

## A Shelter in the Storm

The disagreement with Captain Morek went on for a solid fifteen minutes as Kaira forcefully defended Gryff. Iris suspected that the only reason Morek had eventually dropped the subject was due to Laken's owlbear companion. The creature radiated an aura of menacing protectiveness, emphasized by Laken's thinly veiled threats.

Eventually, they bade Helda farewell and departed from Cosdale. Iris had hoped to say goodbye to Neri as well, but she'd left work early, apparently mentioning how she was feeling unwell to Helda.

The group then set off on the next part of their quest which had them bound for the Cursed Forest. Iris sat astride Mocha, while Laken rode his owlbear who now donned a simple saddle the elven man had purchased and fitted in Cosdale.

Their travel along the road was filled with lighthearted banter and conversation. Even the kitsune had decided to have some fun. Akane was currently in her fox form, playfully dashing in circles around Mocha, eliciting snorts of amusement from the horse.

At the wagon's reins sat Gryff, a determined look on his face as he navigated the road. Bree and Kaira sat in the back, sandwiched between various supplies that they had hastily covered with wool blankets because, overhead, the sky had grown ominously dark, threatening to drench them in a downpour. The road was filled with the clatter of hooves and wagon wheels, a chorus of their adventurous resolve.

Their journey continued, Bree's gentle lute strumming filled the air with a pleasant melody. Iris glanced over at the wagon, catching sight of the bard immersed in her music.

*'Wow, she's really good,'* Mocha nickered from below Iris, the horse filled with a mix of surprise and excitement. *'Ask Bree to sing it! It's time! I wanna hear the Ballad of Mocha the Fabulous!'*

Unable to contain her laughter, Iris replied, "No one called it that!"

"What's she saying?" Kaira asked with a raised brow.

Iris relayed Mocha's request, causing Bree to look up and chuckle. "Well, if Mocha wants to hear her song, I can't refuse," she said, strumming her lute and preparing to sing the now-famous 'Ballad of Mocha'.

Upon hearing the lute, Akane's curiosity was piqued. Deciding to listen more closely, the kitsune dashed to the back of the wagon and leaped into the air. As she did, the fox cast her magic, creating a shimmering cloud of mana that enveloped her like a thick mist. The arcane light danced around her, obscuring her dire fox-sized form from view.

Then, as if emerging from a dream, Akane emerged in her humanoid form, twirling majestically out of the mana cloud as she landed gracefully in the wagon. Her three tails waved behind her as Iris's twin with her vulpine features looked around with excitement in her mismatched eyes.

Moving with an alluring grace, Akane quickly went to sit next to Bree, who engrossed in her music, hadn't noticed the spectacle until the kitsune sat next to her. Giving Akane a smile, the woman started her song, her fingers dancing on the lute as she began to sing the song.

Iris smiled as her best friend listened, enraptured by the song about her fights with the poachers.

As Bree strummed the last note of the ballad, a hush fell over the group, the words of the song still echoing in their ears. In that moment, Mocha was not just a horse, but a hero—a defender of her friends and a formidable warrior.

With a gleeful whinny, Mocha expressed her approval. *'I love it!'* she nickered, her voice filled with an infectious joy. *'Now everyone will know about how amazing I am!'*

Iris, wearing a tender smile, reached out and laid a hand on Mocha's armored neck. "You've always been amazing to me," she replied warmly. "And I'm glad everyone else gets to see you as I do—my brave, badass friend."

Mocha whinnied again, the sound ringing out in the tranquil surroundings around them. Iris couldn't help but smile, noticing the rest of her party joining in as the tension of what awaited them in the Cursed Forest fell away.

Iris was drawn by the sound of Akane's happy yipping, her vulpine eyes sparkling with excitement. The kitsune turned to Bree, a pleading look on her face. "Me... next!" she asked after a bit of concentration and struggle, causing Bree to chuckle.

*'Lucky bitch, I want magic that can turn me into a person that I can actually speak with...'* Mocha nickered.

Akane replied with a string of yips that had the horse huff. *'No, Akane, your illusions don't help. No one except you and Iris can understand me even then.'*

Iris sighed. "Maybe there's a way to manipulate the ability that lets me understand you, to let others as well?"

