

The Quest Begins

The next few days were spent training as a party and planning their quest. While the three lower leveled members worked on creating abilities, Iris honed her capability to alter her spells only to affect enemies. Laken focused on his archery skills, the man extremely interested in Iris's **[Unerring Shot]**.

They also spent time discussing strategy, going over maps of the area, and planning out their approach to locating the Marauder Prince. The initial thought was to go to the bridge and see if it was possible to find remnants of the camp the bandits there had used.

While Kaira wasn't especially hopeful in that, Iris knew it was worth a shot. Especially, if her suspicion was correct in that the Marauder Prince had some type of interest in the harpy's forest.

More like Cursed Forest.

The group clearly couldn't hide there, as she suspected that the harpies would attack them, which left the small woods north of the lake near Stilstead and the forest north of the Cursed Forest between Cosdale and Stilstead.

She felt Stilstead was key.

They were all set to leave. A wagon and horses were rented and their purchased supplies were loaded. Everyone sat in the wagon and waited for Iris and Mocha, everyone fully geared up. They wouldn't be out of their armor except for a night in Stilstead that they planned for after the bridge.

The last thing on Iris's agenda was telling Sera and Tanith goodbye. The two would obviously remain behind, but they would not be sitting idle. Hopefully, by the time the party returned, everything for the Adventurer's Guild would be set and ready to go.

"Are you sure you have everything?" Sera asked, her face filled with concern. "I can put in a request for any last-minute items."

Iris smiled at the woman. "Thank you, Sera, but we're all set. We've got all that we'll need for the journey ahead."

The elf nodded and shared a glance with Tanith.

The former guard spoke up. "We wish you all the best on your quest. Stay safe out there."

Iris nodded. "We will. And we'll be back before you know it."

Sera smiled. "And we'll have everything squared away here. We should have nearly all of the support personnel chosen and a location selected by the time you return."

Mocha neighed and moved forward to bid Sera goodbye, the horse taking care to not hurt the elf with her armor.

Iris clasped hands with Tanith. "Take care of her, Tanith."

The man smiled. "I will. She's been keeping me busy as her assistant."

"I can imagine," Iris said with a chuckle. "Speaking of, start coming up with ways to evaluate potential adventurers. We'll need to separate them by tiers. Head to the temple and go through the ceremony as we did and get their primer. That will give you ideas, hopefully."

Tanith nodded. "Will do. Evaluator, eh? Big change from merchant guard."

Iris smiled. "If you do good work, we may see about *Lead* Evaluator," she said with a wink.

"Sold," he said with a laugh. "Be safe, Iris."

She pulled back her hand and nodded. "We will."

Iris said one last goodbye to Sera and mounted Mocha, directing her girl to turn around and head toward the wagon.

With Iris back with the party, they were ready to hit the road. Laken took the reins and gave a gentle snap to the horses, causing the wagon to start moving. Kaira, who was sitting on the bench beside the elf, turned to Iris.

"So, any last-minute plans before we get to the bridge?" she asked.

Iris shook her head. "No, I think we've covered everything we need to. We just need to be cautious and keep an eye out for any signs of danger."

Gryff and Bree, who were sitting in the back, overheard the conversation and couldn't resist adding their own commentary.

"Caution? What is this caution you speak of?" Gryff said with a grin.

Bree rolled her eyes. "He's just kidding, Iris. We'll be careful."

Iris couldn't help but smile. Despite the danger that lay ahead, she was glad to be traveling with this group. They were all skilled and capable in their own ways, and the four at least had comparable training to fall back on.

As they left the city gates, Iris couldn't help but feel a sense of excitement and anticipation. They were finally embarking on their quest to find the Marauder Prince and put an end to his predations.

Soon they were passing by the farms on the outskirts of the city. Iris took in the sights and smells of the countryside. The air was fresh, and the sun was shining down on them, casting a warm glow over everything. Mocha trotted alongside the wagon, and Iris felt the wind in her hair, a sense of freedom washing over her. She knew that the journey ahead would be dangerous and difficult, but for now, she was content to enjoy the ride and the company of her companions.

Iris leaned forward and rubbed Mocha's ear, whispering as they rode, "You ready girl? You may have a bigger part in this than our last quests."

"Don't worry, Iris. I have armor, I have a new ability. I'm here to eat apples and kick ass. And I'm all out of apples," her horse neighed.

