

Goldenlocks trod towards them confidently, her gilded hair swaying with each step. Well, there was something more to that gait than just mere confidence. Like reality slightly bent to accommodate it, glowing with the sheer weight of her ego. It was not like concepts - those were much firmer about their meaning. The feeling around the Chosen could not be summarized in one word. Nor could Irwyn really tell how it would compare with mages.

When they got closer, Asemo hurried off towards the arranged feast while Goldenlocks took a seat close by them, separated by just one seat from Elizabeth. There was obviously no option but to turn to the Chosen from their meals as the woman smiled.

Irwyn realized he could not tell what that smile meant. Usually, he would be able to, almost as a gut feeling. When the smile was happy, or strained, or pained, or exhilarated. Ironically, he had a knack for reading expressions despite his antisocial tendencies - and Old Crow had once helped him sharpen it into something almost subconscious. To the point Irwyn had gotten used to looking at a face and spotting several secrets at a glance.

Goldenlock's visage revealed nothing. It was a face like any other, with an expression that did not seem unfamiliar. Yet any kind of emotion or insight were as if invisible to him. It was not just a perfect performance - like what Avys had managed - because then Irwyn would have gotten *some* kind of impression, even if a false one. This was just a removal of one of Irwyn's oldest comforts and that disturbed him.

"I am overjoyed you enjoy the hospitality of the City of Terraces," the Chosen broke the silence. "How have you found our cuisine?"

"As would be expected from such a distinguished establishment," Elizabeth said with an amused smile of her own, probably intending it as a subtle jab. "But what may bring you here... oh, Chosen? I apologize for not knowing the proper honorifics."

"Such cannot be begrudged to children from afar," Goldenlocks assured, her expressions changed but remained utterly unreadable. "Yet after I have heard of you from the second librarian I could not help but come visit. And what you call 'magecraft' fascinates me. Tell me... Irwyn, I presume? Can you truly lift such heavy burdens with just Light and Flames summoned from nothing?"

"Of course," Irwyn hesitantly nodded. *What was their play?* Should he downplay his abilities to make them less exciting? Exaggerate as to make himself seem intimidating instead? He pondered it for a moment.

"How much could you actually lift in just weight?" but when she spoke again Irwyn realized that he would not be able to make her even warry no matter what he said. For all the Chosen's expression remained unreadable, she had basically barged in and started a borderline interrogation within a few sentences. That was the act of someone who thought they were close enough to untouchable, without fear.

"There is a limit of course," so, Irwyn remained vague, and certainly would not lie. Who knew if they could somehow tell? "I haven't actually tested *exactly* how much I could hold. More than the elevator, certainly... but with more weight I will drain quicker, speed will become more difficult. Due to Finitude, it will become harder basically exponentially as well."

"I see," she did not even thank him, turning to Elizabeth. "And you cast a shade that can completely block out the sun?"

"Yes," Elizabeth answered. Then did not elaborate.

"How large? Elaborate, please, with exactness," Goldenlocks asked. Asemo finally returned, placing down a dish for the Chosen, then walking a good distance away before sitting down with her own and digging in.

"Not much larger than I have shown but it can be kept indefinitely," Elizabeth blatantly lied. "My other two companions are mostly mundane. Alice can perceive empty spaces through even walls - though very unreliably at times - and Waylan is exceptional at stealth."

"Understood," Goldenlocks nodded while Alice gaped at Elizabeth for making such an outrageous lie... or, if Irwyn looked at it differently, it almost seemed like Alice would be staring in outrage after the insult on her made-up abilities... Alice was not the best actor so disguising her reaction like that would be clever. One of the Duchess' lessons by all likelihood, though Irwyn would never say that out loud in front of Elizabeth. Waylan in the meantime remained completely impassive, even returning to eating at some point.

"What else brings someone as important as you to us?" Elizabeth asked. And it was strange. Something was definitely off, Irwyn knew that much already. He just wasn't sure what or whether to do something about it right away.

"When do you intend to leave?" Goldenlocks asked.

"Today or tomorrow, depending on if something catches my eye," Elizabeth said, much more honestly than before.

"Stay for a while longer," the Chosen said. "A week, at least."

"Very well," Elizabeth surprisingly agreed without a pause. Irwyn stopped himself from showing his bafflement. "It will be an honor."

"That will be all then," Goldenlocks nodded, glancing at her bowl of food - soup of some kind. She placed a hand over it and the meal immediately disappeared, leaving an empty dish. She then stood up and her demeanor shifted, back much more friendly than commanding. "You truly are a fascinating companion-hood. I may be rather busy but I will surely find time to visit again."

