

No Plan Survives Contact

The room fell under an oppressive silence, a tangible aura of shock filling the air in response to the sudden appearance of the kitsune. Iris found herself locked in the piercing gaze of the kitsune, who now stood in her humanoid form, the illusion almost uncannily realistic even if the adventurer knew what lay just beneath.

Each of the kitsune's eyes, one a mesmerizing violet and the other a striking cyan, shone with a mysterious blend of intelligence and playfulness, her trio of tails moving in a steady rhythm that accentuated the silence. There was an unspoken expectation hanging heavy in the room, akin to an arrow nocked, its bowstring stretched to its limits, ready for the snap of release.

The inn's patrons seemed trapped within this sudden spell, cutlery hanging mid-air and words dying on their lips. Faces etched with surprise turned towards the unusual spectacle now occupying center stage—Iris's party and the fascinating fox girl. Iris could feel the intense scrutiny from the audience, all eyes locked on her, awaiting the drama's next act.

The kitsune, utterly unfazed by the attention, her gaze never straying from Iris and her companions. The once cheerful chatter and laughter had vanished, replaced by a pulsing current of anticipation. It was a distinct shift, a startling reminder of how quickly a situation could spiral from the ordinary into the extraordinary.

This is fine. Everything is fine.

"Is that her?" Kaira asked quietly.

Iris nodded slowly, her eyes not leaving the kitsune's. "Yes, this is her."

"How did she get in here?" Ser Meredith hissed.

"Everyone, please be nice to our... guest," Iris ordered, slowly raising a hand toward Ser Meredith who she knew was preparing to attack. "She's quite smart and just likes games, isn't that right?"

The kitsune's eyes brightened and she let out a series of yips before her expression fell again. She turned her focus back to the map and pointed at the location of the bandit fort, again before peering at Iris with an expectant look.

Iris's confusion must have been evident because the fox-girl sighed and pointed at Iris, followed by herself, then down at the map, tapping it furiously with narrowed eyes.

"There's something there that you know?" the adventurer asked, her curiosity overwhelming her confusion.

That did not appear to be the correct answer because then the kitsune *grabbed* Iris's arm, and started pulling.

Iris screamed out in surprise. "I thought that was an illusion!"

The kitsune rolled her eyes and barked, tugging on her arm again.

"Okay, okay. I'll follow you," Iris acquiesced.

A distinct tension clung to the room as if the air itself had solidified. Iris's friends exchanged hesitant glances, their faces a canvas of trepidation.

"Iris, are you sure about this?" Laken questioned, his former desire to meet the kitsune replaced by a mask of concern.

Ser Meredith's gaze was no less wary as her hand stayed hovering over the hilt of her blade, poised to pull it at a moment's notice. "It's dangerous to blindly follow an unknown entity, even if it appears harmless."

Iris offered them a comforting smile. "I know it seems risky," she admitted. "But I have a feeling that we need to trust her."

Her gaze flicked back to the kitsune, who merely rolled her eyes with an air of impatience. She gestured dismissively, her message clear: 'Follow if you want, or don't. It makes no difference to me.'

The group, led by the seemingly frustrated kitsune, cautiously ventured outside, their footsteps on the wooden floorboards of the inn punctuating the silence. The air was cool against their skin, the early morning sun just beginning to peek over the horizon, painting the sky in hues of red and gold. The kitsune led them straight to the stables, where Mocha, Iris's trusted steed, was housed.

Upon entering, the familiar scent of hay and horse washed over them, and Mocha's ears perked up at their entrance, but then her eyes narrowed as she saw the kitsune.

'Iris, who is this?' her friend nickered, the magical horse's focus now entirely on the fox girl.

"Mocha, I'd like to introduce..." Iris started before looking at the kitsune, who sighed and faced Mocha before letting out a series of barks and yips.

'Woah, bitch. Calm down, you know they can't understand you,' Mocha whinnied.

A frustrated bark replied.

