
A Bright Return

'Hang on!' Mocha warned with a neigh that reverberated around the area.

Iris instantly clung tightly to the saddle—after all, Mocha didn't wear reins, her knuckles white as she braced herself.

“Hurry!” Iris cried out, pure terror filling her.

Then with a powerful surge of strength, Mocha leapt forward, accelerating towards the only exit that the monstrous throng had unwittingly left open. The world around them seemed to blur into a miasma of shadows and ominous red eyes as Mocha ran with all her might.

Please go go gogo. Hurry hurry hurry!

Iris shot a look over her shoulder, just in time to see the Marauder Prince's face, a mask of pure terror, fading into the shadows as they raced past him. The prince seemed frozen in place, as if the nightmarish spectacle had stripped him of all courage and action.

But then, with a grimace twisting his face, he roughly spurred his horse, urging it into action. His panicked eyes met hers for a fleeting moment before he angled his mount, trying to fall in behind Mocha and herself. It seemed that even the vile Marauder Prince understood that their quarrel paled in comparison to the imminent threat that pursued them.

But there was no safe passage back the way they came. All they could go was... forward.

The swarm of murder hares had ignited into a frenzy, screeching their bloodthirsty cries into the night that rose into a deafening roar as they sprang into action, launching themselves at the fleeing riders.

Their bodies collided with each other, rolling and tumbling in a horrific display of desperation and fury as they reached out with their grotesque mandibles, grasping for flesh.

Their gleaming eyes reflected a horrifying image of a world gone mad. The surge of eldritch monsters climbing over one another, unyielding in their pursuit, was a sight straight from an apocalyptic nightmare.

Yet, amid the mounting terror, Mocha charged on, her determination unwavering. Iris clung to her, their bond solid in the midst of chaos.

Every nerve screamed for her to surrender to the fear, to give in to the inevitability of the monstrous tide behind them, but she would not.

Iris held hope that her best friend would get them out of this.

She had a life to return to, a love to protect, and a promise to keep.

However, for all Mocha's speed, the monstrous horde seemed to be keeping pace. The terrifying glow of their eyes remained constant in the darkness behind them while their blood-curdling cries were almost like a relentless soundtrack to their chase.

A horrific realization settled in Iris's gut like a stone.

We're not outrunning these things. We're just... barely staying ahead.

Every instinct *begged* her to push Mocha harder, but she knew they were already at their limits. Her friend, despite the fear, was giving everything she had.

'Iris, fucking do something! Keep them off of us!' Mocha neighed, her voice filled with fear as she charged through the forest.

That jolted Iris back to reality.

She was right.

Iris [**Focused**].

Mana welled up through her core and filled her conduits, responding to her call like an eager hound. Iris channeled it, her fingers sparking with raw, potent energy. Drawing from this torrent, she cast [**Spark**], hurling it again and again into the encroaching mass of gnashing teeth and glaring eyes. A few of the beasts screeched as the bolts found their mark, their bodies convulsing violently before they fell, motionless and quickly trampled by the Marauder Prince's horse as he fired lances of ice at the monsters.

One by one they fell to either ice or lightning, but it was a raindrop in a storm. The swarm barely slowed, their relentless pursuit undeterred by the fallen.

Not enough. Okay, let's crank it up.

She pulled more mana through her, the energy surging through her veins like an electric current. She forged it into her spell, the air around her crackling as she cast [**Chain Lightning**]. The resulting arc of electricity zigzagged through the monstrous swarm, searing a wider swath of them.

Yet, still they came.

Iris gritted her teeth, the taste of determination—or blood rather—was sharp in her mouth. She could feel the drain, a gnawing fatigue clawing at her.

But they needed more, much more.

A deeper pull of her mana, stronger, more potent. With an inward breath and a hard swallow, she let loose her [**Chain Lightning**].

The amplified spell roared to life with a deafening crack, a zigzagging arc of destructive power that cut swathes through the monstrous tide. The forest briefly lit up in stark relief under the brilliance of her attack, the bodies of numerous murder hares illuminated in their final throes of life.

Yet, even as some of the horde fell, others filled the gaps, their charge unabated, their thirst for blood undiminished.

The once comforting distance between them was dwindling, it forced the Marauder Prince to take another route, pushing him further away from Iris. If she weren't so focused on their own safety, she would have shot a spell at him.

