

## Leaving the Past Behind

“Iris Stuart,” Helda, the telv innkeeper, said in an incredulous tone. Her stern gaze bore into Iris as she leaned over the counter.

“Yes, Miss Helda?” Iris replied, her voice sweet and light, masking the exhaustion underneath.

Around them, the interior of the inn was warm and inviting, the crackling hearth casting long, dancing shadows on the worn wooden floor. The hearty aroma of stew filled the air, tempting their senses and reminding her just how long it had been since their last warm meal.

*Okay, maybe only a few days... But still. I'm hungry.*

Helda gestured vaguely towards the stables. “What's this I hear about an owlbear, of all things, being in my stables?” she asked. “My poor stableboy ran to me screaming. The poor boy is terrified.” Her tone was somewhere between exasperated and unamused.

Iris shrugged nonchalantly. “That would be Laken's new, uh, friend.”

Of course, his dumb **[Ranger]** path would give him a cheat ability that let him form a bond with an animal. And of course, they would find a badass animal that he could conveniently save.

“Did you ride through the night to get back?” Iris nodded, and the innkeeper sighed. Helda pointed a thumb at Akane, who was awkwardly shifting from foot to foot. “And what's the story with her?”

Iris sighed. “She's upset that I scolded her for being... uh, irresponsible.”

Helda's eyes lit up with mirth as she let out a hearty laugh. “Oh, that's rich!” she exclaimed, slapping the counter in amusement. The innkeeper then turned her attention to Akane. “Come along, dear, let's get you something to drink. You look like you could use it.”

Akane let out a joyful yip, perking up at the mention of a drink. Helda raised an eyebrow and scowled at her. “None of that yipping, girl. We're inside.”

The telv innkeeper turned her gaze back to Iris. “Get some food in you, then go relax in a bath. Let me know when you're ready and I'll have one of the girls fill up a tub for you. Oh and Iris? We'll need to talk later,” she said more seriously. “Especially if you speak to Neri.”

With a promise to converse later hanging in the air, the innkeeper led Akane away while Iris turned her attention to the rest of her group, scanning the ragtag bunch of adventurers with a thoughtful gaze.

Gryff glanced around the room before shrugging and declaring with an air of finality, "I'm going to take a long bath." His voice was gruff but held an undertone of relief.

Iris quirked an eyebrow at Gryff, curious about the sudden decision. Before she could comment, however, Kaira gently grabbed her arm, pulling her attention away. The elf wore a soft smile as she said, "Let's get a drink, Iris. I think we both could use it."

With a shrug, Iris gave her agreement and locked her eyes on Bree. "You coming with us?"

The sun elf medic smiled and nodded. "Of course! Lead the way."

The three women made their way into the tavern area of the inn, instantly hit with the familiar hubbub of the tavern—the clatter of mugs, laughter and murmured conversations, the smell of ale and Helda's rich stew.

*That shit is so good.*

Iris's arm was held by Kaira as the shorter woman led her on, and behind them, Bree followed, her vibrant energy evident in her every movement.

The moment the three women entered the tavern, the strumming of a lute accompanied by a robust singing voice filled the air. Bree's eyes lit up at the sound, a wide grin splitting her face.

"Oh, I'll catch up with you two later!" she declared, her excitement palpable. Without another word, she pranced off, moving towards the source of the music—a telv man expertly plucking at the strings of his lute. His rich voice filled the air, singing a jaunty tune that had patrons tapping their feet and clapping in rhythm.

Watching Bree disappear into the crowd, Iris and Kaira exchanged amused glances, the two women chuckling, before moving to a table and settling down across from each other.

Just as Iris and Kaira were beginning to unwind, a figure approached their table. Neri, a young telv with strawberry blonde hair, bounded over with her apron flapping behind her, her eyes sparkling with excitement. Instead of taking their order as they had expected, the girl slipped into the chair next to Iris.

"Iris! I've been waiting for you to come back!" Neri exclaimed, her voice filled with barely-contained enthusiasm.

Iris blinked in surprise, shooting Kaira a bemused look before turning back to Neri. "Why's that, Neri?" she asked, curiosity piqued.

Before the young barmaid could answer, a sudden clinking sound silenced the tavern. All heads turned to the source of the noise—a small object, presumably a glass, was bouncing on the wooden floor.

