

A Shocking Appearance

Iris dodged to the side, swinging her blade as three wolf-sized rats charged her all at once. Her **Storm Armor** lashed out, a surge of lightning shocking the closest rat, causing it to screech and jump away from her.

The second rat lunged at Iris with sharp claws, but she was quick to parry its attack with her sword. The third rat circled around behind her, trying to catch her off guard. Iris spun around with a susurrus of noise as her chainmail rippled and faced the rat head-on. She could feel the heat emanating from its body as it closed in on her, ready to pounce.

Suddenly, there was a loud crash from upstairs, causing the rats to pause momentarily. Iris took advantage of the distraction and struck out, her sword slicing through the air and hitting the rat square in the chest. The rat let out a piercing squeal before collapsing to the ground. Iris turned her attention back to the other two rats, and nearly froze.

A pulse of red shimmered across their body before smoke started pouring from their maws as they moved beside each other, biting at the air, embers emitting from their mouth with every snap of their jaws.

Iris's heart raced as she realized what was happening. "No... not magical rats," she muttered to herself as she backed away slowly. The rats continued to snap and bite, flames growing larger with each passing moment. She needed to act fast, but she couldn't risk getting too close.

With a flick of her wrist, she fired a **Spark** at one of the two rats. The lightning spell slammed right into its face, causing it to screech in pain and retreat, a ripple of red cascading across its body.

Her eyes widened as she realized that they had done something to resist her lightning.

Shit! Magical flaming rats that can resist lightning. What the F?

The other rat continued to advance slowly, flames licking at its fur and scorching the air around it.

It was almost as if every pore of its body was an exhaust for the fire. She pulled mana into herself and launched a **Chain Lightning** at the rat, the rat froze as the electricity coursed through its body, before the spell jumped to the body of the one lying on the ground, then back to her.

The first rat collapsed, its body twitching, and Iris's heart pounded in her chest as she watched in horror as the rat's body erupted in flames, sending embers flying in all directions.

Just as she was about to unleash another spell, there was a sudden movement out of the corner of her eye. She turned her head just in time to see the second rat lunge at her from behind, its jaws agape and flames spewing from its maw. With lightning-fast reflexes, Iris spun around and brought her sword down in a swift arc, slicing the rat cleanly in half. With a sickening thud, the body collapsed onto the ground. But then, to Iris's surprise, the unexpected happened.

The two halves of the rat's body began to emit a brilliant glow, the heat intensifying with each passing moment.

Iris took a deep breath, trying to steady her nerves as she turned to face the remaining rat as it stood back up. It was still smoldering, its fur singed and blackened from the lightning spell. But it didn't seem deterred by the attack; in fact, it seemed even more determined to get at her now that its partner was gone.

Iris gritted her teeth and prepared to launch another spell, but before she could even begin to channel her mana, the rat suddenly lurched forward, its jaws snapping shut just inches from her face. Iris stumbled backward, barely avoiding the attack, and swung her sword again in a wild arc.

The blade missed, and the rat lashed out with its claws in retaliation. Iris wasn't quick enough to avoid the attack, and the claws caught her on the arm. The razor-sharp claws tore through the fabric between her vambraces and the bottom of her chainmail, causing her to cry out in pain.

She instinctively jerked her arm back, just in time as the rat tried, again, to snap at her with its jaws. Her **Storm Armor** lashed out with a jolt of lightning catching the rat in the chest, and causing it to cry out and dart backward.

"Shit!" she exclaimed, wincing as she looked down at the deep gash in the crease of her arm. A quick cast of **Mana Conduit** connected her with her sword and she lifted it, firing **Spark** after **Spark** at the rat, which against all odds fled and dodged them.

Iris winced and moved to the side to see if she could see it but then noticed the glowing dead body.

The rat's body was starting to glow brighter and brighter, until suddenly it exploded with a deafening boom. Iris was thrown back against the wall by the force of the blast, she cried out in pain as she hit the wall and slumped to the ground, her ears ringing from the explosion. She shook her head, trying to regain her bearings.

