

They did not fly into the city as that was a sure way to gather much unwanted attention. Instead, Irwyn lowered them down to almost the ground level, made easier by the dune landscape becoming flatter around the mountain. Just barely above the ground, the terrain's great fixture did seem much more imposing and towering.

Despite that, the landscape was completely barren besides the city itself. Not so much as another traveler was in sight under the desert sun. Thus, there were no distractions as they approached the beacon of civilization. Irwyn began noting more details as they got close.

For one, the walls were made of solid rock, presumably quarried from the mountain itself, and thick rather than tall. There was a gate of sorts, though it was strange. No door or even grate covered the point of entry, barely any guards in sight. There was seemingly nothing besides a chokepoint. *Seemingly.*

"Pit traps beneath us," Alice whispered as they walked through the gates. There were no visitors either. Asemo was a bit ahead of them. "Pretty complex mechanism to trigger them too."

"Under *sand*?" Waylan pointed out.

"I think they use the sand like leaves in a forest," she nodded. "I am no Realm mage but I assume the ground has to be pretty solid. I am definitely sensing holes."

Asemo led them down a wide paved street that led straight towards the mountain, a highway of sorts. It reminded Irwyn of the Road Street in Ebon Respite - a line cutting through miserable suburbs so that the rich would not need to walk among their lessers. There were signs of it all around him.

The architecture was strange, using unfamiliar bricks and aesthetics - like the focus on creating spots shaded from the sun - but Irwyn *could* tell it was patchwork. Especially when he looked down a side street that led a distance away. Almost none of the buildings seemed new or even in decent shape. That was different than Ebon Respite at least - there the buildings around the main road catered to the upper classes and made sure they looked like it.

In the City of Terraces, there was little pretense of even that. That he saw almost no one besides armed men on their way was suspect as well. Asemo seemed uncaring or even unaware of that, only looking ahead. That meant their pace was quick.

At the foot of the mountain, Irwyn at least found where all the water ended. There were miniature waterfalls plummeting into springs after a small drop, filling them like a reservoir - Irwyn could see two from where he stood but assumed there would be more - the river flowing from the top had been split countless times from what he had beheld at a distance. The water in the spring did not seem to be rising though, despite the lack of any obvious outlet. Maybe that was because it was being withdrawn at the same time.

Surrounding these ponds were low walls - as in, Irwyn could literally see over them from a slight high ground - with a single chokepoint, manned by a duo of men in leather armor and donning bone spears, with some other weapons clearly sheathed on their belts, those were letting the townspeople through to withdraw water. Two more guards were standing closer to the spring itself, observing said people as if afraid they might try to poison their well. That made four guards total per source of liquid.

That was not the only nearby spot with guards. There was actually another proper thick wall built behind those springs, already on the mountain's slope, going the whole way around. A

proper boundary between the upper districts and the city beneath. There was even a gate at the start of the slope, no line but twice as many armed men as the outer one. Thrice even.

"If you would give me a moment, I can secure your passage to the city proper," Asemo said, pointing at the gate in question. "It is only right for my guests."

"Is that usually difficult?" Elizabeth asked.

"No, you are clearly people of status," Asemo assured. "But my word can spare you much Time and questions. I will be right back," she finished and then immediately headed there.

"Is there a massive reservoir beneath this mountain?" Irwyn pondered out loud, thoughts returning to the springs since Asemo was leaving and they needed to talk about something.

"The City of Terraces has never known drought," Asemo paused, turning back momentarily to answer. Apparently, she had still been in earshot. "In three centuries it had not dried up a step."

"There is probably a proper creational source," Elizabeth nodded in thought. "Ironic that it resides in a desert but certainly convenient for the people here."

"A what?" Irwyn questioned.

"A place where matter gets endlessly created," Alice explained first, clearly familiar with the term. "Water in this case."

"Isn't that supposed to be prohibitively mana intensive?" Irwyn frowned. "I feel nothing of the sort from within the mountain. And at that sheer quantity, I think I would."

"Some places naturally create a resource by the will of **Astremus** himself," Elizabeth said. "Reality is either rigged to let Realms form the matter there for a fraction of the cost it would take a mage or it happens under a principle completely detached from the Creational Shift. The Aspects far surpassed even Names and Edicts; nothing is impossible. What we reality considers laws are what they *chose* to put in place."

"I have just never heard of something like this," he nodded. "Sounds strange in all honesty."

"Where do you think ore or gems come from, Irwyn?" Elizabeth smiled.

"From mines," he gave the obvious answer.

"Yes, mines," Elizabeth nodded. "Which have been there for thousands upon thousands of years of constant exploitation. If they were not growing back over Time there would be not even scraps left in the entire Federation."

