
Quest Completion

Nestled within the inn, the main room was awash with the glow of firelight. A hearth crackled nearby, its flames dancing energetically. Around a sturdy, worn table, a mismatched group gathered. The walls, lined with old wooden beams, absorbed the echoes of their voices while the rustic atmosphere and scent of pine added a touch of homeliness. Nearby patrons threw curious glances their way, but the group remained undeterred, ensnared in their intense discussion.

Taking a long, thoughtful swig of his drink, Tanith finally broke the silence. “Wow. That’s some story.”

Sera, looking contemplative, played with the rim of her glass as she processed what she’d heard. Her gaze then settled on Kaira, who’d made her entrance mid-way through Iris’s recounting. “What do you think about all this?”

As Kaira pondered her response, Sera’s attention was quickly drawn to Akane, Mocha, and Neri. A frown creased her forehead, and she continued, “And...you three. What...?”

Chuckling lightly, Iris glanced over to Kaira, who signaled for her to take over. “Akane can use magic that allows her to shift both her own form and those of others. Mocha, on the other hand, is still getting the hang of this form. She’s still my same best friend underneath. Akane... She’s truly something special.”

Akane’s mismatched eyes seemed to sparkle. “...Thank you.” She reached out, pulling Iris close, her voice thick with emotion as she faced Sera, “She’s my... sister.”

A rush of warmth and pride filled Iris.

This damn fox has grown on me.

Sera smiled. “I can see that. You two look almost exactly alike... except for... you know.”

“Yeah, she was affected by an area filled with too much mana,” Iris explained. She then gestured to the last of the trio. “This is Neri, she was a barmaid at the inn I stayed at for my first year and a half back in Cosdale. She’s here to help you out.”

Sera nodded, and Kaira joined in. “How have things been here?”

“They’ve been good! Ser Meredith returned the wagon, Tanith and I sorted through it. It’s in a secure warehouse at Fenren’s so that you can do what you want with it,” Sera replied. “Other than that, it has been... busy.”

But before she could elaborate, Tanith leaned forward, his fingers tracing the wood grain of the table. "Can we circle back to your story? You mentioned the Marauder Prince's death. How did that happen?"

Iris paused, her gaze distant. "Before diving into that, I need to ask something. When I first landed on Eona, post-Flash, I encountered him. He introduced himself as Ser Corin Syllar. Does that name mean anything to any of you?" She scrutinized their faces.

Tanith and Sera exchanged puzzled glances, and even Kaira seemed taken aback. "Syllar? Doesn't ring a bell. I wouldn't be surprised if it was a fake identity," the former guard captain mused.

Iris shrugged, the weight of her memories evident in the slight slump of her shoulders. "Regardless of his real name, after our confrontation, Mocha and I chased him through the forest. Murder hares appeared and we ended up having to run. As Mocha leaped over a *damned* ravine, Syllar was ambushed by those beasts, plummeting down."

Everyone's heads jerked to the sun elf form of Mocha. "A *ravine*?"

Mocha's smile was filled with pride.

Iris, however, just rolled her eyes.

"Mocha transformed us into lightning like my [**Lightning Step**] which helped us cross it." Gratitude evident, Iris reached out, intertwining her fingers with Mocha's, offering a tender smile to her steadfast companion.

Tanith's voice, laced with pragmatism, cut through the momentary silence. "Did you manage to retrieve his body?"

Iris shook her head. "There was no time. There was a horde of murder hares across from us, and the ravine itself was *deep*. I definitely would not have been able to get to the bottom. Hell, I couldn't even *see* the bottom. That said, he was swarmed with murder hares as he and his horse along with at least five of the damned monsters fell over."

Kaira's voice was firm, settling the matter. "The main thing is that he's no longer a threat."

"But is that account sufficient for the bounty? Establishing our guild hinges on that reward," Sera pointed out, worry evident in her eyes.

"If he fell into that ravine, he's as good as dead. It will suffice," Kaira affirmed.

Sera released a pent-up breath, the weight of tension slowly lifting. "That's settled then. Now, for our next steps. Iris, you need an audience with Lady Arden."

"I'll ensure it happens today. How did preparations go on your end?"

