

The Marauder Prince

“You,” the Marauder Prince seethed, his breath crystallizing in the chill. His gaze met Iris’s and she froze, a shiver coursing through her that had nothing to do with his frosty magic.

Recognition flared in his icy glowing eyes, a mirror reflecting her own shock. The world around them seemed to fade into the background as Iris drank in his face, a mask of cruelty she had seen before. A cruel smile played on his lips like a chilling echo of a scene playing on repeat.

And then, with the harsh reality of a winter storm, Iris remembered how she recognized him.



I stumbled out of the camp, my heart racing and the sounds of the small campfires still crackling behind me...

Each gasp pulls in a fresh lungful of what can only be another world’s air, but it does little to calm the whirlwind of thoughts in my head.

The scent of trees and... burnt flesh fill my nostrils...

...

...

I checked over everything... again, just to make sure I had what I needed. There was no telling how long it would be until I found proper civilization... if there even was one.

There are the supplies and rations that I crammed haphazardly into the stolen pack. I tighten the buckle before lifting the pack’s single strap over my head and securing it across my chest.

I rest my hand on the hilt of the longsword that was strapped to my waist in a rough scabbard. My body is encased in an assortment of ill-fitting armor that I stole from the only two women of the camp.

Why would they be okay with what those men were doing?

They were clearly going to...

With a shake of my head, I clear the thoughts away. I need to get away from this area.

I’m terrified, but I swallow the fear, shoving it down as I stumble away from the smoldering remnants... and the bodies of the bandit camp.

The throbbing pulse of adrenaline that had carried me through the fight is dwindling, replaced by an unshakeable fatigue that seems to weigh on my very thoughts.

I lean against a tree, the rough bark scratching at my cheek that makes me wish I had grabbed a helmet, but all I can focus on is my quick breaths.

Hold on, Iris, you've got this.

But then the world seems to tilt, nausea flaring up as my knees buckle and my stomach rejects its meager contents.

My breaths come in ragged gasps, a grim chorus to the retching sounds that echo through the quiet forest.

When I finally finish evicting my stomach's inhabitants from their home like some predatory inner-city landlord, I wipe my mouth on the back of my hand, the metallic taste of bile still lingering on my tongue.

And then, the dam breaks.

An utter ecological disaster of emotions erupts.

All the fear, all the horror of what I've done and been through, it bubbles up and I collapse to my knees, sobs wracking my body.

I want to scream.

To fight.

To run.

But all I can do is cry.

This isn't fair, I didn't ask for this. I didn't want this.

Why is this happening?

How is this happening?

When my eyes eventually flutter open, it's to the sight of a deerlike creature nudging at me, its eyes soft and curious. In any other situation, it probably would have been cute.

I scream.

The sound of my terrified shriek echoes through the woods as the creature startles and bounds away.

When my racing heart finally stops trying to escape the caged prison of my chest, I blink in the red dawn light, the sight really hammering home the alien setting I was magicked away to.

I must have slept all night...

I feel groggy, there's a dull ache in my bones as I force myself to stand.

Keep moving, Iris. You can't stay here.

With a grimace, I grab and drink from the water skin, swishing the lukewarm liquid around my mouth before spitting out the remnants of the vile taste that clung to my tongue.

The fear hasn't left, but it's quiet now, replaced by a sort of resigned determination as I steel myself for what needs doing.

Momma didn't raise no bitch.

At that, I freeze.

Mom...

My breath hitches at the thought of my mom getting news that I died getting hit by some truck, but then learning that there wasn't a body.

Or is there?

What actually happened?

I look back one last time at the ruined camp, the harsh reminder of what I've survived.

Then I turn, following the worn trail leading away from it.

You can figure this out, just keep going.

Hours pass.

Or maybe it's minutes, I can't tell. This world is so familiar, yet so... *other*. The lush greenery reminds me of the forests back home, but the elves... the half-elves...

The thought of those bandit elves sends a shiver down my spine.

I was hit by a truck.

Is this some game? Am I some kind of character in a ridiculously realistic RPG? Some sort of government experiment?