The pulse of alarm from her **[Danger Sense]** sent Iris spinning around just in time to witness a murder hare launch itself out of the dense undergrowth, eyes blood-red and teeth bared for an attack.

Mocha's urgent neigh rang out, a deafening, echoing call in the encroaching silence. Panic tugged at Iris's heart, but she pushed it away, shoving it down with the cool weight of resolve.

She **[Focused]**.

In an instant, reality seemed to warp around her. Each heartbeat became a drawn-out drumroll, each breath a gale force. As if moving through molasses, Iris thrust her hand towards the charging beast, her mana responding with an eager surge.

She used her **[Telekinesis]** and mentally grappled with the airborne threat and immediately a transient, invisible struggle ensued over the span of a single breath. A collision of intent, raw magical power against raw physics, locked in a moment that could determine life or death. Iris strained, then, with a silent and invisible explosion of force, Iris won out.

The creature was hurtled away from them, spinning through the air before it crashed into the undergrowth once more.

Not wanting another situation like that, Iris pulled from her core, the energy coursing through her, crackling and sparking with contained power.

With the image of Mocha, and the thought of the life she must protect in her mind, she cast her **[Storm Armor]**. The spell wrapped them in a shimmering, charged sphere that crackled with barely-contained power. Like an angry star fallen to earth, it sizzled with defiance, sporadic arcs of electricity lashing out, snapping at any murder hare daring to come too close, keeping them at bay, for now.

It's not enough, a voice whispered in the back of her mind. But Iris didn't heed it. She couldn't. *We'll make it. We have to.*

She kept casting, and she lost track of time as all she knew was the surge of spells that shot out based on her intent.

Her breath was ragged, forced out by the relentless pounding of Mocha's hooves against the rough terrain. She felt Mocha's powerful muscles bunch beneath her, the horse's unrelenting spirit pulsating beneath her thighs.

But it was Mocha's unexpected neigh that jerked Iris back into awareness. *'Uh, Iris. Hang on. When I tell you... cast [Featherfall] on us.'*

Her heart hammered against her ribcage, pounding a rhythmic note of confusion and terror. "What? Why would I?" The question fell from her lips in a broken whisper, the words catching in her throat.

Iris tore her gaze from the darkened path to look ahead.

And froze.

A ravine gaped open in front of them, a chasm cutting through the earth like an ugly scar. The sight was enough to turn her stomach.

Her mind reeled.

This was madness. It was suicide.

"Mocha, no. It's too far."

If Mocha heard, she gave no sign. Instead, it was like Mocha switched gears, because her head went down and the horse cranked it up to plaid. Iris forgot the murder hares, and leaned forward, hanging on for dear life as Mocha raced forward, leaving the nightmares in the literal dust.

Each stride carried them closer to the edge, each heartbeat measured the seconds ticking down to their perilous leap. Iris's blood roared in her ears, the sound eclipsing the cries of the pursuing murder hares.

"Mocha, let's talk about this," Iris pleaded. Her voice was hoarse with fear, laced with a desperate hope that they could find another way.

'Get ready!' Mocha neighed.

Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck fuck fuck fuck. She's doing this. Fuck!

The world around her narrowed, the edge of the cliff rushing up to meet them. "Wait! Moooooooooohaa!!!"

And then, they were airborne.

The ground fell away beneath them, and a wave of vertigo swept over Iris as they sailed through the void. But something changed. A sudden rush of static prickled at her skin, a sensation she recognized, but one she hadn't invoked. A moment later, the world twisted as an intense jolt of lightning flooded her being.

It was her [**Lightning Step**], but not her doing.

In the next instant, both she and Mocha shimmered into avatars of pure, sparking energy. In their elemental forms, they crossed the impossible distance, defying reality as they bridged the gap. Then, as they reached the spell's limit, their forms condensed, reshaping into horse and rider once again.

Now! Mocha commanded.

Without hesitation, Iris cast [**Featherfall**]. The plummeting sensation ebbed, replaced with a gentle, almost weightless drift. Together, they soared towards the ravine's far edge, landing with a soft thud that belied the heart-stopping feat they had just accomplished.

Before she could even process what had just happened, a thunderous crashing drew her attention back to the other side of the ravine. Bursting from the undergrowth, the Marauder Prince charged towards the precipice, his horse's eyes wide with terror.