Mocha let out a snort. *'Maybe.'*

The sun elf bard watched the two magical creatures converse, then turned to the kitsune and gave her a slight nod. "I'll have to think of a fitting ballad for you, Akane," Bree promised, eliciting a barking cheer from the kitsune.

No sooner had Bree spoken than the guys in the group started clamoring for their own songs, each requested that Bree immortalize their adventurers in her melodious verses.

Bree chuckled, flashing a mischievous grin at Gryff's back. "Just wait until I write a song about your heroic deeds, Gryff. Maybe I can include a verse about that time you got tangled in your own net—now that will be a ballad for the ages!"

Gryff acted wounded by the bard's playful jab, which pushed them all to start coming up with silly teasing.

Kaira and Iris couldn't help but join in with teasing the guys, although she had to admit a song about a ranger befriending an owlbear sounded like fun.

As the laughter and good-natured teasing continued, Kaira decided to redirect the attention to Iris. "Bree, when you write the song for Iris, don't forget to include the part where she returned from her quest with Akane, all covered in dried mud clumps in her hair!" She giggled at the memory, earning an indignant cry from Iris.

"It was Akane's fault I fell into the water!" Iris exclaimed, shooting a playful glare at the kitsune. The reaction only caused Akane to burst into a bout of vulpine laughter, her mismatched eyes gleaming with mischief.

Taking the tease a step further, Akane used her illusion magic to change Iris's appearance. Within seconds, Iris was virtually covered in illusory twigs and mud, all over her face and entwined in her hair. The group erupted in laughter, the air around them filled with lighthearted cheer.

Despite her feigned indignation, Iris couldn't help but join in, her laughter blending with that of her party... her friends. The illusion, the laughter, and the camaraderie all served to bring a feeling of warmth that Iris felt as if she could bask in during the coldest winter.

Kaira glanced up at Iris and asked Mocha if she could join them. Mocha shot Kaira a look then told Iris to convey a message.

*'Tell your girlfriend that there will be no funny business on my back,'* the horse nickered seriously. *'I swear, I will buck you two off so fast. I know how you are, Iris.'*

Iris's eyes widened. "Me?! What?"

*'Yes, you. You can't keep it in your pants,'* Mocha replied.

"I absolutely can keep it in my pants," Iris complained.

Kaira laughed. "Come on, Mocha, be nice to her. She's only trying to get into *my* pants."

Iris blushed.

*I mean... she's not wrong.*

*'See! That's what I'm talking about! I swear, I will kick both of you off,'* the horse nickered, even as she moved closer to the wagon, allowing Kaira to smoothly transition from her spot in the back of the wagon and climb up into the saddle behind Iris without even stopping.

Kaira wrapped her arms around the adventurer as she settled behind her. A moment later, Iris felt the shorter elf lift her butt off of the saddle and lean close to her ear, her breath sending a shiver down her spine.

“Hey you,” the sultry voice whispered.

Iris felt her cheeks heat up. “H-Hey.”

The alluring whisper next to her ear continued, sending a rush of anticipation through Iris. “Do you wish to officially court me?” Kaira asked.

The question sent more shivers down Iris' spine, her heart pounding in her chest. “W-what?” she stuttered out, her mind spinning. “Does that mean you're my girlfriend?”

“Is that a cultural thing?” Kaira's voice asked, her voice softer now, but no less intense. “Can you explain?”

Iris responded, explaining what it meant, which had her explain the difference between being a girlfriend and a fiancée.

Kaira hummed. “Does this mean you only want to be casual partners?”

The question hung in the air between them, making Iris' breath hitch in her throat. The realization that this was not a joke, that Kaira was truly asking her to be in a serious relationship, made Iris feel an overwhelming sense of joy.

And maybe, a bit of fear.

“A courtship does not mean we will marry immediately, if at all. It is a purpose-driven romantic relationship if that is what you are worried about,” Kaira explained.

*That makes sense.*

Iris had spent so long pushing people away, so long running from her feelings. But Kaira, with her bravery and her strength, had chased Iris down and caught her.

So Iris found herself at a crossroads: to keep running or to take a leap of faith.

It was an easy choice, she shifted in the saddle so that she could look Kaira in her mesmerizing grey eyes. “Yes,” she breathed out, her voice barely a whisper. “I would love to court you.”

With a bright smile, Kaira leaned in, capturing Iris' lips in a sweet kiss that sealed their promise.

