

*Hmm...*

“Is there something else I can help you with, good sir?”

“No, I’m good. Thank you for your assistance.”

“A pleasure, as always!”

*Not that it’s impossible, but he seems awfully upbeat for a Skeleton...*

In the guise of Momon the Black, Pandora’s Actor stole glances at the diminutive Skeleton Merchant across the bars of the counter. He wasn’t sure whether he could be classified as Undead or not. According to his Master, Jeeves was a Mercenary NPC that could be temporarily summoned to serve as a ‘trash-loot-vendor-slash-repair-bot’.

For a pittance in Yggdrasil Gold and the appropriate data, he served as an everyday convenience for the Supreme Beings. Indeed, his Master once offhandedly mentioned that, collectively, Jeeves in all of his iterations was technically the NPC that the Supreme Beings interacted with the most.

He felt a twinge of envy as he tried to imagine all of the far-flung locales in which the unassuming Mercenary NPC had been summoned to serve the Supreme Beings. What wonders had he witnessed? What items had the Supreme Beings personally passed into his hands, completely unknown to the Guild Treasury? Those memories were for Jeeves and the other Mercenary NPCs employed in Yggdrasil alone, as the base NPCs of Nazarick hadn’t been able to leave the guild base until their mysterious manifestation in their strange new world.

The Skeleton Merchant watched him with a pleasant expression as he placed a number of items into his inventory. Even now, Jeeves was something of a mystery. He and his predecessor had been placed into Baroness Zahradnik’s care as an experiment early in the Sorcerous Kingdom’s history.

None of the ‘features’ he possessed in Yggdrasil worked as they once did, but they still worked after a fashion. Additionally, he functioned according to his flavour text despite not having the requisite Job Class Levels as a Mercenary NPC, which was a crucial point of data that helped explain more than a few oddities experienced by many other NPCs. Last, but not least, Jeeves no longer had the limited duration he was supposed to have and there was no indication that he would expire any time soon.

Once he put away the last of his items, Pandora's Actor left the harbourmaster's office of Warden's Vale. He scanned the length of a port that was utterly unrecognisable from his first visit before turning on his heel to make his way to the village. And it was a village, which was more than a bit incongruous with the expansive facilities nearby.

While the harbour and its environs had changed drastically, its population remained small. Fewer than fifteen hundred Humans dwelt within the borders of the original barony and a trickle added to that number every month. Not that the land's 'area guardian' was very good at attracting people to her demesne.

*Tenants wanted. Undeveloped frontier. Long winters and cool summers. Must be fine with wild beasts, Monsters, Demihuman tribes, and the Undead. Dragon nearby. Ninety per cent tax.*

It wasn't a lie, but it only served to reinforce the perception that Warden's Vale was every bit the dangerous wilderness that Humans tended to imagine when they thought of the frontier. If that didn't scare most prospective migrants off, the bit about the taxes did.

The other Nobles of the Sorcerous Kingdom had plenty to say about it, however – mostly complaints about her territorial policies, which amounted to the inefficient utilisation of perfectly good land. As Baroness Zahradnik took full advantage of her rights as a Frontier Noble and continued to claim vast swathes of new territory, those complaints only grew.

Albedo was divided on the issue. The Sorcerous Kingdom was, in part, supposed to be a source of auxiliary income for Nazarick. Since the vast majority of its territory was only capable of producing First-tier materials, it was better to mass-produce fast-growing crops for the Exchange Box. Leaving the Baroness' territory undeveloped was wasteful in this regard, so Albedo initially favoured the other stance of the civilian aristocracy.

In response, opposition to sweeping development came in the form of Aura, Mare, and Shalltear.

Aura stated that the Baroness' policies were in line with the will of the Supreme Beings, who had created Nazarick to be completely self-sufficient. As the Sorcerous Kingdom could be considered a sort of extension of Nazarick, it was only natural that its natural balance be maintained.

Mare noted that the Sorcerous Kingdom's yields in agriculture and forestry were almost entirely dependent on his mana. While expenditures were currently minor, the Sorcerous Kingdom would inevitably expand in their Master's bid for world domination and that growth would come with its requisite mana upkeep. As a Floor Guardian, this was unacceptable as his primary purpose was the defence of Nazarick and he could hardly do that with depleted mana reserves. Baroness Zahradnik was the only administrator who had taken steps to alleviate that burden.

