

Knock on Wood

Iris woke up well before the sun had risen, feeling a little groggy from the previous day's travel. She sat up and stretched her arms above her head, wincing as her sore muscles protested the movement.

As she contemplated what to do next, her gaze fell upon her armor laid out neatly beside her. The dull steel glinted in the morning light, and she couldn't help but feel a sense of purpose stir within her. It was time to get to work.

She stood up and shook off the stiffness from her muscles before reaching for her armor. Piece by piece, she donned the heavy steel plates that protected her body, taking care to ensure each buckle and strap was securely fastened. As she worked, she couldn't help but feel a sense of comfort in the familiar weight of the armor.

Once she was fully suited up, she strapped her sword to her waist, the familiar weight of the weapon a reassuring presence at her side. She took a moment to adjust the straps and make sure the sword was secured in its scabbard before nodding in satisfaction.

With her armor and weapon in place, she felt ready to face whatever challenges the day may bring. It was time to continue on her escort quest, to protect the merchant wagon and its two people.

Iris reached up to gather her unruly locks and deftly wove them into a tight ponytail, securing it with a leather tie. The strands of her hair, the color of scarlet oak leaves, framed her sharp features and intense grey eyes. She didn't need to be humble with herself, Iris knew she had a striking appearance.

And I look damn good in armor.

As she headed toward the entrance, she noticed the soft rustling of leaves and the dawn chorus of birds outside. She reached for the laces that held the tent flap shut and untied them, letting in the fresh morning air. The scent of pine and earth filled her senses, and she smiled contentedly. She took a deep breath and stepped outside her tent, ready to start her day.

First full day on the escort quest.

Mocha was already up and grazing nearby, giving her a nicker of greeting when she saw her awake.

Iris smiled. "Hey girl, you're up early. Couldn't sleep?"

The horse snorted.

"Yeah, me neither. I don't know how you can sleep on the ground," Iris said.

It may have been a trick of shadows, but Iris would have sworn that Mocha just rolled her eyes.

She's getting bolder every day.

She looked around at the campsite they had set up the night before. The merchant wagon was parked a little ways away, and she could see Tanith on watch duty, his sword resting across his lap as he gazed out into the darkness. Sera was sound asleep in her tent, her soft breathing barely audible from where Iris stood.

She walked over to the wagon, peering inside to see the boxes and crates that made up the majority of their cargo. She could hear the soft snuffling of the horses that pulled the wagon as they shifted in their sleep.

It was going to be a long journey, but she was excited for the adventure ahead.

After a few minutes of stretching, she walked over to Tanith and took his place on watch duty. The man was tired and short on words, which suited her fine.

Iris settled down in a comfortable spot and monitored the area.

As she sat there in the pre-dawn hours, she couldn't help but feel a sense of excitement mixed with apprehension. This was her first real *adventure*, and she was determined to prove herself capable. She scanned the surrounding area with hawk-like focus, keeping a close eye out for any potential dangers.

The forest around her was quiet, save for the occasional rustling of leaves and the chirping of birds. It was a peaceful scene, but Iris knew better than to let her guard down. She kept her hand on the hilt of her sword, ready to draw it at a moment's notice.

She was determined.

Steadfast.

Lightning magic surged through her.

Bandits beware, for a Platinum Adventurer—No. An S Ranked Adventurer was on the job.

Iris Stuart was a stalwart sentinel protecting the innocent merchant and the novice guard against the dark.

Ohhohoho. She would not falter, she was the rocks on which the waves broke. The bastion of light...ning. The Savior of Cosdale.

A Named Ranked Adventurer.



Iris lay on her back, her legs straight up against the rough bark of a tree trunk. She tossed a small rock up into the air, watching it fall back into her waiting hand with a dull thud. She repeated the motion over and over again, trying to stave off the boredom that threatened to consume her.

Her eyes traced the patterns of the leaves overhead, but her mind was elsewhere. She missed the bustle of civilization, the lively taverns, and the raucous laughter of the patrons.

