

Mischief and Mayhem

Iris stepped out of the inn, her armor and herself freshly cleaned and her sword at her side. She had eaten a quick meal and was now on her way to help the farmer with his monster problem. As she looked around, she saw Bree standing there, her expression one of worry.

“Hey, Bree,” Iris greeted her with a smile, hoping to alleviate some of her concern. “Is everything alright?”

Bree’s gaze flickered over Iris’s clean armor and sword, then back up to her face. “You’re leaving again?” she asked, her tone firm. “Where are you going?”

“I’m heading to the farm outside the village,” Iris replied. “The farmer there is having trouble with a monster attacking his livestock and crops. I’m going to see what I can do to help.”

“But Kaira is still recovering, and the others aren't back yet,” Bree argued. “We're a party, Iris. You shouldn't be going out on your own like this.”

Iris could see the worry etched on Bree's face, and she knew the sun elf wasn't going to let this go easily. “Bree, I have to go,” Iris said firmly. “The farmer needs my help, and I can't just sit around and wait for the others to return. We don't know how long they'll be gone.”

“But it's dangerous to go out alone,” Bree said, her voice raising slightly. “What if something happens to you? What if you get hurt? We need to stick together as a party.”

“I can handle myself,” Iris said, trying to reassure her. “And I have my magic and my sword. I'll be fine.”

Bree's expression remained resolute, her arms crossed in front of her. “That's not the point, Iris,” she said, her voice steady. “We need to stick together as a party. You can't just run off on your own whenever you feel like it. We have responsibilities to each other and to the people we're trying to protect.”

Iris sighed, knowing that Bree was right in a way, but also feeling like she had to help the farmer. “I understand where you're coming from,” she said, her tone softening a bit. “But I have to go. I promise I'll be careful, and I won't take any unnecessary risks.”

Bree's gaze bore into Iris, her tone edged with accusation. “Do you really have to go, Iris? Or are you rushing off to face a monster in order to avoid confronting your true feelings?”

Iris froze at the unexpected question, taken aback by Bree's accusation. “What? No, Bree, that's not it at all,” she said, her voice rising in defense. “I'm going because I made a promise to that farmer. And as for Kaira, I'm just glad she's alive and recovering. We talked, and we came to a decision.”

Bree looked at her skeptically, arms still crossed in front of her. "I don't believe you, Iris. I think you're avoiding your problems by throwing yourself into danger."

Iris felt a flash of anger at the accusation. "That's not fair, Bree," she said firmly. "We barely know each other. I'm not avoiding anything. But sometimes, we have to make tough choices. And right now, my choice is to help the farmer. I'll come back as soon as I can."

Bree's eyes narrowed, and Iris could see the tension in her body. "You're right. We do barely know each other, and woman from another world or not, I know people. And I've seen the way you try to hide it."

Iris opened her mouth to deny it, to argue, but quickly found herself struggling to find the words to say.

Bree noticed. "I'm sorry, Iris," she said, her tone softening a bit. "I didn't mean to come across that way. But please, think about what you're doing. We're a party for a reason. We need to look out for each other."

Iris nodded, feeling the tension in the air begin to dissipate. "I understand," she said, her voice calm. "And I appreciate your concern. But I have to go. If the others come back before I do, please tell them where I am."

Bree sighed, her arms uncrossing. "Fine, Iris. Don't be a hero, alright? If you run into trouble, get out of there."

Iris smirked, trying to further relieve the tension. "Haven't you heard? I am the hero of this story."

Bree's expression stiffened, and the woman crossed her arms in front of her again. "This isn't a joke, Iris. I still don't like this," she said, her voice firm. "But fine. If you're going, I'm going to check on Kaira. And if the others come back before you do, I'll tell them where you are."

Iris smiled at the gesture, feeling a sense of relief wash over her. "Thanks, Bree," she said. "I'll be careful. And I'll see you soon." With that, Iris turned and began walking towards the village gate, feeling determined to help the farmer and prove to Bree that she could handle herself.

As she walked, Iris couldn't help but think about Bree's words. Was she really avoiding her feelings by throwing herself into danger? She didn't think so, but the doubt lingered in the back of her mind.



Iris arrived at the farm, the sun beating down on her as she stepped into the fields. The air was thick with the scent of growing crops, and the sound of animals and insects filled

her ears. She could see the farmhouse in the distance, a small structure with a red roof and white walls. The surrounding fields were dotted with various crops, including corn, wheat, and soybeans.