Iris watched in horror as the horse skidded to a halt just short of the edge, only to be swarmed by the voracious murder hares.

A chilling scream echoed through the night, the air filling with the piercing wails of both horse and elf. As they toppled over the edge, Iris locked eyes with the Marauder Prince.

There was a flicker of something in his gaze, a desperate plea, a moment of shared horror, before he disappeared into the abyss, the screams of the doomed fading into an eerie silence.

Mocha and Iris shared a look as the horde of rabbits from hell came to a stop on the opposite side of the ravine, screeching and hissing at them.

“Fuck.”

Fuck.



The sky was starting to blush with the first hint of dawn by the time Iris and Mocha navigated around the cavernous ravine and trudged back into the relative safety of the Marauder Prince's camp. The large camp was illuminated by a crackling bonfire in the center, casting flickering shadows that danced across the gathered faces of their party that sat around it talking. The Harpy Queen, Nysera, presided over the assembly, her sharp eyes taking in the pair as they made their entrance.

Upon spotting them, a collective gasp ran through the camp. Iris swung herself from Mocha's saddle just as Kaira broke free from the gathered party.

Her cry rang out, clear and loud, "Iris!" before she rushed forward, her figure a blur in the firelight.

With a force that knocked the breath from her lungs, Kaira embraced Iris, her hands framing Iris's face before she pulled her into a desperate, fierce kiss.

Kaira's eyes shimmered with unshed tears as they parted. "I thought I lost you."

Meanwhile, Akane, in her massive dire fox form, sprang to her hind legs, wrapping her front limbs around Mocha in a furry hug. The sight of it made Iris and Kaira laugh, a sound that filled the clearing, a stark contrast to the somberness that had gripped the party just moments ago.

Iris brushed her thumb against Kaira's cheek, a small smile playing on her lips. "Lose me? Never."

A voice rang out from the edge of the firelight, "I told you, she would be fine." Iris turned, her eyes falling on the limping form of a raithe woman. *This must be the priestess.*

Iris's smile broadened. "I see they got you out."

"Aye. Your healer is a woman after Eona's Heart," the priestess replied.

Emerging from the crowd, Bree reached out to steady the woman, a soft smile on her face. "Thank you, but what did I say?"

The raithe woman sighed, a touch of humor in her voice. "You said to rest and not walk. Yes, mother."

"Don't yes, mother me. Let's get you back to the wagon. Now you've seen that your magic actually makes some Relena damned sense, you can relax."

Bree shot a glance over her shoulder at Iris and Mocha, her smile turning warm and genuine. "I'm glad you two are safe and back. I'll talk to you both after we leave, I need to tend to this fiesty one."

A playful growl rumbled in the raithe woman's throat, her sharp, fang-like teeth glinting in the firelight that made the woman look like some sort of gothic vampire, but it only made Bree roll her eyes in mock exasperation.

Thank the gods the raithe don't actually drink blood.

Despite the raithe woman's reluctance, she finally surrendered to Bree's guiding hand, and together they walked away from the fire, the crowd parting for them as they headed towards the wagon.

Iris watched as Bree, their group's [Bard], guided the [Priestess] towards a wagon that appeared to have been recently... acquired.

She allowed herself another smile.

The conversation shifted as Gryff, Laken, and the Harpy Queen moved closer, their faces etched with concern and curiosity.

Laken's owlbear... Owlie... sat next to the bonfire picking at a meal happily.

"What happened to the Marauder Prince?" the harpy queen inquired, her birdlike eyes sharp and alert.

Iris sighed deeply. "We were being pursued by murder hares. Mocha and I made it across, but he fell in after they jumped onto his horse."

"Murder hares?" Laken tilted his head, his brows furrowed in confusion.

Iris gestured to her mid-thigh. "Giant hares, about this tall, with mouths that open like a flower, and an insatiable hunger for flesh."

"We've been calling them blighted ones. If there's another colony, we'll exterminate them. It helps that we can fly."

Hub. Makes sense.

"Good. Nuke 'em from orbit," Iris replied, ignoring the bemused expressions. "And the situation here?"

"We've gone through the camp," Gryff explained. "Most of what we found we've given to the harpies, but we've set aside a few chests, sets of armor, and weapons for us that we've loaded into a wagon. We can leave the wagon for the elderly couple taking care of the girl."

