

Birds of a Feather

Iris turned around and looked at the kitsune who was watching her warily with her mismatched eyes.

She had to remember, Akane was not human—or elf or all the other races on Eona. Even Mocha was closer to Iris in a way as her entire time during her growing sapience was spent with the adventurer.

The kitsune's mind was almost entirely alien to Iris.

Iris took a deep breath, focusing on the vulpine girl. "Akane, I'm not angry with you. I'm worried. What you did back at the fort... It was reckless. You didn't just endanger yourself—which I understand that sometimes we have to do, but you put everyone else in danger with your actions. Including Mocha—especially Mocha. She has never met another magical creature before you, you represent something she has been missing, so of course she would follow you. What you did to her was wrong."

Akane's ears drooped as she studied Iris while her large, vulpine eyes gleamed with understanding.

"Being a part of a group... a *party* means we trust each other. We rely on each other," Iris continued. "I had trouble learning that too, but I am. We can't go around doing things without thinking about how it might affect the others. You could have gotten Mocha killed. You could have gotten any of us killed. As I've told both you and the others, sometimes we may have to do things alone, and that's fine. But that means you do not risk the rest of your party..."

Akane was silent, her three tails stilled behind her as she listened to Iris, the expression on her face uncharacteristically serious.

"We're not playing games, Akane... No. She-who-loves-pranks-and-chicken. We're fighting against the Marauder Prince. People are going to die, and I don't want it to be anyone in our party. When you act on your own, and pull other members of the party into your games, you put us all in danger. Do you understand?"

Akane frowned, her brows furrowing as she concentrated. "Need... Find bad man."

"Why?" Iris asked, her voice softer now. "Why is it so important to you to find the Marauder Prince?"

Akane's face fell, her eyes shadowed with the look of one who'd lost someone. "Kill... friend. Sad."

Iris's heart ached for the kitsune. "I'm sorry, Akane. I didn't realize. Is that why you've been fighting him? Those poachers were positively terrified of you."

Akane nodded slowly.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Iris asked, but then she had a flash of realization. “Why did you come to me in the woods? Why were you playing pranks on the farmer?”

A tiny flicker of hope sparked in Akane’s eyes as she focused on Iris. “Need... help. You strong. I watch... do help.”

Iris sighed. “You’ve been watching me help people?”

The kitsune nodded again, a little more forceful this time.

She didn’t know how long the kitsune had been following her, but if she knew Iris was going around helping people, it must have been for some time. Had she been waiting for the right moment to entice Iris to come after her? To test her as she did in the forest to see if Iris was truly strong enough to help get her revenge? Because that is what it was.

The kitsune wanted revenge.

I can understand that.

And it appeared that Akane was perfectly willing to be somewhat patient with it. Which was both good and bad.

Good, because it meant the kitsune was capable of long-term strategy and plans. It was bad only because it meant that Akane was clearly better at it than Iris, herself.

Iris let out a small chuckle and rubbed the back of her head. “Of course, Akane. Us adventurers have to stick together. But we need to do it *together* and we have to trust each other. And right now, that trust is broken. But we can work on it and build it back up. But! You need to promise me that you’ll think about your actions, and how they affect us all. Can you do that?”

Akane’s eyes weren’t filled with the usual exasperation, except this time she appeared determined. “Yes,” she said with very little hesitation. “Promise.”

Iris smiled. “Good.”



As they left the relative safety of the homestead, a thick curtain of morning mist wrapped around them, making the path forward unclear and eerie. The sky was still a dull gray, the remnants of the night’s storm having passed but leaving the day both windy and cloudy. Iris led the way, her senses on high alert, Bree and Gryff on either side. Akane, in her fox form, trailed alongside Bree, her ears perked and tails swaying rhythmically with each stride. Kaira rode atop Mocha while Laken, on his owlbear, followed them at a comfortable pace.

The wagon trail they were following was narrow and fringed with tall grass, leading them away from the homestead and toward the main road. It was relatively silent except for the sound of their footsteps and the occasional distant bird songs.

Glancing over at Kaira, Iris called out, "Are you enjoying the ride?"

With the wind tugging at her hair and a broad smile on her face, Kaira shot back, "I always enjoy a good ride!"

Despite the morning chill, a rush of warmth spread across Iris's face, causing Gryff to chuckle. "She only does that to make you blush, Iris," he said as he leaned in close. "If you gave it right back to her, she'd stop teasing you so much."