'Look, yes. Fine, I will tell her. But I don't do things for free. You need to pay in apples,' Mocha nickered. *'Wait... How'd you even know Iris and I could understand each other?'*

The kitsune let out a few yips.

'You followed her back last night...' Mocha gave Iris an unamused look. *'Makes sense. She's obviously oblivious at times.'*

Mocha turned her head to Iris but the kitsune then let out a couple yips, which the horse nodded to. *'And I'm Mocha,'* she huffed in response.

Iris raised a brow. "What did she say, Mocha?"

The kitsune gestured to Iris in a get-a-move-on type of way. Mocha snorted. *'Her name is She-who-loves-pranks-and-chicken. She wants to go with us to the hidden wooden place with many bad men.'*

"She-who... What?"

Pondering the situation, Iris's mind sifted through countless anime memories, picking out one particular kitsune name that she had always liked. With an air of determination—and a little bit of fangirling, she turned to the kitsune. "Can we call you Akane?" she asked, physically forcing herself not to squee.

Please say yes, please say yes.

The kitsune, seeming to sense Iris's sincerity, sighed but then nodded her agreement.

"Okay, awesome," she said. "Mocha, why does she want to go with us, and how does she know about it?"

Mocha asked the question, and Akane replied with a long, winded explanation that the horse then relayed to Iris.

"Iris? What are they saying?" Kaira prodded, reminding Iris that everyone was standing there behind her.

"Oh! Sorry guys," Iris said and turned around. "So, the kitsune, here, has said that we can call her Akane. Her actual name is really long. Also, she wants to join us in attacking the bandit fort. Apparently, the Marauder Prince and all of his bandits are capturing animals, but especially magical animals, to either sell or to kill for their mana cores."

The others exchanged shocked glances, their eyes returning to Akane as they digested the new information. "You want to trust her? She just appeared out of nowhere!" Ser Meredith asked, her focus set on Akane. "She's a... she's a *monster*."

Iris shook her head. "No, she's a magical creature, but that doesn't make her a monster."

"You don't think that it's too much of a risk?" Gryff asked, his own focus set on the fox girl.

Laken, previously silent, studied Akane with newfound interest. "Perhaps," he finally spoke, his voice measured. "this is an opportunity we shouldn't dismiss. After all, we could use all the help we can get."

“I agree with Laken,” Kaira chimed in, folding her arms. “Though I can't shake off the feeling that she's hiding something.” Her gaze met Iris's. “But you trust her, don't you?”

Iris nodded, her determination unshaken. “I do. She's intelligent, capable, and might just be our best bet against the Marauders.” With a decisive nod, she looked at Akane. “We'll work together. You're part of the party now.” Akane simply rolled her eyes, but her tails gave quick, satisfied flicks.

Ser Meredith's gaze passed between all of them with a conflicted expression. “This is crazy, you're all crazy...” she said with a shake of her head.

Iris shrugged, a smile growing on her face. “Of course, it's crazy. We're adventurers. It's our job to deal with the crazy.”



“Keep an eye out for the harpies,” Iris called out, raising her voice over the noise of the moving wagon. “Remember, they look like telv or high elves crossed with birds.”

Their journey led them to the fringes of the Cursed Forest, a notorious area known to be the dominion of harpies. Gryff had taken charge of the wagon, directing the horses along the rugged path, with Kaira seated at his side, her eyes scanning the horizon for potential threats. Their wagon creaked and jostled, the road crunching under the weight of their journey.

In the back of the wagon, Bree and Laken sat in silence, engrossed in their own thoughts. Sandwiched between them was Akane, whose attention seemed entirely focused on the dense foliage of the forest. Meanwhile, Iris rode alongside the wagon astride Mocha, who was bedecked in her full battle armor, the steel glinting under the sunlight.

Akane turned her gaze to Iris and let out a sequence of sharp barks. Mocha's ears flicked back and forth, her equine eyes focused on the fox-girl as she translated, *‘Akane says that the bird people are quite rude,’* Mocha whinnied. *‘And aren't fun to play games with.’*

Iris chuckled as she shook her head.