"Neri."

Gryff shrugged. "Right. The girl."

Iris rolled her eyes before settling her focus on Akane that was yipping and chatting Mocha up like the best of friends.

"And what about the animals?" Iris asked.

Laken smiled. "We've freed them, and—"

"They will be cared for, then helped to rejoin the forest," the harpy queen interjected.

A yip from Akane drew their attention. Mocha translated, *'Akane is happy that everyone was let out. And they're finally free! No more bad men trying to hurt them for their cores. She's also ready to go.'*

"Wait, are you coming with us?" Iris queried, her gaze drawn to Akane.

The dire fox was enveloped in a swirl of black and yellow mist. The ethereal cloak of magic shimmered around her, giving off a soft, incandescent glow that illuminated the area slightly. A moment later, Akane emerged in her humanoid form—Iris's striking vulpine doppelganger with three tails.

The kitsune stepped closer, her mismatched eyes a blend of fierce determination and keen anticipation. “We. Party. Yes?”

A warmth spread through Iris, prompting a smile to tug at the corners of her mouth. She reached out, placing a reassuring hand on Akane's arm. “Yes, we're a party.”

At that, a gleam of excitement lit up in Akane's eyes. “Good! I ride Mocha!”

Iris barely had the chance to formulate a response before Akane was in motion. With a quick, agile leap, she mounted Mocha's saddle, her body fitting snugly against the horse's muscular form.

Iris let out a protest, her words tinged with a playful frustration. “You can't ride Mocha! Only I can!”

Leaning in close, Akane whispered something into Mocha's ear, eliciting a snort of amusement from the horse.

Akane gave her a goofy grin. “I call dibs.”

Mocha neighed softly, the sound tinged with an evident humor. *'Sorry, Iris. She called dibs.'*

The air was sucked out of Iris's lungs, her eyes widening in mock horror. “Traitor!”

Suddenly, a rush of wings filled the air, diverting everyone's attention. Descending gracefully, Lavi alighted on the ground.

She squawked a brief greeting before wrapping Iris in a feathery hug, chirping rapidly in her bird-like language. After their brief reunion, she turned back to her sister, exchanging a swift flurry of caws and clicks.

The harpy queen rolled her eyes in response to her sister's animated chatter. “My sister says thank you for everything. But she is right, it is time we depart. There is much we need to rebuild. Many who need our help.”

Iris met her gaze, determination hardening her features. “You know, I never got your name. I've just called you Harpy Queen in my head.”

Both Lavi and the Harpy Queen chattered their laughter. “I am Lady Nysera, formerly of House Ferane.”

Iris smiled and gave the woman a semblance of a shit curtsy. “Milady.”

Nysera laughed again. “If there isn't anything else...”

“Actually, can we reach an agreement?” Iris asked. “While I don't really have much—or any power really, I could advocate on your behalf with Lady Arden, provided you ensure the safety of travelers on the main road. Perhaps the queendom could designate this forest as a sanctuary for your kind. Or at least grant you personal stewardship over it.”

Lady Nysera nodded respectfully. “This... this sounds good. I hope... I just want my people safe. We will not harm those who do not seek to harm us. I... I would like that. If you can make it so.”

“I will try. I promise...” She hesitated a moment then continued, “I’m grateful our paths crossed, Nysera,” Iris responded, her voice solemn. “My condolences for your people’s loss to the Marauder Prince... and before on the road.”

The Harpy Queen sighed, her feathers ruffling with the motion. “The fault was ours. But now, I must leave. I assure you, my people will remain within the forest. The mana here is strong, nourishing us. Departing is... agonizing on both our body and mind. But we will guard this forest with all our might.”

Iris nodded, her expression resolute. “As it should be. Farewell, Nysera.”

Nysera responded with a powerful screech that echoed throughout the forest. All the harpies within earshot answered her call, taking flight. As she hovered momentarily, Nysera locked eyes with Iris, a mischievous glint twinkling in her gaze. “Thank you, Lightning Bitch.”

With a mighty flap of her wings, sending gusts of wind swirling below, she too soared into the brightening sky.

Iris frowned, her voice carrying an undertone of playful annoyance. “Oi! You, you! Bird-brained jerk!”

