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## The Adventurer's Guild

The pangs of a slowly healing wound shot through Iris as she carefully pushed herself upright. The guild hall was alive with low murmurs and cautious relief. Her eyes flitted from face to face, a vast mosaic of relief, grief, and grim determination.

Audrielle and Divaro from Stilstead were on their knees beside Findal's motionless form. Audrielle's head was buried in Divaro's chest, her sobs silent but heart-wrenching.

Before she could process it all, two forms, but one quite large and furry pounced on her. Akane's velvety muzzle nudged her, and Mocha's worried eyes bore into hers. Iris winced, her wounds protesting at the sudden pressure.

*'Iris!' Akane's yips trembled with emotion. 'I'm sorry. He caught me off guard.'*

Mocha whispered, her eyes holding an unfamiliar depth, "Iris? You... you alright?"

Swallowing the lump in her throat, Iris managed a nod. "I... wasn't prepared for this."

Akane's form shifted and soon her kitsune sister was next to her, latched onto her side with tails curling around her.

"But... how did he survive?" Mocha's brows furrowed, puzzlement evident in her voice. "We watched him fall. It seemed certain. The murder hares... The odds..."

Iris frowned. "I don't know. But we fucked up Mocha. We should have—"

"No, none of that. It was a reasonable assumption," Kaira interrupted. "People simply do not survive falling into ravines with monsters mawing at their faces. However he did it, it had to have been magic."

Iris shook her head though. "Every movie, show, and anime always warned that if there wasn't proof, the villain likely isn't dead. I should have known."

A firm but gentle hand on her face made Iris look up. Kaira's eyes, fiery and determined, locked onto hers. "This isn't some fairy tale or one of those 'shows' you mentioned. This is our reality. You need to remember that. And remember, you don't have to face it all alone."

As Kaira's words settled in, something inside Iris shattered. All the pent-up emotions, the raw vulnerability, came pouring out. Pulling Kaira closer, she clung to her as sobs wracked her frame, letting herself truly feel the weight of the events and the comfort of being surrounded by those who cared.

Time seemed to stand still as Iris and Kaira held onto one another, the world around them a blurred tableau of pain and hope. But the gentle touch on Iris's shoulder brought her back to reality.

Bree's eyes, filled with a mixture of relief and sorrow, locked onto hers. "Are you alright?" she asked softly.

Pushing herself up, Iris pulled Bree into a tight embrace. "Thank you," she murmured, "for me, for all of us."

Bree pulled away slightly, her smile bittersweet. "You saved us all first, Iris and almost paid for it. I couldn't let that be it." Her gaze darkened. "But there were those I couldn't reach in time."

Iris drew a steadying breath, acutely aware of the watching eyes of the survivors. "We'll mourn them together," she replied solemnly. "Tell me what happened."

As Bree recounted the tragic events, Iris almost fell into despair. *I should have been here. If I was...* She shook her head. She couldn't think like that. Instead, she focused on the story of Findal's courageous stand, Laken's desperate defense, and Owlie's selfless sacrifice—each story painted a picture of heroes rising against a force of overwhelming evil.

At some point during the recount, guards came in along with what looked like medics who were looking over people.

Kaira's voice, soft yet firm, broke into Iris's thoughts. "You need to address them. As Grandmaster. They need guidance. Hope."

Nodding, Iris gently cupped Kaira's face. "You're right."

Clearing her throat, she clapped her hands sharply, cutting through the murmur of the crowd. Every eye turned to her, their faces reflecting the myriad emotions of the moment: grief, confusion, anger, and hope. Guards politely backed away and gave her the floor. She nodded to them respectfully.

As she began, her voice trembled, but it grew steadier with every word. "Today, we faced a trial by fire. And though we bear the scars of this battle, both seen and unseen, we must not falter. Findal and Owlie made the ultimate sacrifice so that others might live. Their courage, their spirit, will forever be a beacon for the Adventurer's Guild. I swear that we will honor them. Findal was a courageous man who sought a better life for himself, his friends, and his village. What happened today is proof that your world... no, *our* world has changed. Now more than ever we are needed. Each and every one of you is needed. I will not blame anyone who wants to leave because of this, but I implore you to stay. To help us build this guild into what Lehelia and the rest of Ikios needs."

