

## Forming a Party

As Iris and Mocha approached the entrance to the City Guard's training grounds, they could hear the sound of metal clashing and grunts of exertion coming from within. The imposing entrance loomed before them, flanked by two armored guards who eyed them warily.

Undeterred, Iris sat up in her saddle, chin held high and her back straight, projecting an air of confidence and authority. Mocha strode along as if she owned the place, her head held high, her mane and tail flowing freely in the wind like a mythical horse of the gods.

Iris's armor was immaculate, which was actually unfortunate because clearly someone in shiny armor rarely used it. She wore her longsword on her hip, and her shield and bow were strapped to Mocha's saddle.

The guards tensed up as the two approached, their hands instinctively resting on the hilts of their swords. But as adventurer and steed drew closer, they seemed to relax, their stance softening.

Without a word, Iris and Mocha moved through the entrance and stepped inside, the clang of the metal echoing through the courtyard. As they entered the training grounds, the guards and trainees all turned to watch. Iris felt their eyes on her, and she smirked, reveling in the attention.

*Take in the sight, boys, and girls. This is what a real hero looks like.*

Mocha pranced a bit, sensing the excitement in the air, and Iris patted her neck reassuringly.

She scanned the area, taking in the sights and sounds of the busy training ground.

There were rows of dummies for practicing swordplay and archery, groups of soldiers sparring with each other, and veterans barking orders at their charges. Iris felt a thrill of excitement run through her as she realized that she was now amongst members of the other side of the martial profession she had taken... the law.

*I bet they'd join me if only they hadn't taken an arrow to the knee.*

The four guards-turned-adventurer-lites were standing together, having reserved a ring for the five of them. Kaira turned and waved at her, raising an eyebrow as she saw Mocha strutting around like a showhorse.

Iris smiled, but Mocha snorted, *"You forgive too easily."*

"No, I don't," Iris denied. "She was perfectly reasonable. I was the one acting silly for overreacting. At least I kept it between you and me."

*"You're not silly,"* Mocha nickered. *"You're a perfectly reasonable monkey."*

Iris couldn't help but chuckle at Mocha's remark, shaking her head in amusement. She dismounted from her horse and strode over to the group, her steps confident and purposeful. Kaira greeted her with a smile and a playful punch to the arm.

Mocha let out a low nicker from behind her. "*She better be nice.*"

Iris waved her off.

"You made it," the elf said, gesturing to the training grounds. "What do you think?"

Iris looked around, taking in the scene once more. "Impressive," she said, nodding. She gestured toward groups of three practicing a group fight. "But I think we could give them a run for their money."

Gryff, the telv guard, chuckled. "We'll see! None of us have *actually* seen you in action," he pointed out.

"Kaira has. I got moves!" Iris smiled and bumped into Kaira with her hips, sending the woman stumbling.

Kaira rolled her eyes but couldn't help but smile at Iris's playful antics. "Yeah, she's got moves alright," Kaira said with a chuckle. "Just don't get too cocky, Iris. We're here to train, not to show off."

Iris stuck out her tongue playfully. "Fine, fine. But I'm definitely taking down at least one of those dummies before we leave," she declared.

Kaira groaned. "Please do not damage the training dummies unnecessarily. The Guard has to pay to get them fixed."

"Fiiine. I'll be nice to the training dummies," she whined.

The guard captain rolled her eyes. "Well, you guys have fun."

Iris raised a brow. "You're leaving?"

Kaira nodded. "Yup. Mocha and I have an appointment."

"*Wait, what?*" Mocha whinnied.

"Wait, what?" Iris echoed.

"You heard me," Kaira said. "I have to take Mocha somewhere for a surprise."

Iris arched an eyebrow in curiosity. "A surprise? What kind of surprise?"

Kaira grinned mischievously. "Can't tell you, it's a surprise. But don't worry, we'll be back soon enough."

