

*What should I do now...?*

Ludmila had no desire to chase after Fluder Paradyne, but she also had no idea what to do with the pile of books he had picked out for her. After flipping through each of them, it became abundantly clear that she had no hope of translating them on her own. She carefully placed the books into the *Infinite Haversack* on her left hip before investigating her surroundings. Upon doing so, the first thing she realised was that she was lost.

It was a novel, if unwelcome, feeling. That Rangers never got lost was considered common sense, but it only applied to natural environments or at least the outdoors. Even a window would allow one to orient themselves. The Great Library of Ashurbanipal, however, was a completely enclosed and artificial environment with a layout too vast to immediately commit to memory. It didn't help that she had been following Fluder around the entire time.

She wandered around the wing until she came across the animated model of the ship they had passed on the way in. The thing still didn't make much sense to her. Some of its sails were angled in such a way that they would be below the waterline if it was a seagoing vessel. Was it one of the flying ships that the beacon at Eastwatch was supposed to attract?

Her eyes were drawn to the weaponry mounted around the ship. A pair of ballistae were directed to its port and starboard sides, and another was mounted on the bow. The bolts loaded onto the siege engines had chains attached to them, so they might have been used for interdiction or boarding actions. Parapet-like protrusions along the length of the hull were manned by figures in robes, suggesting stations where magic casters might conduct ranged skirmishes with distant foes.

*I knew it was a good idea. We should have added those to our barges.*

In the event of an attack, the bare decks of their cargo vessels didn't afford their defenders any protection. Her friends insisted it would be fine since each barge was operated by an Elder Lich and two Death Warriors, but one could never be sure if that was enough.

Ludmila moved on from the model, keeping the balcony to her left in hopes that it would lead her back to the entrance of the wing. Thankfully, it did, and a few minutes later she found herself at a desk manned by a dark-robed figure. Her breath caught as her eyes fell over a familiar visage, then she calmed down again as she realised it wasn't the same person.

"Is there something I can help you with?"

The speaker was an Undead being who was in many ways similar to the Sorcerer King in appearance. It had the same height and build, and his black robes fell over its frame in a familiar way. Indeed, many would mistake it for the Sorcerer King himself, so Ludmila was somewhat proud that she could immediately tell the difference.

“Yes, as a matter of fact,” Ludmila replied. “I am Baroness Ludmila Zahradnik, and His Majesty the Sorcerer King brought me here to conduct some research. Someone helped me pick out these books, but I’d like to ensure that they’re what I’m looking for. Is that something you can help me with?”

A bony finger came up to tap the surface of the counter. Ludmila pulled out her books and stacked them in a small pile.

“Thank you for the help,” Ludmila said. “Might I know your name?”

“Aurelius.”

*It sounds like a name from the Theocracy. Maybe he’s a faithful soul from the past who was enlisted into eternal service.*

Ludmila smiled.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Aurelius.”

Aurelius picked up the first book and read its title aloud.

*“Armageddon: the Nuclear Holocaust of the European Arcology War.”*

*Eh?*

*“Kessler’s Curse: the Consequences of International Conflicts in Low Earth Orbit. Plutocratic Virtue and the Stewardship of Humanity. Eco-terrorism in the late 21st Century. Volo’s Guide to the North. The Conservation Fallacy. Morally Bankrupt: the Rise and Fall of the East Pacific Ecosocialist Regime. Aragorn and Legolas’ Other Adventures in Middle-Earth. Food Security and the Masses. Detecting the Onset of Luddite Disorder. Bushwalker’s Guide. Crimes Against Humanity: Inuit Atrocities Against Miners in Greenland.”*

Ludmila jotted down the titles, trying to make sense of what any of them meant. A good quarter of the terms used were unknown to her. Only a few seemed even vaguely related to what she was looking for, though the titles of some of the others seemed interesting. She would have to take a look at them at a later date.

“Out of these books,” Ludmila asked, “which ones are related to Rangers?”

Aurelius went back and flipped through each book. In the end, he identified *Eco-terrorism in the late 21st Century*, *Aragorn and Legolas’ Other Adventures in Middle-Earth*, *Bushwalker’s Guide*, and *Crimes Against Humanity: Inuit Atrocities Against Miners in Greenland*.. as being relevant to her search. Now, all she had to do was figure out how to translate them.