Is my body hooked up to some tubes somewhere?

"System," I mutter with a desperate hope sparking in my chest.

Nothing.

"...Stats."

Nada.

"Character sheet?"

The system did not respond.

I stumble, a laugh bubbling up from my chest. "Just some Tolkien-ass shit, then. Not nearly as cool."

But I keep walking, leaving the camp—and my old life—behind.

The world seems to throb with the harsh pulse of the midday sun as I follow the trail through the forest with a crunch of dirt and rocks under every step.

Beads of sweat trickle down my brow, the heat and the humidity weaving an uncomfortable cocoon around me that made me wish I had a scrunchie.

I blow at a strand that's stuck to my cheek and frown as it remains stuck to me.

Anything to get my damned hair out of my face.

I keep drinking until I realize that I'm nearly out of water; rationing clearly isn't my strong suit.

Pausing to eat, I manage a handful of dried nuts and fruits before the rhythmic drum of hooves echoes in the distance.

Panic seizes me and I scramble to hide as my heart hammers in my chest. I swear it's loud enough that someone will hear it.

Through the veil of the foliage, I watch as a group of seven riders, each adorned in shining armor, draw near.

I suck in a sharp breath, pressing my back against a thick trunk and willing myself invisible.

But it's no use.

The lead rider, an imposing figure atop his horse, spots me and raises a hand to his men to halt.

"Hello?"

His voice is gentle, almost disarming.

I freeze, the instinct to run battles within me against the desire to be seen, to find help.

"You know I can see you," he adds, a note of amusement tingeing his words.

Unbidden, I can feel a surge of the strange magic beginning to build up in me like a capacitor.

But instead of lashing out, I stand, my hand instinctively finding the hilt of my stolen sword as I step from my failure of a hiding spot.

"Hello," I reply cautiously, my voice quiet, hesitant.

The man removes his helmet, revealing the striking ice-blue eyes of an elf.

He asks me what I'm doing out here alone, but I counter by asking who he is. I don't want to be on the back foot, I realize I am out of my depth, but I need information. Which I won't get by only answering questions.

He offers me a kind smile. "I am Ser Corin Syllar. A knight in service to the Queendom."

My brows furrow at that.

Queendom?

I file the information away, a piece of the puzzle that is this world.

He repeats his question, but I again avoid answering.

“How far am I from civilization?”

His casual shrug and indicating that a town is only half a day away, does little to assuage my nerves.

“Don’t worry. I’ll make sure you stay safe,” he says. “Trust me. Now, how did you arrive here? I can’t help you unless I know. We’re on a... mission. One in service of all the people of Lehelia.”

The Queendom of Lehelia? At least I know where I am.

Determined to guard my secrets, I absently tuck a loose strand of scarlet hair behind my ear and note the flicker of surprise in his eyes. Choosing my words carefully, I weave a plausible tale, admitting I was captured by bandits and taken prisoner at a nearby camp.

The knights exchange a glance at my confession, concern etched into their features. “How did you escape?” Syllar asks curiously.

I steeled myself against the tide of emotion threatening to overwhelm me as images flash through my mind. “I killed them,” I whisper.

His eyes widen in shock, and he seems to hesitate before asking, “You... I’m sorry, what?”

I shake my head, fighting the lump forming in my throat. “I had to. They... they were going to do bad things... it was self-defense. I’m sorry.”

The man dismounts, approaching with caution before placing his hands on my arms, his eyes filled with compassion. “Are you okay? Did they..?”

I shake my head as the weight of his question sinks in. “I’m fine. Sorry.”

He seems to accept this as he nods solemnly. His eyes bore into mine, their icy depth revealing a swirl of emotions that begged you to dive into them. “They’re all dead? And the camp?”

Suspicion rickles at the back of my neck, but I answer truthfully. “A lot of it caught fire, but not terribly. I don’t think there will be a forest fire or anything if that’s what you’re worried about.”

I step back, wiping at the tears stinging my eyes.

When I look up, the other knights have drawn their weapons.

Confusion clouds my mind. “What?” I ask, fear slinking down my spine.