Iris chuckled at Mocha's response. She patted the mare's neck and said, "I'm counting on you, girl."



As the sun began to set, the group arrived at a clearing, deciding it was time to set up camp for the night. They quickly got to work, unpacking their supplies and pitching their tents. The women set up a larger tent, while the two men settled into a slightly smaller one. They'd removed part of Mocha's armor so she could freely move around. Her horse was leading the wagon's mundane horses to a nearby stream to drink some water, and Gryff set up a small campfire while the others gathered wood and food to cook.

As they sat around the fire, the party members chatted amiably. Kaira and Iris were sitting close together, their shoulders almost touching. Bree was examining a map by the firelight, while Gryff was sharpening his dagger. Laken was roasting some meat over the fire.

"So Iris," Kaira said, turning to the terran woman. "Tell us more about your world. I haven't met many terrans, but from what I've heard, almost all of you come from different... versions?"

Iris smiled, feeling a sense of warmth at the interest. "Well, Earth is a beautiful place. We have oceans, mountains, forests, deserts, all sorts of landscapes just like here. And we have so many different cultures, languages, and traditions. It's really diverse. However, there's just... us. There are no elves, telv, orkun, or dwarves. Only humans, which is what *my* people called ourselves."

Gryff looked up from his dagger. "Did you have magic on your world?"

Iris shook her head. "Well, not like here. We don't have mages or spells, but we have technology that can do amazing things. We have machines that can fly, communicate instantly over long distances, and even heal people."

Bree looked up from the map. "That's fascinating. How does it all work?"

Iris leaned forward, excited to share her knowledge. "It's all based on science, understanding how the world works and manipulating it to our advantage. It's really quite amazing."

Laken handed Iris a piece of roasted meat. “And what about the people? What are they like?”

Iris took a bite of the meat and chewed thoughtfully. “Well, we're not all that different from the people here. We have our differences, of course, but we all want the same things. To be safe, to be happy, to live our lives the way we choose.” She smiled.

Bree looked at Iris with a curious expression. “Do you think the Flash happened on your world too?”

Iris's expression darkened at the mention of the Flash. “I'm not sure. It's possible, but there's no way to know for sure. And if it did happen, it might not be as easy to recover from as it is here.”

Laken looked up from the fire, a thoughtful look on his face. “What do you mean?”

Iris took a deep breath. “Well, the world of my birth is very different from this one. Our technology, while advanced, is not the same as magic. And if the Flash happened there, I can only imagine the chaos that would have happened as different factions sought to use it to their advantage.”

Kaira reached over and took Iris's hand. “I'm glad people like you are here to help us navigate this new reality.”

Iris smiled as she gently squeezed Kaira's hand. “Your people are tenacious. Every day I hear about new things people from *your* world are coming up with. I suspected not long after I arrived that there was a system, but it was the Church that found a way to prove it. It's fascinating, and I don't doubt that you all would be just as far without people like me.”

Kaira gave her a small smile. “Well, I for one am glad that you're here.”

Iris felt a warmth in her chest at Kaira's words. She leaned over and kissed Kaira's cheek. “I'm glad to be here too. And who knows, maybe one day someone from my world can bring some of my world's technology here and we can learn from each other.”

Kaira's eyes widened and her hand shot to her cheek as she blushed deeply.

Gryff chuckled. “I'd love to see the looks on some people's faces if we showed up with flying machines or something.”

Bree laughed. “Can you imagine? That would be amazing to soar like a bird in the sky.”

Laken grinned. “Maybe we could build our own flying machines. With magic, we might be able to figure it out.”

The group started talking about different topics that sounded like pure fantasy and had her laughing at some of the ideas. The thought of a flying machine that flapped like a metal bird showed just how different her new world was.

Their conversations had her smiling though. It was nice to know that no matter what world she was in, some things were universal. The desire for knowledge, for connection, for progress. And the comfort of friends around the fire.

“Iris,” Kaira said, jerking the adventurer from her thoughts. “How did you decide to become an adventurer?”

Everyone turned to look at Iris, curious about her answer. She thought for a moment before responding, “When I arrived...” She trailed off, feeling a pressure building inside her.

She took a deep breath, collecting herself. A soft nicker sounded from behind her as Mocha walked up and gently lowered herself down next to Iris.