Sera's posture straightened with pride. "I've shortlisted three potential sites for our headquarters. The most promising is a spacious inn in the city's center. Equipped with a bar and numerous other facilities, it's an ideal fit. While many rooms will be repurposed as offices, we can keep some for the adventurers as a cheap place to stay in case of late arrivals from quests."

"Sounds perfect! Financially feasible?"

Sera nodded. "Lady Arden's endorsement will ensure it. I'm sure we'll get it. It's ideally located and includes everything an adventurer might require—stables, a secondary diner that we plan to transform into the shop. While the Fenren Trading House will be the primary vendor, I hope to offer small sections to some other small suppliers. I'd like to convert a room or two into a small practice for a healer, and there's even an expansive yard in the rear near the stables that we could remodel into an evaluation arena for Tanith."

Iris's eyes sparkled with anticipation. "Fantastic! And what about the contacts I directed your way?"

A slight frown creased Sera's brow as she glanced at Tanith, who offered a confirming nod. "Yes, the aspiring adventurers. I have their first quest ready to go—assisting with the headquarters' setup post-acquisition. I also evaluated their... ability to fight. It is lacking, but not excessively. They will be suitable for small tasks."

"Perfect. I will get a ranking system set up. I have two different ideas for that."

Sera chimed in, "We're also ready with prospective staff. I also have an esquire set up to represent us as soon as we need them. Lyra, the barmaid that works here and suggested the bar, would like a job with us. One of the three you sent wants to learn more about how to run a guild than be an adventurer, so she will join as support at first. Plus, Lucille from the Fenren headquarters here in Brightburn will helm the guild shop. That means with Neri on board, we meet the prerequisites of support personnel. How are we on adventurers? We have the two we talked about, you, and I presume Kaira."

Kaira answered for her, "Yes. The others have agreed as well."

Iris smiled. She still couldn't believe the others had wanted to join over returning to the City Guard. They had seemed so against it during the disagreement with Iris going off on her own. But it seems she convinced them during the quest.

"I think we can technically include Akane in that. I'm not sure how that's going to work... considering."

Akane perked up. "Yes!" she said excitedly before flexing an arm. "I'm strong adventurer."

Iris snorted. Her vulpine twin was adorable as always.

Sera chuckled lightly at the display. "We'll figure out everything. I mean, we have terrans now, what's a... I'm sorry, what did you call yourself?"

Akane nudged Iris. "She's a kitsune," Iris explained. "As far as I know, she's the only one of her kind."

Iris turned and looked at Akane who was giving her a small smile. Iris narrowed her eyes. "You *are* the only one. Right?"

Akane shrugged.

"Akane, are there more?"

The kitsune just shrugged again.

"Shit."

Sera who followed along with a bemused expression, sighed. "Well, we have more than enough prospective adventurers without her. So once we figure out her status, Akane can be one of the first to join after it's created."

Iris nodded. "Thanks. Would you be able to assist Neri in getting settled here at the inn?" Sera quickly agreed and the adventurer turned to Akane and Mocha. "Please stay with Neri and Sera. You two can have my room until I can get back and get you set up. Akane, still doing okay with keeping Mocha's form up?"

Akane smiled. "Yes!"

Iris leaned in, her voice low and laden with caution. "Mocha, you're in charge. Stay out of mischief. I doubt Kaira wants to mediate a situation with the City Guard due to any slip-ups."

Kaira sighed, tension evident in the taut line of her shoulders. "That would not be ideal. Especially since after this next meeting, I believe I will no longer be part of it."

Iris's breath hitched. Kaira was about to officially be an adventurer. Just like her.

Is this the right path for her? She had such a secure job with the Guard. Hell, she was a captain.

Sensing Iris's unease, Kaira shot her a smile—radiant, reassuring, and enough to melt any reservations. Her pixie cut hair was growing out, and she had to admit, she liked it a bit longer. Not that she would complain, Kaira was beautiful no matter what.

Before Iris could respond, Sera's assertive voice refocused the atmosphere.

"Iris. It may take time to get an audience."

Her head jerked back to Sera as her cheeks heated up. "Alright. We'll go meet with her now."