Bree smirked at their interaction before turning her attention to Mocha. "Hey, when do I get a turn?" she asked.

The horse whinnied a response, asking Iris to translate.

"Mocha says she only let Kaira on her back because..." Iris paused, mortified. "She...ah, damn it, Mocha. I'm not repeating that."

Mocha let out a loud whinny, clearly amused. *'Say it, bitch!'* she demanded.

Iris groaned, rubbing her temples. "Fine. She said she had to keep Kaira and I separated so we don't... uh, mate with our faces so much. We have a quest to focus on, and our sexual tension isn't conducive to the party."

As soon as the words left Iris's mouth, a ripple of laughter spread through the group, with Kaira sitting on Mocha's back looking amused. The cute high elf leaned forward and whispered something to the horse, who let out a whinnying laugh.

Suddenly, Akane trotted up to Bree, yipping happily and lowering herself in a clear invitation. Mocha interpreted for Iris, *'Akane says the small one can ride, she's the perfect size. Then she can be like me.'*

Iris smirked as she turned to Bree and relayed the message like a game of telephone. "Akane says you're the perfect size and can ride her."

Bree's eyes seemed to light up at the prospect. With a nod from Iris, she carefully climbed onto Akane's back, gripping the fox's thick fur for support. As soon as she was secure, Akane took off, Bree shrieking with surprise and delight as they sped down the trail, leaving Iris and the others behind in a whirl of dust. Mocha whinnied and broke into a gallop, clearly eager to join in the fun, causing Kaira to cheer as they quickly caught the fox.

When they finally reached the edge of the forest, Iris halted them, signaling for quiet. Bree got down off of Akane's back, who immediately used her magic to transform into her humanoid form.

Akane looked around and narrowed her eyes at the forest. "Magic? Help?" she asked Iris.

Iris nodded. “For Mocha, yes. For everyone else, we will wait until needed. I don’t want you to tax yourself. However, we are going to spread out into groups we want to be within shouting distance, but we don’t want to present an easy-to-locate mass for the harpies,” she commanded, keeping her voice low. Now was the time to be serious. “Laken, Bree, and Owlbear, you’re right. Kaira, Akane, you’re left. Mocha, Gryff, and I will take the center. Akane... do not leave Kaira’s side.”

Akane nodded. “Won’t,” she affirmed as she sent a cloud of mana swirling around Mocha. To Iris’s eyes, it appeared that the spell Akane used was a combination of illusion and alteration, or perhaps a bit of conjuration. Mocha’s form was obscured by motes of mana that completely covered her form, and after a moment a sun elf, with long golden hair and eyes that sparkled with awe emerged.

“I look amazing!” Mocha exclaimed, turning to look at herself, her voice filled with awe and a touch of humor. Her horse-like nicker caused everyone to break into a chuckle but was quickly silenced by a look from Iris.

“Focus,” she told them. “Harpies attacked us when we were on the road. I don’t want to assume they’re not around just because we haven’t seen them yet.”

With a series of nods, the group split up.

Gryff, Mocha—now in the form of an uncanny sun elf illusion, and Iris took the center path while the rest diverged to their respective sides. As they pushed into the dense greenery of the forest, the world around them felt increasingly distant, swallowed by the ethereal beauty and eerie silence of the woods.

The hushed squelch of moss and leaves under their feet was the sole mark of their passage as the damp earth muffled the sound of their movement. Overhead, unseen birds chirped sporadically, their songs echoing through the trees that added a surreal touch to the stillness.

Iris was alert, her eyes scanning the tranquil scene around them,

Every creak of branches or rustle of leaves caught her attention and her hand instinctively moved to rest on the hilt of her sword.

Mocha, her elven guide barely wavering, walked beside her with wide eyes that were filled with curiosity as she observed their surroundings.

On the opposite side of Mocha, Gryff moved quietly with his shield and spear at the ready.

They pushed on through the dense weave of the forest, the sounds of the wild surrounding them with its cryptic symphony. Eventually, up ahead, Iris spotted a break in the treeline.

“A clearing ahead,” Iris said to the two with her.

They crept silently on, and as they approached, Iris felt a knot of unease twisting in her gut.

A campsite, or what once had been one, sprawled out before them.