"We shall look forward to it," Elizabeth agreed as the Chosen and Asemo departed, the librarian never saying a word.

"See you around," Alice waved with a smile. She meant it as far as Irwyn could tell and that was strange. The woman had been terribly rude to say the least. His eyes wandered to Waylan but he did not seem angry in any way either. Lastly, he looked at Elizabeth and she seemed *controlled*. In a way he knew she would when very intently trying to *not* appear angry. Basically right after the double doors closed behind the departing pair, Elizabeth erected a veil for privacy.

"I am pleasantly surprised you agreed," Alice said the moment it was erected.

"Why pleasantly?" Elizabeth asked, and she finally seemed outright angry. A contained fury she must have been hiding. And the facade was slipping.

"Well... the city is nice, I guess?" the Time mage frowned, unsure.

"My manipulation safeguards have been triggered," Elizabeth slowly articulated. "That glorified messenger tried to affect our minds. Somewhat succeeded even, with you."

"Fuck," Waylan cursed, "How bad?"

"The way she had been acting for one," Elizabeth snarled. "What do you remember? In general."

"A pleasant chat," Alice said.

"Same," Waylan nodded.

"A rude borderline interrogation," Irwyn shared a different perspective.

"She shifted your perceptions, blurred the exact words a bit, and instead let them be replaced by a positive impression," Elizabeth nodded. "If you try, you will realize you cannot really recall some of the actual words she had said. Subtle, yet also incredibly crude."

"I was not affected then?" Irwyn questioned.

"Neither was I," Elizabeth nodded. "You are just extraordinarily resilient because of your Soul. I have powerful protections meant to save me from domain Liches, even deceive them. They whispered to me what she was trying to inflict and helped in making her believe that I actually was. And the method itself was... strange. Normally, a mind mage would try to read your thoughts while more-or-less directly inserting or modifying some of what they can 'see'... but there was none of that aspect. She was not actually perceiving even surface thoughts in any way."

"Strangeness of a miracle," Irwyn hypothesized. "Just like Alice had seen with the crate. That had been a domain in principle but used inefficiently and with strange limitations. Miracles seemed to act that way from what we have seen."

"We will need protections," Alice said, and was clearly unnerved.

"The bitch will realize we are faking," Waylan opined. "Even if she doesn't sneak a fucking peak into the skull."

"I have solutions," Elizabeth began to take out items. A pair of armbands, and then three others. All five were rather nondescript, simple in design, crafted from what seemed like leather. The biggest difference was that the pair appeared a bit darker than the other. "This will protect your mind. Should be more than enough for this level of power. However, once triggered it will only last three days. The other will disguise your thoughts, making it *seem* like you are affected by hostile manipulations. That one lasts indefinitely - only wearing down with active use - but it doesn't offer any protections by itself. So, it's rather useless unless you can otherwise resist the domination itself. Not as comprehensive as my own but it will do."

"Will need long sleeves to hide them under," Waylan grumbled. "Thanks."

"Yeah," Alice nodded, taking her own two. Irwyn also quickly retrieved the one meant to deceive manipulators.

“She was focused on me so that I would adjust our schedule. Since my protections are advanced I was able to act out being affected. That should earn us some respite from suspicion.”

“Why even bother making you agree?” Waylan asked. “If she can do this, why not just grab us to brainwash in a chamber somewhere?”

“The mind becomes more resistant to manipulation with stress and hostility, but also with other dominations being performed,” Elizabeth explained. “In short, they cannot do too much at once because it becomes progressively less effective. And they want us relaxed and happy because that also makes things easier. It is not an uncommon methodology even in the Federation - though hardly the only one.”

“This is still a crisis,” Irwyn worriedly said. “If they are willing to resort to this kind of mind magic, they are determined and not having any qualms. This is not over. I also had another experience...”

Irwyn elaborated on his issue with being completely unable to read Goldenlock’s expression. The group quickly pooled knowledge for a probable cause.

“I noticed nothing strange in this way,” Waylan offered. “But I generally don’t see much and could be just the mind fuckery too.”

“Neither have I,” Elizabeth’s word carried much more weight in that. “She seemed completely normal at least in this way. No manipulation attempted in this direction either.”

“Me three,” Alice tried to regain her casual attitude.

