

Following Leads

Iris ignored the stares from her party as she made to go look at all of the loot, however, Gryff and Laken stepped in front of her. She gave the guys a smile, but their faces only hardened and then the head jerk in charge stepped in, blocking her path.

“Iris, when are you going to stop being a dumb bitch?” Mocha nickered in a low tone. Her ears twitched, and her tail flicked in agitation. *“Going alone? You never go alone.”*

Iris took a deep breath. “I go alone all the time, Mocha,” she said slowly. “That’s literally what I did for a year and a half. I was a solo adventurer. You know this.”

Mocha huffed and stamped her hoof on the ground, clearly agitated. *“You do not! Ever since we’ve been together, I’ve always been waiting, ready to rush to your aid at a moment’s notice. We’ve fought together! Or don’t you remember the Murder Hares? I even gained an ability that alerts me if you’re in trouble when I’m nearby!”* Mocha’s frustration radiated from her like an aura as she whinnied in anger. A surge of mana enveloped the horse, and her eyes glowed with a swirling mix of yellow and green. *“This ability won’t work if I’m far away with others and you’re off doing your own thing! What if something happened to you? You’re my stupid human, Iris, and I don’t want anything to happen to you!”*

Iris felt a rush of emotions as Mocha laid into her. Her initial reaction was to push back, as it clashed with her independence, but that was quickly tempered the more Mocha spoke. By the time her friend finished, guilt gnawed at Iris’s heart for not considering Mocha’s feelings and loyalty, and she couldn’t deny the warmth that spread through her chest at the thought of Mocha and her new party caring about her safety.

“Mocha...” Iris began, her voice softening as she took a step closer to the agitated horse. “I didn’t realize my actions affected you so much. I’m sorry for not being more considerate, and I promise to be more mindful in the future.” she reached out, gently stroking Mocha’s neck as she sought to reassure her loyal friend.

Laken crossed his arms and turned to face Iris. “I don’t know what she just said, Iris, but I bet it’s something that all of us can agree with,” he said, his tone serious. “Bree filled us in on what happened. I don’t really care about the reasons. We’re a team, and we don’t take jobs alone. Either you keep us involved or we walk.”

He took a deep breath and continued, “Now, I know that some quests may only require one of us to complete. But that doesn’t mean you don’t need support or that you should go wandering off into the woods without anyone knowing where you are. There are other dangers out there, especially now. The world is changing rapidly, and things are getting worse. We need to support each other.”

Gryff nodded, the big telv standing tall. “Agreed. We’re a team. We...” he said while gesturing between himself, Laken, and Mocha. “Wouldn’t have left if we knew you were going to take another job that was potentially so dangerous. You leaving while Kaira was still injured was in poor form.”

Iris wanted to retort, but as soon as the gentle hand touched her shoulder, she knew any chance of argument was over.

Not that I had one in the first place, I guess.

Bree had been right with everything she’d said earlier in the day. Iris had taken that quest to focus on something other than her emotions, or whatever other psychological mumbo-jumbo a whole team of therapists would struggle to identify. *Pretty sure getting whisked away to a world with elves and magic isn’t normal. Surely my mental response is... understandable. Right?*

Kaira moved to her side and looked into her eyes. “Do not do that again, love,” she said with a steely tone that sent shivers down Iris’s spine.

The guilt kept pouring on. Her *party* was right. Iris had been reckless, and it could have ended badly. She nodded, her expression contrite.

Kaira gave her a curt nod in return before wincing.

“I’m sorry everyone,” Iris said quietly. The others let out breaths of relief.

Mocha snorted. *“Damn, straight. And don’t do it again.”*

Kaira focused on the other three members of the party. “Good. Now, remember that Iris has spent her entire time in our world working with only Mocha at her side. She’s not used to working in teams like us all. Please keep that in mind, everyone,” the elf said, the Guard Captain coming out in her tone with finality. “Now, that’s settled. Let’s move on.”

She gave Iris one last squeeze before moving to sit down. The adventurer winced in sympathy as she saw the woman groan while slowly lowering herself onto a crate that had been set up for her.