She paused, allowing her words to sink in. "I cannot promise you safety. We are adventurers. Our very profession is wrought with danger. The road to forming this guild was filled with blood. We quest not just for glory or riches, but to make the world a safer, better place. There is danger around

every corner of this world, and we must step up and make a stand. We are the shield that protects the innocent, the sword that cuts down the darkness. And while the path we tread is fraught with danger, we tread it together. For now, we mourn our friends, but we will rise and face the world once more, united in our purpose.”

As the dust of realization began to settle, determination was the emotion that took hold with an iron grip.

Sera's voice was resolute as she stepped forward. The image of her standing next to the formidable Tanith was powerful. “I'm with you, Grandmaster. But after this?” she started, her eyes fixed on Tanith's, “Teach me to fight.” Her demand was clear, the tone of someone who'd decided never to feel vulnerable again.

Tanith, reading the urgency in the plea, gave a firm nod, his gaze sweeping over the assembly. “Absolutely. You and anyone else who desires it.”

Gryff gently patted Laken's shoulder before standing up. His voice carried a steely undertone. “Our Guild was attacked. And while the enemy lies defeated, we can't be caught unprepared again.” His gaze met Laken's, then Bree's and Kaira's. “Those of us that were within the City Guard will help ensure our Guild Halls are havens from the dangers we are sent to root out. Those who run the halls are vital, and it is our duty as adventurers to ensure you are safe. Because you will be the ones to maintain these sanctuaries when we are gone, to ensure they are prepared when we return from our quests. Today, I failed you all, but no more. I will train and become stronger. This I swear.”

His passionate proclamation was met with silent nods and murmurs of agreement. The sentiment was echoed by many. It was a moment of unity, an implicit vow to fortify, learn, and protect.

Audrielle and Divaro, a pair deeply impacted by the day's tragic events, then stepped into the circle of attention. Their bond was evident as they exchanged a brief, weighted glance. Audrielle, taking a steadying breath, began to speak, her voice reflecting her newfound resolve. “Divaro and I will ensure Findal's safe return home, but we're not leaving this Guild. Had this tragedy befallen Stilstead, without Iris's intervention, we'd all have perished. We will harness the strength and knowledge we acquire here to shield our village in the future.”

*I don't know what I'd do if I lost any of my closest friends. These two have true strength.*

Iris's heart swelled with pride and gratitude. The Guild, though rocked to its core, was showing its resilience, its members rising to pledge allegiance and strength in the face of adversity. This was their legacy. This was their way forward.

They would honor the fallen, and after, they would emerge stronger.

The soft echo of footsteps on the floor was punctuated by a voice that pierced the silence that had fallen over the room. "Grandmaster?"

Iris was pulled from her thoughts, drawing her attention back to the immediate world around her. Pivoting on her heel, she saw Ser Meredith standing there, looking every bit the knight she was. Beside Iris, her two magical sisters and her girlfriend shifted subtly, positioning themselves protectively near her.

"Ser Meredith," Iris greeted. "What can I do for you?"

The knight hesitated for a brief moment, her gaze sweeping the room. Most notably or rather, most telling, was how her eyes lingered on the guards with a hint of unease. "Might we converse somewhere... private?"

Iris gave a reassuring nod to her closest family before nodding in understanding to the knight. She motioned for Meredith to follow as she stepped forward. She glanced back at Sera and the woman nodded before moving to handle the people in the room.

The two women made their way through the main hall, where guards were looking over the damage, and two House Arden guards were covering the Marauder Prince's body. Iris led Meredith to the stairs behind the main counter and up to the administration hallway, where her office resided. The inside was spartan and with just some furniture like a desk, some chairs, and empty bookcases. She was actually looking forward to decorating it.