Shalltear told Albedo that, even if she was the Guardian Overseer, sticking her nose into how the Floor Guardians ran their 'floors' was a violation of the hierarchy established by the Supreme Beings.

As they revolved around the will of the Supreme Beings, Albedo experienced great difficulty arguing her way past those points. When she consulted with the Supreme Overlord of Nazarick, Ainz Ooal Gown, about it, he merely expressed his trust in Albedo's ability to make the right decisions. This, of course, left Albedo mired in endless calculations that attempted to determine how Warden's Vale factored into their Master's ten thousand-year plan.

The Death Knight at the public transportation stop saluted as Pandora's Actor disembarked from the passenger wagon that conveyed him from the port. A short stroll brought him to the village square, where the inhabitants went about their daily business with single-minded purpose. He didn't waste any time heading to his destination, but he did idly muse over the fact that he wasn't swarmed by admirers as he would in most other places. Momon the Black was meant to fade from prominence, but it was happening far faster than projected in a few places.

"Welcome."

"Good morning, Miss Faber. Not at the forge today?"

Upon entering one of the company outlets, he was greeted by a Human female who would be considered a child by any religious or cultural standard. Only her head stuck out from behind the shop's counter, but she carried herself as if nothing was strange about it.

"I came home for lunch. School's right after that."

"Ah, that's right. Well, I shouldn't take up too much of your time, in that case. Were you able to finish that order?"

"Yup! Just a moment, please."

Miss Faber slid off of her stool and disappeared behind the counter. A barrel emerged several moments later, filled with pieces of metalwork.

"Here you go," the girl said. "Fifty steel blades. Are you sure about taking all the bad ones, too?"

Pandora's Actor chuckled.

"Surely you jest, Miss Faber. Even your 'bad ones' are excellent by the standards of most."

He placed a purse of coins on the counter and picked up the crate.

“Thank you for your patronage,” the girl’s head half-disappeared behind the counter as she curtsied.

“Umu.”

Unable to wait, he went to sit on a stone bench in the square to examine the results of Miss Faber’s work. He set the crate down at his feet and held the first blade before the slit of his visor.

By Yggdrasil standards, they were low-level items incapable of holding any great sum of data. What was important, however, was the personal progress that their workmanship indicated. He set down the first blade to look at the next.

*She should be right on track, I think...?*

The low-level items were well within the bounds of what a low-level crafter was capable of. Without a way to directly see one’s status, the only way to figure out what one was capable of was to have them explore the limits of their craft. Usually – at least for the natives of the world – it meant putting combatants through life-threatening situations and for artisans to perform tasks that were far beyond the demands and means of most.

Naturally, this was quite difficult to normally do...but not for the Sorcerous Kingdom. The dead could be returned to life and what was considered a vast fortune was a pittance relative to Nazarick’s coffers. In the case of Miss Faber and the other crafters he collected data from, he simply submitted orders on behalf of the Adventurer Guild.

And the results were as expected. Unexpectedly. It was a strange feeling.

Logically, he should have expected them, but the common sense of the citizenry made what was rational, irrational. Warden’s Vale was one of the only places in the Sorcerous Kingdom that was mostly rational in the minds of Nazarick’s denizens and that made it an irrational place to most of the world’s natives.

*I suppose all that’s left is to try...*

After examining the remaining blades and putting everything away, he returned to the outlet. The girl looked up at him from behind the counter.

“Is there something wrong?” She asked.

“Ah, no. Not at all. It looks like everything should meet our standards. In fact...”

Pandora’s Actor produced a sack and placed it on the table.

“Your work is so impressive that I’d like to see what you can do with this.”

Miss Faber reached up to open the bag, pulling the opening towards herself so she could look inside.

“...Mithril?”

“That’s right,” Pandora’s Actor nodded. “Mithril Ore. Have you ever seen it before?”

The girl shook her head.

*It looks like her appraisal skills as a smith work even without what the Guilds insist is necessary.*

That much, he already knew. In their studies across the Sorcerous Kingdom, it happened consistently in every vocational field. The strange part – at least to those of Nazarick – was that the natives of the world never credited their Job Classes for the knowledge that they gave them. It was always somehow attributed to something else.

