

When Ludmila stepped out of the teleportation gate, she found herself in a brightly-lit foyer. Muted grey stone formed the floors and the walls followed a pastel scheme emphasising cream, lavender, and pink. Crystal chandeliers of incalculable worth illuminated the corridors leading out from the foyer, and a grand staircase dominated the way directly in front of them.

A familiar figure in a Maid uniform stirred from her place along a wall nearby. The Maid's eyes widened slightly as they crossed over Ludmila before her expression returned to a mask of unflappable composure.

"Lord Ainz," Miss Alpha lowered her head as she curtsied before the Sorcerer King, "welcome back."

"I'm back," the Sorcerer King replied. "As you can see, I've brought a guest along with us. This is Baroness Ludmila Zahradnik, one of the Nobles ruling the southern territories of the Sorcerous Kingdom."

"She and I are well acquainted," Miss Alpha rose from her greeting. "It is a surprise to see you here, Baroness Zahradnik, but a pleasure nonetheless. Shall we have a room prepared for our guest, Lord Ainz?"

"Yes, I was thinking of just that," the Sorcerer King nodded. "I figured she should properly situate herself before we continue with our business."

Ludmila exchanged a look with Lady Aura and Lord Mare.

"I-I thought she was staying with us," Lord Mare said. "She set up a tent and everything..."

"...a tent, you say?"

Miss Alpha coolly adjusted her glasses. The intimidating gesture eradicated the twins' nascent objections. Ludmila couldn't say anything, as it was undoubtedly improper for royalty to have a guest sleep outside.

"Will it be difficult to traverse floors?" Ludmila asked, "I'd like to continue spectating the tournament matches, and I believe that I still have some things to see on the Sixth Floor."

"The teleportation gate on this floor is set to send travellers to the Sixth Floor by default over the course of the tournament, my lady," Miss Alpha said. "You will have no issues going back and forth. Lord Ainz, shall I give Lady Zahradnik a tour of the area while her room is prepared?"

"I intended to do it myself," the Sorcerer King replied. "You may attend to us while we do so."

The Maid nodded in acknowledgement before falling into line behind them. The Sorcerer King's crimson gaze went between the corridors.

"Now, where should we start? The Canteen is nearby, but—ah, didn't you have some business with the Head Chef?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," Ludmila replied. "Would he be available to receive us at this hour?"

"I'm sure he's in the kitchen right now. The opening day of the tournament should have given him much to contemplate."

*Doesn't that mean he's busy?*

She followed the Sorcerer King as he made his way down the corridor to the right of the foyer entrance. It wasn't long before countless exotic aromas filled the air. Ahead of them, the corridor opened up into some sort of hall, but Ludmila's gaze was drawn by a pair of doors along the way.

"What do those signs mean?" She asked.

"Those are the washrooms for this wing," the Sorcerer King replied. "The sign with the figure in the dress indicates the one for women."

In hindsight, she supposed that it was fairly clear what the signs meant.

"Don't some races have more than two sexes?" Ludmila said, "How does it work for them?"

"Ehm..."

The Sorcerer King stopped in his tracks. Ludmila shifted uncomfortably. Maybe it was a foolish question generated by her Human-centric upbringing.

"Neuronist goes into the women's washroom," Lady Aura said, "and Sous-chef...actually, does Sous-chef even go to the washroom?"

"He's a Myconid," Lord Mare said, "so probably not."

"Huh. Well, neither of them are from races that have sexes. Neuronist just goes into the washroom that she feels that she should go into."

“Out of curiosity,” Ludmila asked, “what race is she? There are so many here that I’ve never seen or heard of before.”

“She’s a Brain Eater. They don’t have sexes because they reproduce by implanting a tadpole from a spawning pool into people’s brains! Cool, huh?”

Miss Alpha’s face turned a sickly hue. Or maybe it was a normal hue. She was supposedly a type of Zombie, after all.

“Has she...*reproduced* before?” Ludmila asked.

“Nah,” Aura said. “Nazarick doesn’t have any Elder Brains or spawning pools.”

How would facilitating a race like that even work from a legal perspective? Most living things were driven to reproduce, but reproducing in a Brain Eater’s case meant parasitising someone else. Normally, that would be considered murder, but outlawing a race from reproducing was an inevitable death sentence for an entire species, even if they were Heteromorphs. Biological immortality and resurrection magic only kept death at bay – it didn’t guarantee that something couldn’t go terribly wrong in the long span of eternity.

