

A Reasonable Conflict Resolution

With Mocha standing nearby ready to go, Iris prepared to climb up onto the wagon, but the sound of footsteps approaching from behind her made her hesitate. She turned to see Reeve Evelyn walking towards her. As Evelyn approached, Iris noticed she was carrying something in her hand.

“What's that you've got there, Evelyn?” she asked, her curiosity piqued.

Evelyn smiled warmly, pulling away the fabric that hid the object, and holding up a helmet. “Iris, I have a little something for you,” she said. “Our blacksmith made this a while ago for some passing knight, but the woman never returned. It's been collecting dust in the man's workshop, so we decided to present it to you as a reward for bringing us notice about the harpies and for the number you did kill.”

Iris took the helmet, examining it closely. It seemed really familiar, but she couldn't place the name. It had a sloping visor that would cover her face and neck, leaving just a narrow slit across the eyes, with a distinctive pointed tail at the back. It looked sinister and would match her current armor pretty well.

“Wow, thank you, Evelyn,” she said, feeling a sense of pride wash over her. “I can't believe this. How'd you know?”

The woman chuckled and gestured to Iris in a waving motion, causing the adventurer to look down at herself. She wore her full armor, sword, and dagger. Her hair was put up in its customary ponytail, and thus out of her face. Her quiver wasn't on her back since she would be sitting on her wagon, but she could see the woman's point.

She was ready to leave, and there was no helmet in sight.

“Fair point,” she muttered.

The woman smiled. “Now you can protect that pretty face of yours. Try it on lass!”

Iris lifted the helmet to her head and adjusted the leather straps to fit securely. As she pulled down the visor, the world suddenly seemed quieter, and her vision narrowed only slightly but her peripheral vision was the thing hampered the most. It was a strange sensation and would take getting used to during a fight but she couldn't help but feel safer knowing that her face was well protected.

She removed it, smiling at the woman while placing a hand over her heart. “Thank you, truly. We will hurry to Brightburn and I won't let anything stop me from seeing the lady. I'll deliver the message. If no one comes, I'll come back myself. I promise.”

Evelyn nodded gravely. “I appreciate that, Iris. I hope you do start that Adventurer's Guild. If those who join it are even half the person you are, the world will be a better place.”

Iris nodded, her heart swelling with pride. “I will,” she said firmly, tucking the helmet under her arm. “I’ll make sure it happens.”

With that, she turned and climbed up onto the wagon, settling in next to Tanith on the driver's bench. She couldn't help but feel a sense of excitement and anticipation. This was the first step on a new path, one that could lead her to great adventures and even more significant challenges. But she was ready for it. With her armor, her magic and weapons, and now her helmet, not to mention Mocha, she was prepared for anything the world could throw at her.

She felt a single tear fall.

My first quest reward.



After leaving Stilstead, Tanith explained how they would soon be crossing a river. As the wagon drove along, Iris kept stealing glances at her goofy horse. Mocha was by herself next to the wagon, *strutting* where the other horses could see her not having to do any work. She was even neighing happily, which was surely about *not having to carry the heavy human*.

The jerk.

Iris peered at Sera through the little hatch in between her and Tanith, trying not to be too obvious. The merchant was engrossed in her ledgers, scribbling notes and making calculations with a focused intensity. Iris couldn't help but admire the woman's dedication to her craft. It was clear that Sera took her business seriously and was willing to put in the hard work to make it thrive.

That was why even after a short time of knowing the woman, she had asked for her help to establish a guild. Iris was a great judge of character, not that Mocha would agree, but she was sure this time.

Sera and Tanith were good people.

As the wagon approached the bridge, Iris couldn't help but admire the view. The river flowing beneath it was crystal clear, and she could see fish swimming in the water. The bridge itself was a marvel of engineering, made of sturdy wooden planks and supported by thick stone pillars.

But her attention was quickly drawn to the people on the opposite side of the bridge. They were gathered in a small group, looking in the direction of the approaching wagon. Iris could see that they were armed, which made her feel a bit uneasy.

As they approached the group of armed people, Iris turned to Tanith and asked, “Who are they? Do you think they mean us harm?”