Iris looked at Gryff and Laken, the two still giving off an icy stare that appeared to be thawing. She gave them a small smile. “So... How did the camp go?”

Laken glanced at Mocha but the horse shook her head. The high elf sighed, but answered her at least, “It went well. Thank Alos that we let those two bandits live. We would *not* have been able to get everything out without the wagon path. There was a lot that we didn’t see the first time we were there, and frankly... it was an astounding amount of things we managed to take. There’s still more and Ser Meredith’s people are heading there, but there’s nothing worth taking for us,” he said before gesturing at the wagon. “Because we couldn’t fit it. The only reason we took so long to return is because we had to free the caged animals without them attacking us.”

Iris nodded along as he explained.

Gryff walked over to the wagon and pulled aside a large fabric cover. "Come, look at what we got," he said with a now warm smile.

As Iris approached the wagon, she couldn't help but feel excited at the sight of all the loot. She could see that the wagon was filled to the brim with all sorts of goods, from chests of coins and other valuables, and crates of wine, to armor and weapons.

When she saw those, she couldn't help but narrow her eyes. She had to ask, "Why didn't the bandits use some of these weapons and armor? Like, they were so under-gear'd compared to us. Not that I'm complaining."

Kaira, who was still recovering from her injuries, looked over at Iris from where she sat and said, "Well, it's possible that they were saving them to sell later. Some of those weapons and armor are really well-made and could fetch a high price on any market."

"That's true," Gryff added. "It's also possible that they were holding onto them for the Marauder Prince. Who knows when they were supposed to see him again."

Laken nodded in agreement. "Either way, we're the ones who benefit from their foolishness. I mean, just look at all of this. Even after giving a cut to the Guard after we report the camp officially, we're going to be doing quite well for ourselves."

Bree, who had been quiet ever since Iris returned, suddenly spoke up. "All of this is good and all, but did you find anything regarding the Marauder Prince?"

Gryff shrugged. "We found a bunch of documents, but we don't know what they mean."

"Let's grab them and bring them to dinner. I'll go clean up and then we can go over them after I tell you guys about what happened to me," Iris suggested.

As they began to move into the inn, Iris noticed Kaira hobbling over to a guard from Ser Meredith's group that walked up and looked over their group. She waved at the man as she stepped slowly, her hand hovering over her abdomen. "Excuse me, would you mind keeping an eye on our wagon while we have dinner inside?"

The guard scrutinized Kaira, his countenance softening as he took in her injury, and nodded. "Of course, I'll make sure no one touches your belongings."

Kaira thanked the man.

"I'll wait with it as well, Iris," Mocha nickered. *"You guys take your time and find the jerk behind everything."*

"Thanks, girl," Iris said with a smile. "We'll figure this out."

"Good. Now, go help your girlfriend," Mocha said, but then the horse hesitated as she noticed Iris's expression before blowing out some air. *"Tell me later. You okay?"*

"Yeah, yeah," Iris said with a roll of her eyes. "Lemme go help her. I'll be fine."

Mocha gave her a gentle nudge, one filled with love, and turned around. The horse took up a position next to the wagon, ready to stand guard.

Iris moved over to the high elf and put her arm around her. "Need a hand?"

Kaira turned her head up and peered at Iris gratefully. "Thanks. Please."

Bree moved to Kaira's other side. "She should be good by tomorrow with the healing goop, but she *really* should be resting."

"Iris was..." Kaira began, but then relented under Bree's glare. "Fine, yes. After we eat."

Bree nodded. "Good," she said before the shorter sun elf turned her glare on the adventurer. "I have her. You need to go get cleaned up. You smell like a swamp."

She laughed and nodded. "Alright, alright. See you guys in a bit." She gave Kaira's shoulder a gentle squeeze and headed inside.



Once she was clean and presentable, Iris made her way back down to the common room. Seeing the group, she quickly made her way over and slipped into the free chair between Bree and Laken.