As Iris turned back around, Mocha let out a soft nicker, *‘I'm happy for you, Iris.’*

A tear threatened to fall as she leaned forward closer to her friend's ear. “Thanks, Mocha. I couldn't have gotten this far without you,” she whispered.

A pleased sound came from her friend as Iris sat back up. She felt Kaira shimmying behind her, the little wiggles would have caused her to heat up noticeably if there weren't so many layers of armor and clothing in between them.

*Okay, maybe my cheeks are heating up just a bit.*

With Kaira now comfortably nestled behind her on Mocha, Iris felt a sense of calm settle over her. The rhythm of Mocha's steps, the feeling of Kaira's body pressed against her own, and the new commitment between them all contributed to a pleasant ride.

Kaira, holding on to Iris, leaned her head against the taller terran's shoulder, her voice carrying the contentment she felt. "This is nice, riding with you."

Iris couldn't help but agree. "Yeah, it's great... but we'll be at the forest soon."

In response, Kaira let out a soft chuckle. "Let's just enjoy this while it lasts, shall we? We can worry about fighting people and monsters when we get there."

Iris nodded, unable to find any fault in Kaira's argument. As they continued to engage in light conversation, a sudden sneeze broke their tranquil bubble. "Bless you," Iris reflexively said.

"That wasn't me," Bree replied hesitantly, her voice echoing from the wagon beside them.

Iris and Kaira's heads whipped to the side in sync to look at the wagon. A sense of urgency filled the air as Gryff pulled the reins, bringing the wagon to a halt.

Bree, her hand gripping a knife, moved cautiously toward the pile of supplies that were blanketed. Iris, drawing on her mana, focused her gaze on the supply pile.

After a moment of shared understanding, Iris nodded at Bree. With a swift move, Bree pulled back the blanket, revealing a young telv woman.

Iris' eyes widened in surprise. "What the fuck, Neri?!"

The sight of Neri looking around in a panic, clearly not expecting to be found, left Iris gaping. The telv hesitated before offering a nervous chuckle and a sheepish wave of her hand. "H-Hi, Iris. Are we near Stilstead, yet?"

Iris, still taken aback by the sudden discovery, let out an exasperated groan. Sitting on the wagon's driving bench, Gryff had an equally dumbfounded expression, his eyes narrowing suspiciously at the unexpected passenger. "We're close to the Cursed Forest," he clarified for the group, frustration lacing his voice. "That's where we're heading to find the Marauder Prince."

Upon hearing that, Neri's eyes widened, her complexion growing paler. "W-What? But I thought..."

Before the young woman could say anything else, Iris interjected. "Yeah, Neri. Why are you even here?" Iris asked, her tone was stern but not without concern. "Does Helda know you left?"

Seeming to deflate under their questioning gaze, Neri lowered her head, her curly hair forming a strawberry-blonde curtain around her face. "I left a note for her. I wanted

to come with you to Brightburn,” she confessed. “I... I thought that if I hid away in the wagon and showed up in Stilstead, you wouldn’t be able to say no to me.”

While the kitsune thought the situation was absolutely hysterical, the admission left Iris in stunned silence. Neri, who had always been so reserved and quiet when Iris lived in Cosdale, had just pulled off one of the boldest moves she'd ever seen from the telv.

Kaira leaned forward and spoke loud enough for everyone to hear, the words carrying the weight of her concern. “What are we going to do with her? We can't just take her into the forest with us.”

Iris nodded in agreement. Gryff added his opinion that they should turn back, but Kaira pointed out that would possibly add days to their time, and they already weren’t sure if anyone could have warned the Marauder Prince of their assault on the poacher fort.

That started a small debate between Gryff and Kaira, however, Bree, having moved back to her previous spot, merely shrugged at their dilemma. “Why not just have her stay with the horses and the wagon? If anything comes for her, she can grab a horse and flee.”

Upon hearing this, Iris let out an exasperated groan. Yet, Neri, who’d been looking increasingly downtrodden as they spoke of her fate, perked up at Bree’s suggestion. “I can defend myself, and I promise to take care of the horses. If needed, I can ride.”

From his perch atop the owlbear, Laken chimed in, offering his approval with a nonchalant shrug. “It doesn't hurt, and she can make sure the horses don't run off if we take more than a day or two in the forest. We have plenty of supplies.”

