

*They seriously left me behind...*

Momon the Black was supposed to fade from prominence, but Pandora's Actor wasn't sure how he felt about fading into obscurity. Granted, he had gotten curious about some of the ruins he had walked by and then spent the next few hours exploring the forest as Tigris Euphrates, but he never expected to return to an empty expedition camp.

*Baroness Zahradnik probably brought them back to Warden's Vale to discuss Viscount Brennenthal's commission.*

The Baroness' approach to social functions was every bit as practical as everything else that she did. Even celebrations served one purpose or the other, if not several at once.

As it would probably be Awkward if he suddenly showed up mid-dinner, Pandora's Actor took his time making his way back to Warden's Vale. Along the way, he came across an Elder Lich observing two warring highland tribes from a rocky outcropping.

"What's going on here?" Pandora's Actor asked.

"This one is recording the interactions of the two groups of agents below," the Undead mage replied.

*Agents...agent-based modelling, huh...*

It was a bit of wisdom left behind by the Supreme Beings in the Great Library of Ashurbanipal. One could supposedly simulate complex systems and glean data from the individuals acting within them. To their great shame, the three great minds of Nazarick could never seem to get it right even with the vast mental faculties they had been created with. For some reason, the natives never immediately recognised the supremeness of the Supreme One and didn't fling themselves on the ground in abject humility for being allowed to exist in the same world as He. There was clearly something wrong with their heads.

The technique, it seemed, wasn't foreign to the locals, either. They didn't simulate things, but rather let them happen in reality and Baroness Zahradnik was the most extreme about it. The Upper Reaches had been transformed into a gigantic economic and social experiment, though its denizens had no clue about it.

"Have there been any interesting developments?" Pandora's Actor asked.

"No."

Pandora's Actor waited for the Elder Lich to elaborate, but it seemed content with its answer.

*So much for seeing what's behind the reports.*

By and large, the administration's data was delivered in the sterile, no-nonsense style expected of the Elder Liches, but he had still hoped for something meatier on-site. All he could really say from what he had seen so far was that things were progressing. What they were progressing towards was another question.

"How has the local economy been developing?"

"Slowly," the Elder Lich said. "Transfers of goods between tribal populations more often occur as the result of conflict rather than trade. Has the Royal Court devised a method of taxing such transactions?"

"Er...no. I believe the idea is to have the tribes gradually develop their own versions of more advanced economies. Exacting a portion of plunder as tribute wouldn't cast the Sorcerous Kingdom in a very good light. We're supposed to be an upstanding, civilised nation; not some sort of organised criminal enterprise."

"In that case, this one estimates that revenues from this territory will not match those of a developed barony in the heartlands for half a millennium, if ever. Preservation of wealth and productive assets is a foreign concept to the local tribes."

"Mah, well, that's why they've remained as wilderness tribes this entire time, no? The land is their 'productive asset'."

"Which currently cannot be taxed."

"I believe your colleagues collecting data along the river would say otherwise. Rudimentary concepts of regular trade have already taken root there. With trade comes ideas, so I don't share the same, dismal projections."

The nascent river trade was already giving many tribes a clear advantage over their landlocked rivals. As one might suspect, they used those advantages to more effectively pursue their traditional ways, expanding their territories and absorbing smaller tribes. How each tribe and race organised themselves was of interest to Baroness Zahradnik, but also to the central administration as their current laws had many holes and shortfalls when it came to nonhuman behaviours.

For the time being, they were relying on force to uphold those laws, but continuing as they were would undoubtedly become burdensome with the Sorcerous Kingdom expanding its borders and influence. They needed systems that would work for a multiracial population. The efforts of Nobles like Baroness Zahradnik and Baroness Gagnier were currently their greatest leads to realising those systems.

*There's Countess Wagner's planned trade delegation to the City State Alliance in the spring, as well. We should have plenty of data to make comparisons by then.*

He left the Elder Lich to his observations, following the mountain slopes northeast toward Warden's Vale. Indeed, things in the Sorcerous Kingdom seemed to be progressing steadily. Combined with Demiurge's work abroad, they were well on their way to appearing as an island of peace and prosperity in an increasingly troubled world.