Ser Syllar sighs, his expression guarded. “Do you realize what you’ve done?” he asks in a low, dangerous tone.

The fear closes around me as I retreat a step. “I-I was just protecting myself. They wanted to make me a *slave*.”

“Regrettable. Truly regrettable.”

He turns away, signaling two of his men. “Take her. This is going to cause setbacks.”

I can only stand in stunned silence as the reality of my situation crashes down around me.

One of the knights pulls a dagger, advancing with a menacing sneer that jump-starts my brain.

In response, I whip out my sword, my hand shaking despite how resolute I try to feel. “Stay back!” I warn, but my voice trembles, undercutting my threat.

Their laughter cuts through the tension like a cold knife.

A cruel smile curls on Syllar’s lips. “Put down the sword, girl. It will do you no good. You’re going back to the camp with us, then we will figure out what to do with you.”

Suddenly, something in me shifts, like a switch being flipped.

The icy tendrils of fear that had gripped my heart are replaced by a wave of anger, so fierce and raw it shocks me into action.

As the knights get within arm’s reach, I lower my sword and slide it back into the scabbard, their smirks barely registering as the electric hum of my magic thrums to life inside me.

It pulses through my veins as if they are conduits, making my skin tingle, and filling me with a potent sense of invincibility.

The knights hesitate as I tilt my head, their amusement fading to uncertainty.

I feel a tickling sensation coming from my eyes, and with my peripheral vision, I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the shining armor of one of the men—a flickering blue light dancing across my pupils.

I lift my hand and let the magic surge forward, shaping it into a crackling orb of lightning before unleashing it.

The bolt shoots forward, a missile of pure electricity, and slams into the first knight, sending him sprawling. As I turn to the second, his face frozen in disbelief, I fire another bolt.

The first knight stumbles to one knee, clearly injured.

I send two more bolts his way, each strike punctuated by a sharp crackle of energy, until he crumples to the ground.

With a roar, Syllar springs into motion, hurling something at me.

Pain blossoms in my side and I look down to see a dagger buried deep in my flesh, slipped through a gap in my hastily assembled armor.

I really should have taken more time to do it right.

Syllar strides towards me, sword in hand, and I react instinctively, a spark of magic hitting him dead-on. He grits his teeth against the shock but keeps coming.

Panic flares inside me, and I turn and run, one hand clutching holding the hilt of the dagger embedded in my bleeding side.

I hear shouts fading into the distance, but I don't stop, not until I stumble out of the forest, or even upon the glow of a town beneath the inky night sky.

But as I reach the gate of the town, exhaustion hits me like a tidal wave, the world closing in as I stumble and fall to a knee.

As I lift my head, I hear shouts and see figures rushing toward me.

“...Help,” I gasp out.

A strong hand steadies me, and I look up into the eyes of an orc. “I got you. You're safe now.”

“You're green,” I mumble, the words falling from my lips just as the world goes dark.



Iris narrowed her eyes as she recalled who he was, at his lies and attempt to kill her. How she had to run, and how if it wasn't for her magic, she would have died.

She glanced to the side where Kaira stepped to her side, swords at the ready.

“He has a priestess prisoner. You and the others need to save her,” Iris whispered. “What's about to happen... Just... get her to safety. I will catch up after.”

Kaira gave her a searching look.

“Fine. Finish this quickly.”

Iris just nodded and **[Focused]**.

She wasn't sure that this was going to be quick, but she *would* finish it tonight.

The Marauder Prince, resplendent in his ebony armor, straightened to his full height, the sheen of his ice-wrought claymore catching the firelight...

It was over the top on so many levels.

“I should have known it would be you who was behind the attacks on my organization ever since you escaped that day... I must say—”

But Iris wasn't there for his monologues. She wasn't there for his bullshit.

Interrupting his speech, she triggered her [**Lightning Step**], becoming an entity of pure, crackling energy that surged forward like a storm incarnate. She arrived in a crash of lightning which he countered with a hastily erected thin barrier of ice that was immediately shattered by her magic, showering the area with a spray of frosty mist.

