

# Interlude

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## A Day with the Mane Character

“M-m-my... Nahhhm... Mo-kuh,” she tried working the sounds out slowly, using muscles and a smaller tongue that she wasn’t used to for the one-hundredth time.

She let out a very exasperated groan. It was so frustrating learning to talk like an elf. Her mind and body simply did not want to work that way.

Akane sat in front of her, the fox-human ever patient and friendly. The two of them were stuck in Iris’s room within the inn, and while she was highly excited not to be in the stables with the mundanes, she still felt uncomfortable in this form. But she was eternally grateful to Akane for using her magic to help her.

Mocha still wasn’t used to how similar Akane and Iris looked.

Luckily, she could clearly smell the difference between the two. Akane smelled like fur. Iris smelled like someone who used too much soap.

“Doing great!” Akane said with a big smile on her face.

Mocha rolled her eyes, unsure if Akane was just being polite or if she really thought that stuttered attempt at speech was ‘great’. The new form she found herself in was strange and unwieldy, her vocal cords producing sounds she had never used before. Mocha looked down at her hands, flexing her fingers, still getting used to the idea of having digits.

“Try again,” Akane encouraged, her voice warm and gentle. “You got it.”

How well that damn fox was doing with learning to speak was a bit obnoxious.

That made her want to try harder. If only so she could have a proper conversation with everyone, and not have to go through Iris or now Akane.

Mocha took a deep breath, focusing on the word. “My... name... Mocha,” she forced out, the syllables coming out more fluidly this time.

“See? You getting it!” Akane clapped her hands together, a broad smile stretching across her face that showed off her sharp canines.

Mocha felt a slight sense of accomplishment, but a wave of exhaustion overshadowed it. The effort of trying to speak like an elf had taken its toll. She could feel her energy waning, the concentration required draining her reserves.

She focused again. "May... be. Rest?" Mocha suggested. Her voice was still shaky but she was starting to get a bit more confident.

"Okay," Akane agreed, reaching over to a tray on a nearby table and handing Mocha a cup of water.

Mocha took the cup, her fingers still unsteady, and took a sip, the cool liquid soothing her dry throat. She had to admit, it was much better than sticking her head into a big tub that may or may not have random stuff inside.

She was starting to see the benefits of pretending to be a two-legged person.

"Thank-sss," she said quietly.

"Welcome," Akane quickly replied. Her smile was still present and her mismatched eyes were twinkling with kindness.

Mocha wasn't sure why the fox did so much to help her. Although, she would certainly accept it. She and Iris thought Akane would have left after they killed the Marauder Prince.

But she didn't.

She wanted to stay and when Iris had said Akane was her sister... well, the fox seemed steadfast in staying. With Iris preoccupied with her new mate, Mocha was glad to have company.

Especially someone that looked like her best friend.

Akane started looking around and fidgeting before letting out a whimsical sigh. Mocha instantly knew something was up.

"We go see the city?" the fox suggested.

"No. Iris say stay... here," Mocha objected, focusing on her words.

Akane looked around and shrugged. "Neri gone!"

Iris had asked them to remain at the inn with Neri, fearing potential danger. Mocha wasn't sure if her friend had meant for them or for others. Both were a bit silly though. Mocha and Akane were surely some of the strongest in the city after Iris.

"We be fine," Akane insisted, eyes glimmering with mischief. "Only little while. Want to see how elves live!"

Mocha sighed, concentrating on her words. Akane needed to understand. "On... Only small... no... short time. Come back... soon."

Akane's grin broadened. "So good! Yes. We come back soon. First! We play!"

Mocha followed Akane out of the room, feeling a bit of excitement despite herself. It was hard not to get caught up in Akane's infectious enthusiasm. The hallways of the inn were narrow, lined with doors that led to other rooms, their wooden floors creaking underfoot.

The fox lifted a finger to her lips and pointed down the hall before she put a hand on Mocha's chest and used her magic to conceal the two of them from view. Mocha looked to where the fox had pointed and saw Neri bump into one of the inn's workers. The girl quickly apologized and started talking to the telv woman.

Mocha smiled. That girl was used to working in an inn, so she probably found something to talk about.

As they reached the bottom of the stairs, Mocha spotted Iris conversing with Sera, Kaira, and Tanith in the dining area. A pang of guilt struck her, but before she could voice her reservations, Akane took her hand and pulled her toward the entrance.

They reached the entrance, the cool breeze outside wafting in, carrying with it the scents of the city beyond. Outside, the bustling nature of everything greeted them. The cacophony of street vendors, the chatter of the crowd, and the clatter of mundane hooves and wheels on cobblestone streets enveloped them.

Mocha marveled at the sprawling city from such a new perspective. The labyrinth of cobbled streets and the diverse buildings ranging from towering mansions to cozy shops all felt so different when she wasn't just focused on going to and fro.

As they continued through the city streets, Mocha couldn't help but notice the looks of surprise and curiosity that followed them. She realized that they were quite the unusual pair, a fox-woman, and a horse-turned-elf—not that those around them would realize it, but it didn't matter. They were both finding their way in this new world, embracing the challenges and discoveries that came with their unique circumstances.