Mocha responded with a snort, the hint of a horse's grin playing at the corner of her mouth. *'Really? Bird-brained jerk? You're usually more imaginative. I'm disappointed.'*

Iris let out a groan, rolling her eyes. “Whatever, let’s just leave this place.”

In the aftermath of Nysera's dramatic departure, a flurry of activity engulfed the campsite. Each member of the group sprung into action, executing their assigned tasks with impressive efficiency.

They were finally leaving this godsforsaken place, and there was much to prepare.

Gryff, the broad-shouldered, burly figure he was, assumed the reins of their newly 'liberated' wagon with an air of nonchalant authority. He held the leather straps confidently, guiding the horses with practiced ease, their hooves creating a rhythmic melody against the leaf-strewn ground while Laken rode Owlie alongside the wagon opposite of Mocha.

Akane, in her humanoid form, was a striking vision on Mocha's back, her red hair glowing in the light of the rising sun. She guided the horse with a delicate touch, occasionally throwing glances at the wagon, her three-tailed silhouette a constant presence alongside their path.

Iris found herself situated at the back of the wagon, the solid wooden boards beneath her providing a surprisingly comfortable seat. Across from her was the priestess who was deep in a discussion with Bree about healing goop of all things.

I love that everyone uses that name now.

Nestled against Iris was Kaira, the elf's slender body pressed against her side, offering an intimate closeness that stirred a tender warmth in her chest.

Iris glanced down at Kaira, her nose scrunching slightly at the grime and sweat that clung to their bodies. "You know," she said, her voice carrying a hint of playfulness, "I probably smell like a week-old roadkill. You're free to wait until later."

Kaira looked up at her, those piercing blue eyes shimmering with an unspoken affection. With a delicate gesture, she brushed a rebellious strand of Iris's scarlet hair away from her face, tucking it gently behind her ear. "I don't care," she responded, her voice firm yet tender. "I'm staying right here. We can bathe when we get to Stilstead."

Iris let a smile spread across her face, Kaira's steadfast loyalty making her heart flutter. "I can't wait."

As the wagon trundled on, the makeshift trail gradually transformed into a recognizable road, winding its way through the serene woodland. Hours turned into moments under the sun's relentless march across the sky. Eventually, they made it back to the homestead where Neri was waiting.

The old orkun man and telv woman looked visibly relieved upon seeing their approach.

After a happy reunion with the young barmaid, Iris helped the group transfer their possessions to their original wagon. The old couple was given the two horses and the wagon from the Marauder Prince's camp.

Their grateful smiles spoke volumes.

The assurance of a safe road and home, free from bandit or harpy threat, was an additional relief.

With a last wave and a promise of future visits, the group set off once again, this time with an extra passenger. Neri, with a newfound brightness in her eyes, found her place amidst the traveling party.

By the time the sun was a warm glow sinking behind the horizon, the familiar outlines of Stilstead rose in their sights.

After the wagon rattled into town, the party quickly made their way to the inn.

Iris watched as the rest of their eclectic party set about their tasks for the evening. Laken, the beast taming [**Ranger**], headed towards the stables with Owlie following closely behind. The silhouette of man and owlbear would have made for a bad ass painting hanging up in some tabletop gaming room.

“Laken, don’t forget to check the mundanes out. They were pretty anxious on the way to the village,” Iris called out to him.

Laken nodded, the gesture visible even in the dim light. “Will do, Iris,” he assured her, before disappearing into the stables.

Meanwhile, Mocha and Akane were practically bouncing on their heels in anticipation. Their giddiness was contagious as they chattered and giggled among themselves, their humanoid forms failing to mask their true, exuberant selves.

“You. Have key?” Akane asked.

“Just got them,” Iris confirmed, holding up the keys. “You two have your own room, please do not make me regret this. Mocha, you’re in charge.”

Akane snatched the keys and examined them closely, her grin widening and fuzzy ears twitching cutely at the prospect of their own room.

Mocha was in her sun elf form courtesy of the kitsune and was ecstatic. *‘Finally! A bed! No stinking stables!’* she nickered lightly.

Iris smiled. “Work with Akane. I think there’s more to these forms than meets the eye. Maybe you can practice using words.”

Mocha’s warm brown eyes widened before Akane grabbed her hand and pulled her away, the two scampering off toward their allotted quarters.