Leaning against her desk, Iris crossed her arms as she studied Meredith closely. "What did you want to speak about?"

Meredith took a deep breath. "The man who attacked you... That was the marauder prince, correct?"

Iris nodded and waited for Meredith to continue.

The knight's expression tightened. "That is... concerning," the woman said slowly. "Although, I saw the... remains, he was... difficult to identify."

"You're telling me. We're not sure how he survived, but he had magic that was somehow sealing the wounds on his face. He should have died."

"That is even more concerning if magic can accomplish that," she said with a sigh. "I will speak with Lady Arden about this. As for the body, I will take it into House Arden's custody. It might be easier to suggest that he was merely one of the Marauder Prince's lieutenants seeking vengeance."

Iris considered this. "Are you sure? That seems... dangerous."

Meredith's gaze was unwavering. "Absolutely. Having the bastard in the bottom of some ravine would have made it easier to feign ignorance of his royal lineage. Having him... here, and headless... will complicate matters if word gets out."

Iris rubbed her temples, feeling the weight of the situation. *The guild just moved in and we're already part of a government coverup.* "Alright, yeah. I'll play along, and let people know. Was there anything else?"

Meredith extended her hand, her gesture taking Iris by surprise. She clasped it, receiving a warm, reassuring squeeze in return. "You did commendably. The losses your Guild faced were tragic, but you contained a potent threat. I will advocate for more frequent patrols around here by the Guards. Today's events highlighted their lackluster response time. Though, to be fair, they just lost one of their more capable captains."

Iris couldn't suppress a smirk at that thought. *Yeah, they did. Kaira's a badass.*

However, Meredith's proposition gave Iris pause. More guards patrolling could be both a blessing and a curse, given the unpredictable nature of the adventurers. "Thank you, Meredith," she said, choosing her words carefully.

The knight nodded, her features softening slightly. "Take care, Iris. Our paths are bound to cross often. And, just so you're aware, Lady Arden eagerly awaits your next tea session."

Caught off guard, Iris blinked, her response tentative. "That's... good to know?"

A chuckle escaped Meredith's lips. "Until our next encounter, adventurer."

Watching the knight depart, Iris took a moment, letting everything sink in. They faced many challenges ahead, but with her resilient team by her side, they'd weather the storms.

Together.



The day's first light filtered through the high windows of the former luxury inn converted into a guild hall, dust motes lazily dancing in the beams. As the main door opened, the sound of boots echoed through the almost empty hall. Iris walked in confidently, her posture straight and aura commanding. Kaira, Akane, and Mocha followed closely behind.

The front counter was manned by Neri, with Audrielle flipping through a ledger by her side. Their heads turned up as they heard the cadence of Iris's stride. The vastness of the guild hall was eerily silent, amplifying their exchange.

Much of the damage had been cleaned up over the last couple of days. Even the holes in the roof from Iris's **[Call Lightning]** were hastily repaired just yesterday after a message sent by Thalia to the city's Constructionist Guild spurred them into action.

*That's something I'll have more control over as head of the council.*

*Fucking politics.*

Neri looked up, her eyes brightening a touch. "Ah, Iris, you're just in time. There's someone waiting for you in your office."

Iris tilted her head, a brief flash of curiosity lighting up her face. "Oh? Alright, We'll head up and—" she began, her voice trailing off as Neri raised a hand.

"Actually," Neri interrupted, a smirk playing on her lips, "We have a quest that was submitted this morning. The very first one, and it specifically requested Kaira, Akane, and Mocha's party."

It was funny how Kaira and her sisters got a quest just after discussing the three forming a party.

Still, Iris had got to help them come up with their party name. It was almost too easy to trick them into using it.

Now, the first party of the Adventurer's Guild?

The Magical Girl Squad.

She'd take the true background of that phrase to the grave and just laugh every time she heard it. It served that little vulpine trickster and her equine enabler right.

