

The way through the mountain was surprisingly nonmagical. It had something to do with the inside of the wall of rock quite literally draining magic. Not that fast, but at a rate that would still wear out almost any enchantment over years or decades - that meant the inside of the path would be wholly unenchanted and operating something high-speed going through would be more expensive.

Which would still be tenable... if it was something that could afford to be expensive. This was not some kind of private, high-maintenance institute. This was one of dozens of stations that were expected to be used by anyone and everyone who meant to pass through the mountains. There wasn't really a fee... or maybe they were just not charged, which actually seemed more likely.

Either way, that was why they were standing on top of a stupidly tall scaffold, hundreds of meters in the air. Irwyn could not actually see how high exactly because the conveniently present elevator had moved too fast while the sky was still hailing that warm fake snow. The scaffold was erected next to the mountain, cutting into it for most of its supports. The platform on top was quite large and there was a pulley system to the side of them that would allow things to be pulled to the top, above the *exit* at the very foot.

How does one deal with impractically expensive magic then? Gravity, apparently. Since moving through the mountain would drain magic, such as enchanted propulsion, they would instead move to the top of a very tall slope, then ride down using *rails*. An ingenious solution, really. Lifting the wagon and people was actually not *that* hard with mages - there were even the available stairs and manual power option for the pullies, in case a traveler was feeling truly masochistic.

"There will be a large shove at the start," the singular annoyed soldier who had gone up with them said. "Then a bit of jostling until you slow back down to terminal velocity. The whole journey is just over 4 hours."

"Terminal?" Waylan inquired with a hint of alarm.

"It means the highest speed you can get to with just gravity before friction doesn't let you accelerate any longer," Alice explained for him. "Or I suppose what you slow down too if you are faster than that."

"Please, just get in?" the officer begged. They moved to oblige him.

Their 'cart' if it could be called that, looked a bit strange. Like an... onion with a stem? But longer, more even. Downright sleek. Perhaps closer to a cone with a ball at the front. The front was mostly spherical but then the shape constricted down to almost a point at the very back.

It was all on rails and about efficiency, yes... That did not mean that their vehicle was small though. Well over 2 meters tall at the front and 7 meters long, however, much of that was in the prolonged tip where nothing would realistically fit from the inside. It was on wheels with an extremely mana-efficient and durable enchantment to reduce friction - according to Elizabeth, at least. The insides were supposedly also somewhat isolated from the drain, though they had been warned it would only have a notable effect against the drain being passive - that meant no casting spells.

Speaking of inside, it was more than spacious enough for four people. Ample seating area at the front and even a small restroom with a door at the backside. Even from there, it would not be possible to reach the very end of their vehicle as when it approached a certain degree of

slimness a metal boundary closed off access to the rest. Presumably, there was something behind it.

Once they were seated the soldier told to please hold on for the departure and then closed the entrance behind them. About ten seconds later there was a loud *bang* and Irwyn nearly flew out of his seat as the vehicle flew forward. Even with a warning, the force of it surprised him.

"Fucking 'shove' my ass!" Waylan cursed. He had been thrown off to the back of the cart. Perhaps predicting that exact outcome, there was cushioning installed in many places so that there would be no actual injuries beyond perhaps a bruise.

"I might have pulled a muscle," Alice also complained, getting back up from half crouch. She had fallen off her seat but held on without being tossed.

"It should be smooth from now on," Elizabeth said with a slight grin, staring at the two. Unsurprisingly, she had held on the best. Afterward, their means of travel did indeed stabilize for the rest of the journey, not so much as shaking overtly.

The journey was somewhat long, but bearably so in good company. They had plenty to talk about after all: Mostly because they knew almost nothing. They were aware of the Duchess' old home kingdom and of their destination being past several nations... but that was basically all of it. Not by accident, that is. They could have tried to find out more... but that would be against the spirit of the adventure. They could also have a lot of fun *guessing*. The four hours flew by like that.

When Irwyn stepped out of the wagon, he immediately felt *intensely* what had been meant by 'thinner' magic on the other side. He had thought the density had gotten low within that little capsule they used to pass through the mountain - the majority of it had still been drained despite the enchantment - but he was forced to re-evaluate what the bottom of the barrel would be. If most of the Duchy Federation had been like a pond of water going up to the neck, the wagon had become barely ankle-deep by the end of their journey. The other side was like a dried-out bowl.

It staggering. Ebon Respite was considered 'thin' on magic, yet what he was feeling was a fraction of fraction of that. There was so little in the air, Irwyn could scarcely even perceive it. Like trying to feel the moisture in the atmosphere right after jumping out of a bath.

Elizabeth and Alice were having similar extreme reaction, frowning and shuddering at the incredible difference. Waylan seemed the only one unaffected, a mark of his honing or merely the lack of magic. Irwyn was not sure what it would mean for his own magecraft as he basically always drew mana from deep within his being but they *had* also been warned the ambient density would hinder recovery.

