

Packing up was much faster than setting up had been. The 'mature of destruction' as Waylan infuriatingly put it. Afterward, they were invited to eat by the locals - meat skewers rather than the steak Irwyn had predicted. They must have had a great excess of bones to make the sticks from them, though Irwyn was certainly not complaining. Even weak monster meat still retained a trace of delicious power when so fresh.

"You have been hospitable," Elizabeth said as they were finishing their portions, reaching into her pouch. "Perhaps a gift in return is only reasonable."

She gave out a simple-looking iron ring, perhaps on the larger side as far as rings went, it would fit the hunter's thicker fingers well. This was met with much cheering as Elizabeth explained that whoever wore it would become significantly stronger. About 50 percent above their baseline... not actually much when compared to powerful magic but definitely something that made a difference for someone without.

Well, their hosts were overjoyed and indulged Irwyn and Elizabeth for seconds - Waylan and Alice had declined. Soon enough they were ready to leave. Asemo was not difficult to find: The middle-aged woman had stepped a good way out of the camp and the hunters pointed her out to the Federation's group. Irwyn assumed that their loud wishes of 'sand's blessings' and 'your hunts be straightforward', were goodbyes.

"You just carry them rings?" Waylan asked when they were mostly out of earshot. "You wouldn't give them away if you had just a few."

"There is an excess of enchantments like these," Elizabeth nodded. "Cheap work, weak effects that won't last more than two decades at best. I grabbed a few dozen."

"You would think any weapon would be nice against dem undead," Waylan frowned.

"It doesn't matter whether you have the strength of 30 or 31 people trying to stop an undying behemoth," she just shrugged. "I have a lot fewer that improve precision, perception, or reaction time as those are much more likely to make a small difference. And even if I had taken hundreds, it would barely matter. These are produced on an industrial scale, Waylan. Thousands daily in just the Duchy of Black."

"It matters to the sorry bloke who won't be getting one."

"What is our new friend doing anyway?" Irwyn asked both out of curiosity and to distract. Asemo had moved out of the camp and was drawing something in the sand with a bone cane of sorts. As they got closer they noticed a large stone crate placed presumably in the middle of what she was doing

"Oh, please be careful not to step on the lines!" she called out, then got back to her work. Curious, Irwyn suggested they float above to observe better, which they quickly did. Asemo glanced at them but did not try to tell the group off.

It became quickly apparent the woman had been drawing a picture from the middle where the large chest sat. Speaking of said chest, it seemed impractical to make it out of stone given that carrying just its bulk would be rather labour-intensive even for whatever horse equivalent liked the desert - maybe camels? Irwyn had never seen one. Besides that sidetrack, the point was that the crate was bound to be hard to transport even with beasts of burden, doubly so if it was full. Whatever Asemo was drawing might help with that. If not, Irwyn wondered how hard it would be to keep that carved chunk of rock flying.

“Can you lift us up a bit, Irw?” Waylan asked and Irwyn obliged. That got them a much better vantage.

“I think it’s supposed to be a coin,” Alice opined after a moment.

“Coin?” Elizabeth frowned, looking down. “I don’t see it. It’s not even circular.”

It was actually a triangle with a large hole in the middle where the chest sat. Asemo had drawn details inside the shape as well, one for each side. A full purse, seemingly a loaf of strange flat bread, and two crossed... fingers?

“Not every currency needs to be circular,” Alice rolled her eyes. “Metallurgy might be difficult around here. Gold is scarce, and the circle in the middle saves up on such materials. The symbols are very simple because it’s easier to do like that - minting less detailed shapes is cheaper.”

“Why even make currency like that then?” Waylan asked.

“It’s about economic pressure,” Elizabeth answered. “Controlling a currency is a large advantage - or an equalizer against someone else that does. For example, every Duchy in the Federation makes their own, even if the values are agreed to be kept equal – a treaty that requires a lot of coordination.”

“We do?” Waylan asked, eyebrows raised.

“I have never seen more than one kind of a coin,” Irwyn had the same question.

“You also spent most of your life within walking distance of City Black - yet not *in* the City,” Elizabeth shrugged. “Most trade over the borders happens through the Beacons and other currencies are usually worth keeping around to pay when you next do business with someone from another Duchy. That means almost none of it enters circulation through land trade – and House Blackburg has long been helping keep it that way, even before my parents. I would presume that next to no foreign coin has passed through Ebon Respite in the last century. Strange you never saw any in Abonisle thought.”

“I did and I was there for barely a few days,” Alice chimed in.

“Yes... strange,” Irwyn frowned. Thinking back... he had really not done much financial management in Abonisle, had he? Elizabeth ended up paying for many of his meals due to the repeated invitations, which had reduced his spending. At the same time, he never did establish continuous income. He had gotten paid by Old Ibis for opening a box with that ever-burning piece of wood but that was about it for his income. It would not be strange if the Fowl had just sorted out any coin from other Duchies when paying.