The horse nudged her gently. *“I’m here. They’re your party. You should tell them,”* Mocha nickered.

Iris nodded. “When I arrived, I appeared in the middle of a bandit camp. I had no idea where I was or how I got there, and I was completely alone. One of the bandits grabbed me, and they all cheered at their fortune. They were going to present me to their boss as a worthy trophy.”

She took another deep breath. Everyone sat quietly, listening. Not a single look of judgment on their faces, Bree’s face was filled with quiet horror, while Gryff looked like he wanted to kill every one of the people she spoke of.

Too late.

Iris continued, “They threw me into a tent that had been set up for their boss, fancy pillows and furniture all ready for the next day when he arrived.”

Iris’s voice faltered as she remembered the fear and desperation she had felt at that moment, but then she steeled herself. “I thought it was the end for me. But then I got lucky,” she chuckled ruefully. “A man came in, wanting *to test the goods*. We fought, each of us giving as good as we got. I was pissed, mind you. But I fucking tripped on a pillow, pulling us both down.” She let out an airy laugh, closing her eyes as she shook her head. She looked up with a smile on her face. “As we fell, I saw his dagger, this bejeweled thing filled with diamonds and other gems. He fell awkwardly, and it gave me a chance. I snatched it free and stabbed him over and *over and OVER...*”

She sucked in a breath, her chest heaving before she started laughing at the dark humor of it all. But then Kaira was there. The elf wrapped her arms around her and whispered, “You don’t have to continue. It’s okay, we’re here.”

Iris shook her head. “No, I’m fine. I’ve long since dealt with it,” she assured the woman. She ignored the woman’s narrowed eyes and continued, “...As the man died, I

felt a rage that I hadn't felt before. It was so *primal*, and I knew right there what I had to do to *survive*. Something inside of me just... clicked. I felt a surge of energy and strength that I had never experienced before—in hindsight, it was my first level. As I walked out of that tent, I already knew what I wanted and magic answered my call,” she said, adopting a predatory grin on her face.

“That was when I learned [**Spark**],” Iris explained, touching the hilt of the sword that rarely left her side. “And found the sword that I have to this day. I believe it was previously owned by a knight that the bandits had killed, but it has kept me safe ever since. Not a single person from that camp survived. I gained a decent amount of levels from that. Then I ran, and the next day stumbled right into another group of bandits,” she chuckled and shook her head.

“I fought them off, but that was when I learned I am cursed with the Spark of Bad Luck, and it doesn't discriminate. It will affect me or anyone around me. Since then, I have stumbled or charged head first from one bad situation to the next, and it wasn't until Mocha here,” she said, pulling away from Kaira and patting her horse. “That I managed to really find some stability and a sense of purpose as an adventurer. I figured if I'm going to have bad luck, I might as well use it to help others and maybe try to make some good luck along the way,” Iris finished with a smile.

Kaira stared at Iris with a mix of respect and awe. “I can't imagine what that must have been like for you, but I'm so glad you're here with us now,” she said, reaching out to give Iris's hand a reassuring squeeze.

Bree stood up and walked over, standing in front of Iris. “What you went through, is one of the most horrible things a woman could experience. But you fought back, and you survived. And now you're here, with us, fighting for something greater than yourself. You're a true warrior, Iris,” she said, before surging forward and pulling Iris into a big hug.

Iris was taken aback at first, but then she allowed herself to be enveloped in the warm embrace. Emotions she kept deep threatened to emerge. She felt a lump form in her throat and tears prick at the corners of her eyes. For the first time in a long time, she felt seen and valued, not just for her strength and abilities, but for who she was as a person.

“Thank you,” Iris said, her voice barely above a whisper. “Thank you for accepting me,” She pulled back, swallowed hard, and forced a smile on her face.

Gryff nodded in agreement. “We're lucky to have you, Iris. And who knows, maybe your bad luck will turn into good luck for us in this quest,” he said with a grin.

Laken added, “And we'll make sure to have each other's back, no matter what happens. We're a party, after all.”

Iris felt warmth spread through her chest as she looked around at her new friends. It was a strange feeling, to feel so connected to people she had just met, but it felt right.

“Thank you, all of you,” she said, smiling. “I’m honored to be a part of this party and to have you all with me.”

Mocha nickered softly, and Iris reached out to stroke her mane. She knew that there were still dangers ahead and challenges to face, but she felt ready to face them with her new companions by her side.