They meandered through serpentine alleys and crowded thoroughfares, each offering new and exciting sights and sounds. The aroma of cooking spices wafted through the air, mingling with the more pungent scents of the city. It was intoxicating.

At a food stall, a vendor was selling skewers of various meats and vegetables, sizzling and aromatic on an open grill. The man offered a wide assortment of skewers, and Akane's eyes immediately zeroed in on one that was piled with chunks of chicken. Her face lit up with excitement as she pointed at the skewer.

“Chicken! Yum!” she exclaimed with a grin.

Mocha looked at the available skewers and pointed at one that was loaded with assorted vegetables—peppers, mushrooms, and zucchini, all seasoned with fragrant spices. Akane quickly paid for both skewers—with money Mocha was sure she got from Iris—and handed one to Mocha.

Mocha took a tentative bite of a mushroom from her skewer, the smoky, spiced flavors enveloping her taste buds. The experience was new and delightful, and she eagerly consumed the rest of the skewer, savoring the bursts of flavor in each bite.

Akane watched with amusement as Mocha's eyes widened with each mouthful. "Good, yes?" she asked, taking a bite of her chicken skewer and nodding in satisfaction.

Mocha nodded eagerly, her mouth too full to speak. "Mmmm."

They continued strolling, the city's noises and colors swirling around them like a tapestry of life. As they walked, Mocha couldn't help but feel a surge of gratitude toward Akane. The fox-human had patiently taught her to speak, had shown her a world beyond the stable walls, and had shared moments of simple joy with her.

Mocha turned to Akane, her eyes genuine and grateful. "Thank you," she said, the words flowing more naturally now.

Akane smiled warmly, her eyes gentle as she looked at Mocha. "Welcome, Mocha. We friends, yes?"

Mocha nodded, feeling an unfamiliar warmth spread through her chest. "Yes. Friends."

Akane quickly led the way down a side street, where they stumbled upon a group of musicians playing a lively tune. The crowd around them danced and clapped to the rhythm.

The fox joined in, her eyes sparkling with joy. Mocha watched the dancers, her earlier reservations momentarily forgotten, her heart lifted by the sheer energy and happiness of the scene.

Akane pulled Mocha into the crowd, and soon they were both swaying to the music. Mocha was surprised by how much she enjoyed it, how the rhythm seemed to flow through her body and make her want to move. It was a strange and wonderful sensation, something she had never experienced as a horse. She looked over at Akane, who was grinning widely, her fox-like ears twitching in time with the beat.

The musicians played on, their fingers flying over their instruments as the melody filled the air. Mocha felt the beat pulsing through her body, her feet moving in time with the rhythm. She glanced at Akane, who was laughing and clapping, completely lost in the moment. Mocha couldn't help but smile, watching the sheer joy on Akane's face.

As the song came to an end, the crowd erupted in applause. The musicians bowed, their faces flushed with exertion and pleasure. Akane turned to Mocha, her eyes bright. “See? You had fun, yes?” she asked, her voice full of enthusiasm.

Mocha nodded, her mind still racing with the thrill of the experience. “Yes, fun,” she said, her voice still carrying a note of surprise.

They moved away from the musicians, making their way through the crowd, when Mocha noticed a figure approaching them. It was a tall elf, his eyes fixed on Akane. “What are you?” he asked, his voice curious but not unkind.

Akane smiled, her eyes twinkling with amusement. “Flash problems,” she replied cryptically.

The man looked puzzled for a moment, then broke into a wide smile. “Well, it certainly suits you,” he said, his tone appreciative.

As they continued walking, they passed by an elderly elf woman, who reached out and patted Akane on the back. “I’m sorry that happened, dearie,” she said, her eyes sympathetic. “It was such a big change for all of us, but I didn’t realize it could do this... Are you okay?”

Akane nodded, her smile never faltering. “Yes! Never better!”

The woman smiled, her eyes softening. “That’s the spirit,” she said encouragingly.

A little further along, a young woman holding a baby stopped them, her eyes drawn to Akane’s tails. The baby reached out, her small fingers trying to grab one of the fluffy appendages. “You certainly appeal to children with those,” the mother said, a smile playing on her lips.

Akane smirked and gently flicked her tail against the baby’s face, causing the little girl to giggle in delight while she tried to grab it. “Yes, fun,” she replied.

Mocha moved closer to Akane, putting an arm around her and rubbing one of her ears. “Fuzzy.”

The mother laughed, her eyes bright. “I think you look cute, and I’m glad you have the strength to handle what’s happened,” she said, her voice warm. “I know I would have a tough time if I was changed so drastically.”

Akane shrugged nonchalantly. “I’m fine,” she replied simply as they continued on their adventure.

They came across a park where trees provided a canopy of shade against the midday sun. The vibrant green grass seemed to invite them in, a refreshing contrast to the people city they had been navigating. Excited by the sight of the park, the two friends hurried over to the grassy field and lay down on their backs next to each other, their heads nestled against the soft earth. Akane’s three fox tails splayed out behind her, their rich, reddish-brown color standing out against the green grass.