As she walked closer to the farmhouse, she could see a small group of chickens pecking at the ground nearby, and a couple of furry cow-like creatures lazily grazing in a small nearby pasture.

The farmer, a stout man with a friendly face, greeted her as she approached. "Welcome, welcome!" he exclaimed, waving a hand in greeting. "I'm glad you're here. We've really been having trouble with that fox. We could really use your help."

Iris nodded in agreement. "I'm here to help," she said, her voice determined. "What type of livestock did you say it would attack?"

The man shrugged. "It steals a chicken every now and then. But mostly, it's destroying the crops. And today..." He grunted in exasperation. "It's better if I just show you."

The farmer led her to a nearby field where a scarecrow lay in tatters, its straw stuffing scattered around it, except for the head, which was sitting on the clothing and sported a clear claw mark that made it appear to be frowning. Another mark was made to resemble almost tears.

That is... yeah that's fucking weird.

"This is where it happened," he said, pointing to the destroyed scarecrow. "We haven't seen the fox since, but we're afraid it will strike again."

"When did you find this?" she asked, her eyes scanning the area for tracks.

"Yesterday," he said. "But usually we see it at least twice a day. It's like it's deliberately doing things to frustrate us. It leaves nothing but mayhem in its wake."

Hashtag relatable.

Iris nodded, taking note of the details. She crouched down to examine the remains of the scarecrow, searching for any clues that could help her track the fox. She spotted a few tufts of reddish fur caught on the wooden stakes and picked them up for further inspection. The placement was weird as if almost deliberately left there.

"Can you show me where the fox went?" she asked, standing up and dusting off her hands.

The farmer pointed towards the edge of the field, where the crops grew sparse and wild. "It ran that way," he said. "Towards the woods. They're not too far, a short walk beyond the fields."

Iris nodded, tucking the fur into a pouch on her belt. "Wish me luck!" she said with a smile.

The man grunted but dipped his head.

She unsheathed her sword, feeling the familiar weight in her hand, and started walking toward the woods. She kept her eyes peeled for any signs of the fox, scanning the ground for tracks or listening for any sounds of movement.

As Iris left the farm and began her walk to the woods, the sun beat down on her, intensifying the already hot day. Sweat began to form on her forehead, and she could feel the heat emanating from the ground beneath her boots. The air was thick with the scent of freshly plowed earth and the sweet fragrance of wildflowers that dotted the edges of the path. The buzzing of insects and the occasional caw of a distant crow were the only sounds that broke the otherwise peaceful stillness.

Despite the heat, Iris tried to enjoy the walk, taking in the beauty of her surroundings. The fields on either side of her stretched as far as she could see, the bright green of the crops contrasting with the dull brown of the soil. A light breeze picked up, rustling the leaves of nearby trees and offering some respite from the sweltering heat.

As she walked, Iris made sure not to tire herself out, taking slow and steady steps. She used the time to relax and focus her mind, mentally preparing herself for what might lie ahead in the woods. The trail wound on for about a kilometer, and after about ten minutes of walking, Iris could see the edge of the forest looming ahead.

Iris took a deep breath as she stepped into the woods. The air was cooler here, the heat of the sun filtered through the leaves of the trees. The scent of pine and earth filled her nostrils as she made her way deeper into the woods. She kept her eyes peeled for any sign of the fox, scanning the ground for tracks or broken branches. She walked slowly, her senses heightened, not wanting to miss anything important. She could hear the rustling of leaves and the chirping of birds, but nothing that indicated the presence of the fox.

As she moved further into the woods with her sword at the ready, the sounds of the outside world faded away. She could feel the soft dirt and fallen leaves crunching under her feet as she moved through the undergrowth. It was peaceful here, and she felt her tension start to ease.

Suddenly, her **[Danger Sense]** buzzed, and she **[Focused]**, shifting her stance and jerking her head around, looking for the source. As her eyes darted, she moved closer to a large tree, channeling mana into her core as she prepared to cast.

She caught a glimpse of something moving in the distance. Iris paused and squinted, trying to get a better look. There, just ahead, she could make out the shape of a redheaded woman moving through the trees. She couldn't make out any features from this distance, but something about the woman caught her attention. She felt a sudden urge to follow her, to find out who she was and what she was doing in these woods.

Maybe she's seen the fox.