Even as she emerged from the spell, her blade carved a deadly arc through the air aimed at his neck, but the Marauder Prince's defense gave him just enough of a breather to avoid the lethal trajectory with a nimble duck.

Without pause, she lashed out with her [**Mana Conduit**] and [**Static Discharge**] infused gauntlet that hammered into his armored midsection.

The blow contorted the steel, lifting him momentarily off the ground and eliciting a surprised grunt from the man.

Two orbs of lightning exploded outward from the contact point, homing onto another marauder who was immediately thrown to the ground as he convulsed uncontrollably from the shocking impact with twin blackened marks on his body.

The Marauder Prince, however, did not falter.

With a swift movement even as he stepped backward, he raised a hand and conjured a large icicle with a gesture, casting it directly at Iris's face.

She responded with a swift pirouette, her [**Rushing Winds**] enhancing her speed and agility, while simultaneously raising her [**Storm Armor**] that bathed her in electrical energy as he fired two more icy projectiles.

Like unleashed serpents, bolts of lightning sprang forth from her shield, meeting the incoming spells in a fierce display of magical clashes that obliterated them in a shower of shimmering ice before they could reach her.

Kaira's voice pierced through the pandemonium with a rallying cry for the rest of their party. "On me!"

Iris glimpsed her party charging at the other enemies, their battle cries punctuating the tumultuous orchestra of combat while arrows fired down from the tower behind them.

"*You* are the Marauder Prince? I thought you were just a knight," she spat. "On a mission for the Queendom. I see you got some magic, too."

The man's eyes narrowed. "What a naive, ignorant girl you are. I will regain what is rightfully mine after I finish what I started that day."

With her resolve recharged, Iris lunged once more at the Marauder Prince, constantly shifting her augmenting spells to whatever she used to attack him with. Her longsword met his claymore in a forceful clash of steel that echoed throughout the camp, and their magic collided, ice meeting lightning in a cascade of shocks and mist.

The prince barely moved as Iris darted toward him once more.

He skillfully shifted to the side, the glacial edge of his claymore gleaming under the twin moonlight as it swung toward her.

Iris kicked off of the ground, using her **[Rushing Winds]** to amplify her jump and causing her movements to blur in speed and evade his strike.

But he was fast, his steps fluid like a dance choreographed for death as he used a movement ability, and closed the distance between them in a frosty blink of an eye.

Iris swung her blade again, a snaking whip of lightning of her **[Arc Lash]** radiating from her weapon, aimed at his exposed side.

His frosty aura glimmered and a thin layer of icy magic repelled her electric assault while he avoided her attack. His magic was a wall of chill that pushed back against her storm like winter rebuffing a thunderstorm's rage.

Iris ducked under the Marauder Prince's next vicious thrust, feeling the cold wind that trailed in the wake of his massive claymore. She grinned, the gleam of battle in her eyes.

In the corner of her eye, she saw Laken, a beacon of calm amidst the chaos atop the watchtower. He was picking off the prince's reinforcements one by one, making sure no one interrupted their duel.

The rest of her party were already out of her sight as they sought to rescue the priestess she and Laken heard about, leaving Iris and the Marauder Prince in their deadly dance.

I hope Kaira stays safe.

Their fights were far from over, and Iris knew it. She just hoped no one got hurt.

But with Iris's party gone, she didn't have to worry about collateral damage, so she could finally go all out.

Her grin grew into a smile. It was time to shift gears, to take charge, to flip the table on everything.

She was Iris Stuart, adventurer extraordinaire, and she was a witty bitch.

It's time to use that to my advantage.

Leaning back on her heels, she sidestepped, narrowly avoiding his next swing. Using the momentum from her dodge, she flicked her wrist, discharging a **[Spark]** in his direction. The electric orb whizzed past his shoulder, too close for comfort but not close enough to land a hit.

"You're right. I am a bit ignorant. You know, maybe you can help enlighten me. What is it with men and compensating with big swords?" she taunted, her grin only broadening at his scowl. "I mean, it's pretty telling, dude."