The cobblestone streets of the city stretched out in front of Iris and Kaira as they stepped out of the inn. Rows of stone and wooden structures on either side of a street filled with horses, carriages, and people. The noon sun was hidden behind cloud coverage, casting a dreary look on the city. Pedestrians and carriages moved about while the muffled sounds of hooves and distant conversation filled the air.

Kaira glanced at Iris as they walked. “You really think we can make the guild work?” she asked.

Iris gave the question serious consideration, her eyes skimming over the vendors selling their wares as they walked. “It won’t be easy, but I believe we can.”

As they continued, Iris observed a pair of children laughing and chasing after a dog, their innocent joy warming her heart. Nearby, a street musician strummed a lute, sending soothing melodies through the cooling evening air.

“They’ve opened up three new shops since I was last here,” Kaira remarked, pointing to a row of freshly painted facades.

Iris nodded, her gaze caught by a man painting a sign. The bold, swirling letters read, “Brightburn’s Best Apothecary.” She chuckled. “Seems like every alchemist thinks they’re the best.”

Kaira smirked. “Isn’t that the truth?”

The two women continued their journey, walking across an arched stone bridge. The waters beneath murmured softly while a few children threw bread at some ducks. Other people sat on benches nearby and either enjoyed the company of a companion or just relaxed.

It was nice.

She wondered what it would be like to stay in one place for a while, to not go off on quests or adventures only to return to a room in an inn. Should she find a house? An apartment?

Wait, does Kaira have a house?

Am I going to move in with her?

Iris started to panic, and searched for something to say.

“Do you miss being with the guard?”

Kaira exhaled deeply. “Parts of it, yes. But sometimes, change is necessary.”

Iris nodded, her focus returning to the path, her heart racing.

“Do you have a house?”

Kaira tilted her head, looking at Iris quizzically. "Of course. I have a small townhouse, why?" Her eyes suddenly widened with realization. "Oh."

"Yeah. I just thought of it too," Iris murmured, her eyes darting away. It was a topic that hadn't crossed their minds until this moment.

Kaira bit her lip. "That... That may be something we should discuss in a more comfortable setting."

Iris's anxiety flared, and she stumbled over her words. "I... Yeah. If you don't want—"

"No, I mean yes," Kaira interrupted gently, her voice calm and reassuring. "Iris, let's talk later. In your room at the inn."

Iris nodded, a flood of relief washing over her. The prospect of discussing their future together was a conversation she had been avoiding, but it was time to face it head-on. In the silence that followed, she tried to regain her focus, pushing the distracting thoughts to the back of her mind.

But they wouldn't let go.

They continued to walk through the city, passing small shops with their wares displayed in the windows, tempting passersby with colorful textiles, trinkets, and fragrant spices. Street vendors called out, trying to entice potential customers to stop and sample their offerings.

Despite the bustling activity around them, Iris's mind remained inward, grappling with thoughts of the future. Iris needed to find somewhere to live that wasn't an inn. The same went for the others like Sera, Tanith, and Neri.

There were so many things to figure out still, and the pressure it entailed weighed heavily on her. The need to start the guild suddenly felt more pressing. So many people were counting on her for their very livelihood.

She needed somewhere Mocha could stay comfortably, and she needed to figure out what Akane wanted.

Mocha was slowly taking to her humanoid form that was only possible due to Akane. What would happen if the kitsune left? *Where* would the kitsune go? She was a magical creature; would she even be considered a person here?

Iris felt responsible for her, especially since Akane seemed to consider her a sister. It was almost too much responsibility to put on one person. *And I have to lead a guild? Where people I meet may go off on quests and die?*

How did Kaira really feel about Mocha? That would be one deciding factor in their relationship, because Iris would never leave her best friend behind. No matter her form, they were a

pair. Their bond was too important, and no matter how much Iris felt herself falling hard for Kaira, Mocha held a spot in her life that required her to consider the horse's place in any decisions.

A small part of her wanted to push all of these important decisions off, wait until the guild was formed when she knew things would be more stable.

But she couldn't. At least not for Neri, Mocha, and Akane.

Even if the guild fell through somehow, she would have to figure out something for them.

Everyone has been proceeding like the guild is a sure thing. But is it? What will I do if it's not?

As they approached the looming castle Iris looked around. Its towering spires reached for the sky, the walls adorned with vibrant banners fluttering in the breeze. The closer they came, the more the castle seemed to dominate the skyline.