Twilight had long passed by the time he finally arrived in Warden's Vale. To his surprise, he found Baroness Zahradnik and her Lady's Maid outside the foundry on the southern end of the future city. The noblewoman inclined her head in greeting.

"You survived," she said.

"Of course!" He chuckled, "I expected you to be entertaining your guests."

The Baroness gestured toward a carriage parked nearby. Its Soul Eater carted them off at a decent clip once they seated themselves within.

"They're still enjoying themselves with the Adventurers at the restaurant. I excused myself to get some work done. Speaking of which, how is Miss Faber coming along? She was quite excited about her new work order."

"I believe she's progressing splendidly," he replied. "I'm having her work with some Mithril Ore now."

"I cannot begin to express how thankful I am for your help," Lady Zahradnik said. "There isn't much demand for the calibre of work that she's capable of here yet."

"Is that so? What about tools necessary for the work of other artisans?"

"Unless it's a blade of some kind, she won't be producing those sorts of goods. The work will go to its respective artisan."

*Strict as ever, I see...*

Not that it was a bad thing. In fact, it was just the opposite. The experiment related to the girl – which also involved two dozen subjects based in various locations around the Sorcerous Kingdom – sought to determine how readily the natives picked up specialised Job Classes. They received basic training as Blacksmiths before being tasked to exclusively forge specific categories of goods. In theory, this meant that they would begin with the Blacksmith Job Class, then advance to become the specialists that their tasks guided them toward. Miss Faber was meant to advance from Blacksmith to Weaponsmith, and then to Bladesmith.

Pandora's Actor sought to answer several other questions involving Job Class progression through the experiment and many others like it. The existence of certain individuals gaining certain prestige classes long before they should have been able to suggested that Job Class prerequisites did not exist or at the least weren't as stringent as they were in Yggdrasil. This was both intriguing and concerning at the same time.

According to their Master, the number of 'capstone' Prestige Classes – the powerful, top-tier Job Classes that lay at the top of a mountain of prerequisites, like Eclipse and Valkyrie – that a build could obtain was limited by the levels that their prerequisites took up. Heteromorphs often had a good chunk of their Level 100 cap taken up by Racial Class Levels, so they ended up being pigeonholed into very specific builds with only one or two capstone classes. Humanoids, on the other hand, could have two or even three times the number of capstone classes as their heteromorphic counterparts depending on the synergy of their Job Class Builds.

When one considered how the natives of the world could seemingly 'skip' prerequisites and manifest previously unknown Job Classes that had little to no respect for Yggdrasil's 'balance', it presented a disturbing possibility. Impossibly powerful individuals could exist in the world: ones with builds that minimised prerequisites and ended up with dozens of capstone classes. Such an individual could supersede the strength of even the Eighth Floor's defenders and bring ruin to Nazarick.

Fortunately, a seemingly insurmountable wall lay between any native with that potential and the dreaded outcome. The first was that the natives they had encountered thus far appeared to be unaware that the Job Class System existed at all. Someone, somewhere had to have figured it out, however. Job Classes left very clear and replicable indications of the system's existence and the earliest evidence of potential Players in the region dated from over half a millennium previous.

People had centuries of accrued data to draw conclusions from, so Pandora's Actor could only assume that there were entire civilisations taking advantage of that knowledge. The Beastmen encountered in the Draconic Kingdom that effortlessly dispatched Baroness Zahradnik were potential examples of this and thus utmost caution was demanded in their investigation.

Economic restrictions presented the second major barrier. Using Blacksmiths as an example, trying to do what they were doing in Miss Faber's Bladesmith experiment was practically impossible for most individuals. A novice Blacksmith could not simply sit around and wait for specific types of work, as they would starve in the process. Levelling also was a pain since experience seemed dependent on challenge relative to skill and class aptitudes – something else that didn't exist in *Yggdrasil* – seemed to vary by individual.

