

Hidden Camp

With Mocha corralling the other horses and watching the wagon, Iris felt safe as she and her party followed Laken through the woods. As they followed Laken deeper into the woods, the trees grew thicker and the underbrush more tangled. But Kaira trusted Laken's instincts, and he seemed to be following clues that Iris could only guess at, so she was more than willing to let the man take the lead.

She was more of the 'find the monster already there' type of hunter. Not a 'find a camp that may or may not be dismantled after a week' type of tracker.

The forest was quiet except for the sound of leaves rustling underfoot and the occasional chirping of birds. Iris kept her hand on the hilt of her sword, ready for any potential threat.

Gryff walked silently beside her, his spear at the ready. She could sense his nervous energy, and she knew that he was ready for action if needed. Laken moved ahead, scouting the area for any signs of danger.

Kaira and Bree hung back, keeping space from the group so as to not provide one bunched-up target.

As they moved deeper into the woods, the air grew cooler and the light filtered through the leaves overhead. Iris took a deep breath, enjoying the fresh forest air.

After a few hours of following Laken, they stopped to take a break and reassess their progress. Kaira pulled out a map from her bag, spreading it out on a nearby tree stump for them all to see.

"We've gone pretty far in," Kaira said, pointing to a spot on the map.

Iris frowned, feeling a bit disheartened. They had been traveling for hours and had yet to find any concrete clues. She had hoped that they would have made more progress by now.

Gryff sat down on a nearby rock, removing his helmet, the man looking exhausted. "Maybe we should head back and try a different approach?" he suggested, looking at Iris and Laken for their input.

But Iris shook her head after she too removed her helmet, letting her determination show on her face. "No, we can't give up yet. We have to keep going. Laken, do you have any other ideas?"

Laken looked around, scanning the surrounding area. "I think we should head that way," he said, pointing to a direction off the beaten path. "I saw some disturbed foliage and tracks that way. Might be worth investigating."

Iris nodded. "Alright, let's go that way then. Keep your guard up, everyone."

They all stood up and followed Laken, pushing through the dense foliage and brush. The terrain became rougher, and they had to be careful not to trip or slip on the wet rocks and roots.

The sound of trickling water grew louder, indicating that a creek was nearby. Moss covered everything, and Iris was a bit surprised they hadn't seen any animals as of yet.

After another hour, Bree spoke up, breaking the silence. "Do you think we're getting close?" she asked, her voice hushed.

Iris shrugged. "I have no idea. Laken seems to be leading us in the right direction, but we could be searching for hours more."

Kaira nodded in agreement. "It's possible. But we need to stay focused and keep moving forward. We can't afford to waste any time."

Gryff chimed in, "I just hope we find something soon. This waiting and searching is making me anxious."

Iris patted him on the shoulder. "I know, buddy. But we have to be patient. This is the worst part of a quest. All of the build-up for just a quick moment of action."

The man sighed and nodded.

They continued on through the woods, the ground beneath their feet becoming spongy and damp, with moss and mushrooms covering the tree trunks and fallen logs. The sounds of small animals scurrying about echoed through the trees, and birds chirped.

As they walked, Iris couldn't help but feel a sense of unease. Something didn't feel right, but she couldn't put her finger on what it was. Her **[Danger Sense]** was quiet, but she had long learned to not rely on the trait.

Suddenly, Laken held up his hand, signaling for them to stop. He pointed to a nearby tree where a large claw mark was visible. "Looks like we're getting close," he said, his voice low as he reached down and picked something up.

Iris felt a rush of adrenaline as they approached the tree and the **[Ranger]**. The man turned and showed them a broken arrow. It looked as if it had been only recently used.

She glanced at the tree, her eyes narrowing. She had never seen a claw mark that large before. It was at least a foot long, and the claw marks were deep, suggesting that the creature was incredibly strong.

Wait... There is one thing...

"Is this fresh, Laken?" she asked quietly, pulling mana into herself.

The elf shook his head. "Not recent. At least a day or two," he said before pointing in a direction off to the left. "This way."

As the party continued, the forest grew darker, the canopy overhead blocking out more and more of the light. The sound of trickling water grew louder, and they could see the stream up ahead.

But as they approached the bank of the stream, Laken held up his hand again. “I think I see something up ahead,” he whispered as she stepped next to him.