Iris stealthily pursued the woman, attempting to remain undetected. The forest seemed to come alive around her, the shadows deepening and the air growing colder as

she ventured deeper into the woods. The once vibrant and enchanting forest now felt more like a labyrinth, with the trail becoming increasingly obscured by thick undergrowth and tangled roots.

The entire thing seemed off to Iris, it was as if the woman was deliberately trying to lead her somewhere. She'd yet to see anything that made her [**Danger Sense**] go off, which left only the woman.

Iris took a steady breath and channeled mana into herself, using her [**Rushing Wind**] and [**Arcane Capability**] to enhance herself. She wouldn't be caught unawares, but there was something about the woman. Iris needed to catch her.

The mysterious woman seemed to glide through the forest, her movements fluid and almost ethereal. The rustling of her garments and the faint sound of her footsteps were the only indications of her presence. Iris strained her senses, trying to maintain her focus on the woman while also being mindful of her surroundings.

Even with Iris's improved attributes and movement capabilities, it was as if the woman was quicker. More agile. It only made Iris push harder, to catch the wiley jerk.

Iris felt a pang of frustration as her *Bad Luck* reared its ugly head. She tripped over a root that she could have sworn wasn't there a second ago, and almost fell, nearly losing sight of the woman.

Okay, bitch. Now it's a matter of pride.

She had to find out who this person was and what she was doing in the woods.

As Iris continued to follow the woman, she noticed how the sun's rays seemed to grow dimmer, the forest canopy becoming more and more dense. The woman led her through a maze of twisted trees and overgrown brambles. Fortunately, Iris's armor protected her from the thorns that would have otherwise snagged her clothes and scratched her skin. Despite the increasing discomfort and difficulty of the terrain, Iris refused to relent, driven by her determination to uncover the woman's intentions and her possible connection to the elusive fox.

The chase continued for what felt like hours, as the redheaded woman remained always just out of reach. The further Iris pursued, the more the forest seemed to transform, its beauty and serenity replaced by a dark and oppressive atmosphere. The air grew heavier, or perhaps it was all of the exertion she was doing. But she persevered, unwilling to abandon her quest.

In her rush, she caught sight of a branch obstructing her path. Her eyes still scanning the area, she reached out to push it aside, only to realize, to her astonishment, that it wasn't actually there. Confused and momentarily disoriented, she stumbled forward, nearly losing her balance.

Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, Iris squinted her eyes and caught sight of the woman once again. She attributed her earlier mistake to being overly focused on her elusive target and, with renewed determination, continued her pursuit.

As the woman continued to lead her deeper into the woods, Iris noticed that the trees around her seemed to take on strange shapes, their branches twisting and gnarling like something out of a nightmare. The once familiar forest now appeared alien and menacing, but Iris refused to be deterred.

Finally, after a long and arduous chase, Iris saw her again, this time up ahead of her, standing still and looking out from across a small brook. Iris tried to quicken her pace, but the woman suddenly turned and disappeared once again. Iris let out a frustrated growl, feeling as though she was chasing a ghost.

Iris crossed the brook and followed along in the direction of where she saw the woman dart until she reached the edge of a small clearing.

She stepped into the open space and looked around before she caught sight of the woman sitting on a rock, her red hair shining in the dappled sunlight filtering through the trees. She couldn't quite make out her features from this distance, but there was something about her that seemed almost otherworldly.

And this coming from someone literally from another world.

As Iris cautiously approached, she noticed that the woman's form seemed to shimmer, as if she were not entirely of this world. Realizing that this may be her only chance to confront her quarry, Iris steeled herself for whatever lay ahead, her hand gripping her sword tightly as she walked toward the rock where the woman was sitting.

What the fuck?

She realized that the woman was not quite human.

Three long, bushy tails protruded from a hole in the woman's dress and swished back and forth lazily. And as she got closer, Iris could also see two furry ears poking out of the woman's red hair.

Iris stopped in her tracks, unsure of what to do next. She had encountered many strange things since arriving on Eona, but she had never seen anything quite like this. The woman turned to look at her and smiled, revealing a set of sharp teeth that glinted in the sunlight filtering through the trees. The woman's heterochromia was vibrant and gorgeous, giving her left eye a cyan color while the other was a deep violet. The pupils were shaped like a fox's with their vertical slits.