Iris shrugged and looked at her horse, who was looking betrayed. Iris smiled at her. "Alright then, you two have fun! Mocha, don't give her too much grief."

Mocha gave her a look. "*You're doing this on purpose. Punishing me,*" her horse nickered. "*This is because I stole your snacks isn't it?*"

"That was you?!" Iris gasped.

*“Wait, no. Of course not,” Mocha whinnied.*

“I totally thought it was Tanith!”

*“It was definitely Tanith. That guy... so horrible. He steals my apples too. We should prank him,”* Mocha nickered.

Iris rolled her eyes. “Alright, you have fun with Kaira.”

*“Wait! Ugh... Fine. But if she steps out of line, I’m biting her,”* Mocha whinnied, with a resigned look.

Iris stepped close and patted Mocha on the neck. “You’ll be fine. Have fun for me will you?”

*“But I wanted to watch you kick their asses...”*

Iris snorted. “I’ll make sure to have another session when you’re around.”

*“Promise?”* Mocha asked in a lower nicker.

“I promise to go easy on them enough so they’ll want to practice again when you are around,” Iris replied.

*“Good.”*

Kaira watched the exchange with ample amusement. “Come on, Mocha. Let’s go before she changes her mind,” Kaira called out.

Mocha gave her one last look, and Iris waved at her horse who swished her tail in response.

Iris chuckled as she watched them go before turning back to Gryff and the others. “Alright, let’s get to training,” she said with a determined look in her eyes.

Gryff nodded, a smile on his face. “Finally, I’ve been waiting for this.”

Iris raised a brow. “Oh? Why’s that?”

The group chuckled. “We’ve heard all about your magic use. We saw the aftermath of your fight in that house.”

Iris narrowed her eyes. “Speaking of that house, did the Guard find anything else about that?”

Bree nodded. “We did. There was a passage in the back of the basement that we believe ran to the sewers. We sealed it off.”

“That’ll do it,” Iris affirmed, nodding sagely. “Now, practice. We’re going after these bandits, and I’ve already fought them. Now, I’m sure you all know how to fight, so we’re not going to worry about that, but we are going to worry about how you fight *magic* users.”

“How big of a difference is that, really?” Laken asked.

Iris walked toward the stand where the training weapons were. She grabbed a blunted longsword and turned around. Iris smiled. "It all depends on the person. Now, who's first?" she asked.

Gryff shrugged. "I'll go."

The man stepped forward, his spear and shield at the ready, while the other two stepped back to give them space.

"Now," Iris continued. "The system affects people differently, the Church can actually give more information than me. I basically wing it, but I will at least share what I know."

The three nodded. Iris shifted her sword hand-to-hand before settling on using it with her right. With a nod to Gryff, she got into position. "Now, for this fight, I am only going to use my passive spells and abilities. Look for a quick pulse of mana if you can, if not, look for subtle changes in my body language. These passive skills improve my body. As physical users, you'll be able to create abilities. If any of you are hybrid, you'll also be able to create spells."

"What's the benefit of being a physical or magic person then, if hybrid can use both?" Gryff asked, the man still focused on her movements as the two slowly circled each other.

"Great question!" she said with a smile. "I have a guess. I learned that Hybrids get a balance of stats, and of course, have the capability to gain both abilities and spells. Which means more versatility, but they lack the theoretical potential of a pure user. We'll need to get a copy of the Church's primer on this for us to peruse."

She cast [**Arcane Capability**] and [**Rushing Wind**] in quick succession, sighing as she felt her stamina dip while the magic took effect, increasing her strength and movement abilities.

Bree's eyes widened. "I saw that!"

Iris smiled. "Good! You ready Gryff?"

The telv nodded. "Been ready. Just letting you talk."

She chuckled and then feinted left before rushing the man with her increased agility. The man's eyes widened as she lashed out, but he managed to block her strike with his shield. Iris quickly backed away and circled him again, watching for any openings in his defense.