"Steelmire was built over a massive creational source of iron," Alice chimed in again. "It could yield hundreds of tons a year without diminishing reserves. A large portion of our annual income, especially since we processed it before selling."

"And anything can just regrow like that?" Irwyn asked in wonder.

"It depends on scale and quality," Elizabeth nodded. "Some extraordinary magical ores might only recover a few grams every year. And it's never anything too complex or already processed – just raw materials. It also depends on the size of the source - it might be a single vein or half a

mountain's volume. A larger area almost always means faster recovery. It's even possible to move some smaller ones, though the process is difficult and expensive."

"And the one here?" Irwyn asked curiously, glancing again at the springs. "How big would you say it is?"

"Water is probably one the magically cheapest substances to create if we go by the chemical composition alone," Elizabeth nodded. "Being a compound rather than an element tunes that down a bit but still, even a relatively weak source could provide an enormous quantity... so probably smaller than you would expect. I cannot even give a real educated guess to the actual size – all I possess is surface knowledge."

"They are charging for the water," Waylan muttered from the side, frowning. Their sneak had been quiet, observing. And indeed, the people coming to fill their pitchers were handing their due to the armed guards who then let them through the chokepoints. The shape of the coins was familiar but the material... was that *glass*? Maybe he saw wrong from the distance.

Before anyone could think of anything to answer or elaborate on the currency, Asemo finally returned, calling out to them. "Sorry for the delay. Today, it seems only ashbrains are on duty!"

"It was not too long," Elizabeth reassured, as the woman got close. She was also holding four familiar triangular shapes, much like the coin Asemo had drawn in the sand just that morning. They were made out of glass – again – and coloured to look ashen gray. "These are?"

"Pins, of course," Asemo nodded, pointing to the sharp bone attachment meant to fix them to clothes. "The city proper is a closed society. Until your face is recognizable, it is better to wear your exact status - especially as visitors."

"Hmm, I don't think I could pierce my dress even if I wanted to," Elizabeth smiled. "So, what does the pin actually represent?"

"Usually affiliation, especially if a person is scarcely known where they are headed," Asemo explained. "I would wear mine if I went to places where my face is foreign but would not when I belong."

"What does your look like then?" Alice asked curiously.

"I have it in my box," Asemo shook her head. "But mine is green with a golden lining around the center."

"The shape connects you to Her Majesty Prosperity and her followers," Elizabeth analyzed. "That reminds me, is that a coin or just a symbol?"

"Both," Asemo answered. "The symbol of Prosperity is our currency."

"I see," Elizabeth nodded. "Green then would be... vocation? And the gold depicts favor, I presume. Or maybe social status."

"Green speaks of learning, yes," Asemo nodded, smiling proudly. "As the second librarian that is naturally my assignment. A gold line speaks of great respect and achievements obtained. Silver would mean significant rather than great. Those who have not been recognized for such remain without. The process of claiming such lines is complicated."

“What if someone visited without being connected to either Prosperity or the Skyhunter?” Irwyn wanted to know. “Are they denied entrance because of that?”

“It depends,” Asemo explained. “Someone like you, clearly not common folk just by appearance, would likely be admitted after much questioning as foreign travelers, wearing similar pins I brought except merely a neutral full circle. On the other hand, someone truly without any status naturally cannot be allowed into the city proper. As for visitors from other settlements, the City of Terraces is neutral, we allow the followers of other powers entry with their own marks.”

“So, it can be any notable power?” Elizabeth said, a grin appearing on her face.

“Well, yes, with the owner's allowance, of course,” Asemo carefully nodded. “And important factions only. Symbols carry weight and thus must be real.”

“Then perhaps I have something suitable in mind,” her smile only widened as Elizabeth moved a hand to her chest. It was purely theatrical, of course. She could have done what she did with a thought. Instead, she pretended to draw with inhumanly fast motions of her finger for two seconds. When Elizabeth was done, there was a drawing made from Void magic proudly displayed above her heart. A familiar shape of a Black Castle. The insignia of House Blackburg. Ironic in hindsight given that City Black had more of a palace than fortified ramparts at its center.

“If you say so,” Irwyn could not help but grin slightly either. He did not feel much personal loyalty to the House itself... but borrowing their infamy was appealing. Moreover, he would not mind doing this just because it made Elizabeth grin that way. Part of him also wondered if anyone might recognize it and flinch. He followed the heiress' example and manifested the same symbol at roughly the same spot, from a dim but smoldering Flame. As long as he kept maintaining it as an active, impermanent spell images were fine despite his oathbound curse.