Resigned, Iris let out a sigh. “Fine. Let's do that. We should take a bit of time to scout the surroundings, see if there are any dwellings near the forest. Something she can take shelter in.”

Kaira nodded her agreement, and Iris turned her gaze back to Neri. The telv looked a little more hopeful, perhaps sensing the decision swinging in her favor.

“The detour will potentially add some time,” Kaira added. “but it also gives us a chance to find a place to stay for the night, to make a plan. We only have a vague idea of where the Marauder Prince was focusing on in the forest, and you only saw the harpies from the road the first time, right?”

Iris agreed with Kaira’s reasoning, and Gryff, albeit with a hint of annoyance, turned back around, nudging the horses to move.

As Mocha started to canter alongside, Iris stole a glance over at the wagon and noticed Akane had moved to sit next to Neri, attempting to communicate with the nervous former barmaid.

There was something endearing about Akane's efforts, and despite the sudden turn of events, Iris couldn't help but allow a small smile to curve her lips.

*I almost wish we could avoid this quest.*

Stopping somewhere for the night would do them good. Not to mention, she still needed to have a talk with the free-spirited kitsune.



As the sight of the Cursed Forest entered into view, a thunderous crash echoed from the distance, signaling the arrival of a storm. The darkening skies of the impending weather forced them to search for shelter with a newfound urgency. Iris and Kaira, still seated together on Mocha, decided to split from the group to cover more ground quickly.

With the thunder's ominous rumbling serving as their metronome, the pair spurred Mocha into a steady canter, their eyes scanning the surroundings for any semblance of a safe haven. The landscape rolled on, untamed and devoid of the safety they sought, until, after what Iris estimated to be an hour, a wagon trail cutting north from the road came into view.

After darting up it, a small homestead eventually came into view with a small plot of farmland next to it along with a few sheds and what looked like a small barn for some animals. It sat modestly north of the forest, nestled close to a river that mirrored the impending storm in its turbulent flow. Iris immediately felt a surge of relief at the sight, a bright glimmer amidst the gathering darkness in the sky.

As they approached the homestead, the door creaked open, revealing an elderly orkun man, his tough, green skin marked with the tales of many years. Behind him, a telv woman peeked out, her lavender eyes wide with curiosity.

The old man stepped out, hand on the hilt of a sword that sat in an old scabbard, and squinted as he took in the sight of the two women on horseback.

His voice, raspy with age broke the silence with a tone that hinted at a man used to having authority. "Can we help you?" he asked, looking between Iris and Kaira, his weathered face masking any immediate judgment.

With a shared glance and a nod, Iris helped Kaira down from Mocha before quickly sliding down herself. Dusting off her pants, she took a deep breath and then turned to face the elderly orkun man, a smile making its way onto her face.

"Hi! I'm Iris, an adventurer on a quest for Lady Arden from Brightburn. This here is Kaira Harken, a captain in the City Guard there," she began, gesturing to Kaira who offered a polite nod. "We also have three other guards, a barmaid from Cosdale, and another... woman back with our wagon along the main road. With the approaching storm, and we rode ahead of our party to find somewhere to shelter for the night. Would

it be possible for us to stay in your barn or shed? We promise to not bother you, if that's what you're worried about.”

The orkun man's mouth twisted into a disapproving frown, clearly prepared to dismiss their request, but before he could voice his rejection, the telv woman stepped forward, her hand on his arm gently guiding him back. “Have you all eaten?” she asked, her gaze sweeping over the two women. “I was just about to prepare dinner.”

Iris returned her smile. “No, ma'am, but we brought all the food we need. However, if you're willing to feed a small army of hungry adventurers, we have coin.”

Taking a deep breath, the man glanced at the woman before giving a resigned nod. “Fine, go get your group. You mentioned animals, what type? I have a few cows that are afraid of their own shadows.”

Iris chuckled nervously, the sound eerily reminiscent of Neri's own earlier surprise.

It was Kaira who picked up the explanation after a groan at Iris's hesitance, her voice low and cautious. “Do you have anywhere more... private for one of our animals? Preferably with a lot of... space?”

Suspicion clouded the man's eyes. “What is it? You mentioned guardsmen... A big dog?”

A wince made its way onto Iris' face at the man's guess. “One of our guardsmen is a [**Ranger**] and his... companion is an... owlbear.”