“If you would move back a bit!” Asemo called out to them. Her sand drawing was complete and she likely wanted to finish whatever she had been doing before the wind could disrupt it.

Irwyn moved them away a good distance while Asemo stepped to the bottom side of the triangular coin, directly facing the chest in the middle. Then she surprisingly enough kowtowed, but in a strange way. She did not use her hands for support but rather put them beneath her knees. As a result, her forehead was truly buried in sand. It looked mighty uncomfortable.

"*May Prosperity be eternal, small and large,*" she spoke and there was something strange with those words. Not quite magic but a power nonetheless. Like they were calling out into the distance. Asemo remained in the kowtow for several more seconds before she was answered.

Power filled the petite woman. Not all that much, but power nonetheless. It was not mana but *close*. Close enough Irwyn could estimate it would not match even the capacity of a mage early into imbuement – though enough for a single decently powerful spell. Nor did it remain within Asemo's body for more than a moment. Instead, the power flooded into the sand drawing, coursing through the circle. Then the whole picture began to shrink.

Quite quickly too. It became smaller at a rate visible to the naked eye, halving in size in just a few seconds without any signs of stopping. What was *much* more astonishing was that the exact same happened to the chest in the center. Asemo remained motionless through all that.

"Fuck," Alice suddenly cursed, getting everyone else to turn to her. Their Time mage seemed far too bothered by something else to notice that though. She jumped off the platform Irwyn had made for her. They were not that high above ground, though she still broke her fall with a bit of magic almost absentmindedly. Then Alice stared straight ahead at the once large stone chest. By then it seemed small enough to fit into the palm of a hand.

That appeared to also be the limit as the power finally dispersed, every last mote of it consumed. Asemo, stood up, took a deep breath, and quickly began to dust off the sand from her forehead. Besides that she did not appear particularly winder – no trace of mental exhaustion made itself apparent.

"What was *that*?" Alice demanded. Irwyn lowered the rest of their group down, not sure why she was so manic. But he was not their specialist in Time magic, therefore he would certainly not dismiss the situation off hand.

"A small miracle?" Asemo half asked, clearly befuddled by Alice's reaction.

"It's mass..." Alice began to speak, then paused as if at a loss for words. "It's lighter, isn't it?"

"Well, there would be no point in it if I could not carry my things," Asemo chuckled, then went to grab the box.

"What is the matter?" Elizabeth asked the still clearly agitated Alice.

"It didn't just shrink the box," Alice explained. "It shrunk the contents in every regard."

"Well, yes, that is the look of it," Waylan said. Asemo returned to them but seemed interested in the conversation rather than stopping it.

"No, you don't... ok, let me explain," she sighed but somewhat calmed down. Irwyn glimpsed the shape of her ring appearing on her finger for a split second. "Just outright shrinking *everything*... it's like getting rid of insects with hypersonic projectiles. Ridiculously complicated, inefficient, and impossible for basically everyone who would need to get rid of insects."

"Miracles can overcome mortal expectations," Asemo nodded, smiling.

"No, no, that's not the point," Alice shook her head. "I *could* do that. Shrinking stone like that is not simple but it *is* possible since it's not magical in any way. But the contents? No, I would do the exact opposite - I would expand the space inside to remain constant despite the box

becoming smaller. Then I would subvert gravity within that expanded space as to make the weight irrelevant.”

“It seems like a difference in methods then,” Asemo assessed.

“Yes, like using swatter to get rid of flies,” Alice glared. “Shrinking the contents like that? That’s not intention... or even a concept.”

And that meant a domain. Domain magic which had been somehow called upon by this unassuming woman. Irwyn felt a chill run down his spine. The world was flipped on its back and he suddenly had to reassess the sheer *danger* they might just be in.

“Are these ‘mircales’... common?” Elizabeth carefully asked, staring at Asemo with newly discovered wariness.

“Hardly,” the woman shook her head, “Is your Duchy Federation unfamiliar with them? I find that surprising... but some of the divine are stingier than others.”

“It was my first time seeing one performed,” Elizabeth nodded. “Could you... elaborate on the details?”

“It is simple, I worship Her Majesty Prosperity,” Asemo stated. “And for that service, I am allowed a few limited boons.”

“Can just anyone do that?” Irwyn asked, still hiding a hint of anxiety.

“Of course not,” Asemo shook her head. “That which I may call upon is the reward granted for advancing the Her Majesty’s cause! The rituals may be a bit arduous but it *is* an honor. I am no Chosen but yet remain favored enough.”

“The Chosen have come up,” Elizabeth said carefully. “What are they?”

“Those who the gods deem worthy of bearing true blessings,” Asemo nodded. “Of course, such individuals are exceedingly rare! The City of Terraces only houses two, one for each of our patron deities.”