Canvas lay shredded, the skeletal remains of the tents tossed around the clearing. Gryff approached one, his fingers running over the ragged edges, his face grim. "Doesn't look like it was done by any beast I know," he muttered, looking at Iris.

She crouched down to examine another ruined shelter, but then something caught her eye. She reached over and moved aside the canvas revealing a long brown feather. She narrowed her eyes as she grabbed it and lifted it, scrutinizing it as Gryff walked over. "What's that?"

"Harpy feather. It appears that the poachers aren't having as easy of a time as the other ones did," she said.

She stood and let out a whistle.

Iris followed Gryff further into the camp and saw the evidence of a violent end. Supplies were strewn about, bowls and pots lay embedded in mud and leaves that gave the impression that the poachers had been attacked during mealtime.

"Iris," Gryff called out.

She turned and walked to where he stood, her eyes widening.

Humanoid bones, presumably the original occupants of the camp and clean of any remaining flesh, were scattered at the edge of the camp with an eerie white gleam that was harsh against the soft greens and browns of the forest floor.

"Poachers?" Kaira's voice came from behind her.

Iris turned to see her girlfriend and the kitsune in her fox form approach.

Gryff called out as Bree and Laken arrived on the opposite side, the burly telv explaining what they found.

Kaira looked around as Akane moved through the camp sniffing, Mocha stood still as she observed the scene.

As the others started moving around the camp to look around for any clues, Akane let out a bark.

Immediately transforming back to her humanoid form, she quickly disappeared inside a tent. Moments later, she emerged, her fox ears flicking back and forth with alertness and clutching a yellow mana core.

The core, the size of a baseball, was passed to Iris who rolled it around in her hands as she looked down at it in contemplation. Her fingers felt a damaged portion of the core and she held it up, seeing a deep crack running through the orb.

Definitely poachers. But what happened?

Meanwhile, the others continued their search through the ruined camp, scouring the tents and the few belongings scattered around.

After scrutinizing for anything useful or telling of what might have transpired, Kaira shrugged as she returned to Iris. “There’s nothing here,” she said, her tone carrying a mix of disappointment and relief.

Iris, still holding the damaged mana core, let out a sigh before letting the orb fall from her hands and thudding against the leaf-littered ground.

“Let’s continue,” she told the others.

Laken was quick to add his thoughts. “Keep your eyes out. Something picked those bones clean.” his gaze, like Iris’s lingered on the scene that lay at the edge of camp.

Iris nodded in agreement. “And I doubt it was the harpies,” she muttered, turning her attention to Akane. “You’ve been here before, right?”

Akane affirmed with a nod, her fox eyes remaining alert and cautious.

The adventurer continued, “Are there any beasts or monsters we should worry about that could do this?”

Akane squinted for a moment before launching into a series of barks and yips to Mocha.

The illusioned horse listened attentively before translating to Iris in a nicker that sounded amusing to Iris when seeing the source.

‘She says that there are all kinds of things to watch out for, but the area smells of bone cleaners,’ Mocha relayed, her voice hinting at how serious she was taking being more closely involved in the quest.

“Bone cleaners?” Gryffs eyebrows shot up in question even as his hand tightened around his spear.

After Akane responded with a series of yips, Mocha clarified, *‘Small lizard things with a long tail. Likes to climb and hunt in packs.’*

Iris passed it on, and Bree’s eyes widened as she glanced around. “Akane, you’re pretty big in your true form. What do you mean by... *small?*”

Akane nonchalantly gestured to about knee height, causing Laken and Bree to share a knowing look. “Velstrids,” Laken clarified with a sigh.

“What are they?” Iris asked. She hadn’t heard of those before, but she also hadn’t heard of a lot of creatures that roamed the lands of Eona.

Gryff chimed in, “They’re feisty little scavengers. A fast-breeding reptile that isn’t afraid to attack in large numbers... well, against anything. Anytime a nest pops up, the nearest Guard or even the army is sent to clear it.”

“Oh, of course,” Iris groaned. “Just what we need, a side quest.” More trouble was the last thing they needed.

“We need to stay closer,” Laken advised, his gaze scanning their surroundings warily. “Large numbers will overwhelm us if we’re separate.”

“Sounds good,” Iris agreed, clapping her hands together. “Stay close, keep your eyes open. Akane, if you see or smell anything that may be trouble, feel free to toss us under an illusion.”

At the kitsune's acknowledgment, she gestured for them to proceed.