Last night, after a long, 'come to Alos', discussion with Kaira, Iris had made a decision. It wouldn't be right to have a team rely on her when she couldn't leave all of the time. She couldn't afford to be a permanent member of any party because of the responsibilities that her position as grandmaster required of her.

It sucked.

But as grandmaster, though she was going to be quite busy, she could rely heavily on her staff enough to reserve the right to join any quest based on need or even for 'evaluation' purposes.

Akane's eyes widened, and she emitted an elated squeal that seemed to bounce around the hall. Mocha, her sun elf form radiant with an inner glow, looked positively stunned. "Wait, our very first quest? Even before Iris gets one?!"

Iris chuckled, her tone light and teasing. "Apparently so." She glanced over at Kaira, her smile turning into an exaggerated pout. "You're leaving me behind for your first big quest as party leader?"

Kaira met her gaze, eyes dancing with amusement. “Don’t sound so surprised. Maybe it’s about time you took a little break from the spotlight.” She winked, causing a flush to spread across Iris’s cheeks.

“Well then,” Iris responded with a playful roll of her eyes. She leaned in slightly, her voice dropping to a soft murmur meant only for Kaira’s ears. “I’ll catch up with you in a bit?”

Kaira’s smile grew more tender. “Always.”

Iris reached forward and gave her girlfriend’s hand a squeeze before stepping away. Kaira, in her fluid elegance, gently brushed past Akane, who was fervently discussing what adventuring equipment they should get with an increasingly intrigued Mocha. Their animated chatter created a vibrant backdrop as Kaira approached the counter.

Neri looked up with a subtle smile. With practiced ease, her fingers slipped beneath the counter and drew out the parchment with the quest’s details.

Taking a deep breath, Iris adjusted her cloak and made her way past the counter. Audrielle, who had been engrossed in her ledger, gave a polite nod without lifting her eyes, engrossed in organizing what seemed like invoices and delivery notes—likely for the supplies they desperately needed.

The stairwell to the administrative wing had a more refined touch, with smoothly polished steps and sturdier banisters.

Entering her office, Iris noticed a graceful figure—a high elf woman swathed in luxurious winter fabrics, her eyes scanning the sparsely decorated room. She seemed to be taking mental notes, her face a mask of gentle critique.

Thalia broke the silence first, her voice dripping with feigned criticism. “This place is crying out for some personality, dear. It’s roomy though.” She shot Iris a knowing glance, “I presume Sera made you take it?”

Laughing lightly, Iris nodded, her voice carrying an undertone of mock indignation. “She insisted. I told her I didn’t need the space.”

“As expected. You’re the grandmaster. You need gravitas,” Thalia remarked with a fond smirk.

She turned, her eyes locking onto Iris’s, a warmth shimmering within. “It’s been a while. How have you been holding up? Meredith told me about the attack. It’s been handled. I’m... sorry about those you lost.”

Iris leaned against the doorframe. “Thanks. I think I was most surprised that no one left after that. Things have been busy since the attack. It’s been non-stop since we got the damn place, and now

we already have to fix it. Thanks for the help with that, by the way.” She tilted her head. “Although, Meredith, where is she?”

Thalia's smirk transformed into a full-blown grin. “I gave her the second quest of your new guild... fetching us some tea from your bar. Then,” she added with a sly wink, “we can dive deep into conversation.”

As Thalia gracefully settled into one of the chairs that adorned Iris's office, she delicately tapped a finger on Iris's desk with one hand while brushing a strand of her auburn hair out of her face with the other. “I'm hosting a spring ball,” she announced with a glint of excitement in her eyes.

Iris sighed as she moved to sit next to the city lady. “Ah shit, that means I have to make an appearance, doesn't it?”

Thalia tilted her head, perplexed. “I was under the impression you rather enjoyed yourself at my last soiree?”

A grin pulled at Iris's lips. “*Enjoyed* is a strong word. It was fun, don't get me wrong, but man—politics just isn't my thing, Thalia.”