She's so carefree.

As the day wore on, the group maintained a steady pace alongside the foreboding forest, eyes peeled for any signs of danger. Iris's warning appeared to have resonated with her party, lending an eerie quiet to the initial leg of the trip. Yet, no harpies emerged from the forest's depths to harass them as they had when Iris, Sera, and Tanith had journeyed from Cosdale. The only sound accompanying them was the crunch of wheels against the packed dirt and the occasional rustle of leaves in the breeze.

As time wore on though, Iris heard hushed banter and muffled laughter followed by hurried shushes which did much to ease the tension. For her part, Iris remained alert atop Mocha, her gaze flitting between the forest and the road ahead. Meanwhile, Gryff continued guiding the wagon, Kaira steadfast in the seat next to him. Akane sat in the rear, her focus fully immersed in whatever quiet conversation was happening between Laken and Bree.

Finally, the red sun started its descent and the forest's edge receded, signaling a pleasantly uneventful end to their journey past the Cursed Forest.



Cosdale's familiar features were a bittersweet symphony of memories for Iris. As the group neared the town's outskirts, she found herself caught in the tapestry of past encounters and episodes she'd rather forget. The glow of the setting sun seemed to stir these memories, casting long, ominous shadows over the weathered rooftops, while the familiar scents of the local fare lingered in the air like a ghost of her past.

Entering through the guarded gates, she caught sight of the recognizable faces of the guards. Despite the mixed feelings, the surprise in their eyes made her give them a curt nod. She was greeted with nods in return, whispers filling the air like invisible specters as they passed.

It seemed that the town's perception of her as some kind of a hero, despite their lack of overt appreciation, remained even through her abrupt departure.

Guiding the group down the familiar cobblestone paths, they arrived at Helda's inn. A place she'd once considered a haven, now stirred a complex mix of emotions within her. A boy spotted their arrival, running inside to probably warn the innkeeper.

She was dismounting Mocha when the telv woman emerged from within the inn, her eyes quickly meeting Iris's. "Didn't think I'd see your scrawny ass again," Helda commented dryly, her gaze drifting over to Mocha. A soft smile graced her lips as she added, "And how are you, girl? Seems like your adventurer finally got you some armor."

Mocha snorted and walked over to Helda giving the woman a gentle nudge, much to the innkeeper's amusement. She focused back on Iris as Mocha nickered.

"What did she say?" Helda asked.

Iris huffed. "She'll have your best stall for the night, although she still thinks a room on the ground floor would be suitable. If you decline, then she may be bribed with apples."

"I'll see what I can do, girl." Helda chuckled and patted Iris's friend on her neck. "And who are your friends?" she asked as everyone got down from the wagon.

Iris gestured at her party, indicating each member as they approached. “This is Gryff, Laken, Bree, Akane, and—”

“I’m Kaira,” the elf said with a smile and an extended hand. “Iris’s... companion.”

Iris froze.

Helda raised a brow as she gripped Kaira’s hand. “Didn’t think she’d ever go steady,” she said before pulling Kaira close and whispering into her ear. The elf’s eyes widened slightly before a determined expression settled onto her face.

Helda pulled back and the two shared a long look, before Kaira nodded. “I will.”

The innkeeper smiled. “Good! Iris, that girl has three tails and some fluffy ears. I haven’t had anything to drink, so I presume you know this?”

Iris laughed. “Yes, that’s Akane. She was... changed by the Flash.”

Helda nodded like it was just another normal day with Iris. “That’s an extra silver a night. How long are you staying?”

“Oh, come on! Helda! Why do you always gotta charge me extra?” Iris whined.

Kaira laughed, the look of her eyes as they filled with mirth was gorgeous. “Just for the night, Miss Helda. We’re on a *quest*.”