Education. Experience. Recalling tales from Bards or bits of family folklore. To be fair, it was hard to tell and difficult to prove that it wasn’t the case without doing something they considered terminally idiotic from a ‘common sense’ perspective. When one could afford to be ‘foolish’, however, the truth was all too easy to figure out with a bit of foreknowledge.

“What would you like me to make?” Miss Faber asked.

“If you can’t decide on something,” Pandora’s Actor answered, “a simple item such as a dagger will do. I’m sure the Adventures will be happy to see any Mithril gear in the offering.”

“Alright. Anything else?”

“Hm? Ah...we’ll see what you have left over, first.”

That was another strange thing about their new world: the recipes. Crafting in general was an alien affair. Using Yggdrasil’s crafting system, one selected a book that determined the appearance of an item frame, materials determined its quality and data capacity, and data crystals determined its effects. A Blacksmith would produce the base item from the materials using the book as a template, and then the data crystals would be added to the resulting product.

It was common sense to the denizens of Nazarick, but, to the natives of their new world, it was a process that would appear to be something beyond magic. At the same time, the processes of their new world seemed just as alien to the Denizens of Nazarick.

A crafter in their new world did not need a book to determine the appearance of an item: they could fashion it in any way they wished so long as they possessed the skill to do so. Even a basic steel sword in Yggdrasil called for the use of at least one Steel Ingot, but the native smiths didn’t use ingots at all: they used bars and multiple swords could be crafted from a single bar. When they applied effects to that blade, they didn’t need any data crystals: they used mana and reagents that were often laughably easy to obtain.

Many of Nazarick’s denizens wondered why their Master took such a great interest in the processes of the world right from the beginning. Time made the reasons abundantly clear. Their new world was seemingly limitless in its potential, and that potentially made it dangerous. They had to master everything about it before it could be used against them to any significant effect. Since most of its processes were inaccessible in a direct sense, they had to do so through the natives themselves.

His next stop was the Tailor’s workshop, which was also considered an anomaly by Nazarick. This was because tailoring as the natives knew did not exist in Yggdrasil. Neither did many other trades, for that matter. Producing a cloth robe in Yggdrasil followed the same process as producing a suit of armour, a bow, or a sword. Only the materials differed. Whether one desired a breastplate or a bra, they utilised a Blacksmith.

“Ara,” a Tailor looked up from her workstation. “if it isn’t Momon.”

“Good morning.”

“If you’re wondering about that thing, we haven’t had any luck with it yet.”

“Hoh...it turned out to be more of a challenge than I thought. May I take a look?”

The seamstress signalled her permission with a loose gesture before returning to work. Pandora's Actor went to a table near the middle of the workshop where a hand-held spindle lay next to a tuft of wool.

"Has anyone been able to alter it at all?" He asked.

"Not into any usable form," someone replied. "I'm sure we'll get it eventually."

The wool wasn't a material from *Yggdrasil*: it was from one of the races that lived in Warden's Vale. Based on its appraisal value, it was the equivalent of a Fourth-tier material. Unfortunately, Nazarick couldn't use it raw, as it didn't register as a valid item for any recipe. This naturally led to the 'challenge', which was finding someone who could turn the wool into yarn which might be recognised by a *Yggdrasil* recipe.

Their Master had succeeded using a similar method in the past by providing Nfirea Bareare with materials and tools from *Yggdrasil*. A second attempt was still in progress by a certain Dwarf that had run off with a metal ingot. At least the tuft of wool stayed in one place.

"Has this workshop gained access to any new materials?" He asked.

"No, we're still using fibres from the reeds around here. It's serviceable, but not much of a challenge to work with. We got some cotton from Wagner County, as well, but that's just as easy to handle."

*Tch. We need to find a way to bridge those progression gaps.*

That was yet another challenge. Different tiers of materials did not present themselves so readily. Not only had they been unable to locate any metals above Adamantite, but fibres that could be rendered into Second and Third-tier cloth didn't exist in the region, leaving Tailors in a very low-level state. The Merchants that he spoke with claimed that better materials for tailoring existed out in the world, but the caravans dispatched to secure a sampling of items from abroad were still at least a year away from returning.