Tanith furrowed his brow in concern and replied, "I'm not sure, but it's better to be cautious. I'm going to slow the wagon down and we'll approach them slowly."

Iris nodded in agreement and watched as Tanith pulled back on the reins, slowing the wagon to a crawl. Mocha followed closely, seemingly content to let them take the lead. As they got closer, she could see that the group consisted of five men, all heavily armed with spears, roundshields, and chainmail, each with determined expressions on their faces.

The high elf guard leaned toward the hatch. "Sera, possible trouble. Lock the door and shut the hatch."

The woman glanced up quickly from her ledger and nodded. "Understood," she said before quickly shutting the hatch. Iris heard the bar to the door slam into place.

One of the men stepped forward and called out, "Halt! Who goes there?"

Iris took a deep breath and called back, "Merchants on the way to Brightburn. We're just passing through. We mean no harm."

The man, a telv she could tell because he was the only one without a helmet, studied them before shaking his head. "Not without paying the toll, you're not."

Tanith frowned. "Toll? What toll? I've traveled this road many times, and there's never been a toll."

"There is now," the man replied with a smirk. "It's the fee for passage. And if you don't pay, we'll make sure you don't cross."

Iris narrowed her eyes. "But we're already across the bridge."

The man laughed. "And now you have to pay to get off."

She sighed. "We can just turn around and not pay anything."

He laughed again, and it was starting to grate on her nerves.

"You'll have to pay to get off the bridge on the other side now too!" he said, all too happily.

Iris peeked around the wagon and looked back at the way they came. Sure enough, there were three riders on horseback at the other end.

She focused back on the jokester. "Who are you? You're clearly not affiliated with anyone legal," she said before turning toward the man sitting with her. "Tanith, what's the law say about banditry?"

The high elf narrowed his eyes. "Banditry is punishable by death," he said. He looked at the man. "Surely everyone here is reasonable."

"Just pay the toll, and we'll let you go, no banditry. Just simple supply and demand."

Iris rolled her eyes. “That’s not...” she sighed. “No, never mind. How about this? I will get off the wagon and walk, but let the wagon off the bridge, and we can negotiate the toll? Is that fair?”

The man’s smile grew, showing some frankly disgusting teeth. “You have a deal. Hop on down. Come walk with us.”

She smiled and hopped off of the wagon. Mocha made to follow her but she held up a hand. “Stay with the wagon, Mocha.”

Her horse let out a snort before giving the men a death stare.

“Don’t worry,” she reassured the horse.

“Stop delaying. Come on,” the man said.

Iris sighed, and pulled at the mana around them, letting it flow into her. She settled into her **Rushing Wind**, feeling herself feel lighter, quicker. She would have to move quickly if things turned south.

With a deep breath, Iris stepped forward and began walking with the group of armed men, keeping a careful eye on their movements. She couldn't help but feel a bit uneasy, knowing that she was outnumbered and outmatched in terms of weaponry. But she was determined not to let them intimidate her.

After all, she had magic.

She followed their lead as they made their way off the bridge and onto the dirt road, where a makeshift toll booth had been set up. From there, she watched as Tanith guided the wagon off the bridge and parked it alongside the road on the other side from where the hastily constructed hut, barely big enough for two people, stood. She saw the guard slide to the edge of the bench, his eyes tense and focused as he kept watch over the situation.

Another man, an overweight telv who was sweating profusely, wearing a ragged cloak and wielding a rusty sword, stepped out of the ramshackle structure to join them. She narrowed her eyes at the stark difference in equipment.

“Ten gold coins for passage,” he demanded, a scowl set deeply on his face.

Iris raised an eyebrow. “That seems a bit steep, don't you think?” she said, trying to sound casual.

The man sneered. “Pay it or we confiscate the wagon.”

Iris shook her head, crossing her arms. “I don’t think so. I’m not paying that much for a toll.”

The man with the rusty sword scowled at her. “Then we’ll take the wagon and everything in it as payment.”