As Baroness Zahradnik had mentioned, demand for what the natives considered extraordinary work was negligible and additionally limited by the scarcity of materials. Farmers could only level so much by growing mundane grains. Combatants faced fewer and fewer worthy opponents the stronger they became and every worthy opponent was potentially one that ended their lives.

These challenges were easily overcome, however. All the natives had to do was the same thing that Nazarick did. Investment in institutions allowed for the cultivation of specialists and even insignificant tribes already did this to a small degree. Perhaps ironically, the more individualistic a society was, the less of a chance it had to produce individuals who stood above the rest. Maybe Narberal was on the right track all along with her constant referral to the natives as one bug or another. Specialisation is the key to their success, after all.

Despite the certainty that at least a few civilisations in their new world had grasped the Job Class System and put it to work for them, the last few obstacles to producing threats to Nazarick suggested that such threats were next to nonexistent.

The first of those was the low-level state of the world. So far, nearly everything was laughably weak and the remainder was still no true threat to Nazarick in its entirety. By the same token, materials that were middling by *Yggdrasil* standards were nonexistent in their new world. Even if one surpassed the low-level 'barrier', the sheer lack of information that the natives had access to was crippling. Individuals who advanced beyond Level Twenty were essentially pioneers facing the unknown.

All things considered, the great minds of Nazarick agreed that the odds of an existential threat to Nazarick were astronomically small. At best, some high-level natives benefitted from institutional investment with access to equipment from past Players. Their Job Class builds would be an absolute mess because reliable knowledge of high-level Job Classes, skills, spells, and abilities were legends of dubious veracity at best. Without foreknowledge, there was a near-infinite number of ways to slip up while scaling the pinnacles of power.

This only applied to purely-native civilisations, of course. Civilisations led by Players, on the other hand...

It would be foolish to assume that a country like the Sorcerous Kingdom hadn't been founded in the past or wouldn't appear in the future. The Slane Theocracy – which was by all appearances an incomplete attempt at just that – existed, after all.

And, so, the experiments commenced. To become the true masters of their new world, knowledge was required. To prove the supremacy of Nazarick, all challenges had to be overcome. If he said so himself, he was most suited to the task. He would scour the world and discover all of its secrets. He would collect the relics of Yggdrasil scattered far and wide. A true adventure lay before him, perhaps similar to the ones that the Supreme Beings embarked on in the past.

*One could say that I am learning how to fashion a new generation of NPCs, as well...*

His gaze went to Baroness Zahradnik, who continued to ride silently alongside him while he was absorbed in his thoughts. From a certain perspective, she was the first of those NPCs and also served as a perfect prototype. She probably wouldn't even mind if he rebuilt her from scratch if it meant she would be even better than before. The resurrections were free, too.

"What are you adding to the point catalogue? Miss LeNez mentioned that you ordered a new batch of weapon enchantments."

*Eh? How did she know I was done monologuing? I guess her powers of observation are getting up there...*

His 'Momon' form was that of a warrior, which meant he had little in the way of raw concealment. By assuming the forms of a few of the Supreme Beings, he found that the keen senses of Rangers and Rogues enabled them to read even the most insignificant amounts of body language, sound, and scent. This application of sensory abilities didn't exist in Yggdrasil, but, even so, their master in his infinite wisdom knew how to exploit it.

"Some of the rookies finally broke and bought weapons with basic enchantments," he said, "so I ordered replacements. Not that I don't understand the sentiment, but it never ceases to amaze me how consistent that behaviour is. Even after we made it clear that they could sell the equipment back to the point shop after they were done with it, they still tried to save up for choice items while taking all sorts of unnecessary punishment."

"Humans have a way of registering hardships as proof that their ventures are worthy of the effort," the Baroness said. "This undesirable behaviour won't end unless it's clear that what they're trying to do is impossible. Adding opponents that require magical weaponry to properly harm should help."