As Iris joined her companions, the atmosphere around the table grew even more lively. A half-elf waiter arrived, balancing a tray of frothy mugs in his hands. He set one down in front of each of them, the ale sloshing gently against the rim of the mugs. "Here you are," he said, flashing them a friendly smile before disappearing back into the crowd.

Bree grinned at Iris, taking a sip of her ale. "Well, you certainly smell much better now," she teased, raising her mug in a mock toast. "Welcome to the party!"

Iris laughed, accepting the friendly jab with good humor. "Thank you, Bree," she replied, raising her own mug to return the toast.

The rest of the group chimed in, offering their own welcomes to Iris. She glanced over at Kaira who sat at the end of the table and gave the woman a small smile. The elf gave her a slight smirk in reply.

Gryff took a big swig of his mug before gesturing toward Iris. "Laken, Mocha, and I went ahead and handled the wagon while you got cleaned up. We took it over to the camp where Ser Meredith and her soldiers are staying."

Iris nodded. "They'll guard it?" she asked.

The rugged telv shrugged. "They will. That said, because they *are* stolen goods, we went through it all. Items with clear ownership were set aside, the rest will be ours by

right. Ser Meredith will ensure it returns to Brightburn safely for us so that we have an empty wagon tomorrow.”

“We’ll be able to split it quite well even six ways,” Laken added, an amused look on his face.

“Six?” Bree repeated. “Who else are we splitting it... oh.”

The [**Ranger**] smiled. “Yup. It was difficult for her to get the point across, but Mocha is *quite* adamant that she receives a cut,” he said with a laugh. “I couldn’t deny that beautiful horse her fair share.”

Kaira chuckled. “Good.”

“We also took her back to the stables. Her armor is safely locked away there,” he added.

“Thank you, Laken,” Iris replied. “I’m sure Mocha appreciates your kindness. She enjoys feeling like a part of the group. She understandably gets frustrated that others can’t understand her.”

“With magic, maybe one day we will,” Laken added sagely.

Gryff cleared his throat, remembering something else he needed to share. “Oh, and Ser Meredith asked me to pass along her regrets for missing you today, Iris. She had hoped to catch up with you and discuss the Marauder Prince, however, she was pleasantly surprised that you undertook a quest for one of the villagers.”

Iris nodded, feeling a bit guilty that she had missed the woman. “I... forgot that she had mentioned coming by today.”

Gryff continued, “She *did* add that she’ll be bringing by the information regarding their own raids against the bandits tomorrow morning. She thinks that combined with what we gathered, it may prove useful.”

The group exchanged glances, Iris felt her own anticipation growing as she considered the possibility of getting closer to their ultimate goal.

Sensing a lull in the conversation, Laken set his mug down and leaned forward onto his elbows. “So, Iris. Your quest. You mentioned a magical fox?” he asked with eyes that seemed to light up in the warm glow of the hearth’s fire that filled the inn’s dining area.

Iris chuckled, but Gryff stopped her before she could launch into her story. “Wait! Food’s here. Tell us while we eat.”

The waiter returned with heaping plates filled with roasted vegetables and small whole roasted poultry that looked like quail. The rustic wooden tables and chairs creaked under their weight as the group eagerly dove into the mouth-watering food arrayed in front of them with gusto.

As the conversation flowed, Iris leaned forward, her eyes gleaming with excitement as she described her encounter with the large kitsune in vivid detail. “It all began when I was asked to help a farmer whose chickens were being stolen by a mischievous fox. Little did I know that it would lead me to an encounter with a creature straight out of legend.”

She explained that, after accepting the farmer's request, she had ventured deep into the forest. She set the scene, describing how the sun filtered through the trees, casting dappled patterns on the forest floor as Iris carefully searched for any sign of the fox. The rustle of leaves and the calls of birds filled the air, creating an atmosphere of tranquility that contrasted sharply with the urgency of her quest.

“That’s when I saw a woman,” Iris said.

“A woman?” Gryff asked, his brow raised.