She continued to move, her footwork agile as she danced around him, keeping him on his toes. Her voice, though soft, echoed through the battlegrounds, ringing loud and clear over the clamor of combat around them.

The sword in his grip became an extension of his arm, striking at her with the relentless chill of winter. The closer she got, the more the frost that seemed to spread from everywhere he touched crept toward her even through the air.

She wasn't sure what it was, but she knew she couldn't let it cover her.

Iris took a step back, her feet sliding slightly on the frost-slicked ground.

He pressed his advantage and again swung his blade, but this time a mist of frost enveloped the sword and she used her enhanced movement to leap as far back as she could just as his swing erupted in a blast of frost where it would have struck her.

At a distance, she conjured and fired her **[Lightning Spear]** at him, he *rolled* under the spear and raised several more thin panes of ice as it curved and re-targeted him. Each pane was easily pierced by the spear of pure energy that shot toward him, but they deflected its trajectory enough for him to avoid the spear all while casting several icicles at her that kept her moving until her bad-guy-seeking missile crashed into the ground and dispersed.

He was quick to retaliate and released another flurry of ice shards toward her.

Iris's magic was quicker.

Her **[Storm Armor]** pulsed out in response, lightning lashing out and pulverizing the icy projectiles.

But he was already on the move, his speed catching her off guard.

She could barely make out his form amidst a dense, icy mist he flooded the area with that concealed his approach.

Using her **[Mana Sight]**, she managed to catch sight of him just before he materialized from the obscuring fog, his claymore already swinging down.

Iris used her **[Lightning Step]** again, bypassing his strike and rematerializing in the midst of the tents in the camp as her body erupted out of its lightning form and created distance from the man.

She spun on her heel and quickly released a series of **[Sparks]** toward his exposed back.

The crackling energy soared through the air straight at her target, but instead of finding flesh, the three orbs crashed into a thin, fragile pane of ice that appeared just in time to intercept and deflect the attack.

From a distance, Iris could see the lightning illuminating the Marauder Prince, casting a long, ominous shadow on the ground. The crackle of her lightning and the frosty silence of his magic filled the night, two forces of nature locked in combat.

The intensity of their spells, the resilience of their defenses, the fluidity of their movements—it was a dance of power and determination.

But Iris was resolute.

Tonight, the storm would prevail.

Iris squared her shoulders, preparing herself for the next round. The Marauder Prince was a formidable opponent, his mastery of frost magic a stark contrast to her affinity for lightning.

They continued their duel, moving and weaving through the camp in a clash of magic that kept others away.

Bolts of **[Chain Lightning]**, **[Sparks]**, and **[Lightning Spears]** filled the night along with blasts of frost and blinding sprays of sleet.

Their swords rang as they clashed every time he managed to get close with each burst of speed courtesy of his movement ability.

A thin sheen of frost covered her boots like the icing on a high-flying spy plane, but she kept a constant surge of lightning coursing through her with her **[Stormskin]** trait and helping to heat up her armor to melt it away.

“Ever think that might be why you've turned to a life of terror?” she continued her earlier insult, her tone laced with mirth. “Because in a nation filled with beautiful women, not a single one wanted you? Or is it because your masculinity can't handle women in control?”

A dangerous glint flickered in the Marauder Prince's eyes, the frost on his armor seeming to grow colder with his rising fury.

“Your ignorance amuses me,” he shot back, his voice laced with frosty venom. “Your pitiful attempts to grasp the nuances of my motivations and the breadth of my power are nothing more than a sideshow, a comedic interlude in our deadly dance.”

His eyes gleamed beneath the rim of his helm, an icy fury burning within them. “But please, do continue spouting your frivolous taunts. They serve as the perfect distraction while I bring this charade to its inevitable conclusion.”

With a flicker of amusement, she sidestepped his icy blade, responding with a dismissive air, “So, small dick. Got it.”

His snarl resonated in the frigid air, a low, guttural sound that had once held the power to instill fear in his enemies. With an explosive thrust of his offhand, a barrage of glacial spikes, almost as if he'd ripped an icy stalactite from a cavern just for this use and hurled them toward her.