Mocha turned her head towards Akane and tried to find the right words in her new, unfamiliar elf voice. "You... good?" she finally managed, her eyes seeking reassurance in Akane's.

Akane smiled, her gaze still fixed on the fluffy white clouds drifting lazily across the blue sky. "Yes. Silly elves is all. No big deal," she said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

They lay there in comfortable silence, their breathing slow and relaxed, the distant chatter of the city fading into the background. As the minutes passed, Akane sat up suddenly, her ears perked forward. Mocha turned to follow her gaze and saw the kitsune watching a group of children playing nearby.

A small, contented smile played on Akane's lips.

One of the children, a girl with wide, inquisitive eyes, spotted Akane staring and her jaw dropped in astonishment. She rushed over to the fox-woman, her excitement palpable.

"You-you-you have fuzzy cat ears!" she stammered, pointing at Akane's head.

Akane's eyes narrowed slightly. "*Fox*," she corrected tersely.

The girl nodded quickly, her face reddening with embarrassment. "That's what I meant! And tails! They're so *fluffy*! Did the magic do that to you?"

Akane nodded, her eyes still on the girl. "Yes."

The girl turned to shout over her shoulder, calling her friends and a woman who appeared to be her mother. When the kids gathered around, the girl explained in a rush of excitement, "The magic flash changed her! Look at her! She's so pretty!"

Another young girl, her eyes locked on Akane's tails, gasped with her hands to her mouth. "Are those cat—"

"No," the first girl interjected with an exasperated sigh. "Ugh, they're *fox* ears. Get it right."

Mocha covered her mouth with her hand to stifle a laugh. *Akane must be enjoying all this attention*, she thought, her eyes sparkling with amusement.

The mother, who had joined the group, looked at Akane with a hint of embarrassment in her eyes. "I'm sorry for my daughter bothering you," she began, and Mocha thought she sounded apologetic. "We'll just—"

Akane waved her hand dismissively. "No. Is fine." She turned to the children, her eyes twinkling. "You like magic?"

The children's heads bobbed up and down in eager agreement.

"I can do magic. Want to see?" Akane asked, her voice filled with a playful enthusiasm as she stood up.

The children's eyes widened, and the first girl clapped her hands excitedly. "Yes! YES!"

Even the mother joined in with a chuckle. "You don't have to, miss," she said, her voice filled with gratitude. "I'm sure you get bothered enough because of your... changes."

Akane simply smiled and raised a hand. A swirl of bluish-white mana appeared, coalescing into a glittering yellow silhouette of a butterfly. The children's eyes followed the magical butterfly, their faces alight with wonder. Akane then closed her hand around the butterfly, bringing it to her mouth and blowing gently on it. She opened her hand again, as if tossing the butterfly, and tens of them flew out in a mesmerizing dance around the children, who cheered and giggled with delight.

The scene in the park continued with growing excitement as Akane conjured more magical displays for the children and parents gathered around her. She created a small swarm of fireflies that buzzed about, their bioluminescent tails illuminating the grassy field in a soft, ethereal glow. The fireflies danced and weaved around the kids' heads, leaving behind a trail of wonder in their wake.

"Miss Fox, what else can you do?" one of the kids called out, their eyes wide with curiosity.

Akane's eyes sparkled with mischief as she raised her arms again. This time, she summoned a group of illusionary fish that leaped from the ground, splashing into the air as if they were swimming through the very atmosphere.

The fish twisted and twirled in mid-air, their vibrant reds, oranges, and whites creating a mesmerizing dance above the children's heads. Giggles and gasps of amazement echoed through the park.

The parents, watching from a distance, now came closer, sitting down on the grass to join the spectacle.

Mocha glanced at the growing audience and felt a surge of joy. *It's truly amazing what magic can do*, she thought, watching the children's eyes light up with delight.

Akane's voice snapped her out of her thoughts. "Miss Akane, can you make a drakyn?" one of the children asked, their eyes wide with anticipation.

Mocha watched as Akane focused her mana, conjuring an illusion of a giant reptile with wings that seemed to spiral around an enormous, invisible tree. The sight was mesmerizing, the drakyn's scales shimmering with green and gold, its movements fluid and graceful.

Mocha heard a rumble that seemed to echo through the air and realized it was the creature's roar. She watched as the children cheered and clapped, their faces full of wonder.

*She's so awesome*, Mocha thought, a surge of admiration and gratitude filling her heart. She felt so lucky to have Akane as her friend.

As the magical display continued, Mocha could sense that Akane was growing tired. She watched as the illusions began to fade, the magical creatures turning into small glimmers of light before disappearing altogether. The crowd erupted into applause, and Mocha couldn't help but join in.

"You're amazing, Miss Fox!" a young girl called out, her eyes shining with admiration.

Mocha couldn't have agreed more. She watched as Akane bowed, her face flushed with happiness. Mocha caught her eye and gave her an approving nod.