The woman’s eyes widened as she seemed to take in the party in a new light. “Well, I’ll be. Iris Stuart, you turned your silliness into a real profession, girl. I’m impressed. Any of you adventurer types make a mess of my inn and I’ll knock you on your asses. If either of you boys bothers Neri, I’ll take a frying pan to ya,” Helda said, referring to her high elf barmaid.

Her gaze hovered over Bree and Akane for a moment before she shook her head. “You too may be the most normal ones here.”

Kaira sucked in a breath. “Wait, what about me?”

The innkeeper didn’t miss a beat. “You’re the woman that *chose* Iris. You’re probably the worst of the lot,” she said with a huff. “Now, you can park the wagon in the back, choose any stalls for the normal horses and take the closest one to the entrance for Mocha, that girl gets the best. The rest of yous come on in. We’re causing a scene.”

Iris smiled as everyone started moving. Akane exchanged a few words with Mocha before the kitsune sidled up to Iris.

Helda paused as she took in the sight of them next to each other, her eyes narrowed but then she just shook her head. “I’m not even going to ask.”

Akane let out a light bark, and the innkeeper sighed, her gaze moving up to the second moon in the sky. “Nope. Relena grant me patience. Iris, you’ve got a lot of explaining to do tonight.”

Iris’s smile grew. *I missed this woman.*



The woods that sat ahead of the group held memories that Iris wished she could leave behind. A labyrinthine weave of towering trees, their almost sinister familiarity pricking at her skin. It was here, among these very trees that she arrived on Eona, brought by the Flash and bestowed her neverending bad luck.

Yet, it was also here that she learned magic, and cast her **[Spark]** for the first time, turning the tide of a horrible fate. Now, a year and a half later, the forest remained unchanged, silent and foreboding, and still filled with those damned bandits. It was time to change that.

Everyone moved closer together, as Iris pulled out the map and placed it onto the wagon, spreading it out so everyone could see the circle where the fort should be.

“We’re here,” she said, indicating a location almost ten kilometers from their destination. “While I am *sure* there is a hidden wagon trail somewhere, we do not have all day to locate it. So, here’s what I suggest.”

She’d chosen the spot where they’d enter the woods deliberately. She looked up from the map and pointed north where the outline of a building could be seen. “That is the ruins of an old farm. We’ll leave the wagon there. Then it’s all on foot. Mocha, you still okay with guard duty?”

Mocha flicked her tail a bit in irritation before letting out a huff. *‘Yeah, yeah. Fine.’*

Akane let out a couple of barks to Mocha who turned and nodded to the kitsune.

“I suggest we find somewhere to camp for the night,” Kaira suggested, as her eyes scanned the map.

“I agree,” Iris responded. “But I think it would be best if we scout out the fort first. I want to get an idea of the lay of the land, their numbers, and patrol routes if possible. We don’t want to make a camp only to be discovered by one of their patrols.” Her gaze swept the group, searching for any signs of opposition. When none came, she continued. “We’ll move as a group until we’re about a kilometer away. Then, Bree, Gryff, Kaira, and Akane will stay back while Laken and I move in closer for reconnaissance.”

Everyone nodded in agreement with the plan and started gathering their supplies. Akane tilted her head slightly, which made Iris narrow her eyes. She still wasn’t sure how much she could trust the magical creature. Once the group had set up the wagon and made sure Mocha was secure with the mundanes at the abandoned farmstead, they began their trek into the woods.

In the hushed silence, Akane suddenly shimmered. An ethereal light enveloped her, tracing the outline of her humanoid form before it wavered and transformed. Her

body morphed, elongating and shifting until it was no longer the figure the kitsune had used since leaving Stilstead. Standing there, in place of the woman, was a massive fox, her fur gleaming in the dappled sunlight, her multiple tails fluttering behind her. She easily reached Mocha's shoulder, her piercing eyes surveying the group. All around, eyes widened in astonishment as the team took in her true form. Iris merely smirked at the stunned silence, having been privy to this sight before.

Maybe not just an illusion then? Alteration, maybe? An actual humanoid transformation spell?