Pressing on through the dense undergrowth, and over fallen trees, the party made their way deeper into the heart of the forest. Iris's senses were on high alert, and she kept her **[Rushing Winds]** flowing through her as she moved, her eyes keenly searching the environment.

The forest itself seemed to shift in personality, from an uncanny stillness to the signs of... habitation.

They found a... clearing, sort of. The ground was neatly cleared of underbrush and the trees that were there had an almost organized placement, but instead of another poacher camp, they found a different sort of scene.

“What happened here?” Bree asked.

Iris looked around the area, seeing what could only be a harpy nest.

The dwellings were crude, constructed from haphazardly lashed-together sticks and branches. They bore straw-covered roofs that hung low and loose, and doors that seemed to be made of animal skins.

It had a surreal beauty, this makeshift settlement, however, the scene that unfolded before them was anything but.

Everywhere they looked, there were signs of devastation.

The ground was a morbid tapestry of lifeless harpy bodies, their plumage dulled by the dirt and the grim reality of their end.

Each body was pierced by numerous arrows, the deadly projectiles now acting as grim markers of the harpies' last stand.

What was more unsettling were the surroundings.

It was clear that there should have been more dwellings, but some were nothing but piles of burnt wood, while the trees were scorched and blackened as if standing as silent witnesses to the flames of conflict that had engulfed the area.

The smell of burnt wood hung heavily in the air and mingled with the metallic tang of blood.

Gryff broke the silence first, his voice low but steady. “It seems as if we’ve stumbled into a battlefield,” he murmured, his gaze roving over the grim spectacle before them.

Kaira gave a slow nod of agreement. “The question is, who’s winning?” she asked, her voice equally hushed.

Iris stepped forward, but then Akane froze causing the rest of the group to stop mid-motion.

Iris’s [**Danger Sense**] went off with a loud buzzing sound, and without thinking she channeled her [**Arcane Capability**] and [**Focused**].

The kitsune quickly shifted back into her fox form and at the same time transformed Mocha back into hers.

Two clouds of mana enveloped the two creatures, and in less than the time it would have taken for Iris to ask the kitsune what she heard, a dire fox with three tails and an armored warhorse appeared.

Akane’s tails bristled, erect like flagpoles, and she let out a low, throaty growl that reverberated through the clearing, causing a few stray leaves to flutter in response.

A strange, sibilant hissing noise echoed back, an answering call from the depths of the forest. The hairs on the back of Iris’s neck stood on end as the hissing grew louder, the sound warping into a sinister chorus that filled the air with palpable tension.

As Iris looked around, trying to pinpoint the source of the threat, a chill ran down her spine.

They were surrounded.

As she looked around, she realized they were completely surrounded by a large pack of reptiles that reminded Iris of komodo dragons, but taller and clearly more lithe.

These ones had long, sinewy legs that ended in sharp claws that dug into the earth as they advanced, their beady eyes fixed on the party with a predatory glint.

That’s bigger than knee height.

Each of the party calmly readied their weapons

The onrush of the strange reptilian creatures was sudden and brutal.

In the brief instant before chaos ensued, Laken coolly drew his bowstring taut and let an arrow fly. It whizzed through the air, a fleeting whisper before it embedded itself in the face of a charging velstrid. As if in sync with the arrow’s flight, Kaira, Gryff, and Bree steeled themselves, brandishing their weapons and moved together with shields up.

Iris wasted no time as she cast [**Chain Lightning**] at a group of the charging creatures. A surge of electrical energy lashed out, arcing and splitting between the attackers and a spectacle of lethal, dazzling power unfolded as the spell bounced from

one creature to the next. The victims fell, their bodies spasming and smoke coiling off their bodies.

The enemy horde didn't relent, advancing with a fervor that was almost intimidating.

The din of battle erupted as Akane's form blurred, dashing among the velstrids, claws rending and teeth biting.

Meanwhile, Mocha was equally resolute, her sturdy hind legs delivering crushing blows that launched the reptiles into the air.

As the battle escalated, Iris maintained a rapid casting of **[Sparks]** and **[Chain Lightning]**, the energy around her snapping and crackling with the unleashed power. Gryff and Bree held their ground, their spears finding targets in the creatures attempting to breach their defenses.

Despite their best efforts, the terrifying creatures descended upon them like a relentless storm. In that hellish whirlwind, Bree's spear met an unfortunate end.