*Clink.*

*Clink...*

On its third bounce, it shattered loudly, causing a hush to fall over the room.

"You've had two shots! Are you seriously already drunk?" Helda's voice rang out, filled with exasperation.

An offended yip echoed from the other side of the room. Iris sighed, recognizing Akane's voice.

A man's voice shot through the silence. "Sh-She has *tails*! What is she?!"

*Shit. That's my cue.*

Before she could get up, Helda's voice rang out again.

"So what? And you're going to have a lump on your damn head if you say another rude word you nit. She's my customer, you treat her with respect," Helda barked.

Neri let out a hesitant chuckle, her eyes darting from Iris to the scene across the room. "Let me... Go help clean that up. Don't go anywhere!" she quickly excused herself, standing up and hurrying towards the commotion.

"I won't," Iris assured her, turning back to Kaira as the chatter in the room slowly picked up again, and the musician tentatively started the melody once more.

Iris shook her head, a small smile on her face. Life certainly wasn't dull with that Kitsune around.

Kaira, a look of amused bewilderment on her face, turned back to Iris. "Well, that was eventful," she remarked with a chuckle, shaking her head. "Where were we?"

Iris shrugged, a wry smile on her face. "Ales, I believe?" she suggested. "And stew! Helda's is so good."

A twinkle sparked in Kaira's eyes as she nodded, lifting a hand to flag down another server. "Ah, yes. Ales indeed," she agreed, an impish grin on her face. "I'm in dire need of something strong and cold."

As they ordered their drinks and food, the noise in the tavern slowly returned to its usual volume, the shattered glass incident fading into the past as quickly as it had happened.

Iris glanced over to where Akane was now seated, a fresh drink in her hand, and Helda standing protectively by her side, daring anyone to say a word. Iris couldn't help but chuckle to herself, shaking her head in disbelief.

"Never a dull moment, huh?" she muttered, earning a hearty laugh from Kaira. This was just another day in the life of Iris Stuart, and she wouldn't have it any other way.

As she happily dug into her food and drink, the strumming of the lute-like instrument filled the air as another song began. Iris and Kaira had been deep in conversation, but the opening chords caused them to pause, their attention drawn to the

singer in the corner of the room. Bree, the **[Bard]**, her voice a blend of boldness and mirth as she told everyone to listen close for she had a true tale to tell.

*“In the heart of the fray, 'neath the storm-lit sky,”* Bree sang, her voice strong and clear. *“Came a warrior mare, her courage held high. Dark as espresso, with mane of frothy foam, Against an axe-wielding dwarf, she did roam.”*

Iris blinked, a smile tugging at her lips as she listened to the lyrics. “Is she... is she singing about Mocha? I only told her one time what the name meant!”

Kaira chuckled. “She is. Your horse is a hero in her own right, it seems.”

*“Mocha, our heroine, sword clutched in her maw,”* Bree continued. *“Danced through the chaos, in awe we all saw. The dwarf strong and brutal, a fearsome sight, yet 'gainst our brave mare, he lost the fight.”*

Laughter bubbled from Iris as she shook her head. “That's ridiculous. And amazing.”

*“One mighty swipe, the sword found its mark, a blow so true, it extinguished his spark. His body fell, his head rolled in the dirt, A silent testament to Mocha's assert.”*

“Ridiculous, yes. But you have to admit, she paints a vivid picture,” Kaira said, grinning as she swirled the ale in her mug.

*“Then she forsook the blade, a new foe in sight, Jonan the poacher, filled with spite. Spells he hurled, a torrent of earthen might, Yet Mocha danced on, lit by starlight,”* Bree's voice took on a dramatic tone as she sang, her audience, including Iris and Kaira, hanging on to every word.

Iris clapped her hands in glee, the image of Mocha taking on the poacher while Iris fought to get out of the man's spell was too comical to ignore. “I can't wait to tell her she's a tavern hero.”

*Plus, she did save my ass by distracting him long enough.*

Thankfully, Bree spared Iris the embarrassment of her getting her ass kicked because she reacted too slowly.

*“Pranced and weaved, she did with grace, dodging magic, in this deadly chase. With hooves of fury, she claimed her space, And made Jonan taste her equine embrace.”*

“You should have seen her, Iris,” Kaira said. “Mocha was amazing, and I only managed to catch a small portion.”