The transformation sent a ripple of whispers through the group. Laken, in particular, seemed spellbound by the sight of Akane's true form. His gaze was locked on her, mouth slightly agape. "She's... magnificent," he whispered, and Iris had to agree. In this form, Akane was truly a sight to behold.

Beside Iris, Kaira leaned in, her eyes wide as she glanced between Iris and Akane. "You chased her?" she murmured, the disbelief clear in her voice. "Were you out of your mind?"

Iris couldn't help the grin that tugged at her lips. She remembered that day well, the thrill of the chase, the rush of adrenaline. "Maybe a little," she admitted, her eyes twinkling with amusement. It had been a mad thing to do, certainly, but it had let her meet an actual kitsune, and the weeb in her had no regrets.

As they continued on their journey, the group quickly settled into a cautious rhythm, spreading out enough that a large clump of people wouldn't be an easy target for an ambush, but close enough that they could still communicate quietly.

Someone needs to make magic or enchanted comms, for real.

Laken, Akane, and Iris led the way, the **[Ranger]** for his tracking, and Iris for her firepower, Akane because a dire wolf-sized fox was scary as fuck. All three of them kept an eye on the undergrowth surrounding them, the fox stopping occasionally to sniff. Birds chirped high above them, darting between the branches in an intricate dance, their song echoing in the quiet of the forest. Around a quarter of an hour into the journey, Iris smiled as she heard Bree singing along softly to nature's beautiful melody.

Their movements through the foliage were slow, yet deliberate. Their progress was steady as they navigated the uneven forest floor, weaving their way between the thick clusters of trees. Every rustle of leaves had them pausing, each snap of a twig resulted in hands drifting toward weapons.

Their journey through the dense woods was abruptly interrupted by the sound of approaching voices. Iris motioned for the group to stop, her sharp eyes catching sight of four men emerging from the shadows of the trees, chattering carelessly to each other. Their clothing, lack of decent equipment, and mannerisms were unmistakable—it was a patrol of bandits from the fort. Iris and the group quickly took cover, blending into the foliage as best they could.

Feeling a sudden, gentle touch against her arm, Iris turned to find herself eye-to-eye with Akane. The kitsune was partially concealed by the underbrush, her multi-tailed form blending into the shadows. A silent communication passed between them and with a soft glint in her eyes, Akane wove her magic. A veil of illusion fell around the pair, their figures blurring and blending seamlessly with the foliage. The kitsune's adept illusionary skills making them appear no more noticeable than the surrounding vegetation.

From their hidden vantage point, Iris locked eyes with Laken. The high elf ranger glanced at the patrol before nodding subtly, confirming that their illusion was working. Iris let out a quiet sigh of relief. With the bandit patrol moving unknowingly past their location, it was a stark reminder of the danger they were about to face. They were in enemy territory now, and the quest had truly begun.

When they were sure the bandits were gone, Iris nodded to Akane and stood up, the illusion falling away as they did. Catching sight of the others, Iris gestured for them to continue, careful to not make noise that would cause the patrol to turn back too quickly.

Kaira had the other two move closer to her, while Iris, Laken, and Akane drift slightly further from the other group as they resumed their trek with an abundance of caution.

Through the dense thicket of the forest, Iris and her companions advanced, each step taken with painstaking care. The underbrush provided a mix of cover and hindrance; disguising their approach, but also making their progress slow. They came across three more patrols, but each time, they halted, hiding themselves within the forest until the danger had passed.

Akane's fox form proved to be a boon during these encounters. Her keen senses alerted them to the approaching men far before anyone else could detect them, allowing the group ample time to find a hiding spot. Laken too, with his ranger training, was instrumental in guiding their path, identifying the most concealed and noiseless routes to take.

The fort itself appeared more like a makeshift settlement when they first glimpsed it through the gaps in the foliage. Covering almost a hectare of land, it was a sprawling cluster of wooden structures, surrounded by an imposing palisade. Within its walls, Iris could make out a large number of people, moving about with the organized chaos typical of a bandit haven. Their careful scouting allowed them to estimate the numbers to be in the dozens, a force not to be underestimated.