Out here in the wilderness, everything seemed muted and lifeless. She yearned for adventure, for excitement. She knew her calling would be filled with monotony, but... maybe taking this job—

No. This was her role, and she would fulfill it. After all, it was good practice.

She let out a sigh, tossing the rock a little harder this time. It flew high into the air, disappearing into the treetops. For a moment, she felt a small spark of joy. It was almost like flying. But as the rock fell back to earth, the monotony of her task settled back over her like a shroud. She caught the rock, staring up at the sky, and tried to push away the feeling of restlessness that gnawed at her.

As she lay there, Iris noticed a small bird perched on a nearby branch. It chirped softly, seemingly unfazed by her presence. Iris watched it for a moment, transfixed by its tiny form and its simple existence. It was a reminder that life was all around her, even in the quiet moments. She smiled, feeling a small sense of contentment wash over her.

As Iris gazed up at the bird, she couldn't help but feel a twinge of envy at the effortless way it took into the air, soaring higher and higher with each beat of its wings. The grace with which it moved was nothing short of mesmerizing, and for a moment, Iris was lost in the beauty of it all.

But her daydream was cut short as a sudden commotion caught her attention. A hawk swooped in out of nowhere, its sharp talons striking the unsuspecting bird with deadly accuracy. Iris watched in horror as the once-glorious creature was reduced to a flurry of feathers and pained screeches.

It was a sobering reminder of the harsh realities of adventuring, you could be strong one day, and the next... a murder hare was feasting on your corpse.

As Iris watched the hawk fly off with its prize, she couldn't help but feel a sense of resignation settle over her. "Well, shit," she muttered under her breath. "That's my cue."

With a shake of her head, Iris sat up and brushed off her clothes. Clearly, she couldn't waste any more time on idle daydreams, they got things killed. She had a job to do, and she was determined to do it well. She got up, stretched her arms over her head, and headed back to her watch.

It was time to focus on the task at hand and leave her restlessness behind.

Iris froze in her tracks as she heard the sound of wings beating against the air, large ones, not the tiny flutter of the bird she had just seen, nor even the purposeful movements of the hawk. Her senses were on edge and she felt as if she could hear a slight buzzing noise. It was an ominous sound, one that she had learned to associate

with her **Danger Sense** during her time as an adventurer. She peered into the trees, scanning the shadows for any sign of movement.

The rustling grew louder, and soon she could make out the silhouette of a large bird. It swooped down towards her, but despite her earlier boredom, she'd never stopped holding mana within her at the ready. She lifted a hand toward her avian adversary and launched a **Spark**.

The crackling energy bolt shot from her fingertips, illuminating the dark forest as it struck the bird head-on. The creature let out a piercing screech before plummeting to the ground, its body smoking and twitching. A small rush of energy filled her, but not enough to be what she associated with a level-up. No, she just gained some experience.

Iris approached the fallen bird, her hand still crackling with residual lightning magic, and inspected it carefully. The bird was an eagle, but as Iris examined the creature more closely, she could see the telltale signs of monsterization. A phenomenon that she associated with the effect large concentrations of mana had on animals, like those drakkyd.

The creature lay still on the ground, its once-golden feathers now matted and stained with blood. Its razor-sharp talons were still extended, the deadly claws dulled by the impact of the Spark.

Despite having to kill the creature, Iris felt a small sense of satisfaction. She had taken down the monster with ease, and protected the innocent people under her watch.

She glanced around, scanning the canopy above her, using her **Mana Sight** to search for any signs of more animals.

Iris couldn't help but smile at the sight of five tiny wisps of coalescing mana sitting on a nearby tree branch.



Sera woke up to the gentle warmth of the sun streaming into her tent. She stretched her long, slender limbs and took a deep breath, savoring the fresh air of the wilderness. As she got ready, she couldn't help but feel a nagging sense of worry in the back of her mind. The road to Brightburn was dangerous, and she couldn't afford any mishaps. She was grateful that she had hired Iris as a second guard for her wagon, but she couldn't help but wonder if that was enough.