Thalia rolled her eyes with a dramatic flourish, crossing one leg over the other. “You don't have to be a political savant, Iris. All you need to do is show up, cast a spell or two to razzle-dazzle the crowd, and maybe instill a healthy dose of fear into anyone who underestimates you. Besides, you have a secret weapon—me.”

*Oh, the high and mighty nobility vouching for the scrappy adventurer, how original.* Iris raised an eyebrow, skepticism mingling with genuine curiosity. “So we're friends now? Is that what you're saying?”

Thalia chuckled, the sound warm and inviting. “Would I invest so much time and effort into you and your fledgling guild if I didn't actually like you? Although—” she paused, her expression momentarily clouding, “—please don't answer that.”

Iris couldn't help but laugh, the tension in the room diffusing like mist before the sun. Yet, her next words were chosen carefully, her face a serene mask of earnestness. “So this is for real? You're genuinely offering your friendship?”

“Absolutely,” Thalia confirmed, her eyes meeting Iris's with uncharacteristic vulnerability. “You're like a breath of fresh air in a stifling room, Iris. After inheriting my father's responsibilities at such a young age, my life has been a parade of people who always want something from me. With you, I finally feel like I can give—and receive—without ulterior motives.”

*Damn, it's like she just bared her soul or something.* “Well, to be fair, I did want something from you at first.”



Thalia waved her hand dismissively. “Starting a guild hardly counts as personal exploitation. If anything, I exploited you to gain more influence over the guilds.”

“I wouldn’t say that. You gave a lot for quite frankly me to simply be reasonable.”

The woman shrugged. “Taking advantage of people is so exhausting. It’s simply better to treat with people who are open to mutually beneficial agreements.”

Smiling, Iris nodded. “Alright then. Friendship it is, Thalia.”

The high elf’s blue eyes softened, and her posture relaxed. “Thank the gods. Now, I hope you’re prepared to listen to me complain about the innumerable annoyances that are the city’s nobles. It’s like holding in a sneeze, and I’m about to burst.”

Iris laughed heartily, her eyes twinkling with mirth. “How about we make a pact? Whoever needs to bitch brings a bottle of wine to the other’s place. I’ll start by coming over to your house since, you know, I’m currently homeless.”

Thalia burst into laughter, the sound rich and infectious, echoing in the empty corners of the room.

“Deal,” she agreed, sealing their new friendship with the promise of many wine-fueled rants to come.

Thalia’s face lit up with a mischievous glint in her eyes. “Once we secure you a manor, I expect to be invited over. By evening’s end, I suspect Meredith will have to carry me back to the manor. It will be delightfully unladylike.”

Iris raised an eyebrow, pushing away the thought of living in some grand estate. “Look, Thalia, I don’t want some opulent mansion. It’s just me, Akane, and Mocha. We don’t need a palace.”

“No one said anything about a palace. If that’s in the cards, I’m getting it first. No, we’re just talking about somewhere befitting your status.” Thalia smirked. “And what about Lady Harken? Aren’t you planning to play house together anytime soon?”

Iris’s cheeks tinted a light shade of pink. “Not just yet. We’re still in the early stages, courting and all. I want to take things slow and ensure everything’s right for both of us.”

Thalia arched an eyebrow. “My, my, that’s rather mature of you, Iris. What happened to the Mistress of Mayhem?”

Feigning shock, Iris clutched her heart dramatically. “Thalia, I am *wounded* by your insinuation! My mayhem has always been mature.”

Thalia chuckled, rolling her eyes, “Ah, and there it goes—your fleeting moment of maturity. Evaporated into the ether.”

Both women dissolved into laughter, the sound echoing harmoniously throughout the office.

Their mirth was gently interrupted when Ser Meredith entered. Balancing a tray of steaming tea, she moved with grace and precision, pouring the aromatic liquid into mugs before setting them on the desk.