"There are too many demerits to that suggestion," Pandora's Actor replied. "Relying solely on specific opponents will drastically narrow down our encounter variety, thus simplifying training in a different way. If we sprinkle them in, the teams just resort to using magic to blast their way through. Ultimately, it will only have them upgrade their weapons and nothing else. Lord Mare intends to raise the overall difficulty to resolve the problem."

“Again?” The Baroness raised an eyebrow.

“Suffering builds character...or so they say. I’m hard-pressed to disagree given the results. How about you? Do you plan on using similar methods to train your recruits?”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to go through the proper channels for that answer.”

*Strict indeed...*

It didn’t matter if he was a member of the Royal Court: she wouldn’t share any information that Momon didn’t officially have access to despite their long-standing relationship. When he had first visited the military base in Warden’s Vale, the Undead were thoroughly confused when she chased the ‘unauthorised entity’ out.

“Are you acquainted with the Sorcerous Kingdom’s head of magic item development, by the way?”

“I’ve met him before,” Pandora’s Actor replied, “Why do you ask?”

“He keeps sending us the strangest letters,” Lady Zahradnik said. “I get the strong feeling that he has the same problem as our novice Adventurers. He doesn’t like anything that we’re producing and exhorts us to delve into the ‘abyss of magic’.”

“Ah, how should I say it...he’s an ambitious fellow. Don’t you aspire to have your companies produce superior items?”

“They *are* constantly improving, but I’m certain that the common folk have no interest in having their lighting plunging them into the ‘abyss of magic’.”

Pandora’s Actor chuckled at her reply. Despite seeing all sorts of unbelievably fantastical things by native standards, she ever remained grounded in her approach to governance and life in general.

“Perhaps your comparison isn’t too far off,” he said, “but don’t your magic casters carry the same enthusiasm?”

“It’s nowhere near as ambiguous,” Lady Zahradnik replied. “Everyone has clear, achievable goals. Well, the Necromancers are still making a collective, long-term study on how to turn themselves into Elder Liches...”

“...is that possible?”

“According to them, it is. It’s rumoured that several people elsewhere in the world have already achieved lichdom.”

*Yet another mystery...*

In *Yggdrasil*, a Skeleton Mage evolved into an Elder Lich using a specific item called the *Book of the Dead*. Skeleton Mages in their current world, however, were mindless and didn’t grow at all. Elder Liches naturally manifested as Elder Liches. A Human – or any other race, for that matter – should have required a World-class item to be able to change races in the way that the rumours claimed.

The idea that World-class effects might be achievable by the natives without having access to World-class items was a matter of grave concern. At the same time, the locals only seemed to consider it a ‘legendary’ feat. The local governments certainly didn’t invest any resources into obtaining the same power. It was a strange and irrational response to such information as far as he was concerned.

“Do these rumours have anything to do with the Elder Lich who rules over a city far to the southeast?”

“I have no idea,” Baroness Zahradnik replied. “It may be worth investigating in the future, but it will take a while for the Sorcerous Kingdom to grow its influence beyond the immediate region. Was the Royal Court considering reaching out to other Undead powers with its success in the Katze Plains?”

“We would if we actually knew where they were,” Pandora’s Actor replied. “Don’t you think it’s strange that the information that we have about the world beyond the immediate region is merely a collection of rumours and legends?”

“That’s simply a consequence of who delivers information, isn’t it?” The Baroness said, “Merchant networks will share reliable information about trade and events internally. Everyone else relies on Bards and other travellers, who only share what they consider interesting or entertaining. We won’t ever get the sorts of information about far-off lands that we’re looking for without going there ourselves.”

“Then how would an event like the Battle of Katze Plains, the submission of the Empire, or the invasions of the Draconic Kingdom or the Holy Kingdom be perceived?”