"As a physical user, you'll need to be able to anticipate and react quickly to magic attacks," Iris explained. "Keep their attention divided, and overwhelm the caster. They'll typically be weaker physically, so get in close."

Gryff nodded, his eyes focused on Iris as she continued to circle him. Suddenly, he lunged forward with his spear, but Iris easily dodged his attack with a side-step. She

then followed up with a quick strike to his side, but Gryff managed to block it with his shield.

“Good,” Iris said with a smile. “Keep it up.”

Gryff was trying to anticipate Iris's movements, but she was moving too quickly for him to keep up. Suddenly, she feinted to the right, and then in a flash, she was upon him.

Gryff barely managed to bring up his shield in time, and the clang of metal echoed through the training yard as Iris's sword struck it. The force of the blow made Gryff stumble back a step, but he quickly regained his footing and brought his spear back into position, and jabbed forward.

Iris jumped backward away from the strike, watching Gryff carefully. She could see the determination in his eyes, and she knew that he was taking this seriously.

Gryff circled her warily, his spear pointed towards her. He made a feint towards her left side, but Iris easily parried his real attack with her sword. She followed up with a quick slash towards his right side, which he managed to spin and take on his shield with a grunt.

She smirked.

The two went back and forth as she got a gauge of the man's fighting style, purposely drawing out the fight so he too could get a feel for her. She kept increasing her speed and reactions, to see how he responded, and she could sense his confusion as he tried to figure out her movements.

When she noticed him tiring, she decided to end the fight quickly.

She baited him with a wide swing of her sword, which he sidestepped and jabbed forward with his spear.

With a sudden burst of speed, Iris dodged his attack, closed the distance between them, and dropped down. She swept Gryff's leg out from under him, and he fell to the ground with a thud, his spear falling onto the ground beside him.

Iris stood over him, her sword pointed toward his neck. “And that's how you do it,” she said with a smile.

Gryff groaned as he got back up, rubbing his backside. “Damn, you're fast,” he said, impressed.

Iris chuckled. “Thank my magic for that. It's all about using your strengths to your advantage.”

She noticed a few people watching them, quietly talking to each other as she fought and taught her new party members.

Laken raised a hand. “So, me next?”

Gryff laughed. “So quick to get your ass kicked, Laken?”

“Well, I figure it’s better now than in an actual fight,” the elf said.

Iris chuckled. “That’s good thinking, but no. Not *just* you,” she said, smiling at their confused looks. She drew mana into herself, letting her magic settle into her eyes, feeling them start to spark. “Now let’s add some more magic. You three versus me.”

The three glanced between themselves, before coming to an unspoken conclusion and stepping forward. Gasps of surprise amongst the observing guards caused more people to look over and start heading their way.

Iris rolled her shoulders.



Gryff narrowed his eyes as he adjusted his grip on his spear. The terran woman was not technically the best fighter he’d ever faced but when combined with her strength and speed... *Kaira is a lucky woman...*

Now he warily focused on the woman whose eyes looked as if she were a goddess of lightning with how they glowed a fierce bluish-white with cracks of lightning shooting off of them.

“Okay,” she started while sheathing her sword. “So, magic users. I’ve only faced one in combat, and she was pretty weak. So, I don’t have much to give you other than what I can do. We’ll learn together! Now, I’ve toned down the strength of my magic, but you’ll still feel a little shock. How would you face someone like me?”

How *would* he face someone with magic? His first thought was to pepper the area with arrows, but she had mentioned that magic users had fewer physical attributes, whatever that meant. Actually...

“What are attributes?” he asked.

The redhead smiled. “So, I know this based on stories and games in my world. But it seems to hold true here. Attributes are how mana and the system improve your body. Someone with higher capability will be physically stronger if they’re also a physical person. I know there’s a way to quantify your attributes, but apparently, the Church hasn’t figured it out yet.”

“The Church? You’ve mentioned them a few times now,” Bree asked, adjusting her grip on her own spear and shield.