The Sorcerer King raised a hand to this temple. Everyone looked at him expectantly, and, after a moment, he turned to address them.

“You’ll have to excuse me,” he said. “Albedo has something to discuss with me. I’ll rejoin you when we’re done.”

A sense of disappointment fell over Ludmila as she watched the Sorcerer King’s majestic figure go back down the way they had come. It had taken all day for her to come to grips with the fact that she might be around him. Now that she was starting to enjoy his company, he was gone. Lady Aura and Lord Mare similarly bore crestfallen looks.

“She did it on purpose,” Lady Aura grumbled.

Miss Alpha cleared her throat.

“If you would please follow me,” she said.

The corridor brought them to a long hall where rows of tables lined with simple chairs awaited use by their patrons. On the far end of the hall was a counter of unfamiliar construction bearing a variety of foods under rows of metallic magical lightning. They made their way past the tables toward the counter; Ludmila eyed the trays of food on offer as they approached.

“I’ve never seen anything like this before,” she said.

“I believe some of the dishes should be familiar to you, my lady,” Miss Alpha said. “The bread and sausages, for instance.”

“What I meant was this...presentation? The magic items in use here are all unknown to me.”

“Magic items, hm...rather than magic items, you could see them as technology.”

Weren’t magic items a form of technology? She would have to investigate the distinction at a later date.

“This system of serving food is known as a ‘buffet’,” Miss Alpha continued as they walked up to the counter. “The Canteen is designed to service the entire staff, offering fresh meals around the clock. It’s normally a busy place, but everyone’s been indulging themselves at the tournament festival.”

Though she said so, the trays embedded into the counter were heaped with dozens of different types of food. As Miss Alpha mentioned, there were many familiar-looking dishes – some of which might be considered common fare – but the presentation gave everything a luxurious feel. The only part about the buffet that threw things off was the manservant wearing a skintight mask covering his entire head. He had appeared to stare across the counter at her at some point.

*A footman...? But why is he wearing a mask?*

He had a humanoid appearance and was wearing some sort of uniform, but she couldn’t be sure what race he was with the mask on. Then again, she had mistaken the Homunculus Maids for Humans, so being able to see the man’s face might not help.

“The counter along the wall to your right is the salad bar,” Miss Alpha said.

“The drink fountain’s over there!” Lady Aura said.

“Th-There’s an ice cream machine, too,” Lord Mare added.

They spoke as if everything was self-explanatory, but Ludmila struggled to make sense of what everything was. She supposed that the 'salad bar' *did* look like a bar with assorted vegetables on it, but the fountain didn't in any way resemble a fountain. If anything, it looked similar to the 'ice cream machine', which in turn looked like it belonged in one of Liane's machining workshops.

"How do they work?" Ludmila asked.

"I'll go and see if the Head Chef is available." Miss Alpha said, "Lord Mare and Lady Aura can show you how the facilities operate."

The Maid disappeared into a set of metal double doors. The twins' feet pattered over the pink parquet as they led her to the aforementioned 'facilities'. Lady Aura pointed to what appeared to be the bottom of a cup sticking out of a metal cylinder.

"Take a cup," Lady Aura told her.

Ludmila reached out and gingerly gripped the bottom of the cup. It popped out with a bit of effort, revealing the bottom of another cup.

"Is it magic, my lady?" Ludmila asked.

"It's just a cup dispenser," Lady Aura said. "It's not magic."

Ludmila examined the cup. It was made out of an unknown, lightweight material that gave way under her fingers with a bit of a squeeze. To her surprise, the material returned to its original form as she lightened her grip.

On a whim, she dropped the vessel. It hit the ground with a clatter and rolled to a stop against her boot. She picked it up to check for signs of damage.

"This is an amazing piece of work," she said as she marvelled at the item. "Would it be possible to introduce me to the artisan?"

The twins exchanged a look. Lord Mare fidgeted with his staff.

"I-It's magic," he said in a very small voice.

"But Lady Aura said—"

“It’s magic!” Lady Aura said.

Ludmila looked back down at the cup in her hand. Which was it? Maybe she meant that the dispenser was mundane, but the cups were magic.