Iris shook her head. “I was uhh a little busy.”

Kaira gave Iris a small smile and gently pat her hand as Bree continued her song after a short lute solo. *“As the thunder goddess, her power restored, could rise once more, her lightning soared. The poacher fell, his magic ignored, victory for Mocha, our mare adored,”* Bree finished with a flourish, laughter, and applause filling the room.

Iris and Kaira joined in, clapping and laughing along with the rest of the patrons. Bree, meanwhile, took a bow before launching into the next song, leaving the tale of the brave mare behind. But for Iris, the image of her beloved horse taking on a mighty sorcerer would forever be etched in her mind, a symbol of their own absurd, yet triumphant, journey.

Neri reappeared, sliding back into the chair next to Iris with a determined look in her eyes. "Alright, I'm just going to ask. Helda mentioned you're starting a guild. I want in."

Iris raised an eyebrow at the young woman, exchanging a glance with Kaira before turning her attention back to Neri. "Why? You have a good life here in Cosdale, don't you?"

The young telv woman took a deep breath, her gaze never wavering. "Iris, I've only ever known Cosdale. I've watched you, what you've done, how you've saved this town—"

"Some might argue that it's my fault the town was in danger in the first place..." Iris mumbled as memories of the drakyyds flashed through her mind.

Neri dismissed her comment with a wave of her hand. "You can't listen to them. They don't know what they're talking about. I saw you day in and day out, Iris. When you were at your lowest. You have a fire in your eyes now. What I see... I see someone who changed her life around and is now changing the world, and I want to be a part of that.

"I want to see the cities beyond these fields. I want to do something worthwhile, not just serving drinks and cleaning rooms. Let me join you." Her voice was filled with a quiet desperation and hope that Iris found herself unable to ignore.

Iris considered Neri's words and her earnest expression, weighing her options. After a long moment, she finally shrugged. "Alright, Neri. Once the guild officially forms, I'm sure we can find a role for you. However, we're currently on a quest and won't be heading straight to Brightburn."

Just as she finished, Helda appeared by their side. "Don't worry about that," she reassured, her voice filled with warmth as she addressed Neri. "We'll ensure you make it to Brightburn safely."

Iris looked up at Helda with a grateful smile. But the older woman's gaze was stern as she turned to Neri. "Get back to work, girl. You haven't left yet, and people are clamoring for their food." Neri nodded and scurried off, leaving Iris and Helda at the table.

Iris glanced over at where Akane had been sitting, her eyes widened as the kitsune was not where she last saw her.

Her head jerked around to look for the kitsune, but Helda waved her off. “She went outside, presumably to see Mocha.”

Once Neri was out of earshot, Helda turned to Iris with a hard look in her eyes. “She’s looked up to you ever since you stumbled into my inn all bruised up and showed her magic that first time all those seasons ago. I trust you’ll do right by that girl, Iris. If not, I won’t hesitate to trek up to Brightburn and whip your scrawny human ass.”

“You know I will, Helda. I’ll take care of her,” she promised. At the woman’s look, Iris smiled and then sniffed in faux outrage. “Also, these arms are all *muscle* with magic coursing through my veins. I’m a badass. I am not *scrawny*.”

Kaira chuckled from the side, her eyes twinkling with amusement. “Nope, you’re perfect.”

“Well, if I’m so perfect.” Iris leaned in towards Kaira with a mischievous smirk. “Then you must be the ideal blueprint of a goddess. Because every time I look at you, I feel like I’ve found heaven.” She then winked exaggeratedly, her smile turning into a grin at the sight of Kaira’s surprised and amused expression.

Helda groaned and rolled her eyes at their exchange, standing up to leave. “Who taught either of you how to court? Please, keep those words for the bedroom. You’re going to scare my patrons away with your atrocious flirting.”

Iris raised an eyebrow in amusement. “Our flirting is horrible?”

Helda nodded as she moved away, her parting words echoing around them. “Yes, and ask your singing friend for better lines next time. Now, I need to get back to work.”

The innkeeper stood up, and with a final wave, she disappeared into the crowd, leaving Iris and Kaira chuckling at their table.



Later that night, as Iris finally lay down to sleep back in the room she had called home for so long, she let out a deep exhale and stared at the ceiling.