“How powerful does that make them?” Irwyn inquired.

“Invincible,” Asemo answered with complete certainty. “Only one Chosen can contest another. That is well known.”

“I see,” Irwyn did not voice his doubts. Whatever the truth, Asemo clearly believed that. “Two patrons, you said? I assume one is Her Majesty Prosperity?”

“Yes, she ensures our fields overflow and wealth pours through the city,” Asemo nodded. “She has entered a union with the Skyhunter. A truly blessed alliance - all the wealth the sands may offer with the power needed to protect it. Many cities and smaller settlements have converted since it was formed decades ago.”

“What does Skyhunter entail?” Alice had calmed down enough to speak... or perhaps she decided that this other god would be more dangerous and wanted to know more. Just the name immediately made them the obviously more dangerous of the two.

"He is one of the few gods to ever usurp another!" Asemo smiled. "The legend of his hunt through the very heavens... I would not do it justice with just an abridged retelling. He is the patron of all who would dare face a superior foe or those who protect that which they hold dear, weapon in hand."

"Military and economy," Irwyn summarized. "That certainly does seem synergistic."

"We should get going," Waylan interrupted. "We can talk as we fly."

"Do you know the direction?" Irwyn nodded, turning to Asemo. He began to raise his platforms beneath everyone's feet. The woman did seem a bit wary of it but did not protest.

"There," she pointed, roughly North-East. "I can correct us if the course strays."

"You can sense the city," Alice concluded from that.

"Yes," the woman nodded as if that was only natural. "I have a great connection to it."

"Truly, strange powers in these lands," Elizabeth shook her head.

"Yours seem no less mysterious," Asemo pointed at the platform of Light that had formed beneath her feet and was gathering speed. They had to raise their voices a bit but were close enough to each other and the wind was not too strong. "I have never seen anyone create light this way. And fire as well? Does it not burn?" she pointed again at the platform beneath Elizabeth's feet. Light and Void did not go too well together after all.

"Such is magecraft," Irwyn nodded.

"Just the power of flight," she Asemo stared in wonder. "Does it tire you?"

"This much weight, not really," he shook his head. There would be a limit to how much he could carry, though it was untested. Perhaps there was a point where he could still bear a burden but it became too magically expensive for him to sustain. For their current scenario though, his superior reserves rendered the point moot.

"Would you perhaps be interested in long-term work?" Asemo pitched. "People would offer great wealth in exchange for traveling like *this* between cities. Or just to transfer goods to difficult areas."

"We have a destination in mind," Elizabeth interrupted with mild amusement. "I don't expect we will stay in your city overlong."

"A shame," Asemo shook her head, though did not seem surprised by the refusal. "Ah, that reminds me... perhaps it would be best to speak of worship now rather than later."

"Worship?" Alice asked.

"Yes, the City of Terraces is more tolerant than most... but it has adversaries," Asemo glanced at them hesitantly, her hand was moving at her side, making a strange repetitive gesture. "I cannot know if perhaps their influence had spread past the mountains. It would be best to slay any misunderstandings before they can fester."

"There are hardly any deities influential in the Federation," Elizabeth got her meaning. "Following none means we cannot keep to a rival of yours."

"None?" Asemo was visibly baffled by the very concept. She looked around the group as if expecting at least one of them to disagree. Then she looked back "Truly? This is not... witchwork, is it?"

"I have no idea what that would be," Irwyn admitted. "But presumably not. We are mages, except Waylan who doesn't practice any magic as such."

"Witches are heretical thieves who steal the faith which rightfully belongs to the gods," Asemo explained, clearly fighting back heat from entering those words. "Their foulness is a travesty against the natural order of things."

"A mage's power comes from within ourselves," Irwyn reassured. "No stealing or faith involved."

"But still, none..." she looked them over again. "I suppose stranger people have gone through here. Prosperity welcomes all. So please, tell me more."

The trip was not short but there was much to speak about. Everyone in the Federation's group - well, except Waylan - tried to gradually get out of Asemo the limits of miracles like the one she had received. The likeliness of a power so close to a domain had disturbed them if it could be at the back and call of anyone.

Thankfully, Asemo was very open about those aspects of her worship and did not seem to really suspect they were so worried. Ultimately, such fear may have also been a bit exaggerated. Asemo explained that while such miracles were great, they were usually greatly limited in scope and variety.

The shrinking that the woman had asked for was actually a 'common boon', one that many travelers worshiping Her Majesty Prosperity might request. It required the complicated drawing, lasted only a day, and needed to be paid back in either service or donations. On the other hand, it was almost always granted to those in good standing among the worshippers.