The man blinked, clearly taken aback. “What?”

Kaira shrugged, her face impassive. “Yup. We were as surprised as you.”

The man's frown deepened, his face etched with disbelief. Yet, before he could voice his doubts, his wife interjected, her voice a calming presence against his incredulity.

“The guardsman and his...,” she paused, choosing her words with careful deliberation, “completely reasonable and surely safe... companion animal can stay in the shed closest to the farm.”

Despite her tactfully chosen words, a hint of amusement played at the corners of her mouth as she offered them this compromise. She seemed more amenable to their unusual situation than her husband, which instantly made her Iris's favorite woman of the evening.

She glanced at Kaira.

*Second favorite.*





It didn't take long for Iris, Kaira, and Mocha to find the group, and soon the entire party—complete with their assortment of animals—found themselves back at the modest homestead. The old orkun man and his telv wife were waiting for them, settled outside on some crude wooden chairs that seemed to have weathered countless seasons.

As they approached, the man's initially stormy scowl transformed into a look of pure shock, his eyes widening as he noticed Laken, seated nonchalantly atop the owlbear.

His wife, on the other hand, broke into an amused smile, her lavender eyes twinkling in delight at the sight.

The man got up, shaking his head in disbelief. “You weren't kidding. How?” he asked, his gaze focused on Laken with a bemused expression.

Laken merely offered a warm smile in return as if he enjoyed the opportunity to explain. “He was hurt and caged by some poachers. I saved him, and we formed a bond almost instantly.”

The man merely shook his head, apparently lost for words.

“Well, I think he's absolutely gorgeous,” the woman added, her eyes softening as she admired the enormous creature from afar.

Laken dipped his head respectfully, a touch of pride in his voice. “Thank you, ma'am. He's a sweetheart, I promise and I have plenty of dried fish for him to eat.”

As Iris and Kaira dismounted from Mocha, the others followed suit, leaving the wagon. The homestead's atmosphere buzzed with an air of expectancy, all attention subtly focused on the elderly couple.

The orkun man grunted, his initial shock ebbing away. “I have some fish caught just today from the river. He's welcome to a few.”

The offer made Iris raise an eyebrow at the man's change of stance, but she was cut off from commenting when the man froze. His gaze was fixated on Akane, his voice thick with curiosity. “What is... she?”

Iris put an arm around Akane, pulling the kitsune closer with a protective gesture. “You can't see the resemblance?” she said with a light tone, leaning her head against the now amused fox girl's own.

The man took another deep breath and turned to his wife, his expression a mix of disbelief and resignation. “I'm not dealing with this. I tried. Your turn.”

His wife chuckled and rose from her chair, her gaze focused on Akane. “Well, aren't you two just the spitting image of each other. Let me guess, she got magically changed like those others?”

Iris shared a glance with Kaira, who asked, “What others?”

The telv woman shrugged casually, as if discussing the weather. “What, you're not here about the people who went into the forest and got twisted and changed to have wings and feathers?”

Iris' eyes widened at the unexpected revelation. “You know about the harpies?”

“Harpies?” the man interjected as he rose from his chair. “It seems we have a lot to talk about over dinner. Get your animals and wagon situated before that Tenera cursed storm gets here and makes a mess of things.”

“I'm going to get started with dinner while everyone gets all settled,” his wife added.

Iris hesitated for a moment before offering, “I can help too, if you'd like.” She glanced at Kaira, who gave a firm nod of agreement.

“We can both pitch in,” Kaira added, her eyes meeting the telv woman's in a silent pledge of assistance.

The telv woman's face brightened at their offer, an almost maternal warmth radiating from her. “Well aren't you two just the sweetest,” she said, her lavender eyes twinkling with delight. “That's quite a fine offer. Come along then and bring that fox girl with two too many tails...”

Iris glanced over her shoulder at the rest of the group, watching them as they began to get their animals and the wagon sorted.

*‘I'm going to take a nap after one of the minions helps me get the armor off,’* Mocha nickered *‘Come get me if anything happens. Or if they have apples. Especially if they have apples.’*

“I will,” the adventurer promised, patting her friend as she walked off.

Mocha was gently led towards the barn by Bree, who gave Iris an encouraging nod. Laken, meanwhile, was guiding his owlbear companion towards the designated shed, chatting amiably with the old orkun man who was showing them the way while still in disbelief about the creature.