“Earlier, Asemo had convinced us she knew nothing of the Duchy of Black and we did not so much as suspect anything,” Elizabeth recalled. “Unusual. What if that too had been a divine blessing? Though I am not sure why it would only affect Irwyn but unique reactions are surprisingly common with you.”

“Is lying associated with Prosperity?” Alice questioned. “The goddess of wealth, industry, and distorted facts?”

“No, reframe it,” Irwyn realized. “It’s not lying. It’s advancing economic interests through any means necessary, deception included. It makes sense that way.”

“And if it is something even Asemo can request covertly, of course a Chosen can have such an effect always enveloping them. Like a permanently maintained enchantment or shield,” Elizabeth surmised. “She is a manipulator and diplomat, for politics is the foundation on which you can build great economies.”

“We should focus on unfucking ourselves,” Waylan reminded. “We cannot run, can we?”

“They will keep an eye out for us now,” Alice shook her head. “Without a head start either Prosperity or the Skyhunter will definitely have some kind of trick to catch up no matter how hard me or Irwyn push for speed. Then we are stuck fighting a being that *might* be able to tap into a domain, even if delegated. That is hopeless.”

“What do we do then?” Irwyn sighed. “Goldenlocks will clearly not take no for an answer and even with the best protections she will eventually realize that something is off.”

“There is only a single option,” Elizabeth shrugged. “We will have to kill her.”

“I thought the point was to *not* fight any Chosen,” Irwyn reminded. “I agree with Alice: Even if the Gods cannot use genuine domain magic through them, just concepts would destroy us.”

“Yes, that is true,” Elizabeth nodded, not disagreeing. “If they are ready, that is. We need to keep sight of the *nature* of the prey’s power rather than magnitude. It is not *hers*. The Chosen are just vessels for these gods, *glorified messengers* as I said. All their power comes from the deity.”

“Which is a lot of fucking power,” Waylan grunted.

“Relatively,” Elizabeth corrected. “And, much more importantly, conditionally. There is a reason these gods have a select few Chosen rather than bestowing their greatest boons to whichever believer is closest to an issue they want solved. Firstly, they almost certainly need to alter the mortal body to even accept what would course through it - which must take time. And secondly, they have a limited attention span.”

“A regular domain mage can do unbelievable multitasking,” Alice pointed out.

“But these gods need to split themselves ten thousand ways in every moment,” Irwyn figured out where Elizabeth was going. “Hear all the prayers and decide which should be answered, then they need to perform the miracles themselves which would require effort. One spell with one intention is easy but I would not be able to cast ten thousand, especially not if each was different and I had to simultaneously listen to the description of what each of them needed to do. The gods operate on an even far larger scale. Prosperity controls *several* cities like this one.”

“Yes, attention,” Elizabeth nodded. “Goldenlocks is a manipulator, not a warrior. She is vulnerable when her god is not watching. More than mortal... but fragile enough to be killed even by us.”

“*When* Prosperity isn’t paying attention,” Alice sighed. “Which probably isn’t often. There are not that many Chosen so she can spare a little focus for them, possibly at all times.”

“We will need both Goldenlocks and Prosperity to drop their guard,” Elizabeth agreed. “It is not impossible. Complacency, false sense of security, certainty that we are all being affected by the mental effects... I don’t know when but there will be a moment.”

“How do we decide *when* that is though,” Irwyn questioned. “It might pass before we can communicate.”

“I will see it. Perhaps it might be just a single second but that is long enough to replace a head with a hole of Void magic,” Elizabeth smiled. “All three of you will act casually and not even try to force anything, no matter how good of an opportunity you think you see. I am the fastest and thus best suited to deliver one lethal blow - not to mention *trained* to a certain degree in this. Once that happens Irwyn should incinerate the body to ash just in case but the initial attack will be mine.”

“And I thought my criminal days were gone, eh,” Waylan also grinned, though a bit crookedly. “From thief to assassin.”

“More of an assistant,” Alice chided.

"When it happens we will have to flee," Irwyn said. Alice had just outlined the issues with that. "Can we?"

"Hardly any other choice," Elizabeth sighed. "But there is an advantage for us to grasp: The ones doing the pursuit will be the Skyhunter's followers - they are the warriors. That means they will first need to learn of the other Chosen's death from their allies. How long will that take? If the timing is right, several minutes might elapse before a leader's death properly trickles down and the assailants are identified. By the time anyone takes off after us we will hopefully be over the horizon."

"I can push myself for speed," Irwyn nodded. "But it will be incredibly conspicuous if we just fly off from the top of the mountain. Half the city will spot us just by looking in front of them."