“This is much harder to do with Time, you know?” Alice sighed from the side, but followed suit. Hers was half transparent but still visible. It was a distorting in the light passing through it, meticulously arrayed to appear out of place at a glance and form the desired shape upon inspection. Irwyn wondered if he could tease her about it being *practically* mostly natural Light that let it be visible.

“I will take the pin, thanks,” Waylan chimed in from the side. “Personally, not much for standing out.”

“Ah, yes,” Asemo hesitantly gave him one, awkwardly holding the remaining three. Her clothes did not seem to possess any sockets and her only pouch was filled with the minimized chest. “I am unfamiliar with this mark.”

“It is the mark of House Blackburg,” Elizabeth said, taking Pride in it. “The less tolerant among us might take offense at being unrecognized.”

“A house...” Asemo still seemed far from certain. “Some people might take issue with the scale.”

“I assure you, no one who knows of them would dare claim that,” Irwyn spoke in support. “In the city I come from even the name itself can only be spoken with a hint of dread.”

“That is true for basically every town and village in their sphere of influence,” Alice rolled her eyes but played into it. “I know great people who would think anyone a fool for even doubting the incredible power of House Blackburg.”

“Of course, of course,” that seemed to reassure their guide a great deal at least. “And there should be no issues with using it, I presume?”

“My blood ties are undeniable,” Elizabeth nodded. “And my companions have every right to claim close association by that alone.”

“Wonderful, then let us head to the city proper,” Asemo nodded, motioning ahead. “I have spoken to the spearbearers earlier so it should be no issue.”

Thus they walked through the gate onto a wide stairway. Few people walked by them but that quickly changed when they arrived at a large plaza a hundred or so steps later. It was a proper wide market with tents and buildings, all selling something.

But the plaza was *long* rather than wide, the city’s ascending levels were unlike Abonisle in that they could only be built up to a certain distance from the mountain wall. That meant that the market was many times the length it was in width. There were also guards *everywhere* it seemed. Or *spearbearers*, as seemed to be the proper term. By every other shop, sometimes two near one. They stood out with those bone spears more than the semi-uniform armor.

“Is this level of security normal?” Irwyn had to question.

“There is much rabble still walking these parts so more spears are needed to ensure they behave,” Asemo explained. “Twice so with so many goods. It will be better when we reach higher, I promise. There is an elevator on the other side.”

There was indeed such a thing, a pair of platforms moving up and down a sheer slope, a channel of sorts carved into the mountainside for them. There was a long *long* line standing before it, which Asemo immediately skipped. Elizabeth and Alice followed this move with the natural grace of someone to whom it did not ever occur there might be anything strange about that. Irwyn and Waylan followed a step behind, much less confidently. The crowd looked at them but did not speak a word of protest.

On second glance, none of them seemed ‘important’. Not that Irwyn was evaluating them as human beings but rather making a conclusion by their clothes. While Asemo wore simple and thin robes hers were undamaged and clean despite her just returning from a long journey – from quality material. Her hands were uncalloused and she held her head high. These people... well they reminded Irwyn of laborers in Ebon Respite. Not quite the bottom of the barrel but nowhere near the lid either. Calloused hands and slightly patchwork clothes, but not to a point that would make them appear near the end of their rope.

“Ah, Librarian,” an operator by the lift did not complain either. Instead, she bowed, clearly recognizing Asemo. He did a double take at their badges but did not actually comment. “And... guests. Where do you seek to go?”

“To the promenade,” Asemo commanded.

“Of course,” the operator took that in stride. One of the two platforms was just coming level with them. The people on it quickly departed, allowing the group of five to enter. Even spread out with plenty of space, they did not take up a third of the platform’s capacity... despite that no one followed them in boarding. The elevator quickly began to move upwards. The motion was a bit uneven with the occasional tremor going through their platform - not quite the same smoothness as Irwyn had experienced in Abonisle.

“So, what is this promenade?” Alice asked.

“A beautiful place, it is best seen rather than described,” Asemo smiled, not extrapolating further than that.

“I hope so,” Elizabeth nodded. The very same person who had called a city-size dragon in flight ‘not as impressive as I expected’. Irwyn hoped for Asemo’s sake that she was not overselling it too much. She seemed genuinely enthusiastic to show this ‘promenade’ off.

“Why have we stopped?” Waylan asked with a frown. Irwyn realized that they had indeed stopped moving. The elevator had only passed by at most a couple floors so far and was right in the in-between two at the moment.

“Maybe a technical iss...?” Asemo started, frowning as well. That was when she was interrupted by a loud crack, the platform violently shaking beneath their feet.

Then it began to plummet, cut loose from its ropes.