As Sera emerged from her tent, rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she was greeted by the sight of Iris cooking eggs over the campfire. The self-proclaimed adventurer had a wild look in her grey eyes as if she was ready to take on any challenge that came her way. Sera found her a bit intimidating but refused to let it show.

"Morning, Sera!" Iris called out cheerfully. "I've made breakfast. Care to join me?"

Sera nodded, suppressing a smile as she took a seat by the fire. Iris served her a plate of eggs and a hard biscuit.

"I hope you don't mind, I grabbed the biscuits from the supplies in the wagon." the woman said.

Sera's eyes narrowed as she took in the plate in her hands. "Wait. Where did you get the eggs?"

The redheaded terran shrugged and pointed over to the side. Sera followed where she indicated and let out a squeak of shock. "What is that?!"

On the ground was the corpse of a partially processed bird of some sort.

"Some bird that tried attacking me. I didn't want the eggs in its nest to go to waste. So... breakfast!" Iris said, her tone signifying how *normal* the woman believed the action to be.

How could this ever be normal?

Sera took a step closer to the bird's corpse, her eyes still wide with shock. She had never seen such a large bird before. Its feathers were a deep, rich brown, and its talons were as long as her hand. She couldn't help but shudder at the thought of facing such a creature in battle.

"It's huge," she said softly, still in awe of the bird's size. "How did you manage to take it down?"

Iris chuckled a hint of pride in her voice. "Magic," she said simply. "It didn't stand a chance."

Sera nodded slowly, still processing the fact that the terran she had hired had taken down such a fearsome creature. While she had expected a guard to have to potentially face a drakyyd, she suspected they would do it with Tanith at their side. A fierce battle that would still have them flee. Not... this.

She glanced over at Iris, taking in the woman's untroubled demeanor and the scatterbrained air she seemed to exude. It was easy to see that Iris was a dreamer, lost in her own world of adventure and fancy.

"Well, I suppose we shouldn't let such opportunities pass us by. Thank you for the breakfast," she told the woman.

The terran smiled, but then her eyes widened as if remembering something. "Oh! I forgot to mention," she said, reaching into a pouch she kept at her side. "I got this out of it."

Sera's eyes widened as she recognized the fist-sized orb that Iris had pulled out. It was a mana core, and she knew all too well the potential value it held, especially since it

swirled with two colors. A rarity. At the moment, only kingdoms, academies, and interested nobles were willing to pay a decent amount of coin for them, but it was only a matter of time before demand trickled down to others within society.

“What do you think?” the terran asked.

Sera needed to play this right.

A core that large would bring a considerable amount of profit to her company.

Maybe even create the opportunity to transfer to the headquarters in Strathmore, or if luck would have it, to the company’s new location in Maireharboura. She heard that Mister Fenren was expanding their shipping business and had sent out representatives to entice a company out west into dealing with them.

Sera smiled, her grin feral.

“Miss Iris, I would appreciate and consider it a favor if you would allow me to purchase or trade for that core. I believe I have some items that someone of your particular... profession would find appealing,” she offered.

The look Iris returned made her involuntarily shiver, like that of a predator who was sizing up prey. Sera glanced over at the bird that was as large as she was... and realized maybe she wasn’t that far off.



As she rode Mocha alongside the wagon that trudged along toward its next stop, Iris looked down at the container filled with a strange glowing poultice that she had traded for. Well, that and a pretty diamond necklace that likely would have been destined for some noblewoman’s jewelry stash, only to be worn once.

The poultice though... Tanith had been surprised that the merchant had traded it. According to the high elf guard, the material had miraculous medicinal applications. Able to heal lacerations as if they were a mere scrape.

To her, the goopy substance that glowed with a soft turquoise color had the consistency of a face mask or something else from back home. She’d be willing to try it. If only because she knew how often she managed to injure herself.