“That’s a question better answered by Countess Wagner, but, as I understand things, we exist in a corner of the world that’s about as far from anything important as possible. Furthermore, we’re viewed as little more than savage primitives. Stories of distant countries being invaded or



subjugated in such a place aren't noteworthy events. The Battle of Katze Plains stands out from the others due to the fact that it was...*prosecuted* in such a novel way."

Pandora's Actor cursed internally. He had been afraid of that. In other words, news of the Sorcerous Kingdom's helpful interventions and benevolent rule wouldn't make it far while something that raised its infamy likely did. The worst part about it was that they had no idea who was now aware of their existence and making preparations for whatever future they foresaw. Knowing the prevalent attitudes of the natives toward the Undead, they might very well be facing walls of superstition and fear wherever they went.

Their carriage dropped them off at the corner of the village square and Pandora's Actor accompanied the Baroness back to her manor. He eyed the unassuming patches of dirt scattered outside the building.

"It seems like Glasir's little projects are starting to bear fruit," he said. "Or maybe sprouts is a better way to describe it."

"The real test is whether they'll last," the Baroness said. "This soil is made up entirely of city refuse and dead Slimes."

He stopped to examine a patch of dirt near the road. It looked like any other sort of dirt to him. Hundreds of little sprouts carpeted the square-metre plot in stark contrast to the dark grey granite surrounding it.

"Would you like to join me inside?" Lady Zahradnik gestured at the door to her manor, "It looks like you have something to discuss."

The two Death Knights at the entrance offered sharp salutes as he passed between them. Lady Zahradnik's Maids went about their preparations to entertain their guest after he was seated at the table in the former war room on the second floor. The Baroness descended from her bedroom to join him shortly after, though the only thing that seemed to have changed about her was that she had let her hair down. Her long waves of chestnut hair gave off a silky sheen in the magical lighting as she seated herself across from him.

"The Royal Court reviewed the recently submitted development plans for the city here," he said. "I must say that it's an intriguing prospect...and ambitious. It will certainly be quite the sight to witness."

"Do you have any questions about the proposal?"

"My questions are merely out of curiosity," Pandora's Actor replied, "but the Royal Treasurer posed a few that must be answered. As you are a Ranger, you must know that the plants that Lord Mare brought for Glasir to raise are not mundane in any way."

The Baroness nodded.

“Yes, I realise that. Lord Mare went so far as to explain what they were when I noted that, but he wouldn’t say where they were from.”

“It’s the former that the Royal Treasurer is concerned about. Your development plans state that the public spaces of the city will be treated as common land. Maybe I’m misunderstanding something, but doesn’t that mean that goods harvested from the public spaces of the city will belong to the first citizen who puts in the effort?”

“That’s a rather odd interpretation,” Lady Zahradnik tilted her head curiously. “May I ask how in the world you managed to come up with such a thing?”

“That should be the rational conclusion, should it not? Have you not heard of the tragedy of the commons?”

A Maid appeared and poured out two cups of tea. She laid out a platter of biscuits before lowering her head and taking her leave

“I can’t say that I have,” Baroness Zahradnik said.

“Simply put, those who act out of rational self-interest will exploit common land to the detriment of all others. A man may graze his cows beyond his allotment so that they may produce more milk and thus gain more personal benefit. Others, seeing this, will do the same. As a result, the common land becomes ruined from overgrazing.”

“I can’t recall anything so silly ever happening before,” Lady Zahradnik said. “Is this...*idea* by any chance related to the Land Reorganisation Act?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. The House of Lords keeps unanimously voting down the act due to the clause that mandates the enclosure of common land for private redistribution.”

“Yes, I voted it down for the same reason. At the same time, the nobility is already applying the portions of the act that they see as beneficial.”

Which was an extraordinarily annoying tactic to Albedo. With every passing day, her Land Reorganisation Act lost more and more momentum because most of what it proposed to remedy was slowly, but surely, no longer becoming a problem. The more she tried to get the piece of legislation through, the more it seemed that she was wasting everyone’s time. Of course, no one ever suggested this to her face.