*Still, that should mean this magic item has an artisan, shouldn't it?*

“Stick the cup on the platform under one of the nozzles there,” Lady Aura pointed at the ‘fountain’. “Your drink will come out when you press the thingy in the back.”

Before her were the ends of a half-dozen downward-facing pipes. Above them were some colourful labels, but she couldn’t discern what they indicated. She took a moment to steel herself before placing the cup under one of the pipes and pressing the ‘thingy’ beside it. She snatched her hand back as a jet of sizzling green liquid shot out to soak her skin.

“It’s a good thing I’m immune to acid,” Ludmila said.

Lady Aura and Lord Mare stared up at her. Was it that surprising? It shouldn’t have been, as the Sorcerer King mentioned it during their testing not an hour previous.

“...was that not acid?” Ludmila asked.

“I mean...it’s *acidic*,” Lady Aura said, “but it’s not *acid acid*.”

“A-Actually, I think it is, big sis.”

Lord Mare ducked behind Ludmila as his sister scowled at his response.

“My point is that you’re not going to kill anyone by spraying them with melon soda!”

Ludmila wiped the sticky fluid off of her hand with a handkerchief. It must have been a drink for some species of Demihuman or Heteromorph. Humans didn’t drink acid, after all. The device seemed to require training in multiracial conventions to operate without getting injured.

Lady Aura took Ludmila's cup and pressed it against the 'thingy' behind it. Brown liquid filled the vessel. She attached some sort of lid to the cup and poked a long, striped object into it.

"Here," Lady Aura held out the cup to her.

"Thank you, my lady," Ludmila lowered her head as she received her drink. "If I may ask, what is this?"

"It's iced tea."

"Is this a straw, my lady?"

"Yup."

It appeared to be made of the same material as the cup and its lid, and there was no sign of either softening from the drink. She wondered whether it was cheaper to produce than the silver and gold straws used by the wealthy.

"Something wrong?" Lady Aura asked.

"Ah, no, my lady. I was just pondering the applications of this strange material. You mentioned that it was magical...what tier of artisan is required to craft it?"

"Who knows?" Lady Aura shrugged, "You should ask Lord Ainz when he gets back."

Ludmila took a sip from her drink, nearly coughing at its unexpected sweetness. Lord Mare went over to the ice cream machine and retrieved a cup that was made out of a different material.

"This is an ice cream cone," he said. "It's basically a cracker in the shape of a cup. You stick it under the nozzle here and pull the lever...a-actually, maybe I should do it..."

Was the second device even more dangerous than the first? Perhaps her knowledge of ice cream was woefully inadequate.

"What type would you like?" Lord Mare asked.

“Something fruity, if it exists.”

Lord Mare stuck the ice cream cone under a nozzle and reached up to pull a lever. He filled the cone with pink ice cream, piling it up in a somewhat unpleasant shape.

“H-Here you go. It’s strawberry.”

Ludmila smiled.

“Thank you, my lord.”

With her iced tea in one hand and strawberry ice cream in the other, Ludmila moved on to the salad bar. She scanned the foods on display, pondering what wonders awaited her.

“This is the salad bar,” Lady Aura told her.

“Are these all different types of salad, my lady?”

“Yup! I like the egg salad with bacon bits.”

Ludmila’s eyes traced Lady Aura’s gesture to the food in question. She couldn’t say that she had seen green eggs or bacon before.

“I didn’t know that there were so many salads, my lady. How does this device work?”

“First, you take the plate from there.”

Ludmila set down her cup and reached for a plate. The stack of dishes rose slightly as she did so. Was there levitation magic cast on each one? It was an interesting way to prevent accidental breakage, if so.

“What next?” She asked.

“Then you grab a pair of tongs over there…”



“Alright...”

“...and then you use them to put your salad on your plate.”

She reached out for the green egg salad, then hesitated, turning to look at Lady Aura.

“What?” The Dark Elf frowned.

“The salad won’t do anything to me, will it?”

“...I think you’re hoping for too much from some salad.”

“Your ice cream is melting,” Lord Mare said.

She sucked the drippings off of Lord Mare’s ice cream cone before turning her attention back to Lady Aura’s salad. Even food procurement was a highly challenging activity in Nazarick.