The next surprise no one had predicted did not strike more than a few moments later. As soon as the three of them recovered enough to look around, really. They had *not* anticipated a desert to sprawl in front of them.

"How does that even work?" Alice questioned. "There is a snowstorm on the other side!"

"Hundreds of kilometers away, completely blocked off," Elizabeth said after a moment. "And the snowstorm is more magic than cold and moisture. I suppose it makes sense?"

“There is also notably no transport,” Irwyn looked around. While the Duchy had maintained something of a waystation on their side, there was no one on this end. There was a familiar scaffolding sprawling incredibly high up the mountain’s side as well as the metallic ropes of the pulley, yes, but Irwyn felt no sign of the magical elevator they had taken up on the Federation’s side.

There was also seemingly no one keeping watch over the crossing. No proper station or even so much as a tent in sight. Just the mountain wall spreading endlessly behind them and an expanse of sand in front. Just sand, somewhere in between white and yellow, with tall dunes and not so much as a glimpse of vegetation or any wildlife.

“Do we just... leave it down here?” Waylan asked, pointing at the capsule.

“I am not pulling it all the way up,” Alice straight-up announced. It was quite a way to the top of the scaffold, even with magic... especially if they had to walk up the stairs as well. And they were not told something like that would be expected of them.

“We can lift it off the tracks at least,” Elizabeth decided. “Just to the side, in case another goes through. Irwyn?”

He got to it. It was not *that* heavy, really. A bit of solid Light was more than enough to lift and move it to the side. In the meantime, Waylan had another important query. “Where do we go?”

“To the nearest town,” Elizabeth said.

“That is in *which* way?” Waylan gestured towards the featureless desert dunes spreading towards the horizon. “Abonisle was a long way off, and we ain’t even got a carriage now.”

“*That* might be a problem,” Alice admitted looking around but still seeing nothing, just like the rest of them.

“We could just head straight North?” Irwyn suggested. “We are bound to encounter something *eventually*.”

With no one having any better idea, that is what they did. Except there were more issues. They *did* have an excessive amount of water and food, so that wasn’t a problem... but what they didn’t possess was appropriate attire.

Elizabeth, as ever, wore that familiar black dress. Even assuming it did not have ways to ward off dessert’s heat, her affinity with Flame meant decent resistance. Same with Irwyn, who was not sure he even *could* feel uncomfortably hot. If he sweated, it would be from physical strain, not heat.

Alice and Waylan had been wearing clothing appropriate for Abonisle and beyond: Layers of attire intended for chill or even outright cold. Jackets and long sleeves, thick pants, and such. That meant the two of them were sweating heavily even before they could set off. Alice at least had packed an ‘old summer dress’, which she changed into and then kept complaining about having to wear – *for some reason*. Waylan had not... possessed such foresight. The lightest clothes he owned were still much too thick for a dessert.

In the end, Alice ended up cutting his shirt and pants into much less length, then even thinning out the fabric by removing some fibers from the middle. It would supposedly reduce its structural

integrity by a great degree to the point it would develop large holes quickly but a ruined set of clothing was far preferable to the heat, at least to Waylan.

To prevent sunburns, Elizabeth had the idea of making an umbrella of sorts above them. Void magic *was* quite efficient at creating a shadow cast over the group. The magic was not even expensive, given all it had to block was just normal sunlight... though she still frowned and mentioned that it was *noticeably* more expensive than in the Federation, both to cast and maintain.

Then they walked. Excruciatingly through the sand, struggling to move in such a terrain... for about half an hour before an increasingly annoyed Waylan asked whether it wouldn't be easier to just lift them all up with magic and carry the four of them over the damn dunes. Which was a good point, Irwyn had to admit after a moment of embarrassed silence. That it was Waylan coming up with it first sounded like something the sneak would mock the rest of them with for an entire week.

Just 3 platforms of solid Light - and one of Flame for Elizabeth - was simple enough, even if they had to bear people's weight and move them. Yes, holding something with a spell meant it had to fight against gravity and thus become far more expensive and moving at speed would make the costs multiply... but people were not that heavy and simple platform inexpensive as a baseline.

At first, Irwyn tried to match the rising dunes, traveling just above the ground... then he realized it would be so much easier to just float above them. Even with the vantage point they still did not see anything notable.

"Wait, can't someone just... fly higher and look?" Waylan questioned. "Actually, since *when* can you just make people fly?"

"Uhm, it is a bit impractical," Elizabeth tried to explain in Irwyn's stead. "You don't have great control over your body on top if you just move around a platform, then you need to make sure the speed won't just launch you off... or break anything. Then there is the problem of cost. Usually, such a spell would be too expansive for most mages until almost halfway into imbuelement."

"Which the two of you have been in for a while," Alice cheerfully pilled on. "I never used platforms because I intend to learn a *proper* flying spell when I get to it. Irwyn could have been doing that for a while though, right?"

"It, uhm... never really occurred to me," Irwyn admitted.

"You never thought 'hey, maybe I could just fly, eh?' really?" Waylan squinted at him.