Iris groaned as she pushed herself up to a sitting position, and saw that the entire basement was in shambles. The walls were cracked and smoking, the shelves and furniture were smashed to pieces, and the floor was covered in debris and rubble.

She looked around in shock, trying to comprehend what had just happened. Then, she noticed the glowing embers that were slowly fading away, scattered across the

floor. They seemed to be the remains of the rat's body, still burning even after the explosion.

As Iris slowly regained her senses, she could feel a throbbing pain in her head and ringing in her ears. She shook her head to clear her mind, trying to remember where she was and what had just happened. And then she saw it: the last rat, the one that had survived the explosion, was still alive and charging at her.

Iris gritted her teeth, quickly jumping to her feet and steadying herself. She knew she had to finish this, and quickly. The rat was closing in fast, its body still glowing with a fierce heat. She could feel the heat emanating from it even from where she stood, and she knew that if she got too close, she'd be in trouble.

Iris quickly channeled her mana, gathering it around her sword in a bright, crackling aura. She knew she had to end this quickly before the rat got any closer. As the rat charged towards her, Iris swung her sword with her **Arc Lash**, the mana around it releasing in a blinding flash of lightning.

The rat screeched in pain as the whip of lightning hit it square in the chest, sending it flying backward several feet. But it didn't stay down for long. It quickly got back up, shaking off the effects of the lightning strike, and charged at Iris again.

Iris quickly stepped to the side, narrowly avoiding the rat's sharp claws as they slashed through the air where she had just been standing. She swung her sword again, the mana crackling around it as her **Arc Lash** struck the rat once more.

With a final screech, the rat fell to the ground, its body smoldering and still glowing faintly. Iris stepped forward, keeping a safe distance from the still-glowing body as she scanned the room for any more signs of danger.

Her eyes went wide as that rat's body started to glow.

“Oh, shit!”

She turned and sprinted toward the door, casting both **Arcane Capability** and **Rushing Wind** to increase her speed. Just as she was about to reach the door, the blast came.

Iris was thrown forward by the explosion, her body tumbling end over end before slamming hard into the opposite wall. The impact knocked the wind out of her, leaving her gasping for breath. Her head was spinning, and her vision was blurry, but she could still see the aftermath of the explosion: debris and smoke everywhere, the room in shambles. The glowing rat's body was nowhere to be seen, consumed by the blast.

Iris struggled to get back to her feet, her muscles protesting against the effort. She could feel bruises forming all over her body, and her left arm was throbbing with pain from the gash the rat had inflicted on her earlier. But she couldn't stay here, not with the danger still present.

Iris quickly scanned the room for any other threats, but it seemed that the explosion had taken care of everything. She made her way to the door, stepping over debris and avoiding sharp pieces of metal that littered the ground. As she reached for the door handle, she hesitated for a moment, wondering what lay beyond. But she couldn't stay here, not with the risk of another attack.

With a deep breath, Iris pushed open the door, stepped out, and made her way up the stairs, limping with every step.

As she hobbled outside, she passed by a completely stunned old woman. All it took was a look and the woman scrambled, rushing to a table to grab something and return.

The woman handed Iris a pouch that jangled as she grabbed it. Without a word, she nodded and made her way to where Mocha was standing. Iris didn't even care to ask what the woman had done to create the distraction earlier.

Her horse gave her a concerned whinny, her ears darting around as if she were listening for danger.

Mocha moved forward and whinnied again, "*Iris? Are you okay?*"

Iris shook her head. "Nope. Add exploding Ember Rats to the list of quests to not take. I... I need you to drive. I am not sure how much longer I can focus. *Everything* hurts, girl."

Mocha nodded her head and lowered herself, helping Iris onto her back, the horse using an ability that kept her stable and secure on her back. With one last look at the house, smoke coming from a window that led to the basement, she laid down on her friend's back.



"Iris? *Iris!*" a voice called out.