The gleaming shards cut through the night, refracting the ambient light in a shimmering display of deadly beauty.

Her storm armor sprung into action, arcs of electricity snapping out toward the incoming assault. Yet the sheer size of spikes overwhelmed the protective shield, and several managed to slip past her defenses.

In the blink of an eye, she tapped into the core of her magic, the sensation of electricity tingling beneath her skin as she transformed into a bolt of lightning. In an instant, she was meters away from her original position, the remaining spikes whistling past the space she had just vacated.

But the Marauder Prince was far from done.

With a sweeping motion of his arm, he conjured a swirling mist of frost. It rolled towards her like a wave, a wall of icy particles aimed to disorient and obscure her vision.

“I hope you didn't think that frostbite would slow me down,” Iris chided, her voice echoing through the frosty air.

He frowned as his armor's icy exterior glistened. “I preferred the fight when you didn't speak.”

Iris gave a huff of laughter, eyes narrowing as she strategized her next move. “Pretty misogynistic, my dude. Yikes. You should see a therapist about your issues. Or actually, here, have some shock therapy.”

With a jolt, she shot her **[Chain Lightning]** at him and connected them with the bolts of electricity jumping back and forth between them. His armor hummed as the electric charge met frost magic, their power clashing in a brilliant display. He retaliated with a violent wave of icy shards, their cold brilliance cutting through the dark.

But Iris was prepared.

She **[Lightning Stepped]** out of the shards' path, landing atop a pile of supplies. From her elevated vantage, she released several **[Sparks]**, the small orbs of lightning darting toward him.

He easily dodged to the side. “What a pathetic display, you wench! Your feeble prattling can't save you. Not even your little lightning tricks!” he sneered, his eyes glowing an icy blue as his anger rose.

“No need to be so cold-hearted,” Iris retorted, the whirling chaos of her spells lighting up the night. “But I suppose I should take it as a compliment. After all, I am pretty electrifying.”

“Your pride will be your downfall,” the prince retorted, conjuring a thick layer of frost around him as her **[Sparks]** struck. The frosty armor absorbed the shock, diffusing the electricity before it could reach him.

“Isn't that why your troops are losing?” Iris taunted, gesturing to the escalating chaos beyond their battleground. “Seems like they're getting a lesson in the proper pecking order of the forest.”

The Prince glanced back, his icy calm replaced with a flare of annoyance. “A pity you’ll be dead long before it’s over.”

A smirk tugged at the corners of Iris's mouth. “Well, we'll just have to see about that, won't we?”

He surged forward, the ground beneath his feet freezing with each step, his colossal blade gleaming menacingly under the moonlight. Iris watched him come, her grin never faltering.

It was just as she wanted.

Every taunt, every jibe, served to keep him off balance, to throw him off his game. And so far, it was working.

With that, she invoked [**Rushing Winds**] again, the ground beneath her crackling as she shot forward, blade in hand. The Marauder Prince moved to meet her, frost spreading under his feet as he advanced, his icy blade swinging toward her.

The clash of their blades echoed through the field, sparks of lightning meeting shards of ice, the tension escalating as they fought, one intent on breaking the storm, the other resolute in overcoming the winter's chill.



Kneeling on the dirt-stained floor of the Marauder Prince’s tent, Kaira helped Bree gently ease the captive raithe priestess into a sitting position. All around them, the last stragglers of resistance from the tent’s guards were being snuffed out by the unwavering determination of her own group.

“We're adventurers from Brightburn,” Kaira stated, forcing compassion into her voice as she offered a comforting smile to the woman. “We're going to get you to safety. Can you walk?”

At Kaira's words, a glimmer of relief seemed to pass over the raithe woman's bruised and weary features. “Has the storm come to save me?” she asked, a trace of hope bleeding into her weakened tone.

She means Iris.

Kaira's smile widened in reassurance. “She's out there, right now, taking on the Marauder Prince,” she confirmed, extending her hand to the raithe. “Come on, we need to get you out of here.”