What startled Iris the most though, wasn't what was clearly a kitsune sitting right in front of her, it was that the woman's face appeared startlingly similar to her own.

As Iris stood there, her gaze fixed on the mysterious woman, an eerie sound suddenly filled the clearing. A barking laughter, reminiscent of a fox, echoed through the trees, sending a shiver down Iris's spine. The woman gave Iris a feral smile as her form

began to shimmer and quiver, as if she were no longer a solid being but a mirage. In a matter of seconds, the Kitsune's body dissipated into a cloud of glowing motes of mana that danced and flickered in the air like fireflies. The laughter faded away, leaving only a haunting silence in its wake.

Iris stared in disbelief at the spot where the woman had sat, her heart pounding with a mix of adrenaline and awe.

Again, what the actual fuck?

She had no clue what was going on. And she wasn't sure she liked that.

Iris's heart still pounded from her encounter with the Kitsune when she felt a familiar buzzing sensation in her head—her **[Danger Sense]** was warning her of imminent danger. As she scanned her surroundings, she spotted a pair of keen eyes watching her from the shadows of the woods. There, crouched low among the underbrush, was the fox she had been searching for.

Her eyes widened as she took in its size. It was absolutely massive, and a quick guess put it at around two meters long and its head would easily be even with Mocha's shoulders. Its fur was a brilliant shade of red, and it also had three bushy tails flicking behind it. A low growl rumbled from the creature as it locked its gaze on Iris.

What the fuck? The farmer didn't mention how much of a fucking unit it was.

The fox's eyes gleamed with intelligence and cunning as it assessed its opponent. In a sudden burst of speed, it sprang from its hiding spot in the underbrush, launching itself into the clearing. Its powerful legs propelled it forward in great bounding strides, covering the distance between itself and Iris with an alarming swiftness. The fox's three tails trailed behind it, whipping through the air like a trio of crimson banners as it closed in on Iris.

With the fox charging toward her, Iris knew she had to act quickly. She mustered the mana coursing through her and launched a volley of **[Sparks]** at the agile creature. The small orbs of lightning zipped through the air, but the fox proved to be an elusive target, effortlessly dodging each one as it zigged and zagged toward her. Its speed and cunning were a testament to why it had managed to elude the farmer and wreak mayhem on his farm.

As the fox closed the distance, Iris prepared herself for a confrontation and raised her sword. However, in the blink of an eye, the fox darted to her side just as it was about to pounce. Iris felt the soft brush of its three tails as they whipped against her armor, leaving her momentarily stunned by the creature's audacity and agility.

Regaining her composure, Iris turned to face the fox, but it had already made its move. It bolted across the clearing, its red fur a vibrant blur against the green foliage. As the cunning creature disappeared into the depths of the woods, a peal of barking-like laughter echoed through the clearing, clearly taunting her. Iris watched the fox vanish,

leaving her with a mix of awe and frustration, knowing that she would have to muster all her skill and cunning to catch the elusive creature.

She sighed. *I may have bit off more than I can chew.*

Iris sprinted after the fox, determined not to let it escape her grasp. The forest seemed to come alive around her, the once-quiet woods now echoing with the sound of the fox's laughter. As she ran, the creature seemed to materialize out of thin air at every turn, always just out of reach, its laughter ringing in her ears like a taunting challenge. Despite the fox's teasing, Iris refused to give up, her resolve only strengthened by the creature's taunts.

At one point, the fox appeared briefly right in front of her, and she fired off a **[Spark]** in surprise, only to miss. It yipped at her as it bounded around her, avoiding a swing of her sword before rushing off again.

Frustration and anger bubbled up inside her, and she yelled at the fox, "Stop playing games with me!" The creature merely stopped and looked at her. It tilted its head, its tongue lolling out of its maw, as it stared at her. Then she caught sight of its eyes...

They're the same as the kitsune's! Fuck!

The laughter intensified before it vanished once again, its elusive form darting deeper into the woods. Iris gritted her teeth and pressed on, her determination unwavering as she pursued the cunning fox.

After another timeless age of chasing the jerk, the fox suddenly changed its tactics, almost catching Iris off guard, luckily **[Danger Sense]** gave her ample warning.

It charged straight at her, its sharp teeth bared and its eyes filled with a wild intensity. Instinctively, Iris raised her sword, ready to strike the creature down as it closed the distance between them. But just as her blade was about to make contact with the fox, it disappeared in a cloud of shimmering motes of mana, leaving Iris momentarily disoriented and off-balance.