The adventurer in question rolled her head to the side and looked over, seeing Kaira and Tanith rushing over to her and Mocha. Iris groaned and slowly sat up, wincing as pain shot through her body.

"Hey, guys," she said weakly, as Mocha slowly lowered herself, an ear pointed back toward Iris.

Her horse nickered softly as Kaira moved to Iris. The elf nodded to Mocha. "Don't worry, girl. I got her."

Mocha let out a nicker of confirmation and leaned slightly to the side so that Kaira could help Iris down, supporting her as she stumbled.

"What happened?" Tanith asked, his voice filled with concern.

Iris saw Sera standing behind him with wide eyes and her hands over her mouth.

Taking a deep breath, Iris tried to push through the pain. “Long story short, I took on a quest to clear out that rat from a basement. There were three. They had magic. They also exploded when killed. Ouchies.”

Kaira and Tanith exchanged a look of disbelief. “Exploded?” Tanith asked.

Iris nodded. “Yeah. It was... not fun.”

Kaira looked at her with concern. “Are you okay?”

Iris shook her head. “Not really. I need to...”

She tried moving away from Kaira but her leg gave out and the shorter elf caught her, pulling her closer. “Easy.”

Tanith put a hand on her shoulder. “We’ll come with you.”

Iris smiled weakly. “Thanks, guys. I appreciate it.”

Sera’s eyes widened and she turned and ran off. “I’ll be right back! Get her inside!” she called out over her shoulder as she rushed off.

Iris turned her head as Tanith positioned himself on her other side. “Thanks, Mocha. Can you—”

Mocha neighed.

Iris nodded. “I know I don’t have to worry about you...”

Kaira called out to a pair of passing guards, gesturing for them to hurry over. As they arrived, they recognized Kaira and snapped to attention. “Ma’am!”

“Get a patrol to check out the scene where Adventurer Iris just came from. Magical beasts were inside, they used fire magic. Make sure there are no others,” she ordered, before glancing back to Iris.

Iris told them where she came from, and the guards saluted Kaira and rushed off to follow the Guard Captain’s orders.

Kaira nodded. “Good. Now we will be able to file a report of your actions, that will attribute the monster kills to you, and that should count as a quest for the city.”

Iris smiled. “Look at you, looking out for me,” she said, unable to stop smiling as she stared at the cute elf.

Kaira rolled her eyes. “Let’s get you inside.”

The two helped her into the inn, Kaira’s glare ensuring everyone cleared out of the way. Soon enough the group was in Iris’s room and Sera held a small glass container.

Healing goop.

“Here. Tanith, out. We got this,” she ordered the man.

He didn’t argue at all and hastily left.

Sera and Kaira exchanged a look and proceeded to work together to help Iris out of her armor and clothes. As they pulled the battered armor off, the ruined set clanking together on the floor, Kaira sighed. "You're going to need something new. And—"

She stopped as they saw what lay underneath. "Iris..." Sera said softly. "What did you do to yourself?"

Iris winced as they *peeled* the burned and torn clothing off. "It was the Ember Rats." She looked at Kaira. "You need to warn the guard. They literally catch themselves on fire with magic, then if they are in that state when they die, they explode."

Kaira shook her head in disbelief. "That is... I..." She sighed. "We're going to have to clear out the sewers to ensure they're not down there."

Iris winced again as Sera started applying the goop to the gash in her arm, followed by liberally applying it to her burn wounds. "We'll need to get more of this. I'll put in a request with the company. Especially if other adventurers have issues like this."

"Do you really want to help?" Iris asked the elf merchant.

Sera nodded. "Yes. Tanith and I have discussed it. We're all in. This is too great of an opportunity to pass up. I have the talking points ready for Lady Arden. You just worry about the adventuring, I'll worry about the rest. And, with this rat situation, I think you may have further made your case."

Iris smiled weakly. "I probably shouldn't have taken this quest on the same day as the ball."

Kaira shook her head and gently caressed Iris's cheek. "No, sweetheart, you shouldn't have," she admonished softly. "But, your dress is ready and the stylist will meet us there. Let's get you cleaned up and we'll go get it together. I have a carriage for us to use for the rest of the day."

