the front line, but as the plate-clad Fighter raised his warhammer to give it a whack, an arrow whizzed in and blasted his bony opponent apart. Henrich turned around and looked at the Rangers.

“Really?”

The Rangers stared back at him with perfectly straight expressions. Pandora’s Actor cleared his throat.

“Is there any movement further in?” He asked.

“Nothing but the wind in the branches,” Pool, one of the Rangers, said. “The Rogues are already halfway into the town.”

“Then let’s continue clearing the perimeter while we wait for their report.”

Standing on a large boulder overlooking the surroundings, Countess Waldenstein and the other guests watched as the Adventurers carried out their orders. Unsurprisingly, the trivial task didn’t elicit any thoughts of admiration from the trio.

“Do you have any questions for us while we wait?” Pandora’s Actor asked.

“I’ve been reviewing the terms for the Adventurer Guild’s expeditions,” Viscount Brennenthal said. “They seem somewhat similar to the exploration arrangements that governments issue when the occasional ruin is found.”

Pandora’s Actor sent Lady Zahradnik a questioning look.

“Viscount Brennenthal will be employing the Adventurer Guild to survey his new fief in The Blister,” Lady Zahradnik said. “The commission has already received His Majesty the Sorcerer King’s tacit approval.”

“In that case,” Pandora’s Actor said, “I suppose it’s no small wonder that you asked, Lord Brennenthal. The terms are indeed modelled using similar arrangements in the past. Are there ruins in your new territory?”

“That is a complete unknown,” the Viscount replied. “As Lady Zahradnik mentioned, my new fief is in The Blister, which has been the domain of the Viridian Dragon Lord for centuries. Our recent campaign there suggests any ruins that may exist have long been ‘explored’ by the former residents. I think I speak for most of my comrades who might avail themselves of your services that the immediate concern would be the discovery of hidden hoards left behind by the Dragons.”

*Hoh...as expected of Ainz-sama.*

It was a far more exciting prospect for the experienced Adventurers than their current assignment. In his infinite wisdom, their Master had already made a decisive move to not only relieve them of their boredom, but spread the word of the Sorcerous Kingdom's Adventurer Guild. He had undoubtedly made arrangements to ensure that the Empire would rely on their services for the foreseeable future.

"Even if something like that was discovered," Pandora's Actor said, "the terms of the contract would not change. What we find on your land is your property. I do believe that there is a clause where certain artefacts may be taken aside temporarily for research, however. When did you intend on hiring the Adventurer Guild for this survey?"

"As soon as possible," Viscount Brennenthal said. "The Baroness mentioned that it shouldn't be an issue."

"It's an official commission," Lady Zahradnik said, "so it will take priority. This training expedition is better suited for our trainees, anyway. We can have them take over once the bridge is finished construction so they can set up a new expedition camp across the river as Themis recommends."

Pandora's Actor nodded. Everything fit together perfectly, as it should be for any of their Master's plans. As it ever was, his all-encompassing gaze never missed even the smallest details.

"You aren't incorrect," he said. "I hope you don't mind situating yet another expedition."

"I live to serve at His Majesty's pleasure," Lady Zahradnik replied.

"How many of these 'expeditions' can you dispatch?" Viscount Brennenthal asked.

"The minimum rank to qualify for official expeditions is Gold," Pandora's Actor answered. "If all goes well, we'll have a second expeditionary force ready before winter."

"Our newly-landed Imperial Knights will be glad to hear that," the Viscount said. "We have a lot of land to survey, and everyone eagerly anticipates being able to proceed with development."

*Enough to inspire confidence, but not enough to shock, eh?*

It was possible that their guests weren't aware that most of their second expedition was composed of new recruits. Any Adventurer who could rise from Copper to Gold in less than two years would be considered a genius in the Empire and the Sorcerous Kingdom was raising dozens of them at once.

Was it a weak spot in their marketing? Or was it a reputation for excellence that they could cultivate through their work? After a moment's thought, he decided the latter was the better option. Those who aspired to that same excellence would eventually come on their own.

"Howe's back," Themis said. "What did you find?"

"Gradient spike...I think that's what we're calling it these days? Difficulty Ratings get up to the sixties or seventies from what I saw. There's a ruined keep or barracks or something like that in the middle of town. The setup's almost exactly like Zahradnik's lectures."

"What does that mean?" Countess Waldenstein asked.

"Negative energy zones create their own ecologies," Lady Zahradnik answered, "becoming a dark reflection of life. In a settlement like this, every Undead being manifests as a 'citizen'. This has the side benefit of making it easy for us to read the layout of such locations. Did you find any 'lords'?"

"Not on that pass," Howe replied. "There are a handful of 'officers' and 'prominent citizens'. The 'mayor' is a Blood Meat Hulk, heh."

Adventurers filtered back as the Rogues delivered their scouting reports. The site would make for a more impressive demonstration than he had initially thought.

"How much further south beyond this town has the expedition scouted?" Lady Zahradnik asked.

Themis pulled a map out of a satchel on her hip.

"Five kilometres, give or take."

"Have the elemental gradients been mapped?"

“We haven’t located another town, yet,” Themis replied, “but the content of the villages does suggest that the elemental gradient continues to shift in favour of negative energy past this point. We haven’t found anything resembling a ‘front line’ yet.”

“It seems like we’ll be sending everyone away just as things get interesting here,” Lady Zahradnik murmured.

Pandora’s Actor conjured up a vision of the past in his mind, using the evidence left behind in the haunted forest. Presumably, the negative energy concentrations would be at their greatest wherever the greatest amount of violence, suffering, and death had occurred, leaving a negative energy imprint indicating where the ‘front line’ of the conflict was. As far as he could tell, the enemy of these people came swiftly and suddenly.

The residents of the city had managed to evacuate, but this town a few kilometres to the southeast had purchased the time to do so with rivers of blood. This resulted in the ‘spike’ in negative energy concentrations. He couldn’t tell how many people had lived in this ancient country, but there probably weren’t enough to repeat the same sacrifice too many times. The front line of the conflict probably wasn’t far.

“Lady Zahradnik,” Pandora’s Actor said. “Do you mind taking command? We may be able to get to the bottom of this mystery before the day is done.”