Iris smiled, her eyes sparkling with excitement as she recounted her thrilling encounter with the kitsune. “You wouldn't believe it, guys,” she exclaimed, her hands moving animatedly as she spoke. “At first, I was chasing this mysterious woman through the dense forest. She was unbelievably quick and agile, and even with all of my magic she was always staying just out of reach. I could feel the adrenaline pumping through my veins as I dashed after her, dodging branches and leaping over fallen logs.”

Her hands danced through the air, illustrating her words. “The forest seemed to come alive around us, the wind howling through the branches, leaves swirling in our wake. At times, it felt like we were locked in a high-stakes game of cat and mouse, with each of us trying to outwit the other.”

“What happened next,” Laken prodded, the man enraptured by the story.

“I caught up with her in a clearing. The woman sat on a rock with red hair and three tails, and she looked eerily like me! Before I could even react, she vanished into thin air, leaving me completely stunned. And that's when I saw the fox and realized I was dealing with a kitsune!”

Bree tilted her head and asked Iris what a kitsune was, which led to Iris giving an aside, describing the mythical creature that she knew of from her world.

When she returned to the story, Iris recounted how the creature's tricks had left her frustrated and angry.

As Iris described her pursuit of the kitsune, she painted a vivid picture of the chase. She spoke of how she had used her spells and abilities to try and trap the fox, but it always managed to escape.

Laken chuckled, thoroughly enjoying the story. “Sounds like quite the adventure! I'd have loved to see you trying to outwit a magical fox. I bet it was quite the spectacle.”

Bree nodded in agreement. “It must have been an incredible experience.”

Iris laughed, pointing a fork at the woman with something similar to asparagus hanging off it. "And to think, all of this started because the kitsune believed she was engaged in a prank war with a local farmer!"

As Iris continued her tale, she recounted how she had eventually managed to confront the kitsune in a clearing. She described the confusing conversation that followed, with the kitsune communicating through barks and yips.

"Eventually, we came to an agreement," Iris said, her eyes shining with a mixture of pride and relief. "I convinced her to stop bothering the farmer, and in exchange, I promised not to pursue her any further. The kitsune agreed, and her form shimmered and shifted back into that of a fox, which then disappeared into the forest."

Iris couldn't help but smile as she recalled the kitsune's final moments before vanishing into the undergrowth. "I retrieved my sword, which she had left nearby, and made my way back to the farmer's home."

Laken shook his head. "I really wish I could have met her."

As Iris finished her tale, the group shared a moment of quiet reflection, each of them lost in their own thoughts about the changes the Flash had made to Eona and all of the new mysterious and magical wonders it had created.

A telv man in armor, one of the soldiers that were with Ser Meredith, entered and made his way to the bar.

Iris went to take another bite of food but then she hesitated, the fork halfway into her mouth, and frowned.

Really? They sure enjoyed the story...

She felt mana crackle inside of her as irritation built. Kaira's eyes widened but Iris shook her head and focused on the three.

Gryff was the first to notice her look. "Iris?" he asked hesitantly. "Are you alright?"

The other two looked up and Iris took a deep breath. "No. I've been thinking," she started slowly. "I think there's been a bit of a misunderstanding."

The group exchanged looks before turning their heads back to her.

Bree glanced at Kaira before asking, "What was the misunderstanding?"

"I am not a guard," Iris stated calmly. "I am an adventurer."

Kaira started to open her mouth, but Iris's eyes flashed and the elf closed it.

Good, she knows when to pick her battles.

Iris continued, "Bree, Gryff, and especially you, Kaira... It was wrong of me to leave while you were recovering. Bree, you're right, I took the quest to avoid my emotions. Is that healthy? No. Is that my choice? Yes. Again, I am not a guard, but at the same time while on this quest, neither are any of you. I have spent a year and a half

doing this shit. I know what I'm doing, so me taking a solo quest is not the end of the world.”

She took a swig of her drink while the mood of the table dropped. “Laken, you had some serious issues with me earlier but then thought it was so interesting when I told you about the quest... You threatened to walk, man. That’s not cool.”