“Out of curiosity,” Ludmila asked, “are there any language aids available in this library?”

“No.”

“I see. Well, thank you for your kind assistance, Mister Aurelius.”

Ludmila inclined her head respectfully before leaving the wing. She made her way back to the teleportation gate to the Ninth Floor, where Miss Delta and Miss Zeta were still stationed.

“Woodlouse!” Miss Zeta waved her sleeves above her head.

“Woodlouse,” Miss Delta said.

“Miss Del—”

“Shizu is fine.”

“Miss Shizu, Miss Zeta, I hope the night finds you well. Would you happen to know where His Majesty the Sorcerer King went?”

“Lord Ainz went back up through the teleportation gate with Lord Mare and Lady Aura,” Miss Zeta replied. “He didn’t say where he was going.”

“Is that so?” Ludmila said, “I suppose I should get back to the Sixth Floor, then. By the way, are either of you going to be fighting in this tournament?”

“Yup!” Miss Zeta said, “We’re fighting in the morning!”

“I’ll be sure to come and watch,” Ludmila said. “Good luck to the both of you.”

She entered the teleportation gate to the Ninth Floor, where the Sorcerer King’s household staff eyed her curiously as she made her way down the long hallway with its many trophies. Though she knew many of the Maids due to them having duty shifts in E-Rantel, none of them came over to speak with her.

When she arrived on the Sixth Floor, traces of the dawn could be found on the eastern horizon...or at least she assumed that it was the eastern horizon. Day and night could be exchanged on a whim, but she saw little reason to make things purposely confusing. The festival grounds were still empty, so she headed back to Lord Mare and Lady Aura’s house, strolling along the shores of a small lake on the way there.

Outside of her tent, she found Lady Aura already up and about, brushing the glistening scales of a huge reptilian beast with a broom. The Dark Elf Ranger looked comically small beside the creature, which was as long as an Adult Frost Dragon and likely more than five times the mass. It opened a single eye to look lazily in her direction, but didn’t otherwise react to her presence.

“Good morning, Lady Aura,” Ludmila said.

“Good morning!” Lady Aura replied brightly, “How was the library?”

“I can’t even begin to describe how impressed I was with the place, my lady,” Ludmila replied. “The only problem is that I can’t read any of the script used in its books. Speaking of which, would you mind helping me transcribe some of these books?”

Lady Aura’s broom stopped moving. The reptilian creature made a displeased sound.

“Uh...maybe?” The broom started moving again, “How big are these books?”

In response, Ludmila pulled out one of the tomes. Lady Aura wrinkled her nose.

“I guess I could help you with some of it,” she said, “let me take care of Iris here first.”

“Is Iris one of your companions, my lady?” Ludmila asked.

“Yep! She’s sluggish in the morning, so it’s the best time to give her a scrub.”

“She resembles the Raptors that I saw in The Blister.”

Lady Aura looked over at her.

“They have Raptors there? The reports didn’t say anything about that…”

“I’m certain that I mentioned them in my report to the Grand Marshal, my lady,” Ludmila said. “Maybe they were excluded because they didn’t represent much of a threat.”

“Grr… I wish I knew earlier. The Empire’s moving in; they might have hunted them all down already. Did you get any for yourself?”

“For myself…? No, my lady. I already have a companion, so the thought didn’t cross my mind.”

While she may have convinced Viscount Brennenthal to be more mindful of the natural state of his new fief, she was under no illusion that the other Imperial Knights would show the same consideration. The vast majority of them were reliant on seneschals dispatched by the Imperial Administration to manage their territories, so there was no reason to believe that they wouldn’t immediately initiate the development of ‘productive’ land. As they did so, the native species of The Blister would be slowly pushed back until their habitat was finally gone and they went extinct.

“Is there someplace in the Sorcerous Kingdom where we might harbour some survivors?” Ludmila asked.

“Like another jungle? Not at the moment. We have some space on the Sixth Floor, but there won’t be any hot jungles like the Blister in the Sorcerous Kingdom until we conquer some. I was thinking that you could just bring some to Warden’s Vale anyway.”

“Would that be wise, my lady? Suitable environment aside, I’m not sure whether we should introduce foreign species so haphazardly.”

“Why not?” Lady Aura shrugged, “You’re basically building an ecology for your capital from scratch. Raptors would make good pets for your Rangers, too.”