But as they neared the entrance, Iris's attention was drawn to a small group of people gathered in earnest conversation. Amidst them, the armor of a telv knight glinted in the dimming light. Iris's eyes widened in recognition. "Ser Meredith!" she called.

The knight turned, her face registering genuine surprise. Breaking away from the petitioners, she approached Iris and Kaira with brisk steps. "By the Family! We feared the worst when we hadn't heard from you for so long."

Iris smiled warmly, comforted by the familiarity of the knight's face. "Adventures often don't follow strict timelines. But we've returned. Is Lady Arden available? I've come to complete my quest."

Ser Meredith raised an eyebrow, her curiosity evident. "You succeeded?"

Pride welled up in Iris as she nodded confidently. "We did. Can we share the details with both you and Lady Arden?"

Without another word, Ser Meredith gestured for them to follow, leading them into the heart of the castle.

The echo of their footsteps in the stone corridor became more pronounced as Ser Meredith led them to Lady Arden's office. Sunlight streamed in through the high windows, forming slanted beams that intersected with shadows, creating an almost surreal atmosphere. They arrived at the double doors to find Lady Arden engrossed in parchment just like the last time they were here, her brow furrowed in concentration.

At the sound of their entrance, she looked up and her stern face softened, "Miss Stuart!" She rose, her long dress rustling. "You've come back."

Iris inclined her head, a small smile forming on her lips. "Indeed, and I've brought news."

"The Marauder Prince?"

Swallowing hard, Iris replied, "He's no longer a threat. He was Ser Corin Syllar, and now... he's dead."

A sharp intake of breath signaled Lady Arden's shock. Her gaze darted to Meredith. "Ensure our privacy. Now."

Despite her evident surprise, Meredith saluted crisply. "As you command." As the door clicked shut behind the knight, tension built in the room, thick and palpable.

Lady Arden swore vehemently, her voice dripping with exasperation. "Fucking Alos's flaming sack. Fuck. Of course. Of course it wouldn't be that simple. Relena take that decrepit hag and all of her bastard children."

Kaira's brows furrowed, confusion evident, while Iris tried to process the reaction. "What's the significance of the name? Why such a reaction? Which decrepit hag?"

"Corin Syllar. You are positive of this?"

Iris nodded. "I actually met him before by accident when I first arrived in Lehelia. That's how I knew his name."

The woman let out another string of colorful curses that were *not* becoming of a noble.

"And he's dead?"

"He plummeted into a ravine with monsters all over him."

Lady Arden exhaled heavily, the weight of her responsibility pressing on her. "Corin Syllar wasn't just any rogue. He was a bastard, a literal *and* royal one. The son of the queen's first son."

Oh, fuck.

The gravity of the situation pressed down on Iris. She glanced at Kaira, who seemed paralyzed, her mind racing to calculate the implications.

"What does this mean for our quest?" Iris murmured, a tremor of uncertainty in her voice.

The noblewoman rubbed her temples, seemingly trying to ward off a headache. "Your reward is unaffected, but only if his name and identity remain a secret."

Thoughts raced in Iris's head. Tanith and Sera knew. They would have to swear their silence. And soon.

She met Lady Arden's gaze, determination in her eyes. "I promise to remain silent."

Kaira added, her voice carrying an edge of steel, "As do I, milady."

Lady Arden let out a sigh of relief, visibly relaxing. "Then your reward awaits. Despite the complications, I believe congratulations are in order." She tried to smile, though it didn't quite reach her eyes.

With a hesitant nod, Iris acknowledged the sentiment, her stomach in knots.

The noblewoman smiled as she stood up. She reached into a box and pulled out two rolled up bundles of parchment.

“Please, have a seat,” she said, gesturing to the small seating area to the right. Iris and Kaira glanced at each other before moving over and sitting together on a small couch. Her girlfriend’s shoulder brushed comfortingly against hers as Lady Arden handed Iris the papers.

“What are these?” Iris asked, looking down at them.

“First, would you be willing to tell me the story of your quest?” Lady Arden requested, leaning forward with her hands folded.

Iris nodded. “Absolutely.” Iris responded, taking a deep breath.