A significant portion of the fort was occupied by a series of pens, filled with a variety of animals. The constant growling, roars, and other animal sounds created a discordant melody that hung heavy in the forest air. Next to these pens, a large tent stood, a clear hive of activity. They could see bandits moving in and out, carrying various

objects, and even from this distance, they could make out signs of butchery and hide processing.

Taking turns to keep an eye on the fort, the party started making plans. They needed to remain undetected, for being outnumbered and in unfamiliar territory, a head-on confrontation was not in their favor. And so they continued their watch, etching the details of the fort and its inhabitants into their minds, forming plans and contingencies as the sun sank lower in the sky.

Yet, amidst their careful planning and observation, Iris suddenly noticed something. Akane, who had been a constant presence by her side, was no longer there. She glanced around quickly, her heart pounding. There was no sign of the large, multi-tailed kitsune.

“Akane?” she whispered into the quiet forest, dread curling in the pit of her stomach. Her voice echoed slightly, then fell silent, the forest seemingly swallowing up the name of the kitsune.

“Iris, I swear I didn't see her go,” Laken whispered, his eyes wide with concern. His hands fiddled with an arrow, the only sign of his agitation. His focus had been so trained on the fort that he had missed the fox's quiet disappearance. He cursed under his breath, looking around in the dim light, hoping to spot a flicker of the elusive kitsune.

Iris gave him a slight nod, her mind racing. Akane's disappearance was unexpected, but not necessarily a cause for immediate alarm. “We need to regroup,” she said, her gaze never leaving the area where Akane had last been. They moved quietly back towards Kaira's group, their bodies blending into the shadowy forest.

“Kaira, Akane's gone,” Iris informed the high elf once they were within speaking distance. “She was with us, then she disappeared. We don't know where she went.”

Kaira's eyes widened briefly but soon narrowed as the woman crossed her arms over her chest. “I knew that she was hiding something,” she murmured, the high elf paused for a moment before emitting a soft sigh. “Now what do we do? Continue with the plan?”

Gryff shared a glance with Bree before he piped up, “Should we abandon this? Find Akane first?”

Iris looked at them all, her gaze steady. “No,” she said firmly. “We continue with the plan. Akane is not some helpless creature. She can take care of herself.” She paused, taking a deep breath before continuing, “We need to split up, spread out, and get a handle on the patrols and movements within the fort. Meet back here in three hours. Just as the sun is setting.”

They all nodded, though there were clear signs of concern etched into their faces. The thought of venturing further into the bandit-infested woods was daunting,

especially with Akane missing. But they trusted Iris, her leadership had gotten them through tough situations before.

As they split up, each moving to their chosen vantage point, Iris looked once more at the spot where Akane had been. “Where did you go, you sneaky fox?” she whispered into the silence, her words a mix of worry and anticipation.

Even though their quest had potentially become a lot more complicated, she was not ready to back down. Each of them disappeared into the forest, their forms swallowed by the dense foliage. The sun began to lower itself towards the horizon, casting long shadows that stretched out like dark fingers across the forest floor. Time ticked on, the quiet of the woods only broken by the distant sound of activity from the fort.

And so they waited, each in their own hidden corner of the forest, their eyes trained on the fort, their minds alert for any signs of danger—or a certain missing kitsune.

The slow descent of the sun cast a pall of transitioning hues across the fort nestled within the forest. The luscious greens of the foliage retreated, usurped by oranges and purples that pirouetted within the waning sunlight. As the day's light yielded to the impending embrace of darkness, the towering trees threw long shadows that gradually retracted. The symphony of daytime forest sounds was slowly replaced, the chorus of birds and rustling leaves making way for the subdued hoots of nocturnal owls and the sporadic rustles of creatures awakening to their nightly exploits.