"Why *would* I need to fly?" Irwyn spoke in defense. "In Abonisle, I would just stand out and it wasn't much use. Back in Ebon Respite, well, I was mostly staying in camp."

"Irw, the idiot who did not realize he could literally fly," Waylan rolled his eyes. "The tragedy of *you* being the person who can do it."

"Tragedy is not a word," Irwyn deflected.

"But idiot is," Waylan grinned back without pausing. A clear trap, in hindsight. "Which I think describes quite well choosing *not* to fly."

"It was hardly a choice. Just lack of inspiration and need!"

"Watching the scenery is a *need* enough!" Waylan said, then gestured around them to support his argument... The dunes of sand did not look that impressive even if they were flying a bit above them. Every else gave Waylan a sarcastic glare, raised eyebrow and all.

"You should bring me up," Alice still rescued him after suppressing a giggle. "I might be able to see *something* from high above enough. Unless Elizabeth can do that better?"

"Sensible enough. You can probably see further than me during the day," Elizabeth nodded. "Can you catch yourself?"

"Easily," Alice nodded. "Up, Irw?"

"Of course," he *intently* did not react to the shortening of his name. That was *exactly* how one got teased about it more often. He had learned that lesson with Waylan enough times.

"I think there is *something* in that direction," she pointed a bit left of where they had been going, "Not sure what yet."

"Better than just blindly flying north," Elizabeth decided. "How fast can you go?"

"Let's find out," Irwyn grinned.

"May I request an extra handrail?" Waylan asked, looking around the flat flying platform he was standing on.

"Don't worry," Alice said cheerfully. "From this height, sand is actually decently soft as far as landings go!"

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The 'thing' Alice had seen in the distance were, in fact, burnt-out ruins. Not old stone structures covered in sooth, but rather the remnants of a large camp. Perhaps even an encampment, given the size. There were a few half-incinerated remnants of tarp, and metal supports standing around the great black outline in the sand. That all indicated recency of whatever had happened, though something else painted a rather grim image.

"I will step out," Waylan said after spotting the first charred skeleton, a grimace on his face.

"Me too," Alice added. Her face was blank but she was *very* intently not looking in their direction. "We can keep a lookout."

That left Irwyn and Elizabeth to step into the ruins themselves. Black sand covered in soot was thick beneath the feet, barely a few patches of the yellowish kind around. Fighting the feeling of sickness in his stomach, Irwyn looked around. He guessed dozens of corpses without doing a proper count and those were only the ones he could identify. He was certainly not going to double-check whether some of them had been merely short or *too* short to even be adults. Thinking about it as little as possible would be the wisest move.

Elizabeth seemed much less disturbed than him, walking around and taking a closer look at many of the bodies while Irwyn was regaining his composure. He was certainly not going to steal her thunder.

"Not overly damaged," she judged after inspecting a few. "Some cracked bones on many but usually on the legs. Almost none on skulls or necks. Suggests they died to the fire itself rather than before it. Of course, just blackened bones usually won't show a slit throat or an arrow - or most magic."

"A bit strange," Irwyn hesitantly commented. "This is no enclosed space. Why not just run out of the fire?"

"A number of possibilities come to mind," Elizabeth shrugged. "It could have happened at night and most of them woke up too late or not at all. Or maybe there were large crowds and many of these got injured in a stampede until they couldn't flee. Maybe greed? The smoke can knock people out faster than they think while trying to rescue some of their belongings. Or, of course, they were surrounded and stopped from fleeing."

"Why would someone do that?" Irwyn gaped.

"Well, it is a useful doctrine against undead, since they cannot ambush you if you just maintain a perimeter around them, then bombard most of their position to oblivion," Elizabeth said thoughtfully. "Seems a bit pointless against humans. If you have the forces to surround them and stop them from running why even bother with this? It also beats the point of banditry if the loot goes up in flames."

"Yes, that was exactly my question," Irwyn stared around. Whatever the reason, the results were brutal. Dozens of people must have died at least, perhaps as many as 50. He was not quite willing to calculate the exact number.

"Who knows," she shrugged nonchalantly. "We will have to find out more from someone still alive. Somewhere else, it seems."

"We could try to figure out how long ago this happened," he suggested.

"The burned sand is still tightly concentrated around here... so probably not longer than a week?" she suggested. "It would probably get moved around with wind but I have no idea how windy it usually is. Maybe it gets scattered quicker than that?"

"Well, it's not much hotter than the surroundings - and that's probably because black heats up faster in the sunlight - so let's say not within 24 hours," Irwyn looked around again but found nothing else that would give him obvious clues. "So, one to seven days ago. We can go with that. If whoever is responsible goes on foot, we should reasonably be able to catch up to them."

"Maybe look for tracks?" she suggested.

"In the sand?" Irwyn gestured at the desert around them. The wind was light at the moment but it was moving some of the lighter sand particles around.

"We can try," Elizabeth sighed. "Either way, no point in lingering. Let's see if maybe Alice can catch wind of something."