*Good, someone else is confused.*

“Yes, they have a ceremony that shows you all of the stuff about your status with the system. In fact, after this, you three should go perform it. We’ll need to know so I can help you and so we can figure out how to utilize the information for the Adventurer’s Guild,” Iris explained.

*This woman definitely knows her craft. No wonder she's starting a new guild...*

"On the whole fighting a magic user thing," Laken started. "We should probably spread out. Split your focus."

She smiled. "I see someone was listening earlier. Very good. I'm ready when you are. If you don't attack in ten seconds though, I will..."

Gryff's eyes widened. *Shit.*

He glanced at the other two. "Laken, take left. Bree, right. I'll go center. Spread out!"

Laken nodded, twirling his sword in his hand as he took two steps to the left.

Bree nodded and moved to the right, her shield held in front of her. Gryff took a deep breath and charged forward, his spear aimed toward Iris. As he got closer, he could feel a static charge in the air and his eyes widened.

Gryff feinted to the left, causing Iris to dodge the opposite way. Taking advantage of her error, he lunged forward and thrust his spear toward her. Iris managed to dodge the attack, and at the same time launched small orbs of crackling lightning at him and the others.

The spell connected with his chest and Gryff felt a shock of electricity run through his body. He stumbled back, his muscles twitching as he grunted from the pricks that ran through his body.

"Shit! That hurts," Bree cried out.

Gryff stole a glance at the other two and saw Laken and Bree also struggling, both of them affected by Iris's lightning.

Iris took advantage of their weakened state and quickly closed the distance between them. With lightning-fast movements, she disarmed Laken and Bree before they could react.

Then using Laken's sword, she spun and held it pointed at his neck, yet again.

Gryff groaned.

"All three of you just died," Iris stated evenly. "Again."

She handed the sword back to Laken and the four of them reset their positions.

Gryff couldn't believe it. They were all well-trained guards, but still couldn't defeat Iris. She was just too skilled and powerful. But Gryff wasn't one to give up easily.

"Okay, let's try this again," he said, determined to learn from their mistakes and come up with a better strategy.

They spread out once more, this time taking a different approach. Bree went in first, distracting Iris with her shield and spear while Laken circled around from the side. Gryff waited for the perfect moment to strike, watching Iris's movements carefully.

As Iris focused on Bree, Laken made his move, swinging his sword at her from the side. But Iris was too quick, and with a flick of her wrist, she knocked the sword out of Laken's hand.

Gryff seized the opportunity and charged forward, thrusting his spear at Iris with all his might. But she was ready for him, and with a swift move, she disarmed him too.

Bree took that moment to launch forward from behind Iris, giving the two men a chance to retrieve their weapons.

The medic caught two of the terran's spells on her shield and jabbed forward. At the moment just before it would have connected with the redhead's chest, something happened.

Iris *transformed* into a form of lightning and then surged straight up into the sky.

Gryff's eyes went wide, and cries of surprise could be heard from the crowd that had gathered.

The mass of crackling lightning exploded in the air, Iris reemerging from the spell like a goddess. Before she even started to fall, streams of wind circled her, and she started *floating* slowly downward.

Her hands lit up with lightning.

"Shit," he said, resigned.

"Shield up!" Bree called out.

He barely got his shield up as the terran started raining balls of lightning down on their heads. Laken was quickly hit and the man fell to the ground groaning and twitching. Bree managed to block two before one clipped her in the leg and then she, too, went down.

Finally, the woman focused on him. With a flick of her wrist, Iris sent a powerful bolt of lightning toward Gryff. He managed to raise his shield just in time, but the force of the impact sent him tumbling backward. As he struggled to regain his footing, Iris closed in on him, her lightning crackling and flashing around her.

Gryff raised his spear and tried to attack, but Iris easily sidestepped his thrust and countered with a quick blast of lightning that left him reeling. He stumbled backward, his body convulsing from the shock.