She was a bit surprised at how much the woman wanted the bird’s core. It was a fair quality one, she’d only seen a few others of the like.

I wonder if she’d want the ones I have in my pack, also...

Thus far, no one wanted the cores she’d obtained during her monster and beast extermination quests. Which was probably just because no one really knew what they could be used for.

For making magic, duh!

She couldn't help but just shake her head at those people. Such little imagination. What weak vision. It was like they couldn't see the forest for the trees.

"You doing alright down there, Mocha? Not too tired?" she asked as she patted her faithful steed.

Mocha snorted dismissively.

"That's a bit rude. I don't weigh that much..."

The horse shook her head from side to side and neighed.

"Look, if you were a person, I'd give you a piggyback now and then. I know it's only fair, but let's be honest. Girl, you are way too big to ride on my back. We all have our roles in life, Mocha. Yours is being the most amazing horse in the world... *Neigh...* the universe," she said, chuckling at her joke.

Mocha let out a series of neighs that again sounded like curses to her.

"Are—Are you having a conversation with your horse?" Tanith asked in confusion to her right.

Iris glanced over where both the guard and merchant were sitting on the wagon bench, staring at her in confused amazement.

She shook her head a wide grin on her face. "Of course! Mocha here is my best friend and traveling companion. We talk about everything, don't we girl?" she said, patting the horse's neck affectionately.

Mocha snorted derisively.

Sera raised an eyebrow, clearly not used to such behavior. "Well, as long as it doesn't affect our journey, I suppose it's fine," she said with a bit of hesitation.

Iris chuckled. "Don't worry, I won't let our conversations delay us. But Mocha deserves some attention, don't you think?" she said, reaching into the saddle bag behind her and pulling out a purple carrot for the horse to munch on.

Tanith shook his head in disbelief, but couldn't help but smile at Iris's carefree attitude. "You're a strange one, but I suppose it's refreshing in a way," he said.

Iris beamed at the compliment. "Why thank you! I always strive to be unique and bring a little bit of joy to the world," she said, before turning back to Mocha. "Now, where were we? Ah yes, the meaning of life..."

Mocha let out a series of neighs that sounded like a laugh.

It sounded so adorable that Iris couldn't help but join in, tittering along with Mocha's laughter, enjoying the moment of lightheartedness. She looked over at Sera and Tanith, still chuckling, and noticed their confused expressions.

"What?" Iris asked, still grinning. "Just having a little chat with my trusty steed."

Sera shook her head in amusement. "You're a strange one, Iris. But I suppose that's one of the reasons I hired you. We need someone who can handle themselves out here."

Iris's grin faltered slightly at the mention of her escort quest. "Right, of course. I take my duties as a guard very seriously."

Tanith's face was all scrunched up, finally, he mustered the courage to ask, "I-Is your ability to understand animals a magic thing, Miss Iris?"

Iris chuckled. "No, it's not magic. I just have a special bond with Mocha. I can understand her, and she can understand me. It's a gift, really. Very Disney. It's probably the mana helping." She patted Mocha's side affectionately. "Isn't that right, girl?"

Mocha nodded her head and let out a pleased whinny in response. Iris turned back to the others, shock very evident on their faces.

The wagon lurched forward, bouncing slightly over the rough terrain, causing both elves to bounce and shift on the bench. Tanith cursed as he readjusted his grip on the reins. "Sorry, Miss Sera."

The woman smoothed out her dress and resituated herself in her seat. "It is no issue. These things happen," she said. "I cannot wait to stop for the night."

A slightly buzzing sound assaulted Iris's ears as the two elves started talking about the village they would be stopping in. She glanced around, trying to see what was setting her sense off.

Her eyes went wide as she made out some shapes approaching from the sky coming from the direction of the forest. She pulled mana into her, letting both the green and yellow energy settle throughout her body.

"You know, I never asked..." Iris started as she pulled her bow from where it was strapped to the saddle. "How long *will* it take for us to get to Brightburn?"

Laying the bow down across the saddle, she started to string it, keeping the incoming threat at the corner of her eye.