"Thanks, Kaira. Sera, you too. I appreciate you both," Iris said.

The two women glanced at each other then Sera wiped her hands off and placed one on Iris's shoulder. "All set. This should be all healed by the time the bath is ready. Still, take it easy. We'll help."

Iris's eyes went wide. "W-What?"

Kaira smirked. "We're going to bathe you. You're too injured. Don't worry, you don't have anything that we don't."

Iris's eyes darted between the two before settling on Sera. "Aren't you and Tanith—"

Sera's eyes went wide. "*What?!* No! I'm not... No. I mean yes. I do like him, but no I am not... this is not... Ugh!"

Kaira chuckled at the exchange between the two women. “I see your mind is as dirty as you are on the outside,” she said with a smirk. “Don’t worry. It’ll be a proper bath. Mainly because you and I don’t have time for anything else.”

Iris smiled at the two of them, grateful for their support. “Thank you both. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Kaira waved her hand dismissively. “Don’t mention it. Just promise us you won’t take on any more explosive quests before important events.”

Iris chuckled weakly. “I promise. From now on, I’ll stick to quests that won’t leave me injured and smelly.”

Sera huffed. “That’s probably a good thing. You smell like a sewer.”

“I was in some old lady’s basement!” Iris whined.

Kaira grinned. “Well, now you can smell like roses for the ball. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

The three of them made their way to the inn’s baths, where Iris was helped into a large tub of warm, soapy water. Sera and Kaira took turns washing her hair and scrubbing her back, while Iris leaned back with a sigh of relief, the warm water soothing her aching muscles.

“This is nice,” she murmured.

Kaira smiled. “Just wait until you see your dress. It’s going to be stunning.”

Iris’s eyes lit up. “Really? I can’t wait.”

As they finished up, the two women helped Iris get into clothing, the merchant looking over the adventurer as she did, ensuring the wounds were healing. Sera handed her the small glass jar. “Here. This is the remainder of the... *goop* that I used on your burns. It looks like everything is mostly healed, but just in case. Your arm will need some more, for sure.”

Iris took the jar with a grateful smile. “Thanks, Sera. You really are the best.”

Sera blushed. “Oh, stop it.”

Kaira ushered Iris toward the door. “Come on, we don’t want to be late.”

As they stepped out of the inn, Iris couldn’t help but feel happy. It was the first time after a quest, she had someone other than Mocha to be there to help nurse her wounds.

Speaking of her horse, Mocha stood there next to the carriage, waiting for them. The beautiful Jarincian horse stood there, looking resplendent and proud. Her ears swiveled and pointed toward Iris as the horse noticed her, trotting forward and nickering as Iris walked unaided toward her.

“Hey girl. I’m doing better.”

The horse's head bounced a few times as she neighed. *"How are you always getting so hurt?"*

"You know me! I always end up with the worst quests because there's no one else to take them," Iris explained.

Mocha snorted in response. *"You need to be more selective in your quests. Or at least, avoid the ones that involve exploding magic. The entire area shook."*

Iris chuckled. "Yeah, lesson learned. Thanks for being here, girl."

Mocha nuzzled her face against Iris's shoulder, and the adventurer wrapped her arms around the horse's neck, giving her a hug.

Kaira and Sera walked up to them, and Kaira patted Mocha's mane. "She's a good horse, Iris. You're lucky to have her."

Iris nodded, looking up at her friend. "I know," she agreed. "I'm going to go get my dress, girl. I'm okay, I promise. You relax tonight, and I'll see you after the ball?"

Mocha neighed. *"Have fun, but don't do anything I wouldn't do."*

Iris laughed. "I won't. See you soon, girl." She turned to Kaira and Sera. "Let's go get this dress, shall we?"

Kaira gestured towards the carriage. "After you, my brave adventurer."



As Iris and Kaira entered Marlina's shop, they were met with a lively scene. The small space was filled with people, and a young telv woman was engaged in conversation with two well-dressed individuals who appeared to be nobles.