Iris pressed her advantage, her movements graceful and fluid as she dodged and weaved around Gryff's attacks, knowing if the setting was real, he would have died multiple times already.

With a final burst of lightning, she sent him flying backward, his body slamming into the ground with a sickening thud.

The crowd gasped in shock as Iris emerged victorious, her lightning crackling around her in a show of power.



“The key to fighting a magic user is to make sure they’re not a higher level than you,” Iris said as the three of them groaned on the ground. “If they are? Run. Or hit them with literally everything you got and pray.”

*Yeah, no shit.*

As Gryff stumbled to his feet, his entire body aching from the abuse of *training* he just received, one of the other guard captains stepped forward, looking at Iris.

“Who are you?” the woman asked.

Iris smiled. “I’m Iris. The Adventurer,” she said before gesturing to the three sore guards whose asses she just kicked. “And this is my party.”

He wasn’t sure why, but that made Gryff smile. She was powerful, skilled, and confident, but also kind and willing to share her knowledge with others. He couldn’t help but wonder what other adventures she had been on, and what kind of feats she had accomplished.

*Maybe that could be me, too.*



Iris stood by as the three grabbed some water. They had gone a few more times, and each time the coordination between the three improved. They still lost... but at least they were getting better. The final time, Iris used a sword and shield, which made the bout end even more quickly.

*They’ve got to be a bit lower level. They simply can’t keep up.*

Their show had made everyone nearby interested and she had fielded numerous questions about her magic and training methods. She answered each one with a patient smile, enjoying the attention.

As the crowd slowly dispersed, Iris turned to Gryff. “You three put up a good fight,” she said, a note of respect in her voice. “We’ll get a few more training sessions in, but mainly to show how we can work together.”

Gryff grinned, the telv standing a bit straighter. “I know I’m looking forward to it,” he replied. “We learned a lot from this.”

Bree and Laken nodded.

“Good,” she said, nodding. “Remember what I said though. If you ever come across a magic user who’s too strong for you, don’t try to be a hero.”

Bree chuckled. “Don’t have to worry about that. We’ll have you!”

*Oh gods, I’m carrying them aren’t I. Ah, well... If I want more adventurers someone’s gotta do it.*

Iris laughed. "Fair enough. But seriously, you guys could have taken the last magic user I faced, but you have to be careful. Until we leave, I suggest you guys work on gaining abilities. We'll go over that, but first, I want you three to go to the temple and undergo the Ceremony of Paths. Tell them Iris and Kaira sent you."

Gryff raised a brow.

Iris waved him off before he could say anything. "Kaira knows the Praetor there. Just name-drop her, she'll be okay with it. Probably."

"If it's alright with you, I think I should probably bathe first," Bree said while sniffing at her armpit. "I don't want to potentially meet with the highest-ranking paladin in the city smelling like this."

Iris snorted. "Of course!"

As her party members made their way to clean up and prepare to head to the temple, Iris noticed a familiar pair walking into the training grounds. It was Kaira and Mocha, returning from their own errands. Iris smiled and waved as they approached.

Her eyes widened at the sight of Mocha, who was now wearing a set of plate armor that covered her entire body, with a sharp spike protruding from the center of the armor over her head, giving her the appearance of a fierce and majestic war unicorn.

She couldn't believe how badass and intimidating Mocha looked in the armor, a far cry from the gentle horse she met on the farm. Iris felt a sense of pride welling up inside of her at the sight, realizing that Mocha had come a long way from being a mere mare. She had leveled alongside Iris, and now she was every bit the warrior Iris was.

Kaira noticed Iris's reaction and chuckled. "Yeah, Mocha looks the part of a proper warhorse now, doesn't she?" she said, giving the horse a pat on the flank. "I got her some new armor. If she's going to be coming with us into this fight, she needs to be equipped to do so."

*"Oh, my gods, Iris. I look amazing! Look at me!"* Mocha whinnied, standing tall.