She began to weave the story, recounting how they left Brightburn, the difficulties they faced, the people they met, and the multiple fights with the Marauder Prince’s faction.

As Iris recounted, Kaira chimed in at several junctures to add detail or clarify something that may have been misconstrued. Her low voice complemented Iris’s tale, filling in gaps and lending a layer of authenticity. Their voices harmonized, creating a rhythm that carried them through the story.

Time passed unnoticed, with Lady Arden immersed in their tale. When the story reached its climax—the joining with the harpies to fight the Marauder Prince’s camp—Iris noticed Lady Arden’s eyes narrowing, focused intently on every word.

As the story concluded, Lady Arden leaned back in her chair, contemplating what she had heard. She asked questions, first about Akane and the abilities she had demonstrated. The woman seemed quite intrigued.

“Thank you for the thorough account,” she finally said, breaking a silence that had settled over the room. “You have accomplished more than I could have hoped for. The harpy situation requires an immediate solution, and you have provided that. Though,” she added, her voice somber, “I worry about the fate of those who were transformed into such creatures. Rest assured, I will investigate this matter further.”

Relief washed over Iris. At last, the harpy queen would get her wish. It had been a long journey, full of twists and turns, but it had been worth it.

“I will look into granting the Cursed Forest to House Ferane, specifically to Lady Nysera,” Lady Arden continued, her voice determined. “At the very least, I will ensure that travelers are forbidden from entering. That should help protect the harpies and their home, as well as prevent any issues due to their plight.”

Iris's heart swelled with gratitude. The thought of returning to the harpy queen with this news filled her with excitement. She looked at Lady Arden, her eyes shining. "Thank you, Lady Arden. This means everything to the harpies and Lady Nysera."

Lady Arden nodded, her gaze drifting to the bundle of papers in Iris's hands. "Your efforts have not gone unnoticed, Miss Stuart." She took a moment before continuing, "In that bundle, you'll find a citizenship certificate for one Iris Stuart, terran, and now resident of Brightburn."

Iris's eyebrows shot up in surprise. In the whirlwind of events, she'd nearly forgotten about that.

The noblewoman continued, "The second document contains my formal request and authorization for the establishment of the Adventurer's Guild headquarters within Brightburn. It also includes a letter to assist with the purchase of the chosen location. I understand Miss Timrel has her eye on a certain property in the city center, which I fully endorse as a fitting representation of our city and the Guild's mission."

Hearing Lady Arden refer to Brightburn as 'our city' stirred a rush of emotion within Iris. This was right. This was her home now, and she had a part in shaping it. Her eyes met Kaira's, seeking confirmation, and the softness there reaffirmed her sense of belonging.

Iris swallowed, her voice thick with gratitude. "Thank you, Lady Arden. I can't express how much I appreciate your support."

A smile spread across Lady Arden's face that was sincere and warm. "I'm glad you've found a home in my city. I can only imagine what it must be like to wake up in a completely foreign world, alone. You and I will be working closely together once you've settled into your new role."

Iris had to ask. "Lady Arden? What do we do if the council doesn't agree?"

The woman pursed her lips for a moment then shrugged in a very unladylike manner. "We'll do it anyway."

Iris was taken aback. "I'm sorry? But how?"

"I will use my authority to authorize it, and we will go around the Guilds. You already have the support of Valentina, correct?"

Iris nodded.

"Then we have the biggest hurdle complete. I will shove this down their throats if I have to, and they will either get in line or I will use every ounce of influence I have to squeeze them."

"But... isn't that dangerous?"

"It would be if we didn't have Valentina's support. I will get the crown involved if I have to. The queen would be more than willing to weigh in on the matter if it meant gaining Lehelias's first

native guild. I don't think you realize how important this venture is. Not just for Brightburn, but for Lehelia as a whole. We're a small nation, and only our relationship with the Sovereign Cities ensures our... sovereignty against the Kingdom of Avira. This will improve our stature, and Relena take me if I let this fall through."

Iris nodded. "That... that makes a lot of sense. Thank you for explaining it."

"Of course." Lady Arden motioned to the bundle again. "Back to that, there's also a document for the Banking Guild. Present it, and they will release five hundred gold as the reward for the death of the Marauder Prince."