The events of the fort played out in her mind, her near-failure against Jonan, the leader of the poachers, standing out most vividly. She had been caught off guard by his magic.

That was twice now that she’d failed at subtlety, and it seemed she really needed to fix her shit.

Arrogance had played a part, she had to admit. She was high-level, and so had grown used to the idea that most would not pose a real threat.

But Jonan, he’d matched her for longer than she’d anticipated.

Then even before that... the sight of seeing Mocha approaching the fort with Akane alone... She took a deep breath as a shudder ran through her. The thought of Mocha risking her life because of Iris's underestimation and lack of ability to keep a handle on Akane... It was almost too much.

*Man, I really messed up.*

*Again.*

No more. It was time she changed.

*Again.*

She couldn't keep going like this, with very little regard for others, let alone herself. Brute force and overwhelming firepower were no longer the name of the game, she needed finesse, strategy.

Smarts.

They would be going after the Marauder Prince, and she couldn't afford any more fuck ups.

She sat up in bed, her hand running through her damp hair, and accidentally undid her hair tie in the process. She groaned in mild frustration while fussing with her hair back into a bun on the top of her head.

Iris nodded to herself. Time was too short to worry about what-ifs, and she could still be a badass without being arrogant or self-destructive.

Her thoughts shifted to Sera, back in Brightburn, working tirelessly to set up the Adventurer's Guild. Then to the three hopeful adventurers back in Stilstead, who'd been inspired by her. Then Neri, who was willing to leave her familiar life in Cosdale to join the guild.

And then there was Kaira.

*She said to take it slow, but more and more she's signaling that we're more than what we are...*

Kaira, the woman who had dropped everything, a stable life as a captain in the City Guard... all to follow Iris on a quest and join her as an adventurer. Who clearly wanted more, but held back. Not that Iris could blame her.

*I haven't given her a reason to want to move forward. All I've shown her is how reckless I can be, how close I am to getting killed.*

Who would want that life? Iris knew she wouldn't. There was a difference between understanding your partner walked a dangerous path, and seeing your partner have a blatant disregard for their own self-preservation.

Then there were Laken, Gryff, and Bree... they'd all followed her and Kaira blindly, despite Iris never really explaining what they were getting into. She had done

them a disservice, and it was so easy to forget that just because she had ideas and knew what to expect, others may not.

*Sometimes people don't know what they don't know.*

Finally, her thoughts settled on Mocha.

Oh, Mocha.

Her best friend, her confidante. The one who had stood by her through it all. Who fought a mage because Iris had been caught unawares. She owed Mocha more than she could ever express.

*She's more human than anyone else I've met in this world.*

She owed Mocha more than she could ever express. She needed to do more for her friend, to show her how much she cared for her.

*Maybe I can actually find a true home in Brightburn. Somewhere that doesn't have Mocha sleeping in some inn's stables every night.*

Iris sucked in a breath, the thoughts of what she should have done settled into her, feeling as though everything... she shook her head. No, she wouldn't focus on that.

Tomorrow was a new day, and this time... Iris would be ready to take a step forward. To truly become the woman she needed to be.

Too many people were counting on her now.

And she needed to show them that they were right to trust in her. To trust in Iris Stuart—not Iris Stuart the wannabe hero, but the woman who happened to be an adventurer.

As she laid her head back on the pillow, exhaustion of the past however many hours since she slept *before* the attack on the fort finally catching up to her, the thoughts that had been at the forefront of her mind finally faded away.

There was a point where you became so exhausted that you couldn't sleep, then when that time finally passed, sleep came suddenly, wrapping her in its welcoming embrace.

A voice echoed in her head, but she was too far gone in the world of dreams to register it.

**[Storm Warden – Step 50 attained!]**

**[Conditions Met: Trait – Telekinesis obtained!]**





Morning dawned on the inn, casting a warm, inviting glow through the windows while the sounds of early risers mingling with Helda's staff could be heard, echoing up the stairs. Iris, armored and ready to go, emerged from her room, stepping into the hallway just as Bree did the same.

The sun elf woman looked anything but well-rested.

Her face was pale and her eyes were squinted shut against the light. A low groan slipped past her lips, the unmistakable sound of a hangover. Seeing her discomfort, Iris couldn't help but feel a twinge of sympathy. After all, the spirited singing from the previous night had gone hand in hand with ample libations.