*Ah well, at least materials aren't consumed on failure with their system...what a convenient place this is.*

Experimenting with native materials gave him a sense of freedom that could not be experienced with the Guild Treasury's limited inventories. Losing anything from *Yggdrasil* in a test caused him to wail and gnash his teeth over the loss of something irreplaceable.

*That should be it for the village. Next is ordering some enchantments for these blades...*

Regrettably, the selection of weapon enchantments in Warden's Vale was still highly limited. He considered going to Fluder Paradyne for a moment but decided he was far too annoying to deal with in any capacity. The weapons would be targeted toward their Silver Rank trainees anyway, so there was no need for anything extravagant anyway.

After checking the progress of one other experiment running near the harbour's forge, Pandora's Actor made his way south for his weekly visit to the expeditionary base. Baroness Zahradnik had timed a visit by her imperial guests to coincide with his own, so he would have to make a good showing as Momon the Black. Alessia and Themis, the two Orichalcum-rank Adventurers who were overseeing field operations, greeted him upon his arrival.

"How are things coming along?" He asked.

The Cleric of Surshana pointed at a map on the table, indicating a region immediately north of the camp.

"The teams have been crawling around in the woods nearby," Themis answered. "They're under strict orders not to enter any of the ruins until we have a better picture of what's around us. Some of our teams question whether such caution is warranted, however. Lady Zahradnik's briefing mentioned that a highly organised Goblin army came through here about a year ago, so they assume the entire region has already been ransacked."

"That line of reasoning isn't without merit," Pandora's Actor admitted, "but this is still training."

"Our people are operating on that premise," the Cleric nodded. "I'm afraid our true enemy here is a dismal set of expectations. Because that army came through here relatively recently, our teams feel that they're walking on a well-beaten path."

"No sense of adventure, huh..."

Themis nodded.

"The areas we've surveyed so far have been cleared of threats and the remains of the army's encampments are everywhere. It's difficult to maintain our edge with things as they are."

"Then it's good that we have the opportunity to add a bit of excitement," Pandora's Actor crossed his arms. "Have you located a suitable site to demonstrate our capabilities?"



“We have a few candidates,” Themis picked a folder up off of the table and offered it to him. “I’ll let you decide what’s the most appropriate.”

“Hmm...”

He leafed through the handpicked survey data. According to the Royal Army’s reports, the Goblin army had camped near the riverfront for access to fresh water. That disqualified any of the ruins along the shore. In the end, he was left with two sites that were both far inland and a good distance from the highway. He placed the survey data on the table.

“Do we know any more about these two?”

Themis’ gaze went from the documents to the map.

“They were discovered on the way to the river,” she said. “So they were only identified through a cursory inspection of the area before we moved on. Both are reported to be town-sized...actually, many of our members expressed their curiosity about something...”

“What might that be?”

“We’ve identified the remains of villages and towns, but not a single city. Logically, it should be where the old highway we dug up meets the river. In other words, where we’re standing right now. Yet, the only evidence that a city once stood here is the lack of evidence.”

*The lack of evidence?*

Pandora’s Actor glanced at the map.

“I see. There are no ruins within a three or four-kilometre radius of the camp. Would it be safe to say that the city was pillaged and razed to the ground in whatever conflict created this haunted forest?”

“That was the initial theory,” Themis nodded. “However, some unexplained anomalies immediately presented themselves.”

“Such as?”

“If a city once stood here, it should also stand as an epicentre in the region’s negative energy profile. Yet, the signs of negative energy here are no more prevalent than the forest’s observed average.”

“In that case, where did this all start?”

“We have nothing conclusive, but it appears that the negative energy gradient grows stronger the further south our teams explore.”

“So the people here were attacked from the south, but they were able to evacuate the city before the population could be massacred. Does this mean it was a nonhuman country that was destroyed by the Theocracy?”

Themis and Alessia exchanged a look.

“I have no knowledge of such an event in our history,” Alessia said. “My education is mostly that of a Squire, but I have conducted some independent studies in the capital. With how blatant the Theocracy is about spreading pro-Human sentiment as of late, they would have undoubtedly marked the destruction of this place as both a great triumph for humanity and a lesson in the dangers of having nonhuman neighbours.”

“How would you feel if that was actually the case?” Pandora’s Actor asked.

A disgruntled look marred Alessia’s youthful features.