I may be a bit messed up, but hey... Who isn't?



The next day, Iris woke up early, as usual, yawning as she stretched. As she got up, she noticed that Bree was still sound asleep next to her. Which made sense, because the woman had the late shift for the watch. Kaira was also gone, as it was her turn on watch. Iris quietly slipped out of the tent, taking care not to wake the sun elf. After walking a little way into the woods, she found a private spot to relieve herself.

When she returned, she saw that Laken was standing next to Mocha, talking to her in hushed tones. Iris smiled at the sight—it was clear that Mocha had taken a liking to the young archer.

“Good morning, Laken,” she said as she approached the two of them.

“Morning, Iris,” the elf replied, turning to face her. “I was just talking to Mocha, here! I think we’re finally starting to understand each other.”

Her horse nodded. *“He can’t understand shit. I just keep nodding when appropriate,”* Mocha whinnied.

Laken’s eyes went wide. “See! She’s agreeing with me!”

Iris snorted. “She sure is, buddy.”

Laken chuckled. “I’m just glad she seems to like me—”

“Like is such a strong word. I prefer tolerate. Tell this kid to give me apples and we may promote him to... minion,” Mocha nickered.

“See! We’re going to be great friends, Mocha,” Laken said, stepping toward her horse to pat her on the neck.

Mocha turned to face Iris and rolled her eyes.

Iris laughed at the exchange between the two. “Looks like you two are going to get along great,” she said to Laken with a grin.

Laken beamed. "I'm happy to hear it. Maybe one day she'll let me ride her," he said, patting Mocha's neck again.

Mocha snorted. *"Don't count on it, kid. I only let the best of the best ride me."*

Iris put a hand over her heart. "Aww, Mocha! I didn't know you thought so highly of me."

"I fucking take it back. You two-legged weirdos are all the same," Mocha whinnied.

Laken beamed. "Mocha, you are seriously the most amazing horse in the world."

"Keep it coming, suck up some more. Iris, tell this fool to get me some darn apples," Mocha nickered, clearly amused.

Iris chuckled. "Well, the first suggestion I have for you, Laken, is to bribe her with apples."

Mocha's ears swiveled toward Iris and the horse huffed. *"Bribe? What do you take me for? They are offerings from a supplicant."*

Laken nodded eagerly. "I'll do whatever it takes!"

Oddly appropriate response.

Iris smiled at his enthusiasm before turning serious. "So, any news from the night watch?"

The **[Ranger]** shook his head. "No, everything was quiet. Nothing to report, boss."

Iris nodded. "Good to hear. Let's give the others a bit more sleep, but let's start preparing to leave. You can sit in the back with Gryff. You two can get some rest on the way to the bridge. We'll need you then."

Laken stood straighter. "Understood. I'll be ready," he said with a nod.

She turned toward her horse. "Mocha, get the mundanes ready? We'll get you all armored up before heading out."

Mocha lifted her head high. *"Aye, aye, Captain. Adventurer Mocha can handle it."*

Iris laughed. "You're a damn goof."

Kaira waved as the woman saw Iris as she returned from whatever had her busy. Iris smiled as she saw the pixie-haired elf start getting ready for the day. She took a deep breath and went to join her, the two talking about nothing in particular as they cooked and cleaned up.

Once the group packed up their camp and were ready to leave, Iris mounted Mocha and took her place at the front of the party. Bree took the reins of the wagon,

with Kaira sitting next to her. Gryff and Laken climbed into the back of the wagon, ready to catch up on some much-needed rest.

Iris took a deep breath of the morning air and felt the sun warm on her face. She smiled to herself, feeling content with the way things were going.

She turned to look back at Laken and Gryff. The two of them were already dozing off, their heads lolling to one side as the wagon began to move. Iris chuckled softly to herself, glad that they were getting some rest.

As they made their way down the dirt path, the forest slowly giving way to open fields, Iris couldn't help but feel a sense of excitement. They were getting closer to the bridge, and she knew that things were only going to get more challenging from there.

But for now, she was content to enjoy the ride and let Mocha take the lead. She leaned forward and whispered in the horse's ear. "You ready for this, girl?"

"I was born ready," Mocha whinnied.

As the sun steadily rose, the party continued on their journey toward the bridge that would lead them to the next part of their quest. Iris rode ahead on Mocha, her eyes scanning the road ahead for any signs of danger.