"You welcome," Akane said, her voice filled with genuine happiness. Akane surveyed the audience, her eyes twinkling with mischief. "Any else have magic?" she inquired, a challenging glint in her eyes.

One of the older ones hesitantly raised his hand. The other children turned their heads to stare at him, their eyes wide with a mix of excitement and envy. The boy's father reached out as if to stop him from coming forward but, after a moment of hesitation, simply shook his head and retracted his arm.

Akane beckoned the boy closer, giving him a reassuring smile. As he stood next to her, the boy looked up at Akane with awe and nervousness.

"Is okay," Akane encouraged gently, patting his head. "Show us your magic!"

With a nod of determination, the boy pointed to a tiny yellow flower growing in the grass. Sitting cross-legged in front of it, he gently cupped his hands around the delicate bloom and closed his eyes. Mocha felt the boy's mana begin to flow and soon, a soft green glow emanated from his hands.

The crowd watched in amazement as the boy moved his hands away from the flower. It began to grow rapidly, its stalk stretching upward until it stood chest-high to the seated boy. The yellow flower head expanded until it was as large as Mocha's elven hand.

The boy's father looked on with a mixture of pride and anxiety. But his apprehension vanished as Akane waved her hand, conjuring a beautiful butterfly. This butterfly looked real, except for the sparkling trail of a rainbow that streamed from its wings. It fluttered about, drawing gasps of delight from the onlookers, before finally alighting atop the massive yellow flower.

"Pretty," Akane murmured, her voice imbued with genuine admiration.

"Yes," Mocha agreed quietly.

The crowd, including the previously concerned father, was now wholly entranced, their faces filled with awe.

*People forget their worries when they are in the presence of beauty,* Mocha thought, taking in the scene. *It's why everyone is happy when I'm in my true form.*



Suddenly, a little girl, who Mocha guessed couldn't be more than seven based on her interactions with Iris, approached where she sat. "Do you have magic too?" the girl asked, her wide eyes fixed on Mocha.

Mocha smiled warmly at the child. "Yes. You want... to see?"

The little girl's head bobbed up and down so quickly, Mocha feared she might hurt herself.

Catching Akane's eye, Mocha gave her a conspiratorial smile. Akane responded with a knowing nod.

Mocha stood and moved away from the crowd, signaling for the little girl to follow. Once she had enough space to transform, she winked at Akane.

A whirl of mana enveloped Mocha as Akane let the magic holding her elven form dissolve. Muffled gasps of amazement emanated from the spectators, their voices slightly distorted by the curtain of magic.

The spell lifted, and Mocha emerged in her true form, a magnificent, beautiful, magical, and amazing horse. She let out a powerful neigh and emerged from the dissipating mana, sensing the awe in the air. *I know, I know. I look goooooood*, she thought, tossing her lustrous blond mane in the breeze.

She galloped away, her hooves pounding against the ground, the onlookers' exclamations accompanying her flight. After gaining some distance, Mocha activated her [**Can't Even Spell Inersha**] skill, allowing her to reverse direction instantly and return to the crowd at full speed. She slowed and reared up, neighing proudly, '*Behold me, minions!*'

Akane's laughter rang out like a bell.

Mocha raised her head imperiously and trotted over to the wide-eyed girl, gently bowing so she could climb on. The little girl's hands clutched at Mocha's mane as she hesitantly mounted the most magnificent horse.

Mocha released another proud neigh, feeling the admiration in the eyes of the crowd. She slowly circled the gathering, her [**Stop Falling Off**] skill—which she had made because Iris was a damned klutz—ensuring the child remained securely on her back. She transitioned to a canter, her ears twitching backward as the girl began to giggle uncontrollably. Other children ran alongside, their laughter filling the air. The parents, too, were pointing and chatting, their faces alight with pure amazement.

*It's perfect*, Mocha thought, looking toward Akane with an encouraging neigh, '*Come on! Your turn!*'

Akane called out to the children, her voice carrying a note of excitement. A cloud of mana enveloped her, and, within moments, it cleared to reveal a massive fox with a lolling tongue. The fox flopped onto the grass, rolling playfully before bouncing up with a big, goofy smile.

*She knows she looks intimidating. Best to act playful,* Mocha mused, nickering at the little girl on her back as if sharing a secret. *'Let's go play with her!'*

The girl's giggles persisted. "She's so pretty! Let's go over there!"

Mocha snorted in agreement and slowed to a walk as she approached her foxy friend. The atmosphere was charged with joy, the magic of the moment weaving a spell of its own.

Akane sat watching Mocha approach with her three fluffy tails sweeping across the grass in slow, playful arcs.

The magical dire fox looked up at Mocha and let out a series of yips and barks, her fox-like eyes full of excitement. *'They're so happy!'*

*'You were right, Akane, this is so much fun! Look at their faces!'* she neighed in response. In this form, they could communicate just as they did in their other forms. But, unlike when they were humanoid, they could speak in full sentences without difficulty.

Akane rolled onto her back, her paws reaching up to the sky as if she was trying to catch the clouds. She barked joyously, then rolled back onto her feet and leaped around Mocha playfully. The children in the crowd cheered, clapping their hands and running around them, joining in the playful spectacle.