With one last look at the group, Iris turned back towards the homestead, where the telv woman was already heading inside. She and Kaira exchanged a quick glance before waving Akane to join them in following the woman into the warmth of the house, leaving the gathering storm behind.

The telv woman, her eyes shining with anticipation, led them into a modest area clearly used as a kitchen. “If you can clean your hands and get the vegetables out of the pantry, we can get started,” she instructed, pointing them towards a basin and a wooden basket while she went to light the fire.

After drying off her hands, she noticed the woman was still trying to get the fire going, so Iris walked over to her and knelt next to her. “Here, allow me.”

The woman narrowed her eyes. "I can light my own—"

Iris sent a surge of lightning into the kindle the woman had set up and watched as it burst into flames. The woman's eyes widened. "Well, that happened."

Kaira chuckled as she rested her arms on Iris's shoulders. "She's pretty good at the magic thing."

Akane huffed and used some magic to make a small illusion of Iris getting smacked around by the earthbender guy.

"None of that, Akane," Kaira scolded.

Iris sighed. "No, it's alright. Yeah, that guy got me good a few times, but look who's still standing in the end. Also, don't forget you and I still need to have a talk about *your* actions."

Akane's eyes went wide and she concentrated. "...Why?" she asked, yipping at the end.

The telv woman raised a brow. "She having trouble talking?"

Iris and Kaira replied at the same time, "It's complicated."

Chuckling, the woman held up her hands. "Sorry, I asked hon."

As they started to prepare the meal, their conversation was peppered with occasional queries about the recipe as Iris, Kaira, and Akane navigated the unfamiliar meal prep.

Kaira used some water from another basin to wash and then grabbed a knife to chop the vegetables before sliding them over to Akane, who used her illusion magic to mimic Kaira's actions, successfully keeping the kitsune engaged and learning. The homely atmosphere, punctuated by the occasional chuckle or surprised yip from Akane, was a stark contrast to the threatening presence of the Cursed Forest lurking outside.

After some attempts at communication from Akane, Iris relayed her question of if any meat would be added to the pot which elicited a surprised look from the telv woman as she responded, "Of course we are, why wouldn't we?"

Akane's ears perked up at the mention of meat, and she gave a firm, approving nod.

Their host proceeded to bring out cuts of tender beef, stored in a cool corner of the homestead. The meat, along with onions, potatoes, carrots, and what Iris identified as a local variant of celery, were added to the pot. The enticing aroma of herbs and spices, previously tucked away in the woman's cabinet, soon filled the room as they were added into the mixture.

The meal ended up being quite similar to goulash, which got Iris excited, and as it finally started cooking, Iris asked what the woman knew of the harpies.

“Not, much,” she admitted. “I know that a band of refugees made camp in that forest, and then over time we started seeing those... *creatures*. My husband fought one that ventured to our farm, but then for some reason they stopped leaving their forest, almost as if...”

“Something was drawing them back,” Iris finished. “The first time I passed through here, I felt like there was more mana around the edge of the forest than here, for example.”

The woman shrugged. “Don’t know nothing about mana, so I assume it’s got something to do with your magic?”

Iris nodded. “Something like that.”

“I see.” The telv woman responded, her gaze alternating between Iris and her work as she stirred the contents of the pot. “So, you reckon those creatures are connected to this mana thing?”

“I think they might be,” Iris replied, her fingers tracing an absent-minded pattern on the kitchen table. “But why that would change them so drastically, I’m not sure. It’s just a theory. The only thing I have is that an abundance of mana is what changed them, and because they’re used to that much mana, they prefer it. Like a fish used to the deep sea.”

Despite her best efforts, Iris could see her explanation had not fully landed. The woman's brows knitted together as if she were trying to untangle a particularly tricky knot, yet her attention was respectful, earnest.

Before the woman could voice her queries, a loud crack of thunder echoed through the house. Almost immediately after, a startled yelp sounded, shattering the somber ambiance of their conversation.

Akane's features were illuminated by a brief smirk before she slipped out of the room, leaving Kaira and the woman bemused, but Iris was suspicious. The rain began to hammer the roof of the homestead, the house groaning under the relentless force of the storm.

As the aroma of the food filled the kitchen, Iris found herself grateful for this unexpected respite. It was a stark contrast to the storm raging outside, and it filled Iris with a comforting sense of peace and resolve.