Simultaneously, the fort itself underwent its own transition. The dying light was replaced by the growing glow of numerous campfires and braziers, the flickering flames casting a warm and somewhat menacing glow on the wooden palisades. Guard towers studded at intervals along the fort walls were more clearly visible now, with their occupants changing shifts as the day handed the reins to the evening. The entrance of the fort was a flurry of activity as guards, cloaked in the light of the nearby braziers, performed their changing of the guard ritual, giving the fort an appearance of a place bracing itself for the nighttime.

With night taking hold, Iris's group began to make their way back to their designated meeting point. Their movements were slow and cautious as they navigated through the dimming light, each step carefully measured to avoid drawing the attention of the fort's watchful guards. Their silent approach was drowned by the nocturnal orchestra of the forest, their whispered conversations barely a ripple in the concert of the night. The backdrop of the fort's glowing lights provided an unusual ambiance to their secret meeting, the flames throwing dancing shadows that mirrored their concern and anticipation for the task that lay ahead.

Bree and Laken arrived first, their faces etched with a mixture of concern and determination. The bard was softly humming to herself, a habit Iris had learned the woman would do to calm her nerves.

“We spotted a few patterns,” Laken reported, his voice barely above a whisper as they discussed their findings. “There’s a set patrol route with four men, they rotate every hour or so. And there’s a lot of activity around the northern edge of the fort, near the animal pens.”

Bree nodded in agreement. “We saw them loading some animals into smaller cages and onto wagons. They were different than the ones being butchered.”

Kaira and Gryff arrived shortly after, adding their observations to the mix as Iris and the others filled them in. “We also noticed the caging,” Gryff added, his gruff voice unusually soft in the evening quiet. “It appears that not all of the animals are killed, some are clearly captured and transported somewhere.”

Kaira nodded, adding, “Akane was right. There’s definitely more going on than just banditry; it’s a surprisingly sophisticated, if horrific, poaching operation. Especially if any of the creatures are similar to Mocha and Akane.”

As they shared their findings, they all realized the depth and complexity of the operations within the fort. It was more than just a bandit outpost; there was an organized and carefully orchestrated enterprise going on. With Akane still missing and the full extent of the bandits' operations unknown, the quest had certainly become more challenging.

While the last rays of the sun still faintly lingered in the sky, the group huddled together, discussing their plan for the night. Their voices stayed low and hushed, but the undercurrent of tension was palpable. Iris kept casting glances at the fort, her mind churning with questions and scenarios. She was in the middle of outlining their watch schedule when a sudden uproar from the fort froze the words in her mouth.

The sounds of merriment and idle chatter were instantly replaced with a cacophony of shouts and the swift crunching of hurried steps on the gravel. Their eyes flicked towards the fort, struggling to discern the cause of the upheaval against the diminishing daylight.

A sharp intake of breath from Laken drew their attention. The ranger’s face was etched with surprise as he pointed a finger toward the path leading to the fort’s gate. His voice was strained as he called out in a hushed tone, “Iris, look!”

Iris followed his gesture, her breath hitching as her eyes focused on the scene unfolding. Walking up the road with a confident gait that shook the ground was a familiar figure. Her heart pounded as she recognized the form of Mocha, her faithful friend—who should have been back with the mundanes and the wagon. The mare was in her full armor, every piece gleaming under the fading light of day, her stride sure and powerful.

But what took Iris’s breath away was the figure astride Mocha. With an aura of absolute calm and authority, Akane sat in the saddle, her humanoid form visibly undaunted by the proximity to the fort. Iris could only stare in stunned silence as the

sight registered in her mind. She had expected many scenarios, but Akane confidently riding Mocha up to the bandit fort was not one of them. Her voice lodged in her throat, the plans for the night forgotten as she, and the rest of the group, watched the unexpected scene unfold. As the duo neared the gate, Akane lifted and pointed a sword that looked awfully familiar, causing Iris's hand to shoot to her waist, only to see a stick poking out from the sheath.

Fuck!