The high elf’s eyes widened. “Iris, I—”

“No,” she cut him off. “You are here at Lady Arden’s request. If you want to leave after, fine. But do not come here trying to tell me how to do my job. Guards do not hunt monsters in forests, they do not hunt armies of bandits, and they don’t take quests to chase mythical magical creatures through forests. Helping people is fulfilling. And I *did* inform Bree, right?”

“Yes, but...” the woman started but then sighed. “You did and while I had my reservations due to Kaira, I didn’t stop you. For the record, I had no problem with you taking the quest, just the timing.”

“That’s fair,” Iris said with a nod to the woman before focusing on the last two. “Guys, this shit is different than you’re used to. Call me out as Bree did for leaving, but it is time you start shaking out this guard mindset. That will get us killed. We’re not here to capture the bandits. We’re here to figure out where the Marauder Prince is and capture or kill *him*. One man. The rest are kill or be killed,” she said, looking at Kaira with a sympathetic look.

Kaira closed her eyes, and the others looked at her, as they expected her to argue.

Instead, the elf opened her eyes and nodded. “You’re right,” she said. “If I hadn’t hesitated, that man would have never gotten the best of me. All I ask is more communication... Teach us.”

Iris nodded. “I can do that,” she agreed. “What about you two? Look, I respect the hell outta you guys, but I’m not Ser Meredith. I don’t expect you to be soldiers. I expect you to follow whatever plan we all come up with and be badass fighters. But most of all, you have to be adaptable. Adapt or perish.”

Gryff shared a look with Laken before the bearded telv shrugged. “Fair enough. I’ll give it a chance. Just don’t go getting us killed.”

Iris narrowed her eyes. “I would do this alone if I thought I could. I love Mocha to death, but my friend can only do so much. The fact of the matter is, I’m stronger than all of you combined. If it comes to a point where I have to do something alone in order to keep you all safe, I will do it in a moment. With zero hesitation. Because *that’s* what being an adventurer means.”

Laken sighed. “I still don’t like it, but you’re right. I can’t deny that your story captured me. As Gryff said, I’ll give it a chance. And, Iris, I’m sorry for snapping at you. This... isn’t something we’re used to.”

Iris nodded. “Understandable. I'm a laid-back person, guys. But we *are* doing this my way, if only until you guys learn the ropes. Come to me if you have issues, but I may tell you that you're wrong. And I'm not afraid to own up to my own mistakes and give me suggestions. So, again, sorry Kaira.”

The elf gave her a nod. “I put you in a tough spot. I understand the reason for what you did. I will not hold it against you. You're the team, no sorry. The party leader.”

The **[Medic]** looked down at her plate. “My injured will always come first,” the sun elf said. “But I will defer to you on the rest. Food's getting cold.”

Iris gave a final nod, watching as the others went back to their own meals. While it was unfortunate that she had to do it, she didn't regret laying it all out like that. It was something she wasn't good at the moment, and earlier after what Mocha had said, she'd been vulnerable to all of the guilt. She still owed her best friend a chat, but for now, the party came to an understanding.

When the last of the food was devoured and their plates cleared, the atmosphere in the room maintained its serious tone. Gryff reached into his bag and pulled out the stack of documents he and Laken had discovered at the bandit camp. With a nod from Laken, he spread the papers out across the table, their faces reflecting the determination and focus that now settled over the group.

Laken and Gryff detailed where they found each document, answering questions that Iris and Kaira had.

“Alright, let's see if we can find anything,” Iris said as she picked up a random scroll.

The group leaned in, their eyes scanning the documents for any clue that might shed light on the Marauder Prince's plans or whereabouts.

Laken traced a finger along the parchment of a map he spread out, his brow furrowed in concentration. “This map seems to detail their routes and meeting points in the local area,” he mused aloud, pointing to the various markings on the map. “But there's no indication of where they might be headed next.”

Iris held up the letter in her hand, skimming through its contents. “This one talks about a delivery of weapons and supplies, but it doesn't say where they're going or who they're for.” She sighed and looked around the table. “It's like they're intentionally keeping things vague to throw us off.”