Iris chuckled and walked over to her horse. "You do look amazing," she said. "I'm almost afraid to fight alongside you now, you might steal all the attention."

Mocha let out a snort. *"As if!"*

Iris couldn't help but laugh. "So you two had fun?"

Mocha nodded. *"Yeah, she's not so bad. I guess we can keep her,"* the horse nickered.

She shook her head, a smile playing on her face as she turned to the elf, the woman smirking. "Kaira, I..."

"Just say thank you," she said. "And consider it my contribution to the guild."

Iris nodded, grateful for Kaira's help. "Thank you," she said, reaching out to give Kaira a quick hug. "It means a lot to me, and to Mocha too."

Kaira smiled, returning the hug. “Of course. Anything to help out my favorite adventurer and her trusty steed.”

*“Back to the inn? I want to show Sera and Tanith!”* Mocha whinnied.

Iris snorted. “Yeah, let’s go back to the inn. I told the others to meet us there, anyway.”

Kaira’s eyes narrowed as she looked around. “Where are they?”

“I sent them to the temple to do the Ceremony of Paths. We need to know their information and come up with a plan for how to get you all to improve,” she explained. “Oh, and I told them to tell that praetor that you sent them.”

“Wait... what?”

“Yeah! You and that woman seemed to be on good terms,” she said with a wink. “Let’s go.”

Kaira groaned.

Iris climbed up into the saddle on Mocha’s back and reached out to Kaira. “Want to ride?”

Mocha huffed. *“You didn’t even ask me first!”* she nickered. *“But sure, Kaira’s tiny. She can ride.”*

Kaira chuckled. “I still don’t know how you understand what she’s saying, but sure.”

She grabbed Iris’s wrist and climbed behind her, settling down and wrapping her arms around the adventurer’s waist.

Iris smiled.

*This is right.*



Iris and Kaira settled into the inn, ordering some food and drinks as they waited for the rest of their party to return from the temple. Sera and Tanith had gone to spend time with Mocha as the horse showed off her new gear.

The inn was cozy and warm, with a fire crackling in the hearth and a lively buzz of conversation filling the air. Iris leaned back in her chair, feeling content and at ease for the first time in a while. It was good to have a moment to relax and enjoy the company of the cute elf.

As they waited, Iris caught up with Kaira, showing off her new armor and telling her about everything with Marlana.

“She’s never offered to do any work with my armor before!” Kaira complained.

“Well, I did give her some business,” Iris offered. “Maybe that’s why?”

“I was the one that introduced you to her!” she whined. “That should count for something...”

Iris chuckled and took a drink of her ale. “Are you ready for this quest?” she asked, changing topics.

Kaira looked up at her searchingly. After a moment, she nodded. “Yes. I’m ready. Take a couple days to work out team tactics then go?”

“Yup, that’s the plan. We also need supplies and a wagon,” Iris said.

“A wagon? Why do we need that?” the woman asked.

“For the equipment, weapons, and whatever else we might need for the journey. Plus all the loot we get. We can’t exactly carry everything on our backs,” Iris explained. “Mocha and I will ride, while the rest of you take the wagon. We’re not going off and fighting horseback, so we don’t need to function like a cavalry.”

Kaira nodded in understanding. “That makes sense. I’ll see what I can find. Renting one should be fine?”

Iris nodded. “Yes, we don’t need to buy one at the moment. Maybe not ever. We’ll see.”

The two slipped into a conversation about supplies they’d need, and Iris explained the deal with the Fenren Merchant Company.

Eventually, Gryff, Bree, and Laken arrived, looking refreshed and energized from their time at the temple. They joined Iris and Kaira at their table, greeting them with smiles, and settled into chairs, ordering food and drinks as they caught up.

“So, how was the temple?” Iris asked.

“It was... intense,” Gryff said, running a hand through his hair. “We underwent the Ceremony of Paths, and then the Umbral Seers explained everything.”