Taking her first shaky steps, Bree moved to put her arm around the woman and assisted the woman in walking from the tent. Though her condition was grave, she was no longer in immediate danger, thanks in no small part to the tender assistance of the

sun elf. The wounded priestess leaned heavily on the bard, but her eyes were filled with a mixture of gratitude and lingering fear.

Surveying the campsite, Kaira could see the Harpies completing their devastating assault.

It was a victory, though not without its share of sacrifice.

From somewhere in the distance, the distinctive sizzling crackle of Iris's lightning magic reached her ears, sending a ripple of concern through her heart.

She turned toward Mocha, Iris's loyal warhorse and friend who she had rode through the camp like a true cavalrywoman.

The intelligent creature regarded her with sharp, understanding eyes.

"She might need you," Kaira told the horse with the barest hint of concern lacing her voice.

Right now, Kaira would only get in the way of Iris's fierce battle.

I don't want to distract her. It could get her killed.

The mare nodded in response, her breath puffing out in the chill air of the summer night.

As the chaos of battle subsided around them, all Kaira could think of was the storm itself that was her paramour.

Her heart.



A blaze of adrenaline had swept through her veins as Iris had dodged, countered, and attacked the Marauder Prince for what felt like an eternity.

Their duel was a deadly dance, moving through the chaos of the camp like a tempest, leaving behind trails of destruction.

For all his earlier aggressiveness, the Marauder Prince was retreating now, with Iris in hot pursuit.

She laughed, breathless. "I have to admit, I didn't think you had it in you to last this long. I suppose it's something to be proud of, given your obvious... deficiencies."

His cold eyes flashed with a dangerous glint as he shot back, "It's clear you have a fascination with it. Unfortunately, your end is near."

"Oh, the only thing I'm fascinated by is all the coin I get for removing your head," Iris retorted, her grin filled with stormy defiance.

They continued to trade spells and barbs, weariness crept into their movements as they ran through the devastated camp.

A shrill cry sounded above them as the Harpy queen appeared in all her naked, feathered glory as she swooped down, launching a massive stone at the Marauder Prince. He barely managed to evade, cursing, and retaliated with a volley of icicles.

The Harpy queen veered away, her feathers glinting in the firelight as the Marauder Prince turned his icy barrage on Iris, and a veritable hailstorm was launched at her.

She rolled out of the way, her eyes narrowing as she returned to her feet and saw as he pulled out a small handheld device with a glowing core.

“Thought you could manipulate me with your childish insults? You followed my lead without question. I wonder, who manipulated whom? Your head will make a fine trophy.”

He pressed a button on the device and Iris's world erupted into flames.

A series of colorful explosions blasted through the camp, flinging Iris to the ground. Fire roared around her, consuming tents and wooden structures with voracious hunger.

Her head spun, and she shook it as she stumbled back to her feet.

What the fuck?

Through the fiery chaos, she spotted the Marauder Prince mounting a horse, preparing to flee.

“Mocha!” Iris' voice echoed out, amplified with the raw power of her mana. It was more than just a call; it was a plea, a beacon of desperation that she hoped would thread through their bond.

In response, a furious, determined neigh sliced through the cacophony of the battlefield.

The ground reverberated beneath her, rhythmic thumps growing louder and fiercer as they approached. It sounded like a stampede, a freight train bearing down with unstoppable force, but Iris knew better.

It was Mocha, her trusty steed, her partner in countless battles, racing through the burning chaos to her aid.

Then, through the screen of flame and smoke, Mocha burst forth.

Her blonde mane, the foam of her latte, glowed against the backdrop of the inferno, eyes ablaze with a fiery spirit that mirrored Iris's.

With the grace of a trained warhorse, Mocha skidded to a halt near Iris, the ground smoldering under her powerful hooves.

In a swift, practiced motion, Iris vaulted onto Mocha's saddle, her eyes locked on the retreating form of the Marauder Prince. Even in the chaos, Iris could hear Mocha's confusion and worry as she neighed. *'Iris! What happened?'*

“No time! We have to catch him!” Iris shouted back, adrenaline fueling her voice. She leaned forward in the saddle, urging Mocha into a gallop.