"Bree," she called out gently. "Go see Helda. Ask her for her hangover cure. It'll make you feel better." Iris had been a repeat customer of the remedy before and wholeheartedly recommended it to anyone.

The elf nodded in understanding, another groan escaping her as she moved to follow Iris down the stairs. Her steps were sluggish and unsteady, and fairly reminiscent of a zombie—a clear contrast to Iris's vibrant stride.

"Don't worry about us," Iris added, glancing over her shoulder. "We'll gather everything and wait for you outside."

Her words seemed to offer some comfort to Bree, who nodded once more before disappearing toward the tavern in search of Helda. Iris couldn't suppress a small chuckle as she aimed the opposite way toward the entrance, intent on getting everything prepared for the next stage of their quest.

As Iris walked outside, she found the rest of her group already busying themselves. Laken and Gryff were lifting and loading supplies onto their sturdy wagon, their brows furrowed in concentration.

A few feet away, the two mundane horses were standing together, appearing a bit skittish as they eyed the owlbear trying to assist Laken and Gryff. The owlbear would carefully pick up a box and hand it to the men who took them with wary smiles, while Laken was heaping praises onto the large creature.

Kaira was off to the side, focused on adjusting the fit of Mocha's barding, her fingers expertly fastening the buckles and securing the plates.

Iris stepped forward to join them when suddenly, a hand grabbed her side, causing her to shriek in surprise and jump away.

Twisting around, she found herself looking at Akane. The kitsune was hunched over, yipping in laughter while her three furry tails curled around her in amusement.

Iris narrowed her eyes at the fox-woman, a playful scowl on her face. "Rude," she accused.

Akane, still chuckling, focused her concentration and managed to form a single word with her human-like mouth. “Fun,” she articulated, her pronunciation slightly off. It was almost endearing, reminiscent of a toddler saying their first word.

“You're lucky you're cute,” she grumbled teasingly before turning to join the others, her heart lighter.

*“You're only saying that because she looks just like you,”* Mocha nickered.

Iris swung around to face Mocha, feigning shock. “Are you saying I'm not cute?!” She placed a hand dramatically over her heart, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

From beside her, Kaira grinned and joined in the banter. “I think you're cute,” she chimed in, shooting Iris a playful wink that made her heart flutter.

*There she goes again!*

*“She doesn't count,”* the mare nickered. *“She has to say that.”*

Iris rolled her eyes playfully, the corners of her lips turning upward in a smirk. “Alright, alright,” she waved a hand dismissively at Mocha before turning back to her companions. “Is everyone just about ready?”

Kaira nodded, her eyes flitting to the doorway of the inn. “Just about,” she affirmed. “I was going to give Bree a bit more time to sleep it off, though.”

Iris waved off Kaira's concern. “Don't worry about that. I've already spoken to Bree. She's getting some food and asking Helda to give her something to help with the hangover.”

Atop the wagon, Gryff chortled. “I'm kinda sad I missed out on that. Would've been a sight to see Bree hammered.”

Iris shared a knowing look with Kaira, a devilish smirk tugging at the corners of her mouth. “You should have heard her sing last night. She made up a whole song about Mocha!”

The mare's excitement was almost palpable. *“What?! She sang about me?”* Mocha neighed, the note of surprise clear in her voice.

Iris and Kaira burst into laughter. “She sure did, Mocha!” Iris managed to say between fits of giggles “And it was quite a performance!”

Akane walked next to Iris, and placed her arm on Iris's shoulder and leaned on her exaggeratedly before barking and yipping toward Mocha.

Mocha nodded, the horse getting more excited with every vulpine sound.

*“She has to sing it for me!”* Mocha whinnied when Akane finished talking.

She motioned for everyone to gather around, hopping up onto the wagon while Gryff and Laken climbed down, the latter settling close to the owlbear with a casual arm draped over its fur. Iris looked around at the gathered group and a fond smile touched

her lips. "Alright, everyone. Listen up," she began, the ring of authority clear in her voice.