She abruptly stood up, prompting Iris and Kaira to follow suit. The elegant high elf noblewoman extended her hand, and Iris clasped it gently. "I look forward to our collaboration, Miss Stuart," Lady Arden said. Her gaze shifted to Kaira. "And you, Lady Harken, will no doubt be quite busy in your new role."

Kaira's breath caught. Standing rigid, she bowed. "With your permission, milady, I wish to tender my resignation from the City Guard, effective immediately." Her eyes met Iris's, crinkling at the edges as she smiled. "I'm eager to explore a different path that serves our home."

Lady Arden sighed contentedly. "You two are simply adorable."

Iris blinked in confusion, turning to the noblewoman who was covering her mouth, holding back a laugh. "I'm sorry?"

"Oh, the anticipation of watching this relationship flourish. And the magical dances that await," Lady Arden mused. "I can hardly wait for the next ball."

Kaira's eyes widened. "Milady?"

Lady Arden's chuckle was the epitome of grace. "Brightburn's Guildmaster and her noble partner? I assure you, you'll receive an invitation to every future ball in the city. And Lady Imogen's reaction will be priceless. Do me a favor, Lady Harken. Add a little salt to that wound when you see her next. I can hardly stand the woman. Alas, my status prevents me from indulging in the...what did you call it, Miss Stuart? Shenanigans? Badassery? That I shall leave to you two."

All Iris could do was blink.

Lady Arden's smile returned. "Forgive my enthusiasm, Miss Stuart. There are some things I must experience vicariously through others. I eagerly await the accomplishments you both will achieve. While I believe we can make a difference in the city working together, I hope in time, our relationship can be more personal."

“Lady Arden, please call me 'Iris'. My first year and a half in Lehelia were lonely. But since arriving in Brightburn,” Iris glanced at Kaira, reaching over and intertwining their fingers. “I've found more than friends. I've found family. I'd be honored to consider you a friend.”

The noblewoman stepped forward, placing a gentle hand on Iris's arm. “Iris. I look forward to that. And I must insist you call me Thalia. But for now, I've taken up enough of your time. You have much to do. We have a city to improve. You've secured the remainder of the funding? One thousand gold, was it?”

Iris nodded as Thalia stepped back. “I need proof of the amount, and it will go directly into the guild. Most will be for the headquarters. With the five hundred from the reward, Fenren Trading House's investment, and my share of the spoils from the Marauder Prince's locations, we should be close. I'll go over it with Sera after this.”

Kaira chimed in, “The party has discussed it. We're all contributing our shares as well.”

Thalia's eyes softened with appreciation as she listened to Kaira and the others' willingness to invest in the guild. “I would be happy to assist with any refurbishments you require for the location you select,” she offered. “Your guild should not only represent Brightburn but also serve as the standard for any future branches.”

Iris, feeling a surge of gratitude, offered her thanks. After exchanging well wishes and farewells, she and Kaira made their exit. Ser Meredith left them in the company of a servant who escorted them out of the castle while the telv knight returned to confer with Thalia.

Once outside the castle, Iris and Kaira wasted no time in heading to the Banking Guild. The reward for the Marauder Prince was quickly processed, and Iris soon found herself with an additional five-hundred gold in her account.

Quest complete, she thought with a smile.



As Iris and Kaira approached the inn, ready to meet up with Sera and Tanith inside, a voice called out their names. They paused, turning to see a familiar figure hurrying towards them.

“Marly?” Kaira's voice was incredulous as she called out the woman's name. “What are you doing here?”

It was Marlana, Kaira's seamstress friend, who approached with a mix of exasperation and relief in her eyes. “Oh, for Alos's sake!” she exclaimed, her voice tinged with frustration. “Why didn't you two tell me you were back in the city?”

Iris's eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "What do you mean? Why? What's going on?"

Marlena looked at her urgently. "I've been trying to find you, you never told me how long it would be until you returned!" she said, her voice tense. "I have something important to discuss."

Iris winced. She knew Sera and Tanith were waiting inside, especially Sera. She couldn't afford a delay. "Can we take this inside? I really need to talk to Sera about the meeting we just had with Lady Arden."

Marlena sighed. "Yes, yes. I have time. But I really must speak with you."

"Thanks. It shouldn't take too long."