Upon noticing Iris, the young woman interrupted herself. "I'll be with you in just a moment, miss. I just..." Her eyes widened as she recognized Kaira. "I'm sorry, Captain Harken. Marlina told me to direct you straight to the back!"

The two women nodded and made their way to the rear of the shop, passing by a rack filled with dresses in a variety of colors, and Iris couldn't help but admire the various patterns. Marlina truly knew her craft, and it seemed others had also come to her for her services.

Marlena was in the back of the shop, sitting at a table and carefully hand-sewing intricate details onto another dress. Her blonde hair was pulled back into a messy bun as she focused on the task in front of her. The sound of her needle moving in and out of the fabric was the only noise in the room as she concentrated on her work, while faint shimmering of blue mana covered the woman's hands and tools.

"Hey, Marly, we're here," Kaira called out.

Marlena looked up from her work and smiled at the two women. "Hello, my darlings," she said warmly. "Kaira, I told you not to call me that."

The guard captain chuckled. "Fine, fine. Are you ready?"

The woman nodded. "Yes. Nessa is in the other room as well and ready to help your date with her hair."

Iris's mouth dropped as her head jerked to Kaira. "You told her?"

The elf smirked. "Of course. A beautiful woman asks me to the city's most exclusive ball? Why wouldn't I tell one of my oldest friends?"

The seamstress chuckled. "Alright, let's get you all situated, Iris."

Iris approached her, a mixture of excitement and nervousness in her voice. "So it's ready?"

The short seamstress looked up and smiled warmly at Iris. "Yes, my dear. It is finished, and I must say, it has turned out even more beautiful than I had envisioned."

With a flourish, she stood up and went over to a rack in the corner of the room, where the dress hung in all its glory. It was everything Iris had described and more.

She couldn't help but smile as she saw it.

Kaira and Marlena quickly went to work helping Iris into the dress, carefully pulling it over her head and yanking the various laces tight, causing the adventurer to suck in a breath as she watched herself in the mirror. The seamstress did something with her magic and the fabric started shifting, the dress loosening in some areas while tightening in others as it molded itself perfectly to Iris's body, becoming almost like a second skin with how comfortable it was. The process took some time but was still significantly quicker and more efficient than removing the dress and performing it all by hand.

As the woman finished, Iris adopted a pose and checked out the woman's work in the mirror.

The dress was a stunning dark blue color, with intricate beading and embroidery covering the bodice and cascading down the skirt, which ended around her ankles. It was breathtakingly beautiful and she absolutely loved it.

"One second, you two may want to back away," she said with a smirk.

The two women shared a glance and took several steps backward, and Iris drew mana into herself and used **Mana Conduit** on the dress, altering the spell to be harmless to the touch.

Magic surged and suddenly the dress became a storm, sparks of electricity shined and crackled throughout the dress between the beads and along the fabric creating a dazzling display of magic and power.

Marlena gasped at the sight of the dress coming alive with magic, but quickly composed herself and watched with fascination as Iris manipulated the spell. The seamstress's eyes shone with pride as her work was turned into a piece of magical art.

Kaira's eyes widened as she looked at the dress, the sparks of electricity reflecting in her eyes. "Wow, Iris," she said softly.

She turned toward... her date with a broad smile on her face. "Yes?"

The elf gave her a mischievous smile. "I never knew you were such a show-off."

Iris chuckled. "What can I say? I like to make an entrance."

Kaira grinned back at her. "Well, you'll certainly shock people tonight."

Marlena cleared her throat. "Ladies, I hate to interrupt, but you two should finish getting ready."

The guard captain bobbed her head, her eyes remaining on Iris. "She's right. You still have to get your hair done," Kaira said before glancing to the side. "I am going to change into my outfit. You'll be alright with Nessa and Marlena, yes?"

Iris nodded. "Yeah! Hurry up so I can see this surprise look of yours," she said. Iris then turned toward Marlena. "Thank you, so much! This is amazing and beautiful. I love it."