The man pointed and she **[Focused]** as she looked to where he indicated. In the distance was a dim flickering light in a small clearing. Just like that of a campfire. To the left was a slight hill. Enough for one of them to hide and look down if they’re careful.

She smiled, a plan forming.

Iris gestured for Kaira to move up beside her and leaned close to her when she did. “Take the party that way,” she indicated in the more Eastern direction. “I will head to the top. If it is indeed bandits, wait for my signal to approach.”

Kaira’s eyes narrowed. “We don’t need to split up, we can go together.”

Iris shook her head. “If it is the bandits, I have an idea... It will allow you guys to surprise them. Just wait for my signal.”

“What signal is that?”

A smirk grew on Iris’s face. “Lightning, what else?”

Kaira groaned but nodded her head nonetheless.



Iris carefully crawled up the hill, keeping her movements slow and steady to avoid making any noise. As she reached the top, she peered over the edge and saw a small camp in the clearing below. Six people sat around a campfire, eating and chatting.

The camp was well-hidden, surrounded by tall trees that shielded it from prying eyes. It consisted of several makeshift tents, made from scraps of cloth and leather, that were scattered around the clearing. A large one seemed to be where they gathered, and she caught a glance of at least one more person inside.

But it was the cages that caught her attention. Two of them were filled with wolves, their piercing yellow eyes gleaming in the firelight. The third cage was larger and held a bear, pacing back and forth in frustration. Iris couldn't help but feel sorry for the animals, trapped and confined like that.

Iris studied the camp for a few minutes, trying to identify any weaknesses or vulnerabilities. She noticed that there was a guard posted at the entrance to the camp, but the rest of the bandits seemed preoccupied with their food and drink or in the command tent as she was designating it. The cages with the beasts were positioned in a

way that made it difficult for them to be seen from the outside, but Iris could see that they were all in poor condition, malnourished, and mistreated.

Iris took a deep breath, steeling herself for what was to come.

She cast [**Arcane Capability**] and [**Rushing Wind**] before pulling mana into herself, readying a [**Chain Lightning**] to cast on a moment's notice. If things got dicey, she'd rush away with her movement spell.

You got this, Iris. Easy. You fought all the bandits on the bridge and they were better equipped.

With a nod to herself, she stood up and removed her helmet, attaching it to her belt. She forced a smile on her face, spread her hands slightly to her sides, and approached the camp.



What the fuck is she doing?

Kaira couldn't believe her damn eyes. Iris was striding down the hill and straight toward the camp. The woman looked so confident, and so... *gods she's beautiful.*

She shook those thoughts from her head, they were dangerous.

Kaira watched as Iris approached the bandits with an ease and grace that belied the danger of the situation. She noticed that one of the bandits had stood up and was watching Iris closely, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. The man called out to the others and the camp came alive.

Those sitting at the campfire jumped up and pulled blades out.

Kaira tensed, ready to jump in and help if things went south, but she trusted Iris to handle herself. She knew Iris was powerful, and the others had seen firsthand how skilled she was in combat.

"What is she doing?!" Gryff whisper-shouted.

Kaira shrugged. "No clue, watch for the signal," she said in a calm voice completely contrasting how she felt inside. The woman she cared about was walking directly into danger, and she couldn't help but feel anxious.

As Iris reached the edge of the camp, the bandit with his hand on his sword stepped forward, blocking her path.

"What's the signal?" Laken asked.

Kaira sighed. "Lightning."

Gryff sucked in a breath. "Shit."

Even Bree muttered curses as the medic prepared herself.

What are you doing, Iris?

Kaira's heart couldn't take this...



“Who the fuck are you?” the bandit in front of her growled, his eyes narrowing as he looked Iris up and down.

Iris smiled disarmingly, holding her hands off to the side in a gesture of peace. “What do you mean who the fuck am I? Erick and Eira recruited me, and now I'm here. Where are they?” she lied. “I had to finish a job but they gave me directions to meet them when I completed it.”

The bandit didn't look convinced, his hand still on the hilt of his sword. “Erick and Eira? I don't know them.”

She noticed the six from the campfire slowly approaching, a man and two others emerged from the command tent. When their gaze focused on her, the man in the lead spoke to the other two and they split up, walking away.

Shit, scouting for others?

Iris's smile faltered slightly, but she kept her cool. “Well, that's fucking strange. Because they clearly said that they were part of this group. They intimated that my abilities would be well utilized. Are you the leader here?”