“I am a Paladin,” she said. “But my experiences in E-Rantel have shown that my position is difficult for many to understand. I am a servant of the gods: I am not a soldier or Knight of the laity. The Holy Orders do not necessarily serve the interests of the Theocracy High Council – especially in matters of politics. The Scriptures *do* emphasise the well-being of humanity and the cultivation of our strength, but nowhere does it explicitly say that we must be relentless in the destruction of nonhumans. As far as I can tell, that is a recent development exacerbated by the Theocracy’s ongoing feud with the Wood Elves of Evasha.”

Her words were not out of alignment with her thoughts, so Pandora’s Actor could only assume that she spoke her version of the truth. Both Countess Corelyn and Baroness Zahradnik noted the same thing about their Scriptures, as well.

“I see. Apologies for the digression – I was merely curious with the circumstances here as they are. Considering what we know, I believe this southern town will offer the most exciting prospects for both our members and guests.”

“That may be the case for the former,” Themis said, “but the latter...is it a prudent choice? This may be an exercise, but any of the Undead that we encounter in the wild will be real.”

“Their safety won’t be an issue. We have the equivalent of an Adamantite team protecting them, do we not?”

“Of course. In that case, we’ll begin preparations for their arrival. I’ll have the communications staff contact our teams.”

Themis left the table, her voice carrying over the air as she issued instructions to the camp staff. By noon, the teams surveying the north arrived at the camp. They were all veterans of the Azerlisia Expedition and each of them carried themselves with an air that was equal parts confidence and boredom.

*No sense of adventure, huh...*

Pandora’s Actor looked out over the camp as he considered the problem. It was an unexpected complication. The Adventurers had gone in with the understanding that it was a training expedition, yet their desire to be explorers of the unknown had been kindled with the Azerlisia Expedition. Danger and excitement were in demand and no exercise or training expedition could provide a substitute.

He considered potential solutions to the problem, but it was impossible for expeditions to be exciting *all* the time. If anything, the standardised routines devised for the Adventurer Guild’s expeditions all but told its members that most of their work would be what they considered boring. Anticipation was seemingly the only thing that fuelled their excitement.

Perhaps it was simply a matter of letting time temper their expectations. At the same time, the excitement that the Adventurers sought was at the core of the Adventurer Guild’s marketing campaign and cultural identity. Gaining a reputation for not delivering on their promises would be problematic.

“Sister Alessia, our guests will be arriving shortly.”

*And here’s our spy...*

He wasn’t sure if the man should be considered a good spy or a bad one. Admittedly, Itzal came with a fairly solid narrative. He was a follower of the Six Great Gods who led a less-than-spotless life as a citizen of Re-Estize. Once the Sorcerer King advanced his plans with the Adventurer Guild, he decided to give adventuring another shot. With the resurgence of the Faith of the Six, he stepped onto a more devout path and entrenched himself solidly in a growing social network of old and new believers both within the Adventurer Guild and in the city of E-Rantel at large.

It was a tale that most would consider heartwarming and this was all well and good but for the fact that he was an agent who reported to the local Windflower operative. Was it a good idea to profess the same faith that dominated the country that sent one to spy on the Sorcerous Kingdom? Was it fine to place innocent citizens at risk through their association with him? Then again, there were many ways to muddle the issue. Conventional espionage in the region didn't seem to factor in the notion that some beings could read the thoughts of others.

For Pandora's Actor's part, he only looked on in mild amusement. The Theocracy Paladins sent to the Sorcerous Kingdom were initially confused, but grew steadily in their conviction. The Theocracy spies who had come in filled with conviction, however, only grew steadily more confused.

"Momon?" Alessia looked up at him.

"How much have we been able to prepare?" Pandora's Actor asked.

"Team Two should already be at the site," the Paladin answered. "Team One is blazing a trail from the camp and Teams Three and Five are securing checkpoints along the route. Team Four and Six will be on welcoming duties and escort...should we include the Domina as part of Six?"

"We may as well," Pandora's actor said. "She won't hesitate to take command if something happens."

"...do you believe that something will happen?"

Pandora's Actor chuckled, leaving the pavilion with a sweep of his crimson cloak.

"The world is filled with unexpected things," he said, "and the unexpected may be exactly what we need to break up the expedition's monotony."