"Could you teleport the four of us to the foot of the mountain?" Elizabeth turned to Alice.

"Hmm, it's not easy," Alice carefully nodded. "But if I am ready for it, it's completely possible. I will have to keep most of the calculations and coordinates in my thoughts... Ugh, for however long we end up staying here, maybe whole days. That will be a headache but I can do it."

"I could sneak into whatever communication center they have and sabotage it," Waylan took the initiative. "Though timing it might be rough."

"Do we have magical bombs?" Irwyn suggested.

"Of course," Elizabeth nodded and took out a few after thinking for a few seconds. "These are not particularly strong... but we are looking to cause mass confusion, it will be enough for that. I will be able to manually trigger them from afar when the Chosen dies. Good thinking."

"I will be figuring out where I should even put them then," Waylan nodded. "Please, don't blow me up."

"Try to finish most of it throughout today," Elizabeth nodded. "I think the earliest opportunity might be at breakfast tomorrow if the Chosen shows up. Probably return here for the night and stay for a shared last meal."

"We have a plan for after," Irwyn nodded. "What do we do until then?"

"Well, what else but to play the role of excited tourists?" Elizabeth smiled. "Let's not allow a little premeditated murder to distract us from the sights, right?"

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Asemo was waiting for them outside, inquiring what they might want to do. Elizabeth suggested they should visit a market of some kind - she also sought to exchange a chunk of gold for local currency and hoped the librarian would help her find a favorable ratio.

The way down was rather long without the elevators but they eventually reached the large market they had seen not far above the inner gates at the mountain's foot. Elizabeth made Asemo accompany her to a jeweler while the other three were left to wander the market.

"I am off," Waylan nodded when they were safely away from the librarian.

"See ya," Alice waved.

"Don't get caught," Irwyn half-jested with a smile. Then the sneak was off, leaving him and Alice to look around the stands.

It was nothing exceptional, just a particularly large terrace where seemingly anyone could set up a stand and offer their goods. And the guards, of course, which were around every corner. Though they did actually go around a good chunk of the place, neither of the pair found anything that caught their interest - basically nothing was enchanted in any way that a mage could feel. The 'charms' appeared as sheer superstition.

"Where has Waylan gone?" Asemo asked when she eventually returned. Irwyn... thought she was frowning but wasn't sure. He noted that - it felt a bit like what Goldenlocks had done to make her expression unreadable. Perhaps he could learn to at least notice it better.

"Probably caught a sight to his fancy," Irwyn feigned sighing, a bit of prank coming to mind in the moment. "It might not appear as such but Waylan can be rather... prolific. It would behoove the local laborers to hide their daughters - if they still can."

"Or sons," Alice jested, barely suppressing a laugh. "You wouldn't believe how often people forget that part."

"I wouldn't want him to stumble into trouble," Asemo said, surprise once again apparent on her face.

"Waylan can perform his habits with discretion," Elizabeth played along with a deadpan expression. "He knows not to reach too high and will either stumble onto us again or we will see him in the evening. Now then, I think you meant to bring us to this 'Promenade' yesterday. Is the elevator fixed yet?"

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The Promenade was a thin walkway sort of in between floors, a few people walking alongside it in scattered lines. Although only wide enough for two people to pass by each other, the special thing about it lay on the edges and beyond them. Namely, colored and stained glass enveloped it from all directions.

And it was not just glass. Although the color cast interesting shade onto the walkways, what gave it life were the *sights*. It was see-through, yes, so you could behold the city beneath the mountain below - toned by the glass' shades - but there was more. The glass did not change colors but as a person walked alongside, it created an illusion of shifting with the steps. And when he looked into the distance, images appeared on the glass, overlaying the real world in a way that made them truly appear as if they were happening in a far reach of the desert.

Mighty trees as large as mountains appeared, gently swaying in the wind. Then two great dragons, red and amber - both wounded already and appearing as if they were both about to pounce. Then a grassland filled with fields from horizon to horizon. Scenery by scenery.

"Images," Elizabeth commented and that was a problem. Irwyn remembered seeing that dragon-god fly over Ebon Respite. How could a faraway image compare to that? Especially when he *knew* it was not true. It was so still, barely creating an illusion of moving in place. It was not a bad view... but Irwyn could not bring himself to be impressed for all it was cleverly built.

They walked to the end and by then Asemo seemed to be the most excited of them three. They politely pretended it had lived up to her up-playing and then moved on.