Before she could fully recover, the real fox burst out from behind a tree. *Oh, shit.*

Her eyes went wide just before its massive form collided with hers in a powerful, unexpected impact. It was like getting hit by a truck.

Iris was knocked off her feet and slammed hard onto the ground. Her sword slipped from her grasp as her breath was forced from her lungs, clattering to the ground beside her. The fox's laughter echoed through the trees as it bounded away, taunting her with its continued defiance.

Iris shook off the shock and scrambled to her feet, her eyes fixed on the retreating fox. She quickly grabbed her sword and set off after the creature once again. The fox's laughter only fueled her determination as she charged through the forest, intent on finally putting an end to its tricks and mischief.

“You’re a bastard!” she yelled out at its retreating form.

A taunting yip came in reply.

Frustration mounting, Iris decided to rely on her spells to bring the elusive fox to heel. She launched a **[Spark]** at the creature, but it nimbly sidestepped the small orb of lightning, seemingly anticipating her every move.

The fox turned, revealing a long stick that it held in its mouth, wagging it back and forth before it bounced and darted away.

She burst into a sprint after it, using **[Storm Armor]** to ensure it wouldn’t catch her unawares again, the crackling sphere of electricity arcing into nearby trees as she ran.

[Spark] after **[Spark]** were easily avoided by the fox who seemed to be *enjoying* the chase, as if the two were playing a game.

Undeterred, Iris tried a different approach and unleashed a **[Chain Lightning]** spell, hoping to catch the fox off guard. However, her efforts were in vain, as the bolt of lightning merely scorched a nearby tree, leaving the fox unharmed and still on the move.

Determined to end the chase, Iris gathered a large amount of mana and cast her new spell, **[Lightning Spear]**. She thrust her hands forward and a spear made of pure electricity hurled out and toward the fox with unerring accuracy. For a moment, it seemed as though she had finally succeeded in striking the creature, but as the spear made contact, the fox's form shimmered and exploded in an expanding cloud of shimmering motes of mana, revealing yet another illusion. For its part, the **[Lightning Spear]** continued on its path, slamming into a tree with a deafening explosion of electricity, leaving Iris to wonder how she could possibly be getting outsmarted by a damn animal.

Gasping for breath, she chased the fox, soon realizing that it seemed to be leading her in circles. As their pursuit reached a familiar spot near the brook, the fox effortlessly leaped over the water using a fallen tree as a bridge.

Without hesitation, she employed her **[Rushing Winds]** ability to enhance her jump, aiming for the tree. But just as her foot was about to make contact, the tree shimmered and vanished.

“Oh, shiit!” she cried out, tumbling through the now empty space. Her foot splashed into the brook, causing her to stumble forward, roll through the water, and come to a stop on the grassy bank opposite.

Groaning, she struggled to her feet and surveyed her sodden, mud-covered appearance. Her hair was in complete disarray.

“Oh, come on!” she shouted, frustrated. “That was a low blow!”

The fox, only a few meters away, dropped the stick it held in its mouth and let out a barking laugh in amusement. She growled, launching a **[Spark]** at the creature, despite knowing it would evade the attack.

As expected, the fox leaped nimbly into the air, soaring over the sizzling orb that exploded against a nearby tree. Landing gracefully in the same spot, the fox swiftly retrieved the stick and seemed to wink at her before dashing away.

Her eyes widened and she faltered in her steps as realization set in.

It's as sapient as Mocha.

Fuck...

With renewed determination, Iris continued her pursuit of the fox. She traversed the woods, jumping over fallen logs and pushing aside branches as she tried to keep the creature in sight. All the while, her **[Storm Armor]** crackled around her, creating blackened scorch marks in the nearby trees.

The chase seemed to go on forever, but Iris refused to give up. She was starting to feel the strain on her mental stamina from the repeated use of her spells, but she couldn't afford to let the fox escape. Every now and then, she would hear its taunting laughter, spurring her to push herself even harder.

Eventually, Iris found herself in another clearing, where she spotted the fox standing calmly in the center. Its two tails flicked lazily behind it, and it seemed almost amused by the exhausted state Iris was in. She pointed her sword at the fox, her breathing heavy and her brow furrowed in determination.

“I know you can understand me,” she called out, her voice full of conviction. “Let's cut the shit and how about you just leave the damn farmer alone. You're causing too much commotion.”