“Can they be domesticated? I suppose they could occupy the same niche as small predators like cats…”

“They’re smart, so they’re even better. You just have to teach them how things work in your territory. What they’re allowed to hunt and so on.”

“I can’t say I’ve heard of anyone introducing wild beasts to civilisation like that,” Ludmila said. “As much as I’d like to save them, I can’t have them harming my subjects in the process. Maybe a few packs could be tamed and brought along with their eggs or something…”

The Raptors in The Blister kept their distance from the Imperial Army, so she would have to figure out what they were like before committing to anything. Since the Adventurer Guild was there, she might be able to have them investigate in her stead.

“On a related note, my lady, how do you think The Blister will change? The Empire will push development in the region, but the Viridian Dragon Lord is also gone. As Dame Verilyn has demonstrated, Dragons can influence the elemental balance around them.”

“It’ll get less toxic, I guess?” Lady Aura said, “The plants and animals will stop being poisonous and venomous. Of course, that means the Empire will find a whole bunch of rare materials vanishing under their noses, too. Sucks for them.”

She was of the same opinion. Of course, it might not matter to the Empire and they were probably even expecting it due to their experiences with past expansion. The Blister would gradually become less hostile, slowly transforming into the pastoral basin that its conquerors desired. If anything, it might be the Sorcerous Kingdom’s Adventurer Guild’s reputation at stake. They would report their findings only to have things change after doing so.

“Is Lord Mare around?” Ludmila asked, “This is probably something we should let the Adventurer Guild know about.”

“He’s probably lazing around in his room,” Lady Aura answered. “One sec, I’ll call him.”

Lady Aura grasped the acorn amulet hanging from her neck for a moment, then resumed tending to Iris. Her companion’s tail waved back and forth contentedly as the Dark Elf Ranger brushed her fangs. After Lady Aura was done, she looked over at the tree house with a frown before grasping her amulet again.

“That lazy little… I’m going to go get him.”

“Shall I meet you at the tent, my lady?” Ludmila asked, “I’ll see what I can put together for breakfast.”

“Sure!”

Muted shouting came from the tree house as Ludmila went around it to check on her tent. With the way the three Elf Maids treated her, she half expected it to be a pile of ashes by the time she returned. Fortunately, it looked untouched and the tent flap was still secured. She rummaged around in her *Infinite Haversacks*, sorting through her remaining provisions before settling on breakfast. Pulling out a small shovel, she went to dig out a fire pit. A nice little blaze was already going by the time Lady Aura dragged Lord Mare out of their home.

“Good morning, Lord Mare,” Ludmila smiled at his sleepy expression.

“Un...”

“What’s for breakfast?” Lady Aura asked.

Ludmila produced several wooden skewers, followed by a *Shroud of Sleep*. She unwrapped the magic item to reveal several fish the length of her forearm.

“Trout from the Katze River,” Ludmila answered. “I had originally intended to have the local chef prepare something, but cooking them over a campfire feels better when we’re gathered like this.”

She had already cleaned and salted the fish before storing them away, so all that was left was to grill them over the fire. Lord Mare and Lady Aura settled onto the blankets she had set out for them, staring at the flames as they waited for their food.

“Do you still like food?” Lady Aura asked.

“I would say that I still do,” Ludmila answered.

“Isn’t that weird?” Lord Mare said, “Undead don’t get hungry, and most Undead that *do* eat stuff don’t eat, uh, normal stuff. Vampires drink blood. Ghouls eat flesh. A whole bunch just drain their victims with touch attacks.”

“Yeah,” Lady aura nodded. “Shalltear can eat regular food, but she says that the taste is faded or dull.”

“Well,” Ludmila said, “I, for one, am happy that I still experience life as myself. I’ve thought about this in the past and it’s likely due to my being a Revenant. I manifested as myself...or at least what I believe to be myself.”

“Doesn’t that mean you’ll change as your perception of yourself changes?” Lord Mare asked.

“That is a very good question,” Ludmila answered. “One that will probably require someone else to help figure out. I’d like to think that I’ll only change as much as anyone else would. Being eternally unchanging would also be undesirable.”

The latter honestly worried her more. Being unable to change meant that she would eventually be nothing more than a relic of a bygone era. She would be doomed to watch the world leave her behind, or maybe she would fight to prevent it from happening. Either way, it was a fate that she fervently hoped wouldn’t come to pass.