As the three of them entered the inn, Kaira hung back to chat with her friend while Iris led the way into the tavern area, the buzz of midday conversation greeting them as they walked in. Sunlight streamed through the windows, dappling the wooden floor with shifting patterns of light and shadow. A barmaid hustled between tables, distributing mugs of ale and plates of hearty fare.

Another barmaid approached them, glancing around as if searching for an open table. "It may be a few minutes," she said, her voice slightly harried. "We're pretty busy for lunch today."

Iris spotted Sera and Tanith at a corner table and waved off the barmaid. "Don't worry about it, I see our friends over there."

The woman's expression brightened. "Oh, good! We'll come by to take your orders as soon as we can."

"Thanks!" Iris called back as they made their way over to the table.

Sera jumped up as they approached. "Iris! You're back."

"Everything go well?" Tanith asked. The sun elf leaned back against his chair and crossed his arms.

"Yeah, sorry you waited for so long," Iris said, feeling apologetic.

Sera smiled, her eyes showing no trace of irritation. "It's no problem, we figured it would take a while." She glanced at Marlena, confusion flitting across her face. "Oh, sorry. I didn't realize you would be bringing anyone else..."

Marlena gave an awkward smile. "Hi, sorry to interrupt. I'm Marlena. Here, I'll just..."

Without waiting for an invitation, Marlena grabbed a chair from a nearby occupied table, her abrupt action drawing a chorus of annoyed protests from the table's patrons. She ignored them, dragging the chair over to the table and taking a seat, her intense gaze fixed on Iris.

Iris chuckled and sat down next to Sera, while Kaira settled next to Marlena.

She noted the papers, scrolls, and ink pots strewn across the table; it looked like a miniature office had been hastily set up amidst the bustling tavern. She noticed Sera and Tanith's focused looks, waiting for an update on their meeting.

"We went over everything with Lady Arden," Iris began, raising her voice slightly to compete with the din of surrounding conversation. She unrolled the papers Thalia had given her, spreading them out on the table, her finger pointing to various sections as she recapped the details of their discussion. The meeting replayed in her mind, her focus narrowing to the papers and her friends' attentive faces.

Sera and Tanith leaned in, their eyes keenly tracking the movements of Iris's fingers as she outlined what had been promised by the city's lady. The two listened intently as the information flowed, their thoughts quickly calculating and assessing the implications of each word. When Iris finally looked up, it was Tanith who spoke first, his voice steady and pragmatic. "From the loot you gathered on your quest, we should be able to gain around twenty to thirty gold by selling it since your group offered to invest the proceeds into the guild."

Sera nodded and added, "Fenren Trading House has also committed to investing one hundred and twenty-five gold. It's a good start, but we still need more."

Iris frowned, her eyes scanning the numbers scribbled on the papers before her. It's not enough. *Where are we going to get the rest of the money?* She felt a tightening in her chest, a familiar knot of worry forming.

Sera noticed Iris's distress and reached across the table, her hand gently touching Iris's, offering a wordless reassurance. "Don't worry, Iris. We'll figure this out," she said, her voice calm and soothing. "In the meantime, let's focus on getting ready for the guild. I'll meet with you later to discuss our next steps with the Guild Council."

Iris nodded, trying to shake off the anxiety. "Maybe I can take on a few more quests."

"*We* can take on a few more quests," Kaira corrected.

Marlena burst into laughter, her face breaking into a wide smile as everyone's focus turned to her. "By Eona's bountiful tits, this is too perfect! That's exactly why I'm here!"

Iris's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "What are you talking about?"

Marlena leaned forward, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "Did you forget our partnership?" she whispered, her voice laced with amusement.

Iris's eyes widened in realization. "Oh my god," she breathed, her hands coming up to cover her face in a mixture of embarrassment and disbelief. "With everything that's been happening, I completely forgot."

“What partnership?”

Iris turned to Sera and explained, “I provided some designs for lingerie—undergarments for women—to Marlana to make. She thought she could sell them to the aristocrats of the city.”

“Wait... *you* came up with those?” Sera asked.

Iris tilted her head, puzzled. “Yes...?”

“I’ve heard about them everywhere,” Sera said, her eyes fixed on Marlana. “You’re the seamstress who makes them?”