Their group was then obviously curious about more militant applications, so Asemo described to them that it was the Skyhunter who usually granted those. For one, there was a ritual to sacrifice livestock or a captured monster but in return made the weapon used for the killing sharp and durable enough to cut through 'Zanibar steel' - whatever that was.

Asking for more situational miracles was apparently very unreliable. Completely dependent on the gods' whims. A cornered monster hunter had a decent chance of succeeding in getting the Skyhunter to grant them superhuman strength for a short while with honest enough prayers. On the other hand, a merchant stood almost no chance receiving direct help to deal with bandits from Prosperity, as battle was not her purview. Her nature was hiring more guards in advance, or paying the Skyhunter's followers to drive any marauders away from trade routes, and for that she may well lend a small boon to assist in negotiations.

The exception were the Chosen. Asemo seemed reverent of them, and Irwyn could see why. Those were individuals that the gods were *invested* in. For whatever reason, they had a much more direct connection to their patrons. And said patrons would *not* let them die. Not easily at least. Only another Chosen could break through all those blessings, at least according to Asemo. It was the decree of heavens that only a Chosen could defeat another Chosen.

"I think that's not true," Elizabeth had another hypothesis. Asemo was distracted by Alice, talking about regional logistics of all things. Waylan and Irwyn had moved close enough to let Elizabeth speak quietly. "It's actually all about efficiency."

“Don’t know what that means here,” Waylan said.

“Gods draw power from faith, I never realized how literal that was until today,” Elizabeth explained. “It seems like the belief flows through them the same way mana courses through our veins.”

“And that implies that it has a limit,” Irwyn understood her implication. “That spell... it was like a domain but contained incredibly little actual power. Just barely enough to complete it, I would wager.”

“Domains are *nudging* the rules, but that effect is not always expensive mana-wise. It is likely the same here. Why else would they need worship? They are pooling together all that power and then distributing some of it back as investments to spread their names and thus worship. But that means the power is finite.”

“So, it must be a right mess when two different of them ‘Chosen’ fight,” Waylan half grinned. “Do you care more about hoarding that sweet faith or about the bloke you picked out to represent you? It’s about who spends more.”

“Exactly,” Elizabeth nodded. “Though we should still not pick a fight with them. We can presume these gods possess power close to domain mages, maybe even equal or greater. I don’t know how much they can and would actually channel through these ‘Chosen’ but it’s almost certainly more than we can handle as we are.”

“Agreed,” Irwyn nodded.

Their flying trip continued after that. They were not the only ones interrogating though. Asemo seemed just as full of questions about the Federation. A lot of information about the structure of things and such. Many of which Irwyn frankly had not know answers to himself. Elizabeth once again proved a bottomless well of general knowledge though, easily keeping up with the older woman’s curiosity. Most of it was true as Asemo mostly asked about things anyone could learn. Well, Elizabeth certainly omitted much of House Blackburn or any association when speaking of the rulers and perhaps some other actual secrets.

They did not speak all day, of course. The trip was rather long and they ended up taking a break around midday. Then they still needed to travel for several more hours, Asemo having to correct their course a few times. Just talking was not enough to fill all that time - some things needed to be digested. And the scenery was not exactly extraordinary. Endless dunes of yellow-white sand passed them as they hid from the sun beneath Elizabeth’s umbrella. But boredom was becoming more and more unbearable as the sun sailed overhead.

Then they *finally* saw something different in front of them. A small mountain, standing impossibly in the middle of a desert. It was no behemoth rising above the clouds but it was nonetheless perhaps hundreds of meters tall. But it was much more than a sheer rock. Much more than a mere fixture of untouched nature.

At the very summit, there was a bursting geyser. Water sprung from it at such quantities it was somewhat visible even from as far as they were. And from there, a spring thick enough to be called a river flowed... perhaps even from multiple sides if Irwyn’s eyes weren’t deceiving him. Then below that peak, structures began to emerge.

Extravagant villas near the top, but not many of them. What was more important were the platforms, large flat surfaces, cut into the mountain surface, then extending a good distance out of it - all thickly layered on top of each other. Terraces, levels upon levels of them.

Some were streets with houses. Some were outright farms, covered in fields of some kind of crop Irwyn could not identify from so far away. Some with different, more open structures. Irwyn spotted at least two large statues and what he thought may have been a market of some kind. He also spotted the stairways, ramps, and pulleys connecting the levels. This kind of architecture spanned all the way to the bottom.

There was more at the mountain's foot. The city did not end, rather it continued on. The river-like stream was split and diminished many times on its way from the mountain's top but the town beneath would still possess a supply of water. The buildings seemed almost small in comparison to what stood above it but it nonetheless stretched a good distance away – the edge of the town enclosed behind tall walls. Irwyn squinted, trying to see where the water ended but it must have been somewhere in between the buildings.

"Welcome to the City of Terraces," Asemo said as they approached ever closer, smile wide.
"Here where all Prosper."