Kaira leaned in, her eyes narrowed as she inspected another document. “They're definitely being cautious, but there must be something here that can help us. We just need to find it,” she said with determination, her gaze turning to meet Iris's.

The adventurer nodded in agreement. “I'm sure we've each faced tougher challenges before, and we'll figure this one out too,” she said with a reassuring smile.

Gryff let out a hesitant laugh and scratched his head. “Speak for yourself, Iris. I haven't done anything like any of this. This is all new to me.”

Laken grinned. “Let's not forget that time when we had to sneak into that fancy party and recover that stolen painting.”

Bree nodded in agreement. “Yeah, and Gryff had to distract the noble’s guards with his terrible dance moves!”

Gryff gasped in mock offense. “Hey, I'll have you know that I have some pretty slick dance moves! Plus, you dance to Bree’s singing. It’s so difficult!”

“Hey!” the **[Bard]** cried out. “I can *sing*. It’s not difficult to dance to it, you just can’t dance! Not my fault you fell on your arse because you tripped over your own two feet.”

Iris chuckled at the playful banter of her companions. “Alright, alright. Let’s get back to the task at hand. I’m sure there’s something here that can give us a clue about the Marauder Prince and his plans.”

As they continued to sort through the documents, Iris couldn't help but feel hopeful that they all had stories like that about their party in the future.

As they continued to pore over the documents, their determination unwavering, Bree suddenly paused, her eyes narrowing as she examined one letter more closely. “Hold on a second,” she murmured, her brow furrowing in concentration. “There's a hidden code embedded within the text.”

As Bree deciphered the code, she found that it mentioned something about gathering and collecting certain items before transporting them to an important hideout. The group pondered what this could mean, exchanging theories and speculations.

They sat there for what seemed like hours. Finally, Iris leaned back, frustration filling her, and let out an exhale. “I don’t know what it means guys.”

Gryff scratched his beard. “Well, whatever it means, we'll need to dig deeper to find any solid leads. For now, let's rest up and prepare for tomorrow's investigation.”

With their course of action decided, the group wrapped up their discussion and began to rise from the table, their minds already focused on the challenges that awaited them the following day. Bree led the way, guiding her friends to the rooms she had procured for them earlier in the day. The tired adventurers climbed the creaking wooden stairs, each one looking forward to a well-deserved rest after their long day of traveling and investigations.



The following morning, Iris awoke feeling refreshed and ready to tackle the day's challenges. She descended the creaking wooden staircase to the common room of the inn, where the early morning sunlight streamed in through the windows, casting a warm glow over the rustic furniture.

Reeve Evelyn was there, deep in conversation with two men and a woman. As Iris approached, Evelyn caught sight of her and waved her over, a friendly smile on her face. "Iris, just who we were waiting for. You slept in!" she said with a chuckle. "I'd like you to meet these fine folks. After hearing about your quest with that fox, they got excited. They're looking to become adventurers and have expressed an interest in joining the Adventurer's Guild."

The eager expressions on the faces of the trio showed their excitement at the prospect of a new beginning. Iris couldn't help but feel a sense of pride, knowing that her efforts were starting to bear fruit. She greeted the aspiring adventurers warmly, her enthusiasm contagious.

"I'm so glad to hear that you're interested in the Adventurer's Guild," Iris said, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "I'd recommend making your way to Brightburn and meeting with Sera Tamril. She's a merchant turned administrator who's been helping me with the formation of the Guild. You'll find her at The Frolicking Fawn Inn."

The woman, who seemed particularly eager to learn the ins and outs of the Guild, nodded vigorously. "Thank you, Iris. I hope to gain enough knowledge and experience to bring back to Stilstead and start a branch of the Adventurer's Guild here."

Iris smiled encouragingly. "That's a wonderful goal. Just remember, it may be some time before I return to Brightburn and officially found the Guild. But in the meantime, Sera will be able to guide you and help you prepare for your new careers as adventurers."