The little girl on Mocha's back giggled even harder, her voice high and clear, blending with the laughter of the other children. "Do it again, do it again!" she said.

Akane looked up at Mocha, her fox eyes twinkling, and let out a series of playful yips, *'Let's put on a show they'll never forget!'*

Mocha neighed in agreement, and they both started to move around the field, their majestic forms casting long shadows across the grass. Akane darted in and out of the trees, her massive, but nimble fox form was agile and swift, while Mocha galloped after her, the wind lifting her mane and tail like banners. They played tag, and their movements synchronized in a dance of joy and freedom.

As they played, the children joined in, chasing after them, pretending to be horses and foxes. The parents, too, watched with smiles on their faces, some even joining in the game. It was a scene of pure, unadulterated happiness, a moment of magic in a world that had seen so much change.

Akane bounded up to Mocha, her fox tongue lolling out as she barked, *'I never thought the elves could be so nice like this. It's so much fun. We have to get Iris to join us.'*

The little girl on her back yawned, signaling it was time to be done. She walked near the girl's parents and lowered herself to the ground. The young girl's mother, a radiant high elf with long, flowing hair, hurried over to retrieve her daughter. Her eyes sparkled with joy as she lifted the child from Mocha's back and set her down gently on the grass. The young girl dashed over to an elderly couple that Mocha assumed were her grandparents, her voice high with excitement as she eagerly recounted the experience of her ride.

The mother approached Mocha, her eyes still shining with delight. She leaned in close, a smile stretching across her face as she whispered, "Thank you, miss. Your magic is absolutely enchanting, and you are the most gorgeous sight I've laid eyes upon. How I wish I could possess the power to transform into such a majestic creature like you can. This day has become a day my daughter will never forget, and for that, I am deeply grateful."

Mocha nodded toward Akane, who responded by releasing a cascade of magical energy. As the swirling cloud of mana enveloped them, Mocha found herself transitioning once more. Emerging from the mist, she stood before the slightly shorter woman in her sun elf form.

"Thank you," Mocha managed to say through the difficulty of her shifted speech. "You child bring happiness."

The woman stepped forward and gently grasped Mocha's arm, her face etched with concern. "Does the magic make it harder for you to speak? Are you sure you're alright?"

Mocha felt a welling of emotion, her eyes moistening. "I fine. Promise." Her gaze swept across the delighted children, their excited chatter filling the air. Some of the younger ones were attempting to jump and grasp at one of Akane's swaying tails. Mocha's face broke into a wide smile. "So happy. It is... good, I think. To feel like equal."

The woman's brows furrowed slightly in confusion, but she soon nodded with a soft, understanding smile. "I'm sure the other parents feel just as grateful as I do. You both are surely blessed by Eona herself."

A sudden spark of inspiration flashed in Mocha's mind, an idea taking shape. "Eona... Yes, we must go."

"Do you live in the city?" the woman asked.

Mocha nodded. *I do, we just don't have a home quite yet.*

The woman's grip on Mocha's arm tightened momentarily in a reassuring squeeze before releasing. "Alright, then. I wish you the best, and I hope to see you again. My daughter won't let me live it down if she cannot!"

Mocha made her way over to Akane, who was still surrounded by a throng of captivated children. Signaling that it was time to depart, the two magical creatures bid farewell to the children and the parents, who were a mix of elation and regret at their leaving.

Several parents voiced hopes that they might return someday, even extending invitations for a warm welcome at any time. Akane responded by promising that next time, she would bring her sister, a strong adventurer.

The statement puzzled the parents, but no one inquired further.

With a final glance at the children, who continued to buzz with excitement, Mocha and Akane walked away from the park.

"Where should we go next?" Akane inquired.

Mocha's smile broadened, and she confidently answered, "To the temple."



As the temple's spires came into view, Akane nudged Mocha, pointing discreetly to a store. Turning her head, Mocha caught sight of a quaint clothing shop nestled among the buildings.

"Can you get a cloak," Akane whispered, pressing a mishmash of coins into Mocha's hand. "For... camouflage."

Mocha glanced down at the coins, then realized the intention. *Oh, her ears and tails.*

"Wait. Where did you get these coins?"

"From our adventures," Akane replied with a wink, the hint of a smirk tugging at the corner of her mouth. "My part of the loot."

"And where mine?"

"In Iris's room," Akane replied, a touch too innocently.

Mocha rolled her eyes, letting out a playful huff. *Of course she's got my loot on lockdown.*

A soft swish of a tail, playful and teasing, grazed Mocha's arm, causing her to chuckle. *We're about to do something sneaky, aren't we?* she mused.

Quickly, Mocha entered the shop, her heart racing a bit from the excitement of their upcoming scheme. She selected a light black cloak, the fabric smooth under her fingers, and offered the handful of coins to the elderly shopkeeper. The woman raised an eyebrow, seemingly deliberating for a moment, before taking probably a coin or two more than the cloak's worth.