With a resonating snap, the shaft broke against the body of an overly aggressive velstrid. Without missing a beat, she used the broken spear to bash back the creature, buying herself a precious moment.

Quick as a flash, she drew a short sword from her belt and drove it into the nearest threat with a grim determination.

Amidst the chaos, Kaira danced a deadly ballet, her blade carving a path of destruction through the reptiles that tried to flank them. Laken's owlbear was a whirlwind of fury, its immense form crashing into the ranks of the creatures, tossing them as if they weighed no more than feathers.

The onslaught was relentless and chaotic.

Several of the creatures knocked into Iris as she focused on other groups, their weight jarring her balance. She staggered as they seemed to use each other to climb up after her, she almost panicked when she felt the hot breath of a velstrid on her face, its reptilian eyes void of any fear.

Acting on instinct, she used **[Lightning Step]**, her lightning form surging away from the velstrids that had nearly overwhelmed her.

She reappeared amid a fresh cluster of the creatures, her reformation from energy back into her physical form creating a violent shockwave of electrical power. The immediate vicinity was transformed into a localized storm of electricity, charring the surprised reptiles.

At least four fell, their bodies spasming before going still.

The battle raged on, each member of their party proving their worth in the bloody chaos. Iris found her body pushed to its limits, her mental stamina waning as she sent bolt after bolt of electricity into the mass of creatures.

Another leaped at her, but suddenly Mocha was there. The horse impaled the creature mid-air with her steel horn before ripping it out and using an ability to charge at another that was seeking to get at Iris.

The battle became a rhythm, a brutal symphony of casting, attacking, and defending. Iris, recognizing the efficiency of **[Chain Lightning]** against the sheer numbers, committed to casting it exclusively. It was a taxing spell, but their situation left no room for conservation of energy.

The clash of metal on scales, the hisses of the reptiles, and the battle cries of their group echoed through the trees. The owlbear's roars punctuated the chaos as it weathered a bite from a velstrid, retaliating with a swift and savage response.

Their confrontation felt endless, but, eventually, the last velstrid fell.

And oddly, they fought to the death without showing any signs of retreat.

The chill that ran down Iris's spine wasn't just from exhaustion—something about these creatures didn't sit right. They seemed less like natural predators and more like mindless pawns in a game they were yet to understand, but that was a mystery for another time.

For now, they had to regroup and recover, the eerie silence of the forest broken only by their ragged breaths.

“Is everyone okay?” Iris’s voice sliced through the quiet aftermath of the fight. She cast her gaze over the party, her heart pounding in her chest as she assessed the weary forms of her companions.

Gryff was propped against a tree, his muscular form slumped in exhaustion. His usual grin was absent, replaced by a tight grimace as Bree silently inspected a deep gash on his arm. Upon hearing Iris, he raised his free hand in a thumbs-up, his silence more telling than any words.

Laken was tending to his owlbear, his fingers gently probing the beast’s injured leg, a small frown creasing his forehead. Catching Iris's concerned gaze, he offered a nod of assurance before resuming his care for the creature.

Kaira, leaning on Mocha for support, locked eyes with Iris and managed a fatigued smile as she nodded affirmatively.

Suddenly, Akane's gleam of mischief disrupted the moment as she abruptly returned herself and Mocha to their humanoid forms.

Taken by surprise, Kaira's eyes widened and she gasped as her arms windmilled and she almost toppled over.

But Mocha, quick to adapt to her changed form, reached out from the dissipating cloud of mana and caught Kaira in her sun elf arms.

Both Mocha and Kaira turned on Akane, their expressions a mix of surprise and annoyance, but the kitsune simply skipped away, seemingly unaffected by their scowls. She joined Iris's side, her giddy energy a stark contrast against the otherwise tense scene.

The group convened in hushed discussion while Bree applied a small layer of healing goop to the owlbear's injured leg. The beast whimpered slightly at the contact but soon relaxed under her gentle attention.

Iris looked up at the sky, seeing the red sun start to make its descent, and she knew what to do. "We should continue," she told everyone. "We need to find somewhere to hold up for the night. Somewhere we can recover."

Kaira, her arms crossed over her chest, considered Iris's suggestion, and while she was clearly still heavy with fatigue, she nodded her head in agreement. "Probably a good idea," the high elf confirmed.

With a collective nod, the party trudged on, a broken spear left behind. Their movements were noticeably slower, but after what seemed like a few hours of hiking, the soft murmur of flowing water caught their attention.