As another thunderous boom sounded, another high-pitched yelp echoed, followed by Neri's chiding yell. “Akane! That's mean!”

Suppressing a chuckle, Iris poked her head around the corner to find Bree and the men guffawing at a disgruntled Neri. Turning back into the kitchen, Iris caught the woman's call for everyone to gather for dinner.

With a holler that rivaled the storm, the woman announced, "Food's ready! Get your behinds in here and grab a bowl before it gets cold!" Iris could hear the sound of hurried feet, followed by the welcome din of laughter and conversation.

With bowls filled to the brim with delicious goulash in hand, the group found spots around the room to sit, many of them preferring the warmth of the rug-covered floor. The welcoming fragrance of cooked beef and veggies intermingled with the sound of contented eating, punctuated by the occasional slurp or sigh of satisfaction.

Seated somewhat apart from the rest, the old orkun man seemed to be lost in thought. His eyes darted from one face to another, as if sizing up the group and then with a deep sigh, he pointed a gnarled finger towards Neri.

"That girl isn't a fighter. Why is she with you?" he asked.

Iris met his gaze, a spark of protective defiance in her eyes, but it was Neri who answered first, "Me?" she asked, pointing at herself.

The old man nodded.

"I'm...I'm going to work in Iris's Guild," Neri stammered. "I didn't know they were going into the forest first..."

The man glanced back at Iris, an unspoken question in his eyes. Iris tilted her head in mild confusion, then nodded in agreement when he pointedly turned his gaze to Neri. "Alright, girl. You'll stay with us tomorrow while they go off and do what needs doing."

Turning back to Iris, the man continued, "I take it you'd like to keep the wagon here?"

Iris nodded, gratitude flickering in her eyes. "I would. We're... we're going after the Marauder Prince."

The old woman gasped, her eyes widening in surprise. Her husband, however, simply narrowed his eyes. "The Marauder Prince? He's nearby?"

Kaira affirmed with a curt nod, her mouth full of food that she hastily swallowed. "We attacked one of his forts near Cosdale, and found out that he's in what Iris is calling the Cursed Forest."

The man chuckled, a deep rumble that echoed around the room. "Cursed Forest? Good a name as any I suppose. You lot sleep in here tonight. Your bear won't cause any trouble, will it?" His gaze turned to Laken, who was just finishing his meal.

"No, Mocha's with him and she'll keep him in line."

"Mocha is... the horse?" The man gave a deadpan look. "Of course the horse will keep an owlbear in line. That's perfectly normal."

A wide grin spread across Iris's face. "Mocha also sword fought a dwarf poacher and won."

With a shake of his head, the man rose from his seat. He walked over to his wife, kissed her forehead, and murmured, “Good night, hon.” He then shuffled away without another word to his guests, leaving the room filled with quiet chuckles and knowing glances shared amongst the adventurers.

With the meals finished, Bree and Neri offered to assist their hostess with the cleanup, which brought an appreciative smile to the elder woman’s face.

Meanwhile, the others settled back, letting the rhythmic lullaby of the rain and the sporadic bursts of thunder provide a soothing backdrop to their thoughts and conversations.

After what she assumed would be enough time for the women in the kitchen to finish their task, Iris stood up and gestured to her vulpine twin. “Follow me, Akane,” Iris quietly called, her eyes fixed on the kitsune as she tried for a stern yet gentle expression to reinforce her words.

Akane responded with a nod, her ears twitching slightly as she got up to follow Iris toward the kitchen area, and passing by Bree and Neri on the way. The two women, now laden with piles of woolen blankets each, returned to the main room, their hushed laughter and banter filled the room with a warm, homely feeling as they set to distribute the blankets amongst the group.

Inside the kitchen, Iris turned toward the telv woman, her voice low as she requested some privacy. The woman simply nodded in understanding, offering a comforting pat on Akane's shoulder as she left the room.

Now alone, Iris turned her full attention toward Akane. “Okay, it's time we had our chat,” she announced.

The flash of a wince across Akane's face brought a glimmer of hope to Iris that maybe the kitsune would be receptive and willing to listen.

Iris took a deep breath, steadying herself for the conversation that needed to be had with the magical creature.

*We cannot have any fuckups tomorrow.*