On the other side of the inn, Bree, Gryff, and the priestess had already settled at a table laden with food and drinks. The robust laughter and banter echoed around the inn, adding a lively note to the otherwise quiet evening.

With everyone settling in, Iris found herself leaning against the inn’s wooden balustrade, watching the sun finally sink beyond the horizon, the town bathed in the serene glow of twilight. Kaira stood beside her, their fingers interlaced in a silent promise of shared strength.

Everything is going great. We’ll get back to Brightburn and we can start the next chapter of our lives.

I wonder who will stay in the party.

The sound of the inn’s door creaking open pulled Iris out of her reverie. She turned to see Evelyn, a robust figure cloaked in the authoritative aura of her office, stepping into the inn. The headwoman’s eyes sparkled with a mix of relief and admiration as they landed on Iris.

“Well, ain’t this a sight for sore eyes,” Evelyn’s deep, hearty voice cut through the lingering silence, a wide grin tugging at her lips.

With a tired but genuine smile, Iris pushed herself off the balustrade, meeting Evelyn halfway.

She offered the headwoman a brief, respectful nod. "Hey, Evelyn," she greeted, her voice threading with the weariness of the day but also echoing the deep satisfaction of their victorious return.

"You did it, huh?" She asked with a touch of awe, her gaze moving between Iris and Kaira.

Iris shared a look with Kaira, and a slow smile spread across her face. "Yeah. We did," she responded, a sense of accomplishment coursing through her voice.

The headwoman's eyes sparkled as she replied, "Good, good. I look forward to establishing the first branch of the Adventurer's Guild here in Stilstead."

"I can't wait."

The three found themselves at a table and their conversation meandered, filled with laughter and tales of what happened since leaving, and Iris really found herself enjoying time with Kaira and Evelyn. It made her happy, and she felt a friendship with Evelyn blossoming like a flower in spring. After a while, however, Iris's thoughts started to stray towards a hot bath and a soft bed.

"I...I think I might turn in, Evelyn. A nice long bath before sleep sounds like heaven right now," Iris confessed, her body aching for rest and rejuvenation.

Evelyn chuckled, her eyes crinkling in understanding. She gestured towards the inn's stairwell. "Go relax, you two. Don't forget to say goodbye before you leave in the morning," she reminded them, her tone gentle and filled with affection.

Iris nodded, her appreciation shining through her tired eyes. "I won't. And thanks. For everything. See you in the morning, Evelyn," she promised, already anticipating the comfort of warm water and soft sheets.

As she and Kaira retreated towards their room, the promise of a new day and a new chapter awaited.

The highlight of the evening, though, was the long-awaited bath.

"Kaira, are you sure?" she finally managed to ask as realization of what they were about to do hit her like another truck-kun.

Kaira merely chuckled at that. "Absolutely. Strip," she commanded. "Let's get you clean."

The moments that followed were filled with quiet laughter, whispered words of comfort, and the sound of clothing hitting the stone floor before the two women eased themselves into the hot bath, settling down across from each other.

As the water gently lapped at the sides of the narrow bath, Iris found herself apprehensive, her gaze focused on Kaira's warm smile across from her. Their victories, their triumphs, and the long day of travel had finally led them here, to this intimate moment.

Their first.

Iris was nervous as fuck.

“So, we did it,” Iris broke the silence.

“We did,” Kaira echoed, leaning forward to intertwine her fingers with Iris's. Her lips curled into a soft smile, eyes glowing warmly in the dim light.

They sat in quiet reflection for a while, the reality of their victory sinking in slowly, accompanied by the soft sounds of water lapping against the sides of the bath. Each was lost in her thoughts, basking in the comfort of the other's presence.

Eventually, Iris and Kaira stripped away layers of grime, sweat, and memories of battle in the soothing warm waters, their bodies relaxing under the tender care of the other.

Later, as they finally sank into the plush softness of an actual bed, it felt like a dream come true.

Kaira turned on her side. “Iris,” she began, and Iris turned her head to look at her, only to see her beautiful smile turning mischievous. “We are finally alone, in bed, away from all our troubles...”

Iris caught on to her insinuation, a light blush creeping onto her cheeks. A soft chuckle escaped her lips as the teasing glint in Kaira's eyes made her heart flutter.