*Whatever.*

Emerging from the store, the streets now cast in the shadow of the setting sun, Mocha handed the cloak to Akane. In one fluid motion, the fox gracefully draped the cloak over herself, adjusting the hood to perfectly obscure her distinct features.

With Akane now suitably disguised, the duo resumed their journey, their footsteps crunching on the gravel path that led to the imposing structure. The massive pillars and intricate carvings of the temple's facade stood as a testament to the reverence held for the pantheon's so-called Family. Statues of the gods of the elves dotted the courtyard, standing stoically among the vibrant blooms of the garden.

It was pretty.

Mocha and Akane, moving with an air of casual nonchalance, joined a group of worshippers who were just entering the temple. The cool, sacred ambiance of the temple enveloped them as they moved forward, two souls amongst many, seeking solace and connection in this place of the elven gods.

As they entered the temple's main hall, they found themselves amidst a sea of worshippers. Long, ornate benches stretched out before them, their intricate woodwork polished to a gleaming sheen. The two quickly took a spot in the back, glancing around as the creaks and whispers of settling bodies filled the room.

Up ahead, a platform raised slightly above the rest held an elven woman. Cloaked in flowing robes of deep green and gold, she looked every bit the part of a speaker for the elven gods. Her eyes closed briefly, taking in a deep breath, then she began to speak. Her voice, melodic and strong, carried across the room, demanding everyone's rapt attention.

Just as the congregation's gaze became firmly fixed on the priestess, Akane's elbow gave a discreet nudge into Mocha's side. The signal was clear. *It's time.* With an effortless grace, the duo began to slide from their seats.

To any onlooker, it would have seemed as though the two women were just stepping out briefly, perhaps to answer nature's call.

But their intent was far more clandestine.

Moving with purpose, yet not drawing undue attention, they wandered down a dimly lit corridor. The faint scent of burning incense lingered in the air, guiding their steps as they navigated the maze-like interior of the temple.

Their footsteps, muffled by the plush carpet that adorned the hallway, barely made a sound. Every so often, they would pause, pressing themselves against a wall or ducking into a shadowy alcove whenever they heard the distant echo of footsteps or voices.

The walls of the temple were adorned with vibrant tapestries depicting tales of the gods, their threads shimmering under the muted light from the occasional torch. Each turn brought a new visual feast, but the duo kept their focus, ever-vigilant and alert.

The walls were adorned with old fabric that had faded pictures sewn into them. Mocha wasn't sure what the appeal was. Muted sunlight filtered through the stained-glass windows, casting colorful patterns on the stone floor and bathing the halls in a warm, ethereal glow.

Which would be pretty to look at if she didn't have the master fox of illusions next to her that could make prettier things.

As they walked down the halls, they encountered the scene of a man dressed in black robes standing outside a larger door conversing with a finely dressed woman who was wearing a poofy, extravagant dress. It looked like she was trying too hard.

Iris looked much better in her dresses.

The woman had a refined, aristocratic air about her, and she was smiling in a way that conveyed both confidence and fake gratitude. As she spoke, even her attitude was annoying.

She was probably a dumb bitch.

"...Lady Imogen, thank you for coming by today. I am pleased that we were able to offer assistance in your path, and I am truly grateful for your generous donation to Their temple. May Alos smile down upon you," the robed man said with a gentle bow.

"Thank you, Hierophant," Lady Imogen replied in a voice that was both gracious and commanding. "I shall take my leave now and return in one four weeks to verify my progress."

"Until then, My Lady," the Hierophant said, his voice filled with respect.

As Lady Imogen turned to leave, she caught sight of Akane, and her body physically jerked in shock. Her eyes widened as they fixed on the hooded form of the foxy woman. She opened her mouth as if to speak, but before any words could escape her lips, an armored woman quickly stepped between them.

"Have a pleasant day, Lady Imogen," the woman in red armor said firmly.

"B-But..."

"Please escort the lady out," the woman instructed while maintaining a calm and authoritative tone.

"Right this way, milady," a priest standing nearby said in a gentle voice.

Lady Imogen tried to glance back at Akane, her curiosity clear as day, but the priest gently guided her away, keeping her from looking back.

When Lady Imogen was finally out of sight, the woman turned her attention to the robed elf. “Hierophant,” she began, “I apologize for the intrusion. I will handle this.”

The woman turned to where Mocha and Akane stood. “May we help you? You two are outside of the authorized areas.”

Both Akane and Mocha jumped, startled, and the Hierophant laughed gently. “Praetor, that wasn’t kind. You scared these two young women.”

The sun elf woman in red armor with golden accents and a spotless white tabard sporting an embroidered sun stepped forward, her gaze sweeping over the two of them, lingering on Mocha. “Who are you?”

Mocha, regaining her composure, smiled. “My name... is Mocha.”

Akane waved enthusiastically. “I’m Akane. Iris is my sister.”

That made the horse in sun elf form roll her eyes. *Does she have to brag?*

*She’s my best friend.*

The woman sighed, her tone exasperated. “Iris Stuart? You...” Her eyes glowed briefly, narrowing further. “You are her sister?”