He took out a scroll and held it tightly in his hand. “To be told your path and purpose in life... It’s eye-opening.”

Kaira’s eyes widened. “What did you learn?”

“I’m a **Spear Fighter** on the 24th step,” Gryff said, his back straightening.

Iris smiled. “Level 24 is good!”

Laken tilted his head. “Level?”

“Level is what my people call steps,” she explained. “It seems the Church just chose terms that best reflect the religious aspect of how they view the system. That’s why what I call a status is the wordy Excerpt of your Path. Path... Class, also the same thing.”

The three nodded.

“What is your path and step, Iris?” Bree asked.

“I am a level 45 **Storm Warden**,” Iris proclaimed proudly.

The three shared a glance.

“So... What about you two?” Iris asked them.

“I’m a... *level*... 28 **Ranger**,” Laken added, grinning. “I’m the highest level of our group.”

“Of course, you are,” Bree said, rolling her eyes playfully. “I’m a step 25 **Bard**. Apparently, I am also a hybrid.”

Iris’s eyes went wide. “That’s how you were able to see my stuff earlier! And a bard is really good! Do you play any instruments?”

Kaira squinted. “Uhm, what does that have to do with anything, Iris?”

“A bard’s magic is weaved through words and music. It’s the basis of all they do,” she explained.

Bree opened and closed her mouth a few times. Laken and Gryff started laughing.

Gryff shook his head as his laughter subsided. “You’re telling me, she’s got to *sing* or play us a jaunty tune to use magic?”

Iris smiled. “Yup! And based on her chosen profession, we’re going to test if her magic will allow it to heal us.”

Everyone stopped and stared at that. “I can use magic to *heal*?” Bree asked quietly.

Iris shrugged. “No idea! We’ll need to test it.”

The woman nodded. “I do sing...”

Iris quirked a brow. “Any instruments?”

*Please be a lute, please be a lute!*

“I dabble with a lute,” she replied hesitantly.

*Yes!*

“...but I don’t feel comfortable using that during a fight... Maybe, I can just sing?” the woman added as if even she thought the idea silly.

*Boo! But we can work with this! Bards are awesome!*

Pumped at having a bard in the party, she turned to Kaira. “And you, sweetheart? What is your stuff?”

Iris froze as she realized what she had mistakenly said. Kaira, however, smiled at Iris’s slip of the tongue and leaned forward.

“I’m a level 30 **Champion**,” she stated with a smirk at Laken, who grunted good-naturedly in response.

Iris nodded in approval. “That’s going to be really useful, especially if we’re facing off against any particularly tough opponents. I’m sure we can get you some defensive-based abilities as we practice.”

Kaira smiled. “I’d like that.”

“Sounds like we’ve got a pretty well-rounded party,” Iris said. “A fighter, ranger, bard, champion, and a mage. We’ve got offense, defense, healing, and support all covered!”

There was a moment of silence as the rest of the party absorbed this information. Then Laken spoke up. “Don’t forget our fierce warhorse!”

Iris chuckled. “I’d never forget Mocha! She’s the fiercest one on the team. And probably almost as high level as me.”

Laken and Kaira shared a mischievous look that had Iris worried. Unfortunately, dinner arrived before she could call them out on it.

Over dinner, they discussed their training session and what they had learned. Iris shared some of her own techniques with them, encouraging them to practice and hone their skills. They talked about the upcoming quest and what they might expect, strategizing and preparing for the challenges ahead.

As they finished their dinner and got ready to part for the night, Iris swept her gaze over her party. “Remember, we’re all in this together,” she said, grabbing ahold of her mug. “We’ll need to rely on each other’s skills and abilities to make it through this quest alive.”

“Agreed,” Kaira said, raising her mug. “To the party.”

They all raised their mugs in a toast, feeling a sense of camaraderie and excitement for the journey ahead.

Iris downed the rest of her ale and smiled. It made her happy to finally be a part of something. To have people that were there to help her do good.

*My luck is finally turning.*