“Well, I suppose we should... make the most of it,” she finally responded, her voice trailing off into a soft whisper.

[Storm Warden – Step 52 attained!]



Barely able to contain his exaggerated enthusiasm, Gryff announced their arrival with an exuberant cry. “Finally! Home!” The worn gates of Brightburn opened before them, offering the embrace of the familiar and the promise of relaxation.

As they crossed into the city's boundaries, the bustle of life, the simple joys and burdens of home, swarmed around them. Some inhabitants cast curious glances at the strange, adventurous ensemble, their eyes filled with a mixture of awe and bemusement.

For her part, Akane was wide eyed and bushy tailed as she darted around them with Mocha on her back taking in the sights of the city. The horse was in her sun elf form and was riding the dire fox who was... getting a ton of attention from passersby. In fact, it had almost caused a scene at the gate.

But then Kaira had pulled out the Captain Kaira Harken card and easily convinced... or rather bullied... the guards at the gate to let them through.

As they found a spot to park the wagon for a moment, plans for the rest of the day started to unfold among the group, each adventurer pulled towards different tasks.

Bree turned to Orianna, the serene raithe priestess. "Let's get you to the temple. I'll help," she offered. Orianna, her red eyes reflecting gratitude, nodded in silent agreement.

Before the two women parted, the priestess turned to Iris, her gaze softening. "Iris," she began, "you were the best storm anyone could hope for."

Iris's smile broke into a full grin at her words, her blue eyes dancing with amusement. "Just keep working on your magic, Orianna. Got to make sure you *see* things before you need us to come save you."

As if spurred on by Iris's words, Orianna nodded determinedly. "That's why I'm here. I need to train on how to perform a ceremony, then I'll head over to Blightwych to help establish it there."

Recognition dawned in Iris. "Oh! The Ceremony of Paths! I did that!"

A soft nicker came from beside Iris, *'I want to do it too...'*

Iris turned, seeing Mocha lay down on Akane's back, her elven form's eyes gleaming in whimsical thought as she watched the pedestrians around them.

The fox let out a couple yips and Mocha's eyes lit up as quickly she sat back up, but Iris didn't catch what they were saying when Orianna spoke again, "Perhaps I will see you all again one day then."

Iris smiled. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Orianna."

As she and Bree were about to depart, Orianna turned back, "Keep lighting up the skies, Angel of Storms."

Their departure left Iris bubbling with joy, turning to Kaira with a wide grin on her face. She began to tease her partner, but Kaira quickly cut her off. "Don't even say it," she warned.

But Iris was unstoppable. "But she thinks I'm an angel! Do you? Do you think I'm an angel, Kaira?"

The cute elf rolled her eyes, feigning annoyance. "She clearly doesn't know you."

Ignoring her, Iris continued deadpan, "Kaira? Would you love me if I was a worm?"

Throwing her hands up in mock exasperation, Kaira turned to the rest of the group. “One of you come get her. She’s going crazy.”

Laken chuckled and patted Owlie. “Sorry, Kaira. Gryff and I are heading to the barracks. Gonna find Owlie somewhere to sleep while we wait for Iris to get the Guild started.”

Iris gasped. “You guys are staying?”

Gryff walked over and wrapped Iris in a warm hug, his boisterous laughter echoing through the street. “Of course we are. We’re a party.”

He set her down and patted her shoulder in a gesture of camaraderie that made Iris’s heart warm up.

Mocha interrupted the sentimental moment with a decidedly elvish sigh. “L-Lame.”

Iris whipped around, her eyes wide with astonishment.

“You did it! You said—Wait... was your first fucking word something to criticize me?” Iris asked incredulously, her laughter ringing out into the cool Brightburn air.

Gryff and Laken parted ways with the group, their laughter fading into the ambient noise of the city.

Akane let out a series of sharp yips before a cloud of shimmering motes of mana grew around her and quickly obfuscated her form. The sudden display of magic caused the cityfolk to gasp in awe and apprehension.

Kaira, recognizing the stirring panic, quickly took charge. She raised her voice to carry over the growing whispers. “Everything’s fine. Just a bit of magic. Go about your day.”

From the midst of the magical mist, a figure began to emerge. Akane’s kitsune form solidified, her multi-tailed silhouette taking shape and emerging from the fog.