Together, they raced into the forest, their path illuminated by the lurid glow of the burning camp behind them.

As Iris cast one last glance over her shoulder, she saw her party rushing to the edge of the camp amidst the chaos, ready to finish what they started. But the Marauder Prince was hers, and she wouldn't rest until she got him.

With Mocha's powerful strides carrying them forward, they disappeared into the forest, leaving behind the dying flames and echoes of the battlefield.

Mocha tore through the underbrush with ability-fueled speed, as they sped after their quarry. The rhythmic pound of hooves against earth became the drumbeat of their quest.

The quest was almost over.

They had reached the final boss.

A sobering thought hit her like a sledgehammer.

I'm never going home, am I?

This is it.

This is my life.

Iris squinted against the wind on the retreating figure of the Marauder Prince. She wasn't brought to Eona for a purpose.

She was no hero.

She was a broken woman who had finally found hope, and it all started with... ending a man's life. Such a far cry from the college student who had no idea how to fight when she arrived.

What some fucked up shit.

All she had to do was finish this quest and she could hopefully have a normal life, she could finally rest and maybe work on herself.

And Kaira.

Let the other adventurers go off and take the torch for a while while I work on the Guild.

She just needed to catch the fleeing man ahead of her.

Iris urged Mocha faster.

They inched closer until she could make out the frantic gaze of the Marauder Prince looking back at them.

She extended her hand, her fingertips sparking with raw energy, and launched a **[Spark]** straight at him.

The Marauder Prince ducked just in time, a snarl of a curse escaping his lips. He retaliated with a salvo of icicles, each one dangerously sharp and glittering in the dim forest light.

But Mocha was no ordinary horse.

With an agility that belied her size, Mocha wove a path around the icicles, a few of them diverting their trajectory as they were repelled by an unseen ability.

Ahead of them, the prince's horse burst through a dense brush, and Mocha followed suit. As they emerged from the foliage, Mocha skidded to a halt, as she saw the ground falling away into a gaping ravine in the distance. The Marauder Prince pulled his horse to a stop and turned to face Iris, a cold scowl marring his face.

Iris met his gaze evenly. "If you surrender now, I'll swear to bring you back to Brightburn alive."

His lips curled in contempt. "And face a slow death there? I don't think so. All I need to do is to kill you here and now. You're alone."

A hollow laugh escaped her lips. "You're right. Let's finish it here then, no more running. All you have to do is kill me. It's not like I have a squadron of harpies to back me up here."

The sarcastic remark hung in the air between them, until a sudden, eerie chittering from the surrounding woods sent shivers down her spine.

She froze.

I know that sound.

The prince's mocking expression faltered.

And then, the forest came alive.

The noise multiplied, the surrounding woods filling with a terrifying chorus.

Her **[Danger Sense]** activated with the intensity of an air raid siren, blaring a warning that made her blood run cold.

A terrifying realization dawned upon them both.

As she glanced around, she saw countless pairs of eyes gleaming in the undergrowth, their red glow piercing the darkness.

"Oh, no," the prince muttered under his breath. He lowered his hand slowly, his eyes wide and fixed on the encroaching danger. The Marauder Prince's confident facade crumbled, replaced with a primal fear that mirrored Iris's own.

It was a fear that Iris understood all too well.

Drawing mana into herself, she prepared for what was to come. Beneath her, Mocha shifted restlessly, sensing the impending danger.

Suddenly, a figure emerged from the shadowy underbrush.

A hare.

A murder hare.

And one that was the size of a labrador, its fur matted and beady eyes glowing with an ominous light as it sniffed the air before locking onto Iris.

Her breath hitched in her throat as the creature hissed, baring a maw of four mandibles that bloomed like a grotesque, flesh-eating flower.

Then, one by one, more of the creatures started to emerge from the brush.

All thoughts of her quest disappeared, dwarfed by the immediate, horrifying reality.

They were now caught in the eye of a tempest of living nightmares, their crimson gaze glowing with an insatiable hunger.

And one that wouldn't stop until they got their fill.