They seated themselves at one of the tables to wait for Miss Alpha to return with the Head Chef. She had to eat the ice cream before starting on the salad and she wasn’t sure how to feel about the resulting taste.

“Our apologies for the wait.”

Miss Alpha re-emerged from the double doors. The hulking figure of Master Tokitsu filled the space behind her. He was even larger than Qrs Gan Zu.

“Miss Yuri says that you have something to discuss with me,” he said. “But she didn’t have any of the details.”

Ludmila rose from her seat.

“Thank you for taking the time to come and speak with me, Master Tokitsu,” she said. “Please forgive me for requesting this impromptu appointment. To be honest, I’ve only just broached the topic with His Majesty the Sorcerer King. He said you would be interested—”

“OKAY!”

Across the table from the Boarc, Ludmila, Lady Aura, and Lord Mare's hair was blown back by the force of his bellow. Ludmila blinked several times.

"Okay...?"

"When do we start?"

"Wouldn't you like to hear my proposal first, Master Tokitsu?" Ludmila asked.

"Nonsense!" Master Tokitsu answered, "If Lord Ainz said I'm interested, then I'm interested! What should I pack?"

*I hope I can make things interesting for him...*

In a way, it felt like a good turn of events. Rather than an imposition, it was an expression of the Sorcerer King's confidence to deliver what was required. It was precisely how a king should be.

"I'm still in the process of planning things out," Ludmila said, "so this won't interfere with your activities in the tournament. Ultimately, it is a long-term project meant for the development of the culinary arts in the Sorcerous Kingdom, but it shouldn't get in the way of your other duties."

"Sounds good to me...what was your name again?"

"Ah, I beg your pardon, Master Tokitsu. I am Baroness Ludmila Zahradnik, a vassal of Lady Shalltear."

The Head Chef looked down at her with his out-of-alignment gaze, stroking his chin.

"One of the new Area Guardians, huh...well, as your senior, feel free to ask me anything."

"You're an Area Guardian, as well?"

"Sure am!" Lord Tokitsu slapped the unknown script inked on his belly, "I'm the Area Guardian of the Canteen!"

Ludmila glanced at her surroundings. Could it be that she had truly been translated into a divine realm? Was the 'Canteen' merely a conceptual metaphor perceived through the lens of her limited comprehension? She might have been taking things too lightly. The 'Boarc' that stood across the table from her could very well be a god of cooking.

*If that is the case, claiming to be an 'Area Guardian' is too presumptuous by far. I'm just an inexperienced noblewoman relying on unearned power to advance my interests.*

She certainly didn't make any claims to divinity. If anyone started praying to her, they would be sorely disappointed over how stingy their supposed god was.

The potential god of cooking waved a meaty hand in front of her face.

"You still with us?" He said.

"F-Forgive me, Lord Tokitsu," Ludmila said. "I look forward to a long and fruitful relationship with you."

Lord Tokitsu straightened and let out a boisterous guffaw.

"That's the spirit! Let's bust out some results that please Lord Ainz! I'll be waiting to hear from ya!"

With that, the Head Chef returned to his kitchen. The silence left in the wake of his loud energy felt especially profound.

"Wh-Where are we going now?" Lord Mare asked.

"Dunno!" Lady Aura said.

"His Majesty mentioned something about a library," Ludmila offered.

"It is probably best for us to wait until Lord Ainz returns for that," Miss Alpha said. "How about we show Lady Zahradnik to her accommodations in the royal suites?"

An assuredly idiotic thing sprouted from the depths of Ludmila's imagination. She tried to shake her head free of the thought, but it stubbornly stuck with her.

“Just for clarification,” Ludmila asked, “what are the royal suites?”

“They are the rooms belonging to the Supreme Beings, my lady,” Miss Alpha answered.

“I-It’s best that I stay on the Sixth Floor after all,” Ludmila said. “I am absolutely unworthy of soiling such divine abodes.”

“Lord Ainz has expressed his desire for you to stay in one of the suites,” Miss Alpha said. “We can hardly refuse his orders, can we?”

Ludmila looked to Lord Mare and Lady And for help, but they only looked back at her with blank expressions. She didn’t know what that meant, but it couldn’t possibly be good.

“Please follow me, Lady Zahradnik,” Miss Alpha said.