The bandit scoffed. “I ain't the leader. But—”

“Then maybe fucking get them? Because I don't really feel like wasting my time on some stooge,” she demanded.

Before the man could respond, the man she had already pegged as the leader called out. “What do we have here?” he asked as he approached. The man, a telv with a scar on his neck, was the only one wearing proper armor, with two short swords on either hip.

The bandit turned and stood straighter. “She says someone named Erick recruited her and told her to come here.”

The man rubbed at his chin. “Erick, eh? Are you sure?”

Iris narrowed her eyes. “Of course, I'm sure. Him and the two other terrans he was with.”

The man nodded. “Interesting. When did you say they recruited you?”

She shrugged. “I didn't say, but it was about two weeks ago? In Stilstead. I was on a job, and Galen thought it would blow my cover to leave it. He suggested I come after.”

“Oh? What about Maya? What did she think? Although, she wasn’t one to talk much, so...” he said, clearly as a test.

She laughed. “Did you say, ‘Maya’? If you mean, Eira? She’s the one that approached me first! The woman wouldn’t shut up. So excited to see another terran, she was. She’s the reason I almost declined. Thank the gods for Galen, he convinced me there was some good coin in it.”

The man chuckled. “I see you’ve met her, but I have some unfortunate news for you,” he said, his expression becoming more serious. “They’re dead.”

Iris faked surprise. “W-What? How? They said they were coming back here!”

The bandit leader sighed and crossed his arms. “That’s what we’ve been trying to figure out. They and six of my men were killed by some guards. No one made it out alive.”

She schooled her features, the man was lying. She was still sustaining her spells, keeping her attributes boosted. Iris shook her head. “But... Eira had magic... How’d she... She was so nice,” Iris said sadly.

The man nodded and stepped closer, patting her on the shoulder. “Come on, let’s get you a drink, yeah? To Eira, Erick, and Galen! Then we can talk about you joining us. What’s your name?”

“Iris,” she replied smoothly.

The man led Iris to a makeshift bar set up inside the command tent. She kept her guard up, scanning the faces of the bandits around her. She couldn’t let herself become comfortable at all, and hopefully, the two that had left wouldn’t find the others.

As they walked, the man ask if she had made sure to not be followed. To which she replied that, of course, she hadn’t. He was acting friendly enough, but Iris could sense an undercurrent of suspicion. She tried to keep up the act, smiling and chatting with him as if she was just another recruit looking for work.

Keep it cool, play the part. You’re a bandit extraordinaire. You steal candy from babies and the panties off of women and men... nevermind.

They arrived at the bar, which was really just a rickety wooden bar-height table with bottles on it with a large keg sitting behind it. The bandit leader poured them each a mug of ale and gestured for Iris to sit on a nearby barrel.

“So, Iris,” the telv said, taking a long sip from his mug. “What kind of work are you looking for?”

Iris shrugged. “I’m not picky. I’ve done everything from smuggling to guard work since arriving. I mainly deal with work dealing with monsters, though. As long as the pay is good, I’m in.”

He nodded. "We could always use more muscle around here, and you're a whole lot of woman."

"A whole lot of woman, really?" Iris raised an eyebrow. "You need muscle or are you trying to get in my pants?"

The man chuckled and raised his mug. "Take it easy, I mean you clearly look like you can handle yourself in a fight. If Erick and Galen were recruiting you, I'd expect nothing less."

She lifted her mug. "To Erick, Galen, and Eira! May they find peace with Relena."

The man smirked and echoed her toast.

He leaned in, lowering his voice. "We've been having some trouble with the knights and guards from Brightburn that showed up in Stilstead. They found one of our other camps. We've lost a lot of men in the past few weeks. I'm worried they will find us here. That's why it is important that you weren't followed."

"I'm no amateur, I already told you I wasn't followed." Iris frowned. "But, seriously, that sounds rough. The fucking law here in Lehelia are nothing but tyrants. But why not just move your camp somewhere else?"

"You will find no argument from me." The bandit leader shook his head. "Don't you worry about that, though. This isn't all we have in our... organization."

Iris nodded, taking a sip of her ale, forcing herself to not wince at the vile taste. "I see. So what's your plan, then?"

The man shrugged. "We're going to lay low. Something's coming and it will change everything."