“But don’t you want some things to never change?” Lord Mare asked, “Things that you like, or stuff that you think is good.”

“I can certainly empathise with that sentiment,” Ludmila answered, “but clinging to the past is never a good thing. The cost of doing so will eventually catch up with anyone who tries. We are the keepers of our own past; remaining stagnant may seem like a good way to preserve things, but, in reality, it’s a guarantee that they will eventually be lost.”

“Mmh, this is hard...”

Lady Aura’s fingers went to the timekeeping device on her wrist.

“But places like Nazarick are made to last forever,” she said. “I thought that meant things could stay the same forever.”

“What does His Majesty have to say about that?” Ludmila asked. “Is he content with staying in Nazarick under this notion that it will last forever?”

“N-No,” Lord Mare answered. “He went out to see what the world was like and founded the Sorcerous Kingdom. He’s always cautious about stuff and tells us to be careful.”

“That’s right,” Ludmila said. “I also know he cares for you a great deal, but does he lock you inside your house or use magic to keep you the same forever?”

“No. Lord Ainz says that he wants to see us learn and grow. He sends us outside to do stuff, too.”

“See?” Ludmila smiled, “You don’t have to hear it from me: His Majesty has already shown you the way forward.”



Ludmila checked to see if the fish were cooked before handing the twins their skewers. They wiped their eyes before taking their meals, tearing into them with a relish. She planted another two skewers over the fire before taking her time with her own.

“Mare,” Lady Aura said around a mouthful of food, “Ludmila said that the expedition needs to be careful about what they report on their survey.”

“E-Expedition?”

“The Adventurer Guild expedition to The Blister.”

“Oh...why?”

“The ecology of the area will change with the removal of the Green Dragons in the area,” Ludmila said. “We don’t want people claiming that our survey work is shoddy because of it. At the least, our work should note that this will happen.”

“Will they really complain?” Lord Mare asked, “Countess Wagner said that we’re giving them a super good deal.”

“It’s an extremely generous offer,” Ludmila answered, “but it would still result in a stain on the reputation of our Adventurer Guild. People will tell others that our rates are cheap, but our work reflects those cheap rates.”

“That’s not good...okay, I’ll figure something out.”

They ate in silence as the landscape brightened around them. After Lady Aura finished off her second fish, she used a *Trooper’s Towel* to clean her hands before settling more comfortably into her blanket.

“So,” she said, “what books did you find?”

“I managed to get Fluder Paradyne to find a few for me,” Ludmila replied. “Speaking of which...you all abandoned me.”

“I-It can’t be helped,” Lady Aura protested. “He’s smelly and annoying and crazy. I wouldn’t have been surprised to find out you tossed him over a balcony railing.”

“I don’t casually kill people like that,” Ludmila frowned. “Anyway, I had a gentleman named Aurelius check through our findings and he narrowed things down to these four books.”

She reached into her *Infinite Haversack* and pulled out *Eco-terrorism in the late 21st Century*, *Aragorn and Legolas' Other Adventures in Middle-Earth*, *Bushwalker's Guide*, and *Crimes Against Humanity: Inuit Atrocities Against Miners in Greenland*. Lady Aura made a face at the thickness of the last one.

"I'm kind of interested in what you're researching," Lady Aura said, "but did you have to pick out such a huge book?"

"I don't mind," Ludmila said, "it just means that whoever wrote it had a lot to share. That said, I'm unsure if I understand these titles correctly. All but one of them doesn't seem to have anything to do with Rangers."

Lady Aura stretched out a hand. Ludmila handed her *Eco-terrorism in the late 21st Century*.

"Let's see...in the late 2060s, extremists around the world banded together to form anti-progress militia groups. Dubbing themselves 'Rangers', their terrorist activities disrupted the global supply chain, causing trillions in damage to industry and logistical infrastructure. This barbaric campaign, which the public likened to the second coming of the Mongols, lasted nearly two decades and resulted in the deaths of three billion innocent civilians before international peacekeeping efforts put an end to their atrocities."

"They sound kind of cool," Lord Mare said.

"I'm not so sure about them sounding 'cool'," Ludmila frowned, "but what do they have to do with Rangers aside from using the term for their organisation?"

"I don't know," Lady Aura said. "Hmm...it looks like there are sections describing how they fought and stuff. Maybe that's the important part?"