What was going to happen to her? Ludmila did her best not to drag her feet as she allowed the Maid to lead her back the way they had come. Surely, she would be struck down for blasphemy. Was it some sort of test?

*If so, what is the correct answer? To follow orders even if I know they’re wrong, or refuse them?*

Surshana was the god of judgement and justice, so he would surely hate it if she went along with everything simply because they were his orders. Or was she looking at it the wrong way? Did the god of justice define what was just?

They re-entered the foyer and turned to ascend the sweeping central staircase. Ludmila swallowed as she stared at the crimson carpet along their path. And, then, she remembered something.

“Wait,” Ludmila said.

*They were envious of me.*

It was a year previous, but she still remembered it clearly. Lady Shalltear’s handmaidens envied her ability to serve the Sorcerer King by questioning his decisions.

“I shouldn’t do this,” Ludmila told Miss Alpha. “I have no right to stay in a suite meant for Supreme Beings. A tent on the Sixth Floor is good enough for me.”

“But Lord Ainz said—”

“I am not ungrateful for His Majesty’s hospitality,” Ludmila said. “But it is simply too much. To be able to see the Great Tomb of Nazarick with my own eyes is blessing enough.”

A serene smile lit up Miss Alpha’s face, and then she reached out to take Ludmila by the wrist. Her hand phased through. Ludmila turned and bolted.

“[Stunning Fist]!”

Something heavy thumped into the small of her back, but she kept running.

“Wha—!”

“She has a *Freedom* effect, Yuri,” Lady Aura said.

*Miss Alpha is trying to restrain me.*

Had she answered wrongly? No, there wasn’t any time to think. Ludmila activated *Wind Stride* and sped towards the teleportation gate. Miss Alpha flashed into existence in front of her.

“Do not resist, Lady Zahradnik!”

“My apologies,” Ludmila swerved past Miss Alpha, “but I do not know how to disable personal effects yet!”

The Maid’s arm phased through her midriff. Ludmila made it the last few metres to the gate. Nothing happened.

*Not this again...*

She turned around to find Miss Alpha moving in to corner her with arms spread wide.

“I thought you said that this teleportation gate is set to send travellers to the Sixth Floor, Miss Alpha.”

“My little sister is quite adept at managing the gate network,” Miss Alpha replied.

Along the corridors extending from the foyer, a few curious faces looked in from their respective rooms.

“What’s going on?”

“Is that big sis Yuri?”

“She’s fighting someone...?”

“An intruder!”

“How did an intruder get down here?!”

“Punch her head off, big sis Yuri!”

Ludmila glanced in the direction of the last voice. They would have words if she ever figured out who it was.

A vast darkness appeared between Ludmila and Miss Alpha. Ludmila’s legs went weak and she sank to her knees.

“Hm? What’s going on here? Is there a defence alert?”

Miss Alpha lowered her fists and folded her hands in front of her.

“Lord Ainz,” she lowered her head, “apologies for my rudeness. Lady Zahradnik just attempted to flee.”

“...again?”

Ludmila winced at the Sorcerer King’s reply. It wasn’t the best of impressions to leave.

“She didn’t want to stay in the royal suites,” Lady Aura said. “But it’s what Lord Ainz wanted, so…”

“How strange,” the Sorcerer King said. “She didn’t show any aversion to the royal suites the last time she was here.”

A chorus of whispers rose in the wake of His Majesty’s remark. Even Lady Aura and Lord Mare frowned, tilting their heads as they regarded her.

“I wasn’t aware that Lady Zahradnik had visited Nazarick before, Lord Ainz,” Miss Alpha said.

“It was a brief visit,” the Sorcerer King replied. “We just dropped in for a few minutes to see to something, so there wasn’t any need for a formal reception.”

The Sorcerer King looked over his shoulder. Ludmila rose on unsteady legs. Having His Majesty appear right in front of her without warning was still too much to take in all at once.

“I didn’t know where I was back then, Your Majesty,” Ludmila said. “Still, I think it would be better for me to reside on the Sixth Floor. Besides, the Ranger part of me still prefers sleeping outdoors.”

“Is that so? Well, if that’s what you want. Aura. Mare. Be sure to be good hosts.”

“Yes, Lord Ainz!”

Ludmila breathed an internal sigh of relief. It appeared that she had managed to get through her trial unscathed.