"Today, we head toward the Cursed Forest to look for the Marauder Prince. This whole time, he's been right under our noses. Right under the Queendom's nose. We're gonna take this bastard out, and hopefully make this entire region safer in the process—and earn a bit of coin to form our Guild. That's what being an adventurer is all about, isn't it? Doing what gets us loot and coin, all while doing good deeds for those who need it most."

She took a moment to let her words sink in, her gaze scanning the faces of her team. "We'll find a place to stash the wagon and the horses. But if we can't... we might need someone to stay behind with it, as unideal as that sounds. We can't leave the mundanes unattended, there are just too many unknowns in the forest." She shifted her gaze to Mocha. "And I think we'll need you this time, Mocha."

At Iris' words, Mocha whinnied excitedly. "*Really? No more guard duty?*"

Iris looked at her friend and gave her a smirk. "After our teamwork against that earthbender? Heck no. You're with me, girl."

Mocha bobbed her head in acknowledgment and stood a bit taller, her excitement clear.

The sound of the inn door creaking open drew everyone's attention, and Bree emerged slowly, immediately groaning about the sunlight. She hollered, "Iris! This stuff isn't working yet!"

Helda followed right behind her, chuckling. "It takes a few to kick in, girl! Give it time!"

As Bree groaned louder, another voice echoed from behind them. "Iris Stuart?"

Iris turned around, her eyes meeting the gaze of an orkun man dressed in Town Guard garb. Captain Morek, the jerk and one of the people in Cosdale she hoped to avoid.

Mocha flared her nostrils. "*What's he doing here?*" she huffed.

A tight frown pulled at Iris's lips as she stared back at him, her mood swiftly changing from jovial to angry. "What do you want, Morek?" She ground out, the challenge clear in her tone.

Iris glanced over and caught Kaira's eye, the elf narrowing hers and stepping away from Mocha.

Morek shifted uncomfortably on his feet, his gaze flicking between Iris and the group of curious faces. "Iris, I need a word with you," he grunted, his voice holding that typical gruff edge, but strained with a hint of reluctance.

Iris crossed her arms, fixing Morek with a cool stare. “Just spit it out. What’s so important?” she kept her tone casual, not really wanting a fight.

“Don’t you cause any problems in front of my inn, Morek,” Helda said with a huff.

The guard captain sighed, ignoring the innkeeper. “Could we talk privately?”

Before she could respond, Kaira stepped next to her and put a hand on her hip. “Well, if it isn’t Morek Dommar,” Kaira’s voice held a cold edge, the false civility not quite masking her dislike for the man.

Morek’s eyes widened marginally as he took in Kaira’s presence, his face hardening as he begrudgingly dipped his head. “Lady Harken,” he bit out. “What are you doing in our... backwater town?”

The corner of Kaira’s mouth curled up into a small smirk. “I’ve been assigned by Lady Arden herself to assist Adventurer Stuart in her quest. We are a party, and if you have something to say to Iris, you can say it in front of all of us.”

Morek’s gaze flickered between Kaira and Iris, the unspoken tension between him and Kaira sat in the air like a physical thing. It was something she intended to talk to the cute elf about later, because she looked so cute right then as she stood there glaring at the orkun man.

With a visible sigh, Morek seemed to deflate slightly, the hint of a scowl crossing his face. “Forget it. This was a bad idea,” he grumbled, already beginning to turn away.

Iris instantly felt a bit guilty. “Wait,” she said, softer this time. Morek’s eyes darted back to her, his gaze guarded. Iris softened her own look, offering a small nod. “Let’s talk.”

Held under her gaze, Morek seemed to mull over her words, his hard expression softening incrementally. With a deep breath, he finally gave her a curt nod of assent.

As Iris prepared to lead Morek away for a private chat, her gaze briefly met Kaira’s, the elf’s ice-blue eyes filled with concern. Reaching out, Iris gave Kaira a reassuring squeeze on her arm, a silent promise that she would be alright.

With one last look back at the party, Iris led Morek a short distance away from the group, turning to face him once they were out of earshot. She crossed her arms and took a deep breath, preparing herself for whatever this conversation might bring. “Okay,” she said finally, her voice steady. “Talk.”

The corners of Morek’s mouth turned up slightly in a self-deprecating smile. “I owe you an apology, Iris,” he began, his voice low. “I always thought you could use a bit of help, and while I thought you were rash at times, I did try. That said, I was the one who assigned you to deal with the monster in the woods. I didn’t realize there were so many drakyds. And for that, I take responsibility.”