Iris narrowed her eyes, sensing the situation was quickly escalating. “I don’t think you understand the situation here,” she said, her voice cold and firm. “I’m not paying

your ridiculous toll, and you're not taking our wagon. We're leaving, and if you try to stop us, I won't hesitate to use force."

The rotund telv laughed, clearly not intimidated. "You and what army?"

Iris took a step forward, and the air around her crackled with energy. "Just me," she said, her eyes glowing with magic. "Now stand aside, or face the consequences."

Iris could hear the sound of hooves pounding on the stone bridge before a voice called out, "Hold! Hold!"

As the riders approached, Iris tensed slightly, recognizing them as Erick, Galen, and Eira. She narrowed her eyes as they reined in their horses next to the group of toll collectors. Mocha moved closer to the wagon, positioning herself to rush to Iris's aid if needed.

"What's going on here?" Erick asked, his eyes scanning the group of armed men.

She almost rolled her eyes at the man's acting. After what Tanith and Sera told her, it wouldn't surprise her if the three terrans were working with these bandits.

However, Iris could act as well.

"Clearly, these bandits are trying to extort us for an exorbitant toll," Iris explained, her tone laced with frustration.

Galen snorted in disgust. "Typical. They think they can take advantage of anyone who passes through here."

The large telv man feigned hurt. "My, we're just doing our duty, milord. These merchants wish to cheat us."

Eira, who had been quiet until now, spoke up. "We can take them down easily. Let us handle this."

Iris wasn't sure if the woman was talking to the bandits or her, but she figured she'd find out shortly. "Thank you so much, Eira. I am glad you guys were able to get here so fast to help us."

The woman narrowed her eyes, but Erick placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Iris, Iris, Iris... Eira here wasn't the only one that gained magic when we arrived," he said.

Galen shook his head. "Indeed," he said as he stepped forward. "My magic allows me to hear things from a distance. Imagine my surprise when your companions told you about the prince."

Iris let out an exaggerated sigh. "Ah, so you do work with a terrorist. Good to know," she said offhandedly as if she were completely unconcerned.

The soft thud of Tanith's boots hit the ground behind her, and she glanced back, seeing the man with his sword out and holding her helmet.

“Here,” he said, tossing her the helm.

She smiled and caught it. “Thanks,” she said before turning back to the terrans and lifting a finger. “One second, I’m probably going to need this.”

Eira *growled*, which elicited an angry neigh from Mocha.

Yeah, I’d love to see her try too, girl.

Quickly placing the helmet on, she almost laughed that they actually let her. Settling the visor in place, she nodded. “Okay, I’m good.”

Erick sighed. “You know that we can’t let you go,” the man said with a shake of his head. “You have one chance here, Iris. This world is fucked. It’s filled with people who don’t give two shits, who want to keep the world living in squalor. I don’t think you realize how rare magic is. Don’t let your life go to waste for these... elves.”

She almost believed he felt regret at needing to potentially kill her.

Iris remained unmoved by Erick’s little speech, her eyes cold and unyielding. “I won’t be swayed by your words, Erick,” she said. “Using magic for nefarious purposes is not something I will ever condone, no matter how rare it may be. And I certainly won’t abandon my morals for the sake of a few coins and a misguided cause.”

The man scoffed and gestured the armored men forward. They lined up, lowering their spears, and took a step toward the wagon.

“I tried,” Erick said with a shrug.

Mocha did *not* like that. Her horse reared up and let out a high-pitched, piercing squeal. The sound startled the armed men, causing them to take a step back. Iris took advantage of the momentary distraction to step closer to Tanith and draw her sword.

She channeled her **Arcane Capability**, despite still feeling the effects of her **Rushing Wind**.

Mocha took a few charging steps at the five men before stopping and snorting at the group. The spear wielders seemed wary of her steed, and rightly so. She’d bet on Mocha in that fight.

“It’s just a stupid horse. You have spears!” Eira shouted.

Iris narrowed her eyes. “Do not call my horse stupid. That’s strike one.”

“What are you going to do, bitch?” The woman sneered. She turned to Erick. “Clearly she’s a lost cause, let’s be done with her and move on. The prince will want us to investigate the harpies she warned the village about.”