The seamstress's face scrunched up into an amused look. "I'm coming with you! I want to see the end result," she said with a chuckle. "But thank you. I'm delighted you are pleased, my dear."

Iris smiled and thanked Marlena once again as she followed the woman to the other room, where Nessa, the hairstylist, and another woman were waiting for her. As she walked, the lightning magic surging through her dress continued to spark and crackle with great eclat. It was as if the dress had come to life, an extension of Iris's own power.

Nessa, a slender telv with dirty blonde hair, greeted Iris with a warm smile, and together they discussed the hairstyle that would complement the dress followed by the other woman discussing makeup. The hairstylist led Iris to a chair and began her work while the makeup artist moved to the front and performed metaphorical magic on Iris's face. The two women worked like a duet of ballerinas as one twisted, curled, and pinned Iris's scarlet locks into a chaotic, but ordered, style that matched the adventurer's preferred magic, and the other applied understated makeup to accentuate her cheekbones and eyes.

By the time Nessa finished her work, Iris couldn't believe her eyes. She turned her head back and forth in the mirror as she examined it. The two women stood back as she took in her appearance.

Iris's scarlet hair was absolutely hypnotizing with its complicated hairstyle where a small fishtail braid was weaved into a chain braid, finished with tucking the ends of her messy updo.

Leave it to women to take so much time to perfect the 'messy' look.

"Thank you so much. Both of you," Iris told the two women as she still took in her elaborate look. "It's perfect."

Nessa smiled warmly. "It was my pleasure, Iris. You look beautiful," she said, and the other woman agreed.

Marlena, who had been watching the whole time, clapped her hands together. "Well, you two are a dream team! Iris, you're going to turn heads tonight!"

"I agree," a voice said from behind her. Iris looked up and saw Kaira's reflection in the mirror.

She gasped and spun around.

"Kaira..." she said softly.

Holy fucking shit.

Kaira's eyes scanned over Iris's figure, taking in the sight of the deep blue dress, her gaze lingering where it hugged her curves. "Wow," Kaira breathed out. "You look absolutely stunning, Iris. The dress suits you perfectly."

Iris blushed at the compliment, feeling a surge of confidence from her date's words. "Thanks," she said softly.

That's what she thought. Kaira stood there in what she would assume was a nobleman's outfit but tailored to the woman's form. She wore a black doublet with silver buttons and sleeves that were adorned with intricate embroidery. The Guard Captain wore a white half-cape that was attached by a polished silver chain. She wore a ceremonial longsword that had a complicated hilt and cross guard. Black breeches and leather boots completed the outfit, giving Kaira a refined and elegant look.

Her hair had been cut and styled, with the sides of her head trimmed short, giving her a bold and daring look that perfectly complemented the more masculine attire.

The woman gave her a smirk, lifting her arms and spinning around. "So, what do you think?"

What did she think? Iris inhaled before letting the breath out slowly. "Eh, you clean up alright."

Kaira's eyes widened, making Iris chuckle as she surged to her feet and bounded over to the woman. She leaned in close and whispered into the shorter woman's ear. "You look beautiful and eye-catching. I'm going to have to beat off other women with a stick," Iris said playfully.

Kaira laughed and wrapped her arms around Iris, pulling her close. “As if anyone could take their eyes off you tonight,” she said, placing a gentle kiss on Iris’s cheek.

Iris blushed at the words and the gesture. She smiled and pulled back, turning her gaze on the three women that all looked on at the two with varying degrees of amusement.

“I know I’ve said it a ton, but thank you all. This has been amazing.”

Marlena smiled. “You’re most welcome, now go turn heads, you two.”

Kaira nodded to the woman before offering her arm to Iris. “Shall we?”

Iris took her arm, feeling a surge of excitement and anticipation. Together, they made their way out of Marlena’s shop and to the carriage.

As the two sat down inside, Iris took a deep breath.

Now comes the hard part.

Her only regret about the dress... was that it didn’t allow her to wear her sword.