"Cosdale to Brightburn is a three-day journey at our pace," Tanith explained. "We'll stop again tonight in the village of Stilstead."

Iris nodded and drew an arrow from the quiver. Tanith's eyes went wide as he finally took in what she was doing.

"Good. I think you should urge those horses to go a bit faster. Uhm." She turned her head. "Yeah, like now."

"What? What is going on?" Sera asked.

Tanith peeked his head around the side of the wagon and looked at what she was focused on. He cursed.

"Sera, I need you to get inside the wagon. Now!"

The elf jerked in shock.

Iris shook her head. “No, there’s not enough time. You need to go faster, not slow down.”

“Is this because of the bird you killed?” Sera called out.

Tanith glanced between the two women. “What bird?” his head turned toward Iris. “Wait, is that where you got the core?”

She narrowed her eyes. “You missed the body sitting back by the campfire?”

“I was focused on packing up!”

Iris rolled her eyes. “Well, uh..” She **Focused**, letting her thoughts settle. Iris took in what was coming and her spell fell as her shock overrode it. “What?”

“You guys have harpies?” she called out.

“What in Alos’s name is a harpy!?” Tanith yelled.

Iris scowled.

Mana monsterization? How? People? No... Surely they would have heard about that.

She tried to peer closer at the flapping figures. They had long beaks, wings for arms, and bird-like legs and feet all in a humanoid–*elvenoid*–form. Their feathers were a beautiful array of colors that almost had her mesmerized if she didn’t think they’d eat her face given the chance.

Yup, definitely harpies. Maybe formed from a type of bird, though? Weird.

“That,” she pointed at the oncoming monsters. “Is a harpy. Winged being, looks kinda like a bird mixed with a person.”

Tanith lifted his hand to block out the reddish sun and looked at the group of six harpies.

His gasp of surprise was a bit much in Iris’s opinion.

“Eona’s Bountiful Tits! What are those!?”

“Whoa, dude, language. I just told you. Harpies,” she called out over the sound of galloping horses and a bouncing wagon. She glanced down at her horse. “Okay, Mocha, hold me steady. I’m going to turn around, okay girl?”

Mocha let out a neigh of acknowledgment and the horse’s muscles seemed to tense even as she maintained her fast pace. Still, the galloping horse’s focus became dedicated to providing the smoothest ride possible despite her movements.

Iris shifted in the saddle until she was facing backward... reverse...cowgirl style.

Ugh! Damn it, Iris. Now isn’t the time.

Her mind turned to the two elves who held fearful expressions.

Plus, Tanith and Sera have all that built-up sexual tension. It's rubbing off on me... shit. Did it again.

Focus. Iris took a deep breath and nocked her arrow.

The harpies flew closer. When they reached what she felt was her max range, she drew back. She channeled her **Static Discharge** spell into the arrow, sighted in on the lead harpy...

Then used her **Unerring Shot** ability.

The arrow flew straight and true, striking the lead harpy in the chest in a burst of lightning that shot two sparks of energy that flew toward the closest monsters. The harpy screeched in pain as it tumbled out of the sky. The two lightning sparks hit the nearest two harpies, jolting them with a paralyzing shock of energy that caused them to also fall to their demise.

Undeterred, Iris quickly fired two more arrows, taking down two of the remaining three harpies with **Unerring Shot**. The remaining harpy let out a shrill cry as it retreated, disappearing into the sky.

Iris let out a satisfied sigh and lowered her bow. "That should teach them to mess with us," she said with a grin.

"Uhm, Miss Iris?!" Sera called out.

Iris turned toward the merchant and tilted her head. "Yeah?"

The woman just pointed toward the forest's canopy, where more harpies were soaring into the sky.

Iris groaned.

"I really need to stop jinxing myself."

Mocha neighed her agreement.

"Traitor. If I could have knocked on wood, I would have."

Actually...

She knocked on Mocha's head. "There. We're safe."

Mocha cursed her out.