Iris raised an eyebrow. "Interesting. I'd ask, but honestly, I just want the coin. I'm not into all the high-level strategy stuff."

The man laughed and slapped the bar. "That's the spirit. We can't keep losing men like this. But we could use someone like you on our side. Someone with experience and skills."

She smiled. "Well, I definitely have skills. What do you—"

Movement came and Iris instinctively **[Focused]**. One of the two that had gone off to scout, a high elf man, walked into the tent and caught the leader's eye before giving a small shake of his head. The man wore a robe just like Eira had. Iris narrowed her eyes.

Magic user? What kind of nonsense ideas did Eira or Erick put in their heads?

The leader smiled big as he turned back and looked at Iris. "Good! You're all alone. Can't be too careful, yeah?"

Iris narrowed her eyes. "Of course, I'm alone," she said. "Who else would I be here with?"

The man shrugged as he put his mug down and gestured for her to go outside. “The knights, of course. They’ve been trying to find this camp for some time, and you just waltz in like you own the place.”

She adopted a smirk as she stood up. “Ah, come on now. I don’t own it... yet,” she said with a wink. “So, what kind of jobs have you got? I could really use the coin. This world is so hard to find work in.”

She was led outside where the others had spread around the camp, looking busy. It immediately put her on edge. Something wasn’t right. Based on the robes, she suspected the two lieutenants or whatever were casters. That put a slight wrench in her plans, but nothing insurmountable.

This is going south. He suspects something.

The bandit leader nodded as he walked her toward the fire. “Well, we’ve got all sorts of jobs. But we need to make sure we can trust you first. And I’m going to be honest with you, Iris. I don’t trust you at all.”

Iris shrugged, hiding her impatience. “Understandable. We just met. What’s a girl got to do to prove herself? And no, getting in my pants is not on the table.”

He shook his head as he chuckled. “We’re not uncivilized here. You ain’t got to worry about none of that. Men. Women. We’re all in this together. Anyone who would turn on one of their own doesn’t deserve mercy,” he said.

She nodded understanding. “Completely agree.”

“And the people who supposedly recruited you are all dead,” he added. “Your fellow terrans.”

Suddenly, the bandit leader gestured to his men, and they all took out their weapons, causing Iris to take a step back and draw her own sword. The bandit leader was glaring at her, his hands resting on the twin hilts of his blades.

“I think you’ve been lying to us, Iris,” he said, his voice cold and hard. “You know how I know that?”

Iris kept her cool as she took a defensive stance. “What are you talking about?” she asked, her voice steady. She was confident in her chances, all she had to do was **[Lightning Step]** away if things got dicey.

The bandit leader gestured to the side toward a tent, and a man stepped out. Iris had to curse her luck when she recognized the large telv man that had gotten away at the bridge.

Damn it.

“He warned us all about the redheaded terran with magic that killed everyone on the bridge,” he said. “How you slaughtered your fellow terrans.”

Iris gritted her teeth. *So much for keeping a low profile.*

She took a deep breath and tried to keep her composure, despite feeling frustrated at getting zero information out of them. *Well, just leave one or two alive to get it out of them then...*

Actually... this is probably not gonna work, but let's try it.

“Listen, I don’t know what he told you, but he’s lying,” she said, pointing her sword at the telv man. “I didn’t kill anyone. In fact, he let me and my group through under Erick’s orders. I had the merchant pay him fifty gold for the ‘convenience’.”

The bandit leader raised an eyebrow. “Is that so? And how do we know you’re telling the truth?”

Iris took a step forward, still holding her sword at the ready. “If I killed everyone, why’s he still alive? You really think he could outrun *anything*?” she asked. “But I’m not going to stand here and let you accuse me of something I didn’t do. I’m a mercenary, not a murderer.”

The bandit leader chuckled. “Well, we’ll just have to see about that, won’t we?” he gestured to his men. “Capture her. She’ll answer us when she isn’t so confident.”

One of the caster’s hands erupted in flames, while the wind started whipping around the other’s. *Why is it always fire? So cliché my dude. At least airbender bro is kinda unique.*

Iris cast **[Storm Armor]** and smiled as bolts of lightning shot off of the crackling sphere of electricity that formed around her. “Alright my guy, I’ll give you one chance, otherwise you all get to die. Well, maybe not all of you. We’ll see.”