Asemo dragged them to a variety of tourist sites for half a day, none of which even surpassed the Promenade in Irwyn's eyes. Then the librarian brought them to a restaurant of some kind - whatever those were called locally. The food was very good at least. Afterward, they spent most of the afternoon in the library.

Waylan made it back to the Cradle first even though they bit Asemo goodbye long before sundown. At least the four of them could relax in privacy with the built-in game rooms.

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Then it was once again the morning and their group went down to the dining hall for breakfast. Though Irwyn had little appetite, he still chose a plate and reluctantly picked at it as he sat down. Waylan looked much like him - serene outwardly but a full plate betraying nerves. Alice seemed to be on the verge of shaking... every minute or so for about a second before she allowed the nervousness to drain into her ring. A convenient trick to get around her poor poker face. Elizabeth ate with gusto, seemingly not even worried.

Goldilocks and Asemo returned as Elizabeth had predicted. The Chosen once again sat close to them and spoke, mainly with the Blackburg heiress. Irwyn kept track of the conversation but it was mostly pointless, inane words about the sights and greatness of the city. Blatantly just a background noise for the mind manipulation. He felt like a rock was in his stomach, wondering every moment: When? The conversation carried on for a few minutes, then Goldenlocks bid them goodbye and left much like the day before - except this time she had not even bothered pretending to eat a meal.

Then the Chosen was out of the door and it became clear it would not be the day. Or at least not the morning. He glanced at Elizabeth and she pretended not to notice. That had a meaning of its own: To carry on as things were and trust that an opportunity would come.

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It was harder for Waylan inconspicuously to slip away with Asemo more careful about it. He *could* do it but the one thing about himself that could not be hidden was the absence itself. The librarian had decided to bring the lot of them around the city's various associations - basically guilds with a different name. They had already seen the concoctors, but naturally there would be more.

Scribe's association was first, it was basically a semi-independent subsidiary of the librarians - apparently, it was one human *per* library to actually hold the title and the city had just three. The third was much more public, placed not very high up and notably larger. It contained mostly stories, plays, and such. Entertainment and some educational supplies for people just learning literacy - though Asemo had insisted that bringing them would be 'rude' when they asked to see. The first was a library of 'secrets', as was its location.

They visited many others afterward... to the point Irwyn frankly lost interest. It was a bit too much information about a city he was mostly thinking about leaving as soon as possible. There was a benefit to it though: Waylan did not actually need to disappear, he was already right in the



buildings he wanted to be, even receiving a tour. Slipping away for a few moments was easy enough to do without rousing suspicion for him.

Lunch was good again, then they were forced to endure yet more pointless tours, this time more focused on the Skyhunter's followers. A lot of similar military groups, basically barely distinguished from one another by a quirk like favored weapons or such. Some were better trained than others sure, but they were all mortal men with maybe a small blessing on their call among those higher up, but not enough to make them seem that dangerous.

Besides the Chosen, of course. If there was one fruitful happening throughout the day, it was that they learned about the Skyhunter's Chosen. The only other in the City of Terraces. His name was Trapper - rather self-explanatory - which made Waylan extra careful about leaving behind Elizabeth's little explosives around their compounds. It did bode well for their plan at least - someone named Pursuer would have been much better suited to catching up to their escape.

They returned to Wind's Cradle for the night, the building's song almost mocking to Irwyn's ears.

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In the morning Goldenlocks arrived again, making it seem like this would become routine. She did not even bother bringing Asemo along anymore. The last Time Elizabeth had seen no opportunity so Irwyn was still uncertain whether that would change. He remained ready. The Chosen spoke for a while and then suddenly paused. Irwyn could not read her expression still but it shifted.

"I apologize but it seems that I will have to take my leave sooner today," she spoke. "My Kin in the City of Glass has just been murdered. It will..."

It was at that exact moment that a black knife sprung from the Chosen's throat. Irwyn was not completely sure why Elizabeth had attacked from behind but the spell had been so subtle that he had not felt even a smidgen of mana so perhaps it was for the line of sight. That was not something to dwell on though, they needed to move fast.

As per their plan, Irwyn incinerated the body in the blink of an eye, his flames so hot not even smell escaped burning. Alice was still reeling but she would soon get her composure back to cast her teleportation spell. Everything was going according to plan in that regard. Then, of course, Elizabeth said something that threw all those expectations into disarray again:

"That wasn't me!" she gaped; eyes wide in surprise.