That made Iris raise a brow. Why would the bandits want to investigate the harpies too?

Erick sighed. “My sister is right. Last chance, Iris. We can put this all behind us.” He gestured to the river. “Water under the bridge and all that.”

One of the armed men darted forward and jabbed his spear at Mocha. Her horse dodged to the side, snapped at the spear with her teeth, and ripped it from the man's hands. He let out a cry of surprise followed by pain as Mocha *swung* it at him, breaking it against his arm, and causing him to fall.

Iris's **Danger Sense** went off.

She turned just in time to see Eira *throw* what looked like a handful of fire at Mocha. Her horse saw it at the last second but wasn't able to get away before the spell hit her in the shoulder. Mocha let out a squeal of pain as the fire burst against her.

Iris's heart raced as she watched Mocha suffer from the unexpected attack. She quickly focused her magic and rushed forward to defend her companion, feeling the anger and determination coursing through her body. She was not going to let anyone hurt her horse or get away with such a cowardly attack.

She looked over at Tanith. "Get the healing goop! Help Mocha, I'll handle them."

He took one look at her before nodding and rushing to help her friend.

Iris pulled in every bit of mana that she could, letting **Storm Armor** settle into her, and channeled **Mana Conduit** into her sword before switching it to her right hand.

She turned and faced the people arrayed against her.

"Time's up. It was unfortunate that your horse had to be made an example of, but it's just a beast. We have plenty more if you join us," Erick said.

Her fingers curled into tight fists, nails digging into her palm and the others into the hilt of her sword as she fought to control her anger.

"I was willing to let you go without a fight, but then you hurt my best friend," Iris ground out, lightning crackling around her as the smell of ozone filled the air. She saw their hair start to stand on end.

Making new spells had always been about trials and tribulations for Iris. Moments of desperation and need. This definitely qualified. She needed to help her injured friend, and these people needed to be punished.

Arcane Capability and mana surged through Iris even as **Storm Armor** sent lightning cracks around her. She prepared a spell, altering it, enhancing its strength.

Eira's eyes narrowed and her hands burst into flames. Pitiful flames.

She glared at the terrans standing there, the group overconfident in their numbers. "You obviously know who Thor is," She sneered, **Focus** settling into her. "Here? I'm the closest thing to the goddess of thunder, bitch."

Her hand shot up and an overcharged **Chain Lightning** lashed out, altered to concentrate on a single target. The blast hit Eira with her stupid robes right in her unarmored chest. Before the blonde mage even fell, a hole bored through her chest,

mana and magic bent to Iris's will and she *stepped*. She felt herself transform into lightning, and surge toward where she wanted, arcs of superheated energy shooting out from her form as she moved. She arrived in a burst of electricity and instantly struck with her sword using **Arc Lash**. Galen tried to get his sword up in time, but the man was just *so slow*. Her blade sliced right through his throat before she raised a hand and fired a **Spark** point-blank at Erick. The man managed to get his shield up, but then she was there. She bashed her sword into his shield three times before his knee buckled.

The armored men sprang into action, charging at Iris with weapons at the ready. The man that had fallen to Mocha's attack lagged behind but held a sword as he joined his comrades.

She cast her **Arcane Torrent** and a flurry of slivers of pure energy launched out like miniature homing missiles, causing the men to cower behind their shields as the deceptively small spells burst against them in a cacophony of power.

Without hesitation, she unleashed her **Static Discharge** spell by altering a flurry of **Sparks**, channeling her mana to fire bolts of piercing electricity that connected with the first man, and shot out two more crackling balls of lightning with each hit. With a flick of her wrist, **Chain Lightning** followed, releasing a spray of lightning that surged through the five attackers. The men's armor glowed and smoked as they fell to the ground, dead before they even knew what hit them. Iris spun around, scanning the area for Erick, but the man was already making a hasty retreat.

She narrowed her eyes and used **Lightning Step**, her form shifted and surged toward the man, emerging in a crouch right in front of him with bolts of electricity arcing from her to the ground.