The fox tilted its head, its eyes seemingly locked onto Iris's sword. It had been carrying a stick in its mouth throughout the chase, and suddenly, the stick began to shimmer and change. Before Iris's eyes, the stick transformed into an exact replica of her sword. At that same moment, she felt a strange sensation in her hand and looked down, only to see that the sword she had been holding had become a mere stick.

Confusion and disbelief washed over Iris as she stared at the stick in her hand, then back at the fox. Realization set in. *That bastard switched them when he knocked me over!*

“Okay, so you've got some tricks up your sleeve,” Iris said, trying to keep her voice steady. “And we don't have to fight, I just want you to stop causing trouble for the farmer. Can we come to some sort of agreement, man?”

The fox suddenly dropped the sword. It barked at her and growled, its eyes narrowing. Iris hesitated for a moment before speaking again.

“Wait... are you... female?” she asked tentatively, remembering the red-haired Kitsune she had encountered earlier. The fox tilted its head and lolled out its tongue, seemingly amused by Iris’s question. This only served to make the situation more confusing for her. She wondered if the kitsune and the fox were somehow connected, and if that was why the kitsune had led her on such a wild chase.

“Was that kitsune... you?” Iris pressed, trying to make sense of everything.

As Iris watched the fox, its form suddenly began to shimmer and waver, like a mirage in the heat. Within moments, the fox had disappeared completely, leaving Iris momentarily stunned. However, she didn't have much time to process this development, for as the fox vanished, the illusion of the kitsune appeared in the same spot, her red hair and bushy tails unmistakable.

The kitsune gazed at Iris with an enigmatic smile, her eyes glinting with mischief. It was now clear to Iris that the fox and the kitsune were one and the same, a trickster that had been leading her on a wild chase through the woods.

Well now. That's not fucking strange.

She dropped her **[Storm Armor]** spell, but kept her two body-enhancing spells active, just in case. The drain on her mental stamina was reaching a crucial point after the constant use of the past who knew how many hours.

“Well, uh, hello there,” Iris said, uncertain of how to proceed.

The kitsune barked in reply, her tone seemingly more friendly. Her face was still eerily similar to Iris’s, which was only a little disconcerting. Her ear twitched as she stared at Iris. That caused Iris to feel a *massive* urge to go move the being’s red hair to see if it also had human ears.

Iris took a deep breath and tried to address the kitsune, even though she could apparently only communicate through yips and barks. “Look,” she began, “I don't know what your intentions are, but I'm asking you to stop bothering the farmer. He doesn't deserve to have his livelihood disrupted by your antics.”

The kitsune tilted her head as if considering Iris's words. She then yipped softly, and Iris took it as a sign that the creature was willing to listen.

She continued, “If you agree to leave the farmer alone, I promise I won't pursue you any further. We can both go our separate ways, and no one gets hurt.”

After a moment, the kitsune barked, seemingly agreeing to Iris's proposal. It was difficult for Iris to know for certain, but she chose to trust that the creature would honor their agreement.

She sure is cute as hell, I look good as a fox girl.

Iris smiled. “I'm glad we were able to come to an agreement. It's not every day that I encounter a magical creature like you.” She tried to maintain a friendly tone,

hoping to build some rapport with the kitsune. “In fact, my best friend is a magical horse. Her name is Mocha. Do you have a name?”

The kitsune perked up, her tails wagging a bit more enthusiastically behind her. She nodded quickly and let out a series of yips and barks in response, her eyes seeming to sparkle with amusement. Iris couldn't help but smile at the creature's playful demeanor, despite the earlier chaos it had caused.

“Listen,” Iris continued, “I know you're probably just trying to have some fun, but there are consequences to your actions. People can get hurt, and their lives can be disrupted. I hope you understand that.”

The kitsune cocked her head to the side, appearing thoughtful. After a moment, it barked again, this time with a more solemn tone. Iris took this as a sign that the kitsune was acknowledging her words and was willing to consider them.

With a final nod, Iris said, “Thank you for understanding. I hope we can both move forward and avoid any further misunderstandings.”

The kitsune offered one last, gentle bark in reply, and with a final nod, her form shimmered and shifted, revealing the fox once more. She stared at Iris for a brief moment, then turned and dashed off into the forest, her red fur disappearing among the trees.