“I take it back. Just kill her, she’s more trouble than she’s worth,” the bandit leader ordered while taking several steps back.

She laughed.

The fire caster launched several orbs of fire toward Iris, but she dodged them easily with **[Rushing Wind]**. The wind caster retaliated by sending sharp gusts of wind her way, but she weaved around them with ease.

She rushed at a nearby guard, spinning around him as another orb of fire lashed out at her, hitting the bandit in the chest.

The bandits started yelling and coordinating, but she just **[Focused]** on herself.

She dodged another orb of fire and flicked her wrist at the fire user. Iris grinned as her **[Chain Lightning]** launched at the fire caster, the crackling energy connecting and then surging off of him and hitting another bandit as well.

They both fell to the ground, smoking.

And that’s why you wear armor folks.

The wind caster scowled and sent a barrage of wind blades toward Iris, but she sidestepped and **[Lightning Stepped]** to him, emerging in an explosion of electricity that shocked two nearby bandits.

Before she could launch a spell at the wind caster, the bandit leader was there. The man swung his blades at her, but she caught them both on her longsword. She shoved him back and spun, using **[Arc Lash]** but the man lept backward, dodging it.

The buzz of her **[Danger Sense]** went off and she immediately used her **[Lightning Step]** to surge away, narrowly dodging more wind blades.

As she emerged away from the bandits, she could hear the sounds of her party rushing into the camp and engaging the bandits.

She stole a glance in their direction, just in time to see Gryff impale a telv woman through the back, while Laken launched an arrow into another.

The wind caster used a gust of wind that threw a crate at the **[Ranger]** but the man dove out of the way just in time.

“Iris! Get the caster!” Kaira yelled out, then rushed straight toward the camp leader.

Oh, this is gonna be fun.

She pulled mana into her, channeling all she could, and started launching **[Sparks]** one after another at the caster. The man started sprinting as he used something to hasten his movement speed, throwing spells at her as he dodged her orbs of lightning.

A bandit rushed her, but before he was even within four paces, Bree bashed into him with her shield and then stabbed him with her spear as he fell to the ground.

Iris continued to focus on the wind caster, dodging his spells and launching her own. She could feel the sweat pouring down her face and the strain on her mental stamina, but she didn't let up.

The caster stumbled as one of her **[Sparks]** clipped him in the leg, and she took advantage of the opening to **[Lightning Step]** to him and drive her sword through his chest.

The man gasped and fell to the ground, dead.

Three bandits were rushing back out from a tent, armed with crossbows. She saw their focus on Gryff and Laken, intent on firing at the two men. She lifted her hand and channeled her **[Arcane Torrent]**. A flurry of arcane splinters formed and shot out, homing in on the area, each exploding in a burst of energy.

The men didn't have a chance as they were shredded by the spell.

She took a deep breath and looked around the camp. The bandits were either dead or in the midst of fighting with her party members. Even as she watched, a bandit

woman was easily dispatched by Bree before the medic engaged with a man armed with only a club and a basic wooden shield.

She fired a **[Spark]** at another bandit that tried rushing her, catching him right in the face. The man locked up and fell, and she had to look away from the damage.

Kaira was engaged in a fierce battle with the bandit leader, she raised her hand to cast a spell but realized she didn't have a clean shot. She watched as the two clashed their weapons together, the sound of steel ringing through the air. Kaira was wielding a sword and shield, while the bandit leader had two swords.

Iris could see that Kaira was holding her own, her movements graceful and precise. She was blocking and parrying the bandit leader's attacks with ease, using her shield to deflect his strikes while simultaneously countering with her sword.

The bandit leader was strong and fast, but Kaira was clearly the better fighter. She was able to anticipate his moves and strike back with deadly accuracy.

After a minute of fighting, Kaira managed to disarm the bandit leader, knocking one of his swords out of his hand. She pressed her advantage, pushing him back and forcing him to his knees.

The bandit leader raised his hands in surrender, blood streaming from a wound on his side. Kaira approached him, sword at the ready. Iris could see the satisfaction on Kaira's face as she held the bandit leader at sword point.

As the woman lowered her blade, thinking the fight was over, the bandit leader saw an opportunity and pulled out a hidden stiletto.

Iris's **[Danger Sense]** buzzed and she yanked at the mana around her. Her mind raced as she sought a solution, and the world seemed as if was nearly still. She watched in slow motion as the man moved.