Akane nodded quickly, her voice eager. “Yes! Sister.”

The woman regarded them for a moment. “I am the Praetor of this temple.” She then asked, “What can Their temple do for you today?”

That was a good sign, and Mocha felt better about what they wanted to accomplish. She just had to convince this woman to help them.

Mocha’s smile was bright and hopeful. “Show Path!”

*Fuck, I hate talking like this. I sound like a newborn fowl.*

The red-armored woman raised an eyebrow. “I’m sorry?”

Akane jumped in, her voice more composed as she tried walking past the armored woman. “Show us our paths, please?” The woman stepped in Akane’s way and placed a hand on the foxy girl’s shoulder. Akane’s jumped in fright and bumped into the woman. “Oh! Sorry,” she said before backing away.

Akane handed a quill to Mocha. “Please hold!”

Mocha smirked and nodded.

The paladin looked between them with an unamused expression. “Unfortunately, due to the number of people who wish to undergo it, we require individuals to make an appointment or to come on public days.”

Akane's face fell, and she pouted. "But! Iris said..."

The paladin sighed. "I will have to request for you to step back."

Akane sulked as she stepped back.

The woman's eyes flashed with mana.

The narrowed her eyes at Mocha and Akane, her voice questioning yet firm. "You wholly believe that Miss Stuart is your sister. But she isn't your real sister, is she?"

"Iris. Sister," Akane said, her voice firm and a bit defiant.

"Why are you two speaking like that?"

The kitsune tried again, focusing with greater effort. "We just want to see paths. Pleaaase~!" she asked in a sing-song tone.

The paladin, however, seemed more intrigued than irritated. "The Ceremony of Paths is sacred. We can't just offer it on a whim."

Akane's eyes shimmered, and she seemed to be thinking rapidly. "I understand," she began, clearly trying to think of what to say.

Mocha laid a hand on Akane's shoulder and gently pulled her back. Mana filled her as it did in times of need, just like her best friend, and this time she knew what she had to do. She needed to focus and she needed to act like a real elf. She smiled at Akane as blue mana settled into her mind, organizing her thoughts and allowing her to focus. She felt something click, something important... something that would help her gain confidence in situations just like this and Mocha spoke it aloud, "**[Trust me, I've Got This].**"

Akane took a deep breath and nodded.

"We are close friends with Iris," Mocha explained, her voice smooth and articulate. "The Flash changed us like it did many others. Iris once said that she was told something here about her Excerpt, something that ultimately saved our group when we needed it most. I believe that Akane and I can be of help too. We just want to learn and understand our roles. I don't want to fall too far behind my best friend. Please, we mean no disrespect."

For her part, the praetor's reaction was immediate.

"You are using magic."

Mocha tilted her hand. "No?"

"Not you, her," the woman said gesturing to Akane.

Mocha turned to the fox who was trying to look as innocent as possible. "Akane..."



When Mocha returned her focus to the elf, she noticed the praetor's hand resting on the hilt of her sword, her eyes glowing yellow with mana as she watched them intently. Mocha felt a surge of adrenaline, and she shifted her stance, ready for a fight if it came to that. In her current form, she wasn't sure how well she would fare, but she wouldn't back down.

She could see the black-robed elf's head tilt in consideration as he watched the interaction.

"You aren't a terran," the praetor accused, her glowing eyes almost piercing in their scrutiny. "That much is clear as day. You aren't a sun elf either, are you? Who... or *what* are you?"

Mocha looked at the praetor with a confident smile on her face. The new ability she had found within herself wasn't something external; it was for herself. Her voice steady, she began to speak.

Mocha gestured to the praetor's sword, her tone becoming slightly playful. "I am Mocha Latte, faithful best friend of Iris Stuart and if you still want to draw that sword, we can step outside after for a friendly spar and I'll kick your face in. I've learned that it solves a lot of problems. Then, I can show you how to use it properly. Trust me, I'm an expert."

The praetor's eyebrows shot up, and she took a deep breath as if she was about to say something. But then, something happened that Mocha didn't expect.

The hierophant started laughing.

It was like a switch and the building tension melted as the man stepped forward and laid a hand on the elf's shoulder. "Praetor, let's give them a chance to speak. It's clear they mean no harm."

The real sun elf woman regained her composure and straightened her back. She gave Mocha a searching look as a corner of her lip curled slightly upward. "You fully, and I mean fully believed that statement. I'm impressed."

"I believe these two will provide an enlightening Ceremony of Paths," the hierophant stated calmly. "One from which the Church will gain much *understanding*. I would like to think you for your vigilance, Praetor. You do credit to your order, but this... I believe is something the Archpriestess will want to know more about."

The praetor's eyes widened, and she finally seemed to fully take in the appearance of Mocha and Akane. Her breath hitched for a moment, but she quickly composed himself. "Of course," she agreed in a measured tone.

Turning to one of the other black-robed men, the hierophant instructed, "Please delay our next appointment."

"Yes, Hierophant," the man responded with a respectful bow.

"I will wait out here, Hierophant," the Praetor said, her tone respectful. "Alos Protects."