For the life of him, Pandora's Actor also couldn't see what was wrong with the bill. It was a piece of economic wisdom left behind by the Supreme Beings, after all.

Lady Zahradnik quietly sipped her tea, watching him with her dark brown eyes.

"Then perhaps you can explain to me why it is that they keep rejecting it," he said.

"I'm sure any of the other Nobles could explain it to you better," the Baroness replied, "but, as a whole, the reason is that it undermines the aristocratic establishment and weakens our societal fabric. The Royal Court is proposing the seizure of communal land that has been managed by the people for generations in the interests of 'economic efficiency'. The bill fails to propose how it will adequately compensate for the damage that this would cause...though, based on this 'tragedy of the commons' that you proposed, perhaps the Royal Court thinks that it is saving us from some injustice?"

"I can't speak for the others," Pandora's Actor said, "but I never imagined that the bill would be seen as harmful."

"That's because whatever image this 'tragedy' invoked couldn't be further from the truth. Common land isn't some...*pot* that people can access for soup as much as they wish. Common land usage rights are what is deemed fair allocation by community consensus. The local magistrate is responsible for keeping people accountable according to that agreement and the local lord enters the picture should forceful measures become necessary. This 'tragedy of the commons' does not exist in the rural territories of E-Rantel – only the triumph of community management. The very idea assumes that people are nothing more than unthinking animals...it's almost like an excuse to treat everyone as livestock.

"This motion to enclose common land alienates people from one another for no good reason. Not only does it distance the people from each other, it distances them from their lords and their sovereign. It has the effect of weakening the people's identity as villagers, denizens of a fief, and subjects of His Majesty the Sorcerer King. The Nobles of the Sorcerous Kingdom are rejecting the bill because it weakens the Sorcerous Kingdom on multiple levels in favour of a short-sighted desire for economic gain."

Pandora's Actor stared down at his steaming cup of tea. In truth, he had gone around asking the Nobles of the Duchy the very day that the House of Lords rejected Albedo's bill. Not only did he know that she would be infuriated by the rejection and would demand an explanation, but it was also an ideal opportunity to reinforce the notion that Momon the Black stood for the people of E-Rantel. By and large, Lady Zahradnik gave a simplified version of their rationale.

"In that case," he said, "could you explain how this system of common land will work in practice here?"

“It isn’t complicated,” Lady Zahradnik replied. “Lord Mare mentioned that the plants Glasir is tending to are supposed to grow around her tree and that the materials they produce are valuable to the Sorcerous Kingdom. The city’s custodians will be tending to the city’s public spaces and the local culture discourages people from doing what they aren’t supposed to be doing.”

“...I think I’ve lost sight of the part where this is supposedly common land,” Pandora’s Actor said.

“Think of it as the evolution of common land,” Lady Zahradnik’s lips turned up slightly. “A city is a population of specialists. It would hardly do to have them grow food and tend to herds on the side. The custodians of the city will be specialists themselves: Druids, Rangers, and their apprentices. Perhaps even Farmers. The proceeds garnered by their efforts will fund the operations and maintenance of the city as a whole. This, of course, includes programs that promote the health of the community.”

*Why didn’t Mare mention any of this? I should ask Aura next time.*

When he had asked about how things would work out in Warden’s Vale, the Floor Guardian’s answer was ‘Un. It should be fine...probably’. The plants that Mare had left with Glasir weren’t *too* valuable by *Yggdrasil* standards, but they were still ingredients that weren’t obtainable anywhere else. Thus, Mare’s ambiguous answer drove Pandora’s Actor to figure out how the resulting resources would be handled. In the end, it appeared that everything would be fine...probably.

“I’ll relay your words to the Royal Treasurer,” Pandora’s Actor rose from his seat. “Hopefully, they will be enough to answer his concerns.”

Baroness Zahradnik rose from her seat and lowered her head.

“It is always a pleasure to serve, she said. Hopefully, the next time that His Excellency the Royal Treasurer has questions for me, he will come and ask them himself.”