Iris was left standing in the clearing, a mixture of confusion and relief washing over her. She shook her head, trying to make sense of the bizarre encounter, but ultimately decided that she had had enough for one day. With a weary sigh, she walked over to where the fox had dropped her sword. She poked it a few times and then tested the blade, ensuring it was real. Content that it was the real deal, she sheathed the blade and began the trek back to the farmer's home.

The journey back took about thirty minutes, and by the time Iris arrived at the farm, the sun was already dipping low in the sky, casting long shadows across the fields. The day's events had taken more time and energy than she had anticipated, and she couldn't help but feel a sense of exhaustion as she approached the farmhouse, hoping that her encounter with the kitsune would be the end of the strange occurrences that seemed to constantly surround her time in this new world.

As Iris returned to the farm, she found the farmer waiting for her, his face filled with anticipation. “So, did you find the fox?” he asked, his voice a mix of hope and anxiety.

Iris nodded. “I did. I believe it won't be bothering your farm anymore.” She hesitated for a moment, then added, “However, I can't be completely sure, so I won't accept any payment. If it does cause any more trouble, try to get a message to me through Reeve Evelyn in Brightburn. I'll come back and deal with it.”

The farmer looked at her with gratitude and uncertainty. "You're sure you don't want any payment? You've done a lot for us."

Iris shook her head. "No, it's fine. I can't guarantee the problem is completely solved, and it wouldn't feel right to take payment for something I'm not certain about."

The man hesitated for a moment before nodding. "Alright, if you insist. Thank you, Iris. We're grateful for your help, and I hope whatever you did discourages it from bothering us again. I'll make sure to contact you through Reeve Evelyn if anything happens."

She started to turn but then stopped. "Hey, I have a question. Do you know what caused it to start messing with your farm?" she asked, curiosity lacing her tone.

The man paused, his arms crossing as he tapped a finger against his cheek in thought. After a moment, his eyes lit up with a spark of recognition. "You know, I think I remember when the harassment started to increase. It all began when the fox stole one of our prized pumpkins. So, I decided to spread a bunch of spicy pepper all over another pumpkin, hoping to deter it. But, the next night, that pumpkin was stolen as well. Since then, the fox hasn't stopped its mischief."

Iris let out a low groan, realizing that the farmer's attempt to deter the fox had only backfired and made things worse.

That'll do it.

"You may want to leave out a peace offering of some kind," she said, shaking her head at how much of the day was wasted because of a simple misunderstanding. "I'm pretty sure the fox just saw all of this back and forth you two did as a game of pranks."

The farmer's expression froze. Finally, he sighed. "Damn it. You may be right," he said, rubbing his chin. "I never thought about it that way."

Iris offered the farmer a reassuring smile. "Just give it a try. Leave out a peace offering, and I think you'll see a difference."

The man nodded in reply.

With that, she took her leave, heading back to the inn. As she walked, she couldn't help but hope that Gryff and Laken had returned by now. She was eager to share the bizarre tale of the three-tailed fox with her party, especially Mocha, who always enjoyed a good story.

Plus, she'll probably get a kick out of me getting pranked.

The sun dipped lower in the sky as she trekked down the road and into the village, the events of the day replaying in her mind. The strange encounter with the cunning kitsune slash fox had left her with plenty to think about. She had to admit, despite the confusion and frustration, it had been a rather exhilarating adventure.

As the inn came into view, a surge of relief filled her and a sense of warmth and camaraderie washed over her. The wagon was outside, filled to the brim with all sorts of loot that Iris was excited to sort through. Next to it, Gryff and Laken stood talking to Bree who had an arm around a clearly worn-out Kaira.

Mocha was, of course, the first to notice Iris as she approached. *“Iris! We were getting worried! What took you so long,”* the horse whinnied. *“And what the hell happened to you? You look like you wrestled a pig.”*

Iris snorted.

A mental image of Mocha and the fox running around together filled her mind. The adventurer shook her head as she chuckled.

She took in the expectant looks of her party, before looking into Kaira’s eyes. “Guys, have I got a fucking story for you,” she said with another chuckle. “But first, let’s see what you have in the wagon. Then I need to clean up. Again.”

She couldn’t wait to sit down and share a hearty meal with her party. She looked forward to the chat about what had happened with the guys that went back to the bandit camp, and then recount her own peculiar tale of the mischievous fox that had led her on such an unexpected chase.

Maybe Bree was right. Being alone sucks.