Iris crossed her arms over her chest, studying him. “That was never the issue, Morek. The issue was that you and the rest of the guards just stood on the wall and

watched. It was like my potential death was some sort of spectacle. Not one of you tried to help me when you locked me out. I could have been up on that wall, helping.”

Morek nodded, a guilty look on his face. “I know. But my responsibility was to the town first, and I wasn't sure if the monsters could have breached our walls if something went wrong. That was a poor decision on my part,” he admitted before wincing. “And honestly... seeing your magic at that scale... it was like watching an agent of the gods. The men who join the Town Guard are not always the most disciplined so... everyone just *froze*. Again, I'm sorry.” He added after a pause, “And I deserved that punch.”

Iris sucked in a deep breath, letting his words settle for a moment. “Fine, I accept your apology.” She softened her gaze. “Now, I know this isn't all you wanted. What did you actually need to talk to me about?”

He shifted, a touch of discomfort in his gaze. “The town's head councilwoman wants the guard to verify the safety of the route from here to Stilstead, and to make assessments on what to do if it's not.”

Iris immediately raised a brow. “I can tell you right now, it's not safe.”

Morek shrugged. “I know it's not. So, I want to send a guardsman with you when you leave again. You can show him, and then leave him in Stilstead. We'll send a second group in a week.”

Iris drew a deep breath, her eyes narrowing. “Who do you want to go?”

Morek turned his head, looking past Iris. She followed his gaze and... *Oh, damn it*. Her eyes landed on the nameless elf with the formerly cute butt.

Her gaze snapped back to Morek. “Not just no, but fuck no. Nope. Not happening.”

*Eona, if you're really up there... Give me some patience right now.*

Morek looked genuinely surprised. “I thought you liked him! He talked about all the, uh... interesting times you two had together.”

“Excuse me?” Iris's voice rose in surprise and anger. “Oh, I'm gonna kill him.”

Iris spun on her heel, storming towards the elf with Morek trailing behind trying to stop her, but not willing to actually get in her way. As Iris neared her group, Kaira's eyes widened, as if sensing her seething anger. The elf woman quickly closed the distance between them and stopped in front of her, followed by the rest of the party.

“What's wrong?” Kaira asked, her eyes scanning Iris's face.

Iris's voice was filled with a simmering fury as she replied, “Morek wants to send a guard with us, and it's him...” She gestured towards the elf.

Mocha, upon seeing the elf, let out a whinny. “*Oh. Shit.*”

Kaira glanced at the man, her confusion deepening. “What? What did he do? Who is he?”

In the meantime, Gryff's eyes had widened in understanding. He instantly broke away from the group, heading towards the elf. Soon, heated words were exchanged, escalating into a full-blown argument that had Laken turning and walking toward him with an owlbear in tow.

Seeing Kaira's confusion, Iris sighed and explained, "I was in a bad place back then. I lost myself in alcohol and... other nighttime activities. He was the last person I was with before leaving Cosdale. When I fought the monsters at the gate, he literally turned his back on me."

Kaira's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Oh, I'll kill him."

Both women turned just in time to see Gryff land a punch square on the elf's jaw. The man crumpled to the ground, unconscious while the owlbear moved to stand over the man threateningly.

Morek let out a string of curses and rushed forward.

Kaira glanced back at Iris, a small smirk playing on her lips. "Looks like someone beat me to it," she said. She fixed Iris with a serious gaze. "The past is the past—leave it there. You're with me now."

Iris blinked, taken aback. "W-what?"

Kaira, however, didn't hesitate. Her eyes sparkled with determination as she stepped forward, closing the gap between them. "Waiting was a bad idea."

Before Iris could even process what was happening, Kaira's hands found her face, pulling her down. Their lips met in a passionate kiss, and Iris felt her mind go blank.

For a moment, the world around them seemed to blur and fade away. There was only Kaira and the feel of her lips against Iris's, the grip of her hands firm and reassuring. The intensity of the kiss stole Iris's breath away, leaving her dazed and reeling.

A thought fluttered in her mind as she leaned into the kiss. *Damn, she is so smooth.*

Iris knew then, she had truly been caught in Kaira's irresistible charm.