"If you please, my lady."

The Dark Elf Ranger cleared her throat.

"Operationally, the Rangers' activities could be divided into three main strategies. The most prevalent was known as *rewilding*, which involved the destruction of primary industries such as farms, mines, and fisheries. New urban developments were also targeted, creating a housing crisis leading to overcrowding and the growth of slums in established urban centres. Thus, responsibility for the squalid conditions and uncontrollable epidemic waves of that period can be placed squarely on the activities of the eco-terrorists.

“The higher-profile strategies involved the destruction of port facilities and acts of piracy and banditry along major transport arteries. Fertiliser storage and fuel depots were a favoured target, as well as unmonitored stretches of railway, highway, and bottlenecks in shipping lanes. Use of improvised explosive devices and converted commercial drones to carry out these attacks was widespread, with agents masquerading as corporate employees sent to target higher-security facilities.”

“What’s a ‘drone’?” Ludmila asked.

“Who knows?” Lady Aura shrugged.

“Isn’t there a Job Class archetype that uses them?” Lord Mare said, “One of the ones that use machines.”

Machines being used to attack logistical facilities? She would have to keep an eye out for that.

“Finally,” Lady Aura continued, “the greatest acts of terrorism were committed against refineries, factories, and other large-scale corporate facilities. Most notably, several thousand corporate executives were assassinated throughout the campaign in senseless acts of savagery. The last organised acts of eco-terrorism were conducted in the 2080s, though sporadic incidents continued to occur beyond the turn of the century.”

“Why was this campaign conducted in the first place?” Ludmila asked.

“Uh...” Lady Aura flipped to the front of the book, “It says something about the eco-terrorists being a cult that subscribed to the Anthropocene hoax. Their actions were supposedly meant to save the environment, but they destroyed it, instead.”

Ludmila looked back and forth between Lady Aura and Lord Mare.

“Does that sound right to you?” Ludmila said, “It sounded like they were trying to stop industrial expansion to preserve nature. Why would that instead result in its destruction?”

“I don’t know...” Lady Aura scanned the pages, “Okay, this part talks about why the eco-terrorists were wrong. It says that, because people are a part of nature, anything that people do is natural behaviour. The actions of the Rangers came at a crucial juncture wherein people, and thus nature, were trying to gain the ability to spread itself beyond the planet. They had one shot – the terrorists ruined it and doomed everyone.”

“I still find it difficult to believe,” Ludmila crossed her arms. “Can people ruin the entire world? Why not develop magics to counteract the damage?”

When did the events described in the book even happen? I mentioned the 2050s and 2070s, so did that mean it happened two millennia after the birth of the world? A time so long ago that the world had restored the damage and left no trace of the doomed civilisation mentioned in the book. Since it was in the great library, maybe the Sorcerer King came from that era, meaning that he was wise and ancient beyond what the Temples of the Six imagined.

“Maybe magic came later,” Lord Mare suggested. “Or maybe they just didn’t figure it out in time.”

“I don’t think the book says anything about everyone dying,” Lady Aura said. “Maybe the survivors just stuck it out until nature restored itself…”

“See?” Ludmila said, “You said it, too. If nature came back after this society collapsed, then the assertion that the Rangers were wrong is flawed.”

“I-if we have more information,” Lord Mare said, “maybe we could get a better idea of what happened.”

Ludmila picked up the thinnest book, *Aragorn and Legolas’ Other Adventures in Middle-Earth*, and handed it to Lord Mare. The title suggested that it occurred at a midpoint in history. Lord Mare flipped open the cover, his eyes moving back and forth across the page.

“What does it say?” Lady Aura asked.

Lord Mare flipped to the next page without answering. Lady Aura shrugged off her blanket and came over to look over her brother’s shoulder. Her eyes slowly grew wide and she went red to the tips of her ears before she snatched the book from Lord Mare and smacked him in the back of the head with it.

“Ow!” Lord Mare cried as his hands came up to shield himself, “Wh-What was that for, big sis?!”

“You’re not allowed to read this kind of book!” Lady Aura told him.

“What is it?” Ludmila asked.

“It’s *dangerous*,” Lady Aura said as she stuffed the book into her inventory, “I’ll be holding onto this for safekeeping. A-Anyway, let’s see what the next book has.”