The Hierophant hesitated briefly, seemingly contemplating something, before finally nodding in acknowledgment. “Understood. We will call upon you if there is a need. However, I have a feeling that these young women will be most pleasant to work with.” He looked at Akane and Mocha with a warm smile and gestured toward the open door. “Please, follow me.”

Mocha Latte walked alongside her kitsune friend as they were led into the circular chamber by the Hierophant. The room, lit with a faint blue glow emanating from the walls, housed a pedestal in the center with a massive mana core on top of it. Three robed figures, shrouded in shadows, stood in waiting.

The Hierophant stepped forward and turned to Mocha. “Miss, if you're comfortable, I suggest that you undertake the ceremony alone.”

Mocha's eyes darted to Akane, who nodded in understanding. “She's staying,” Mocha declared with a hint of stubbornness in her voice.

The Hierophant, his eyes obscured by the shadow of his hood, locked onto Mocha, his voice gentle yet questioning, “Are you sure? The sanctity of the ceremony's secrecy is paramount. We have sworn an oath upon the Family to never divulge what we call the prime details of your Excerpt.”

“Yes,” Mocha reaffirmed. “I'm certain.”

The elf then explained how the ceremony would go and motioned for Mocha to step toward the pedestal in the center of the chamber.

As Mocha placed her hands on the cool surface of the mana core, the other seers readied their quills and parchments, their faces a mix of excitement and curiosity.

The Hierophant murmured under his breath, his eyes slowly filling with a yellow light. Mocha felt an odd yet soothing pulse of energy flow through her. The room felt different, almost charged with a peculiar magic. The other seers leaned in with anticipation, the soft scratching of their quills filling the room.

As the Hierophant began to speak, the room went utterly still. It was quickly apparent something was different as the quills started scratching faster and light gasps filled the room.

**Mocha Latte Stuart**  
**Manabound Equine**  
(*Nascent Growth Imminent*)

**Path:** Storm's Herald  
**Steps:** 51

**Core Quality:** Remarkable  
**Affinity:** Unknown  
**Attunement:** Blue, Green  
**Alignment:** Hybrid

**All About Me:** [Close at Heart], [Uniquely Fabulous], [I Can Do This All Day]

**Set it and Forget it:** [Can't Touch This], [Stop Falling Off], [I Am Speed], [I Can Dress Myself], [Trust Me, I've Got This]

**If I Have To:** [Nothing a Kick to the Face Can't Fix], [Can't Even Spell Inersha], [What Works for you, Works for Me]

The room was silent, save for the seers hurriedly writing down everything. The Hierophant stared at Mocha, eyes wide, then finally whispered, "It is an honor to meet you, Miss Stuart. You are a truly fascinating *person*."

Tears streaked down Mocha's face as she felt the sudden rush of emotions that came with what the man had said and the revelation of her Excerpt. Akane immediately pulled her into an embrace. Mocha, her voice thick with emotion, whispered, "Sisters!"

Then it was Akane's turn.

Akane's participation in the ceremony caused a stir among the ones who called themselves seers. Each line spoken seemed more mystifying than the last, but it was when she gracefully drew back her hood at the end that the chamber filled with hushed gasps. The fabric slid back to reveal her kitsune features, causing the onlookers to exchange a mix of shock and awe.

The Hierophant appeared alight with barely suppressed glee. He stepped forward, extending a hand to maintain order, and made the other black-robed men and women remember their oath of secrecy, which they immediately did.

When the ceremony concluded, the two made their way to the Hierophant.

Gratitude shining in their eyes, he offered each of them a scroll, an intricate seal marking its authenticity. "This is a record of your Excerpt," he explained, his voice warm and reverent. "Do you have any questions for us?" When both Mocha and Akane shook their heads he continued, "Then I would like to grant you permission to return here whenever your hearts desire. Though," he added, a playful glint entering his eyes, "next time, perhaps bring Miss Stuart along."

Akane's eyes crinkled in a sincere smile. "We will," she promised.

With the weight of the ceremony behind them, Akane and Mocha swiftly navigated the streets, making their way to their inn. The dim lighting of the entrance lobby greeted them, and the wooden floor creaked beneath their steps. Akane, turning to Mocha, inquired in a low voice, "You still have quill?"

Without speaking, Mocha reached into her pocket and produced the item. But then, as if caught in a breeze of magic, the illusion surrounding the quill dissipated. It transformed into a magnificent sword, its hilt adorned with intricate designs and gems that caught the soft lighting, making it gleam.

Mocha's eyes widened in stunned realization. *Ab. This isn't good...*

A familiar voice interrupted her thoughts. "Where the hell have you two been?" Iris demanded, her tone dripping with a mix of concern and irritation.

From the shadows, another voice emerged, this one sharper and more accusing. "And why," Kaira inquired, "do you have a paladin's ceremonial blade in your possession?"

Mocha's startled gaze darted to Akane, who seemed unusually pleased with herself, a mischievous grin stretching across her lips.

The magical being, disguised as a sun elf, let out an exasperated sigh. "Ah, fuck."