Evelyn gave the woman a proud smile. "As Reeve, I can't be focusing on the quests myself. Especially with that cursed forest south of us, I figure we may become an important stop for such people. I'll get her set up somewhere."

Iris glanced around the inn. "Why not here? Expand the inn a bit and give her a counter. The adventurers can stay in the inn and drink and eat here in the tavern. It doesn't have to be something fancy."

The Reeve took on a thoughtful expression as she gazed around the inn. "That's not a bad idea, Iris. Yeah, we can do that. Then we can have the quest board here in the common room."

Iris smiled, happy to have helped. "See? Perfect."

With a newfound sense of purpose and determination, the trio thanked Iris and bade her farewell. As they set off to prepare for their journey to Brightburn, Iris couldn't

help but feel a sense of pride and hope for the future of the Adventurer's Guild and the impact it would have on the lives of those who joined its ranks.

As the trio of aspiring adventurers left the inn, Evelyn turned to Iris with a curious expression on her face. "So, what do you and this party of yours plan on doing next? I know you've had quite the adventure lately, but you don't seem like the type to sit idly by."

Iris chuckled, appreciating Evelyn's insight. "You're right, I sat still for too long back in Cosdale. I guess now I'm filled with an anxious desire to get this done," she said with a pensive sigh. "Our current plan is to follow a lead on the Marauder Prince. We found some intriguing documents at the bandit camp, and we're hoping they'll point us in the right direction. If we can figure it out, we're going to head out today."

Evelyn nodded, understanding the urgency of their mission. "I see. Well, I wish you the best of luck in your endeavors. It's clear that your efforts are already making a difference, and I have no doubt that you'll continue to do so."

As they continued to chat, Ser Meredith entered the inn, carrying a satchel over her shoulder. Spotting Iris, she approached with a warm smile. "Ah, Adventurer Iris! I apologize for missing you yesterday. I came by, but heard that you were out helping a local farmer with a... monster?"

Iris shrugged. "It was a magical beast, but I managed to handle it... I hope."

"Ser Meredith, welcome," Evelyn greeted the knight before turning her focus back to Iris. "I will let you two work. I have other business I must attend to. Thank you again, Iris. I hope that wherever your quest leads you, you will be safe and make your way back through Silstead again."

Iris smiled. "Thank you, Evelyn. We'll see each other again."

As the reeve walked away, the knight nodded. "I've brought the documents I mentioned. The ones that we found at the other bandit camps," she said while offering the bag to Iris. "I hope they'll be of some help in your investigation."

"Thank you, Ser Meredith," Iris replied gratefully, accepting the satchel. "Your assistance is greatly appreciated. Why don't you come take a look as well, an extra set of eyes can't hurt."

Together, Iris and Ser Meredith made their way to a table in the common room, spreading the documents across its surface. As they began to examine the papers, looking for any clues or connections to the Marauder Prince, the rest of Iris's party trickled down from their rooms, their curiosity piqued by the new information.

Bree joined them first, rubbing the sleep from her eyes as she glanced over the documents. "What have you got there?" she inquired, her interest piqued.

Ser Meredith explained, “These are the documents we found in our raids. We're hoping they'll provide some insight into the Marauder Prince's whereabouts or intentions.”

Soon, Gryff, Laken, and Kaira joined the group as well, each of them taking a seat at the table and diving into the task at hand. They eagerly poured over the documents, searching for any hidden messages or patterns that might lead them closer to their quarry.

As they worked, the group discussed their findings, bouncing ideas and theories off one another. They compared the information they had gathered at the bandit camp with the new documents, hoping to uncover any connections or similarities.

“I've noticed that some of the symbols used in these documents seem to be repeated,” Ser Meredith observed, tracing a finger over one of the pages. “Perhaps they're some sort of code or shorthand?”

Gryff leaned in, examining the symbols more closely. “Hmm, could be. We should try to figure out what they mean. We could be overlooking crucial information.” He glanced over at Bree. “Want to take a shot at them again?”