Bree was driving the wagon with Kaira at her side, while Laken was in the back of the wagon preparing his bow and Gryff was watching the treelines, spear, and shield at the ready.

As the bridge came into view, Iris didn't see anything out of the ordinary. She **[Focused]**, trying to catch anything. When she didn't find anything, she motioned the group forward.

They approached the bridge slowly before Iris signaled for the group to slow down and stop. She dismounted from Mocha, patting the horse's neck affectionately before turning to face the rest of the group.

The stillness of the surrounding forest was only broken by the tranquil sounds of nature. The gentle chirping of birds and the hum of insects harmoniously intertwined with the soothing flow of the nearby river, creating a tranquil symphony that permeated the entire area. It was as if the forest itself had taken a deep breath, pausing for a moment to relish in the beauty of its surroundings. Iris took a moment to breathe it all in before addressing the others.

"Alright, team," she said, her voice low and serious. "This is where I was attacked by the bandits and the evil terrans. We need to find where the bandit camp was and see if we can find any clues that might lead us to the prince."

Kaira narrowed her eyes. "Iris..."

The woman stood and hopped down from the wagon, moving toward her with a purpose. "What do you mean 'evil terrans', you didn't say anything about them in your report," she said with a low voice as she neared.

Shit. I forgot to tell her later.

Iris shifted uncomfortably on her feet, not really knowing what to say. “I... I didn’t want anyone to dismiss the seriousness of it because they were also terran. Everytime I see other terrans, people think that I automatically want to join them or talk to them... I don’t *know* them. They’re the ones who approached me to join them.”

Kaira crossed her arms, studying Iris for a moment before nodding in understanding. “I see your point,” she said, her voice softening slightly. “But we need to be clear with each other if we’re going to work together effectively. No hiding things and we can’t afford any misunderstandings or omissions of important details. *That* was an important detail.”

Iris nodded, feeling relieved that Kaira didn’t scold her too much. “I’m sorry. You’re right. I should have mentioned the terrans, at least, when you and I talked.”

Kaira searched her for a moment, the shorter elf narrowing her eyes as she thought of something to say. “Tell me *exactly* what happened when and where they approached you. Then finish with exactly what happened *here*,” Kaira said, gesturing around them to emphasize the point.

“Wait...” Kaira turned and waved to the others. “Laken, come here!” she called out.

After Laken joined them, Iris took a deep breath and proceeded to explain what happened, starting with when the terrans had approached her at the inn in Stilstead and ending with the attack on the bridge. Kaira listened intently, nodding occasionally and asking questions for clarification.

Laken tilted his head. “The magic-user you spoke of, it was them, wasn’t it?”

Iris nodded. “Yeah, Eira was shit, but she hurt Mocha... I gave them every chance to stop before that point...”

Laken’s countenance grew dark. “Good. No one hurts Mocha.”

“*That’s a good minion,*” Mocha neighed and gave Laken a nudge. “*Iris, tell him about my fight with the guard!*”

Laken and Kaira looked at the horse with curiosity.

“What did she say, Iris?” Laken asked.

Iris chuckled. “She wants me to tell you about her part in the fight.”

The archer’s brows rose while Kaira’s furrowed.

“So, Mocha here, faced down five spearmen. She snatched one of their spears and proceeded to beat the crap out of the man with it,” she said with a laugh.

Mocha adopted the most heroic pose, raising her head and neighing proudly to confirm the story. Which made her look even more badass in her armor. Laken and

Kaira exchanged a surprised look, clearly impressed by the horse's bravery and skill in battle.

Laken shook his head. "That is amazing."

Iris smiled, patting Mocha on the nose. "Well done, girl. Now they see you as more than just a pretty face."

Mocha blew air into Iris's face.

Kaira chuckled but then brought the group back on task. "Alright, let's get to work. Laken, you're up."

The man nodded and started looking around. He asked Iris some questions, such as the direction the telv man ran off, and she pointed away, back down the road and toward the woods. "Over there. He ran down the road a bit then darted into the woods."

Laken nodded. "Looks like that's our destination then. Let's move the wagon and get our gear."

Iris turned to Mocha. "Alright, girl. We know how you are in the woods. I need to give you a job. I need you to make sure the mundanes don't run off and that you protect the wagon."

Mocha nodded. "*Leave it to me.*"