Erick stumbled backward, a look of fear on his face as he scrambled to draw his weapon. But Iris was already upon him, delivering blow after blow to the man's face that sent him reeling. He fell to the ground, and instantly tried to scramble away.

She took a deep breath and surveyed the area. Everyone else was dead except the large telv man who she could see fleeing in the distance. He would probably warn the Marauder Prince about what happened, but for now, she couldn't care less.

Iris looked down at the blonde terran. "Erick, Erick, Erick... I have it on good authority that banditry's something that gets you sentenced to death. Give Relena my regards."

She flicked her wrist again, firing a **Chain Lightning**.

Erick's body collapsed in a smoking heap.

She sheathed her sword and walked back over to where Mocha was waiting, lifting the visor of her helmet and patting the mare soothingly. She remained quiet as she watched Tanith work, the man liberally applying the healing poultice to the burns.

As Tanith rubbed the poultice into Mocha's burns, the mare let out soft whines, her nostrils flaring with discomfort. She shook her head a few times, trying to relieve the pain, but Tanith's gentle touch kept her from getting too agitated. The whines became more and more subdued as the poultice took effect and the pain subsided. Eventually, Mocha's breathing slowed and she stood still, seemingly at ease once more.

"Thank you," Iris said softly to the man, her voice filled with emotion.

Tanith nodded. "I'm going to check on Sera, then we should leave."

Iris looked around. "We should gather what gear we can. I'm sure Sera can sell it."

The man paused and scanned the area. "I agree."

As he walked away, Iris moved to look Mocha in the eye. She could see the pain still lingering in the horse's expression, despite the healing poultice applied by Tanith. Iris reached out a hand and gently stroked Mocha's mane, trying to reassure the animal that she was there and everything would be alright.

Mocha let out a soft whinny and nuzzled her head against Iris's chest as if seeking comfort. Iris wrapped her arms around the mare's neck and held her close, feeling the warmth of the animal's body and the softness of her fur.

"Shh, you did good, girl. You used that spear like a pro!"

Her horse blew out some air and grunted.

"I'm sorry you got hurt. Can you walk with us? I'll ride on the wagon again," Iris asked Mocha, her voice filled with concern.

Her friend lifted and stretched the leg of the shoulder that was hit, seeming to consider the question. After taking a few more steps, she turned around and nodded a few times toward Iris, indicating she was okay.

"Alright, then let me start gathering all of this stuff. Rest until we have to leave," Iris said, looking at Mocha.

The horse made no complaint.



As the wagon approached the top of the hill, the sprawling city of Brightburn came into view, stretching out amongst the hills that made up the region. They had traveled all night, with Tanith and Iris taking turns driving the wagon with only oil lamps as their lumination in the cloudy night.

Despite the hazards of traveling in a wooden wagon at night, the fear of more bandits attacking had sucked out any desire of stopping for the night after the battle of the bridge.

Just seeing the city had both her and Tanith sighing in relief.

And it was a sight alright. The early morning sun was just beginning to rise, casting a warm glow over the city and illuminating the tops of the tallest buildings. From this distance, Iris could see the towering spires of the castle in the center of the city, rising above the rest of the buildings like a beacon.

The city walls could be seen as well, tall and imposing, made of dark grey stone and lined with small figures, only visible by their glinting armor, patrolling the battlements. The walls encircled the entire city, creating a barrier against the outside world. Beyond the walls, the city was a sea of rooftops, each one sloping at a slightly different angle and made of a different material.

In the distance, she could see the fields and farms that surrounded the city, patches of green and gold that stretched out to the horizon. Smoke rose from chimneys of the houses both within the walls and the small farmhouses outside of it, and she could see the glittering surface of a nearby river that snaked its way toward the city.

As the wagon continued toward the city gates, Iris couldn't help but feel a sense of awe at the sight before her. Brightburn was a city unlike any other she had seen, and she couldn't wait to explore its streets and find the best place to set up the new guild.

But first, they needed to complete the contract, alert the Guard about the Marauder Prince and his bandits, and then meet the lady of the city to request aid for Stilstead, while informing her of the harpy threat.

All in a day's work for an Adventurer.