She had no chance to get there in time. Iris needed a spell, but her current spells wouldn't work. She closed her eyes and focused on her thoughts, delving deep into her mind. She could feel the power of **[Arcane Torrent]** pulsing within her, a cracking orb of purple energy with shards flickering around it, yearning to be unleashed. It was a spell that had saved her when she had needed it, but one that she no longer needed. The pressure inside her head increased as she pushed back against it, forcing it to recede deep into her subconscious.

As the spell seemed to go dormant, she felt a weight lifted from her mind, the constant pressure of the spell no longer bearing down on her.

She opened her eyes, and dropped her sword, before it even hit the ground she was forming a new spell. Lightning surged to her will, and using her **[Electromancy]** and affinity to alter her magic to combine it with **[Unerring Shot]**, she formed a spear of pure electricity.

Iris lifted the spear and drew back, just as the man lunged forward and stabbed Kaira in the stomach. The man grabbed Kaira by the shoulder and stabbed her again. Iris yelled out as Kaira stumbled back, dropping her sword and shield, her hand moving to cover the wounds even though she wore armor.

Iris threw her **[Lightning Spear]**.

The bandit leader laughed as he kicked Kaira to the ground, picked up one of his swords, and raised it to finish her off.

The crackling spear of lightning shot forward, homing in on the bandit leader, and just as he was about to bring his blade down on the woman she liked, the spear pierced through his chest, then shot off and spun around before piercing him again... and again... and again.

As the man fell, multiple holes through his chest, Iris was already rushing forward.

“Kaira!” she yelled, ignoring the fighting that was still going on between the last few bandits and the others.

Iris rushed to Kaira, who was lying on the ground, the elf’s hand clutching her stomach. “Kaira, stay with me!” Iris yelled as she checked for the wound. She saw that the armor had been punctured, and blood was seeping out of the wound beneath it rapidly.

Kaira smiled up at her. “You’re so pretty,” the woman said quietly.

“Bree, we need you here!” she shouted.

The woman arrived a moment later, her medical kit in hand. “Kaira, you’re going to be alright,” she said, as she quickly assessed the wound.

“We need to get her armor off,” Bree said, her voice shaking. “And then stop the bleeding.”

Iris nodded and the two women started removing Kaira’s breastplate as carefully and quickly as possible.

Once it was off and tossed aside, the medic applied pressure to the wound. “We need to get her to Stilstead,” she said.

“No,” Iris said firmly. “We need to do something now.”

Bree looked at her, confused. “I don’t have what we need here to do something!”

“The healing goop,” Iris ordered. “Use it. Shove it in the wound if you have to. We can’t wait.”

The sun elf took a deep breath before nodding. She quickly retrieved the vials of glowing green goop from her kit. She applied it to the wounds, carefully ensuring that the material seeped into the holes. As she did, the goop seemed to glow with a soft green light.

Bree gasped and jerked back.

Iris shook her head. "More, cover it."

As the woman applied more, the bleeding started to slow. "It's working, Bree said, notes of awe and relief in her voice.

Iris let out a breath she didn't realize she was holding. "Now, we need to get her out of here."

She turned and looked for the two men. Seeing them shove down two bandits to their knees. "Gryff!" Iris yelled. "We need a stretcher!"

The man glanced down at the bandits before saying something to Laken and rushing off.

"She's stable for now," Bree said, causing Iris to jerk her head back to Kaira as the sun elf started to bandage the wound. "But we need to get her to Stilstead as soon as possible."

Iris nodded, her mind already racing with plans to keep Kaira safe.

When Gryff finally arrived with a makeshift stretcher made from tent material and two poles, Iris took a deep breath. Laken arrived at the back of the two bandits who looked terrified.

Iris looked at the group. "Gryff, you and Laken carry Kaira. Bree, you guide them. I'll watch out for danger and keep a handle on these two."

Her eyes narrowed as she looked at the bandits. "We will be moving quickly you stay in front of me and behind them. If either of you slows us down or tries anything, you die. You keep up or you die. I do not care."

Both men nodded quickly. One of them pointed in a direction. "That way is the quickest to the road," he said.

Iris narrowed her eyes.

"I swear!" he said quickly.

"If you're lying to me, remember," she warned in a low voice.

He nodded. "I die."

"Good," she growled. "We understand each other."

You're going to be alright, Kaira.