Marlana nodded, her grin widening as if she’d won a prize. “How much do you need for this guild?”

Sera sighed, a hint of irritation in her voice. “One hundred gold.”

“That’s it?” Marlana shook her head, disbelief etched in her features. “You have no idea how much we’re making off your designs. You have that and more waiting for you in our business.”

Iris burst into laughter, her body shaking with mirth. She laughed until she began to cough, and Kaira quickly passed her a glass of water. Iris wiped tears from her eyes, trying to catch her breath. “That’s some protagonist bullshit right there,” she managed to say between gasps. “Wow.”

Turning to Sera, Iris’s eyes glowed with a renewed determination, a spark that had been missing. “Let’s fucking do this.”

Sera looked at Iris with a smile that mirrored the fiery determination in her eyes. She then turned to Marlana. “How quickly can we access those funds?”

Marlana shrugged, her fingers drumming on the table. “Give me a day, and I’ll have it ready.”

“A day?” Iris asked incredulously. “That’s amazing, Marlana, thank you!”

Marlana waved her off. “It’s your designs that have made it possible, Iris. You deserve it.”

Kaira clapped her hands together. “Alright then! We’ve got the money we need. Now, let’s talk about setting up the guild.”

The group leaned in, their focus now centered on the discussion at hand. Plans were discussed, strategies outlined, and roles assigned. The initial excitement gave way to a more measured approach, as they talked through every detail of their upcoming venture.

Sera took charge, her voice steady as she shared her insights on dealing with the Guild Council. “I will get with Guildmistress Valentina,” she said, her eyes flicking to each person in turn. “I’ll let her know we’re ready to proceed.”

As the group conversed around the table, Iris felt herself relaxing. Everything was really starting to come together, and all she had to do was plan to convince the council. She knew she already had

Guildmistress Valentina's support, so she would just need to worry about the rest. The group was so engrossed in their discussion that they didn't notice Neri approaching until she greeted them with a bright smile. "Hey everyone!"

Iris looked up and met Neri's eyes, offering a small smile in return. "Good afternoon, Neri. How are you?" she asked.

"I'm good, a bit hungry, but I'm just excited to see the city," Neri said, her eyes full of anticipation. "Is there any chance we could do that today?"

Iris glanced at Kaira, seeking her opinion. Her girlfriend's nod was all the confirmation she needed.

"The others wanted to meet up tonight to discuss the future," Kaira added, her voice soft but assured. "But other than that, we're free to do whatever. I'd be happy to show the both of you around."

The idea appealed to Iris. She and Kaira had walked around the city before, but she was eager to explore it again with a tourist's perspective. The city was vast, and she was sure there were hidden gems waiting to be discovered.

Neri's smile broadened, her eyes lighting up with gratitude. "That sounds great! Thank you, Kaira."

Iris was about to reply, offer to get Neri lunch, but she hesitated, a nagging feeling gnawing at her. She scanned the crowded tavern, noticing the vibrant mix of patrons, the laughter, and the clinking of mugs. But there was something missing.

Fuzzy ears. Three tails.

She narrowed her eyes, suspicion creeping in like a shadow, and turned back to Neri, her tone cautious. "Neri?"

The young Telv woman's smile remained as she turned her attention to Iris.

Iris inhaled deeply, her chest constricting as if she were bracing herself for a blow. She already had a sinking feeling, but she had to ask. A throbbing headache was building, adding to her discomfort.

"Where are Akane and Mocha?" she said slowly, her voice sharper than intended.

Kaira muttered a curse under her breath, her eyes darting around the room with newfound urgency.

Marlena, who was clearly lost in the conversation, unhelpfully chimed in. "Who are Akane and Mocha? Wait, isn't Mocha your horse?"

Iris groaned.

Neri, her face a picture of confusion, turned to Iris. Iris could see it coming, like a train hurtling down the tracks. She closed her eyes, steeling herself for the inevitable.

“I thought they were with you today?” Neri asked, her voice laced with genuine bewilderment.

There it is.

“Why? Why do the gods of this world hate me?” Iris whispered to herself, her voice a mix of frustration and resignation, as she pressed her fingers to her throbbing temples.

Kaira laid a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. “I’ll help you look.”

Iris just nodded.