The group came to a halt at the river's edge, the crystal-clear water was a welcome sight and they quickly took turns washing up and refilling their water skins, the cool water serving as a small comfort against their aching muscles and lingering fatigue.

Kaira stretched her shoulders, her gaze scanning the dense underbrush. "I'll be right back," she said, turning away from Iris.

Iris frowned in concern. "Wait, you shouldn't go alone," she responded quickly, moving to follow her girlfriend.

The high elf looked at her with an amused expression. "I just need to relieve myself."

"Good, I gotta pee too," Iris said with a smirk. "Let's go."

"You're so strange," Kaira replied with a shake of her head, but she didn't stop. "Are all terran women like this?"

Iris shrugged. "No idea for the terrans here, but where I am from, it's not uncommon for women to go to the restroom together. We gossip, chat, help each other make sure we look our best, and sometimes it's really just about safety in numbers."

Kaira just shook her head again as they moved off together, finding opposite sides of a large tree to relieve themselves. As they rejoined the high elf just chuckled. "That was so weird."

Iris smiled. “Fine, fine. We’re not at the point in our relationship where we can pee in front of each other, I suppose.”

Her girlfriend looked at her with a mortified expression. “W-Why would you want to do that?”

“I mean...” Iris started, amused at her girlfriend’s awkwardness. “It’s something we all do, I don’t think it’s a big deal. Look, you can stand there while I pee anytime.”

Kaira shook her head quickly. “No, not at all doing that,” she stated. She gave Iris a searching look then pointed at her. “We’re not doing it, Iris. That’s private.”

Iris chuckled and held up her hands. “Fine, fine,” she acquiesced. The shorter elf was clearly uncomfortable with the thought and her brows were furrowed together in thought as the two walked back.

Different cultures.

Upon their return, the two women smiled as they watched Laken’s owlbear throwing caution to the wind and plunge headfirst into the river despite the ranger’s half-hearted protests. The animal resurfaced a moment later, a wriggling fish triumphantly clasped in its jaws. It climbed back onto land, shook the water from itself, and lumbered over to Laken to present the fish with a pleased grunt.

That’s too cute.

Iris found Mocha perched on the riverbank, staring at her reflection in the water. She approached her friend and cleaned her hands in the river next to her. “How are you doing?” she asked gently.

Mocha opened her mouth to respond, but the words came out garbled and awkward. Finally, she resigned to her equine form of communication, nickering softly, *‘This is so strange. I’m not sure I like it, Iris.’*

Iris smiled at the response, settling down beside Mocha and wrapping an arm around her. “It’s okay. You don’t have to be an elf to be my best friend, Mocha. You’re a badass no matter what form you take.”

Mocha turned to look at her, her eyes softened, and she leaned her head on Iris’s shoulder. *‘This is nice though,’* she admitted.

“It really is,” Iris agreed, her fingers gently stroking Mocha’s hair.

The two friends sat like that while the others did their thing, but eventually the moment was interrupted by Bree’s voice. “I think we should follow the river,” she proposed. “And find somewhere to stop for the night. It’s getting late.”

Mocha lifted her head and looked at Iris, giving her a nod in thanks. Iris gently squeezed her friend’s shoulder before standing up.

“You’re probably right,” Iris agreed. “Is everyone ready?”

At everyone's agreement, the group continued on, following the bank of the river deeper still into the Cursed Forest.



The day was growing late as they followed the river upstream, the sun sinking below the surrounding trees, leaving the land beneath the canopy growing increasingly dark. The group moved with a wariness that was an unwelcome change from the vigor they showed that morning.

Ahead of them, Laken was leading the way with his owlbear when, suddenly, the ranger raised a hand and crouched down, signaling everyone to halt.

The man turned his face toward them and gestured for Iris to come closer. She crept to him, seeing the man's furrowed brow as he squinted into the distance.

"Hold on," he said in a cautious tone. After a moment, he pointed up ahead. "There's another camp just there."

Iris tried to see what he saw, but could not see anything, she turned to him to question it but he just nodded. "It's there, I got an ability that helps. I don't see movement, we should move quietly."

And with that, she could understand. She gestured to the others and the group resumed their movement, though with more caution toward the camp.

Iris turned to her kitsune twin, whispering, "Can you illusion us?"