Kaira, who had been mostly quiet up to this point, suddenly spoke up. “I think I've seen something like this before, back when I was part of an investigation into a particularly nasty gang in Brightburn. I think it was... a season before the Flash. The symbols were a way for criminals to communicate without being easily understood by outsiders.”

Ser Meredith snapped her fingers. “I remember that! Lady Arden was awake late every night for weeks as she worried about the populace. She nearly had the House Guard go door-to-door.”

The guard captain-turned-adventurer nodded, looking much better after another night of rest and healing. “It was brutal. But we figured it out. The symbols turned out to be markers that identified various targets, safe houses, and other crucial information. With that knowledge, we launched several key raids that led to the elimination of the leadership.”

Iris shook her head in disbelief. Just a season before the Flash had brought her to Eona, she had been studying Literature as her major. Fighting and magic were entirely foreign to her, something she had to learn out of necessity since arriving in this strange world. She'd always been sporty and worked out, but that only ensured she was decently in shape when she arrived.

Man, none of that shit really prepared me for this. It's been hard work since I found my ass here, all that learning how to fight. And I'm still shit at it. Thank the gods for magic, eh?

The idea of wielding magic and fighting with a sword or bow would have seemed ludicrous to her, no matter how much she loved escaping into a good fantasy setting, but now it was her everyday life. It was as if she had stepped right into one of the fantastical stories she had studied back on Earth.

I wonder how some of my shows ended... You know, thank the gods that this isn't a cultivation setting. I'd suck ass at that.

With a sigh, she turned back and focused on the investigation.

They passed around the documents, but they ended up in front of the group's medic for her to analyze. After a bit, Bree's eyes suddenly lit up with recognition. "Wait, I think I've figured something out. There's a pattern to the way these symbols are arranged—it's another code!"

A code within a code? Codeception?

She chuckled, which garnered her a *Look* from Kaira. Iris quickly put on a serious face, but one that maybe seemed too exaggerated, because the cute pixie-haired elf laughed softly into her hand and rolled her eyes.

With the group's excitement mounting, they focused their efforts on deciphering the code hidden within the text. Bree once again proved her puzzle mastery as she cracked the code. She discovered that it mentioned something about an eye of the storm.

Laken's eyes widened in surprise. "Wait! A map, give me a map!"

Ser Meredith jumped up, telling them she'd be right back before rushing out the door. Iris raised a brow and was about to make a comment, but the woman burst back in holding a large rolled-up parchment.

"I got one!" the knight said with a bit more excitement than was probably warranted.

The woman sat down next to Iris and spread out the map on the table, while Laken scrambled and shifted through a stack of parchments. Gryff and Bree placed some mugs down on the corners so that the map would stay flat as Laken stared at it intensely. Kaira moved over and sat next to Iris as everyone waited for the man to reveal his revelation.

Laken's eyes widened in sudden realization, and he held his breath for a moment before exhaling sharply. "I found it! Look here," he said, pointing at a reference in a letter and then down at the illustration on the map of a forest southwest of Cosdale. "The bandits have a hidden fort called Storm's End right in this location."

Iris's heart skipped a beat as she stared at the point on the map. Her breath caught in her throat as a sense of shock and recognition slammed into her harder than Truck-kun ever could. The room fell silent, and everyone's eyes turned to her. Kaira, concerned, reached for Iris. "What is it?" she asked softly.

“That's... That's where I arrived,” Iris whispered, her voice barely audible as the gravity of the situation sank in.

As they all stared at the map, suddenly a hand reached over Iris's shoulder and pointed at the same spot that the **[Ranger]** had indicated, accompanied by a series of barks and yips.

Everyone looked up, and Laken gasped.

Iris turned and found herself staring into the eyes of the kitsune, the mismatched colors of her irises were a delicious irony on a face that was oh so like her own.

The atmosphere in the room grew tense as everyone's gaze fixed upon the unexpected visitor. The kitsune's eyes were locked onto Iris's, her three tails swaying behind her, and after a moment of charged silence, a mischievous smile slowly spread across her face.