Kaira shot a scowl in Akane’s direction. “Really? In the middle of the city?”

Shrugging nonchalantly, Akane responded, “What?”

“It’s her first time in a city, Kaira. She’s fine.” Iris interjected. “See, only a few people are staring at the kitsune.”

Kaira let out a groan, throwing her hands up in defeat. “Fine,” she conceded. Yet, her surrender was followed by a pause and a devilish smile that sent a chill down Iris’s spine. “She’s your responsibility, after all... she’s your twin sister. Just happened to be affected by mana.”

Iris couldn’t suppress her own groan as she walked back to the wagon, her boots scraping against the cobblestones. She hoisted herself onto the bench and was quickly joined by Kaira, who took the duty of driving. Behind them, Akane and Mocha moved to the back, settling in for the ride.

With a skillful tug on the reins, Kaira set the horses into motion. The wagon creaked into life, slowly rolling and bumping down the road.

With a casual lean against the back of the bench, Iris took in the sights and sounds of the city. Soon, The Frolicking Fawn Inn's welcoming facade came into view. As they came to a stop in front of it, Kaira issued a series of instructions to the young stableboy, tasking him with the duty of helping her take care of their wagon and horses.

Afterwards, Kaira turned her attention back to Iris. "Go say hello to Sera and Tanith for me," she requested.

"Will do, don't take too long," she told her lover with a wink.

Kaira gave her a knowing look, but then her eyes darted over Iris's shoulder.

Mocha and Akane hopped down from the back of the wagon and were making their way to the front door of the inn. Kaira lifted an eyebrow at the sight of them. "You better hurry, and join them. I don't want to see what mischief those two will get into if left to themselves."

"You're telling me..." Iris muttered under her breath, her heart pounding with the thought of the potential chaos. She quickly hopped down from the wagon and hurried after her two magical companions.

Iris barely had time to process the familiar warmth of the inn before a sudden scream pierced the air. Startled, she found Akane and Mocha frozen in their tracks while a teary girl pointed an accusing finger at Akane from behind the counter.

With a weary sigh, Iris moved forward, gently wrapping her arm around Akane and leading her toward the counter.

"W-what is she?!" the girl stammered, her eyes wide with fear.

Iris managed a reassuring smile. "This is my sister. She had an accident with all this mana stuff going around, and it gave her these cute fuzzy ears and these oh so soft tails." Iris emphasized her point by gently ruffling Akane's ears and puffing up her tails, earning herself a disgruntled glare from the kitsune.

In response, Iris leaned closer and whispered, "Play along, please."

Evidently understanding the situation, Akane offered a tiny nod before turning back to the girl. "Hi. Sorry. Accident."

Suddenly, a familiar voice rang out. "Iris?"

The sound of her name prompted Iris to look over and meet the gaze of Sera and Tanith.

"Sera!"

“Iris! You’re back!” Sera’s face lit up with delight.

Iris quickly reached into her pouch and withdrew a small gold coin, tossing it to the girl behind the counter. “Please, we need a room with at least two beds. I was staying here—”

Sera interrupted Iris smoothly, “Put it on my tab please. Keep the coin as a tip.”

The girl nodded in agreement, “Of-of course, Miss Timrel.”

Iris smirked, raising an eyebrow at Sera. “Wow, you seem important,” she said as the high elf quickly moved in for a hug. Iris smiled down at the shorter woman.

The high elf chuckled as she pulled away. “I’ve stayed here ever since we first arrived.” Her gaze then flickered between Akane and Mocha.

“Hey, Iris. How are you?” Tanith greeted.

“Hey Tanith, I’m good. You?”

“I’ve been well. Glad to see you safe and sound.”

“Let’s get a table and maybe you can introduce us to your new friends,” Sera suggested, before looking around. “Is Kaira coming?”

However, before Iris could reply, Mocha had already advanced and wrapped the shorter Sera in an unexpected hug. “Uh, hi?” Sera stammered, taken aback.

Mocha pulled back, gently tapping the top of Sera’s head before mimicking her greeting. “Hi.”

Iris couldn’t help but laugh at the confusion on Sera’s face. “Sera, say hi to Mocha.”

Sera’s gaze snapped back to the sun elf in front of her, her expression a perfect blend of shock and confusion. “What the fuck?”

Iris and Akane broke into a fit of laughter.