The kitsune's eyes flashed yellow, and her form blurred slightly for a moment before nodding. "Hard. Not long."

Accepting the constraints, Iris nodded in acknowledgment. Soon, the forms of her party were obscured by a semi-transparent stealth effect that left them looking almost ghost-like.

"Let's go," she said in a low voice, before quietly moving toward the camp.

As they grew closer, the harsh reality of the situation unfolded before them.

It was another scene of a fight.

Bodies of both poachers and harpies littered the ground, and a shiver coursed down Iris's spine as she realized that the battle had been recently fought.

Content that the camp was clear of immediate danger, she turned toward the kitsune. "Drop the illusions, Akane," Iris instructed.

At her words, everyone's forms shimmered as they reappeared. Akane shifted back into her dire fox form while Mocha transformed back to her normal horse self.

The Jarincían warhorse stood proud while the large kitsune prowled through the camp.

Iris turned to the group. “We need to move the bodies. It’s looking like we won’t have time to find somewhere else to stay the night. So, we should prepare the camp for our use, but the bodies will attract beasts.”

Laken looked around. “I agree, I’ll put together something we can put the bodies on and Owlie can help pull them out of the camp.”

Iris raised a brow. “Owlie?”

The ranger shrugged. “Look, I’m not good with names and he likes it.”

‘I’ll help too,’ Mocha nickered. *‘Can’t let Owlie show me up.’*

Abruptly, Akane barked several times in the distance. Mocha turned her head toward Iris and nickered, *‘She needs you and Bree, now.’*

There was a sense of urgency in the tone that made Iris jump into action. She quickly relayed the message to Bree who nodded, while Gryff, who had been surveying the area, turned to her. “We’ll handle this, Iris. Go see what’s up.”

With the telv’s reassurance, Iris moved quickly through the camp with Bree on her heels.

The sight that met Iris as they rounded the tent made her heart clench.

A harpy lay sprawled on the ground, gasping in pain, while Akane sat by her side, a gentle paw placed with an uncanny tenderness on the creature’s chest. Three arrows protruded from the harpy’s body, and the quiet chattering sounds escaping the harpy made Iris’s stomach twist with empathetic pain.

She was alive, but barely.

Akane’s mismatched eyes met Iris’s, a pleading, desperate look held in them.

Next to her, Bree stood with her arms folded tightly around her midriff, and her usually calm face was etched with an expression of hesitant fear, her eyes darting between the wounded harpy and Iris, uncertain.

Iris swallowed hard, her mind wrestling with the decision before her.

She was aware of the day’s harsh scenes; the devastation they had stumbled upon at the first camp and the nest. She remembered the attack on the road, and how they could have died.

But looking at the suffering harpy, the aftertaste of those encounters seemed to bolster rather than deter her.

She had a quest, and that quest wasn’t against the harpies, if anything, it seemed that they were simply protecting their homes against the invaders. The Marauder Prince was the one she was after.

Not this... woman.

The harpy woman bore an uncanny resemblance to an elf, her delicate, angular face framed by long, pointed ears which gave her an air of ethereal beauty. Yet, this grace was accentuated by a strange amalgamation of avian features. Her arms were transformed into wings, a complex structure of leathery skin and glossy feathers, tipped by long spindly hands that ended in sharp, deadly talons.

The plumage that sprouted from her body was a rich palette of brown tones, subtle gradations of color that shifted from chestnut to mocha, highlighted by unexpected hints of iridescent green and blue when caught in the right light. However, the woman's torso was surprisingly devoid of feathers, leaving her ample breasts and toned midriff exposed.

The sight was jarring, a strange blend of humanoid and bird-like characteristics, yet it carried its own unique elegance, one that could only have occurred because of mana.

Somewhere within the forest, there had to be a mana well, or fount. Something that pooled mana in the area and twisted creatures and... people, if what the homesteaders said was true, and turned them into something more.

Stepping forward, Iris made her choice. "Bree, we need to help her," she stated, keeping her voice steady. The sun elf medic looked at her with wide eyes, but after a moment, she nodded, pulling off her satchel and revealing the medical supplies stashed within.

Drawing a deep breath, Iris and Bree knelt beside the harpy, their faces set with determination as they worked together to save the woman.

While they worked, the harpy's fearful looks turned into hope as she watched the two women working to help her. Iris felt a surge of determination fill her as it appeared the woman may have a chance.

We need to help them all.