After, she handed a document to Thalia before taking up a silent, protective position outside of the door. Thalia, however, looked momentarily deflated as she accepted the paper.

“So, this is why I’m here, a missive from the queen. Well, in addition to the quest I just posted,” Thalia began, waving the parchment slightly.

“What was the quest about by the way?”

“Oh, just the meeting with Lady Nysera, your... ‘harpy queen’ as we discussed before.”

Iris nodded. That made sense, and the Magical Girls Squad would be perfect for it.

“So, what does the queen want from us?”

“So presumptive to think it’s ‘us’.”

Iris rolled her eyes. “You’re here to bring it up. It’s definitely *us*.”

Thalia smiled as she skimmed through the document before speaking. “She’s expressing her gratitude for quelling the threat posed by the Marauder Prince and appreciating the hefty bounty I financed. Furthermore, she’s affirming my decision to grant you citizenship. She sounds pleased with our initiative in supporting the guild’s formation and...” Thalia’s voice trailed off slightly.

Iris tensed. “And?”

The elf sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. “She’s dispatching personnel to be trained. She wants a branch of the guild in the capital.”

*Oh, shit.* Iris grimaced. “We’re nowhere near equipped to handle that right now.”

Thalia leaned back, her expression contemplative. “Well, there’s fuck-all we can do to prevent it. We’ll just have to improvise.” She gave the paper a pointed tap. “The good news? There’s no mention of how long it should take to train them. So, you can take your sweet time. With that, I have a handful of volunteers that will be joining you. Expect them to arrive to be evaluated within the week. They’re setting up appointments with the Church for the ceremony.”

Iris let out a relieved chuckle, grateful for Thalia’s pragmatism.

“Well, it seems we have a lot to do in the future.”

With a languid grace, Thalia eased back into her chair, arms stretching upward in a momentary show of indulgence. “Indeed we do, my dear friend. Indeed we do,” she mused, picking up her tea with

the elegance only a noblewoman possessed. Taking a tentative sip, her poise faltered. She grimaced. “Iris, what in Tenera’s crooked nipple is this?”

Iris blinked, slightly taken aback. “Um, tea?”

Exhaling deeply, Thalia pinched the bridge of her nose, a gesture she often resorted to when exasperated. “Alright, I’m making a decree right now. I’m sending you a personal stash of tea. Keep it safe, hide it away, and save it for the rare moments when I decide to grace you with my presence.”

Feigning indignation, Iris scowled playfully. “Oh? So, our humble guild’s tea isn’t palatable enough for the delicate taste buds of the esteemed city lady?”

Thalia shot her a pointed look. “Darling, your tea isn’t palatable enough for anyone.”

Iris’s face fell, almost childlike in her disappointment. “But... I was the one that chose it,” she muttered under her breath.

Thalia leaned forward, narrowing her eyes in mock suspicion. “You chose this. Why?”

“It was... cheap?”

Shaking her head with a chuckle, Thalia inquired, “Has anyone else had the... pleasure of sampling this yet?”

From her poised stance by the door, Meredith piped up, mischief evident in her tone. “I believe, milady, the container was only just opened when I requested it.”

“Ah, the irony,” Thalia mused. “Meredith, darling, next quest assignment for you: collect all of this tea and do the realm a favor by disposing of it. As a dear friend, I simply can’t let Iris inflict this on unsuspecting clientele.”

Rolling her eyes, yet wearing a hint of a grin, Iris retorted, “Are you being dramatic or is it truly that bad?”

Raising an eyebrow, Thalia pointedly looked at Iris’s untouched mug. “Why don’t you give it a try?”

Dubiously, Iris picked up her cup, hesitating for just a second before taking a brave sip. The ensuing struggle to not promptly eject it was a sight, her eyes watering slightly as she swallowed with effort.

She met Thalia’s smug gaze, sighing in defeat. “Alright, alright, point taken. Damn, that’s horrendous.”

A bell later, The rich chime of the guild’s entrance bell signaled Lady Arden and Ser Meredith’s departure. With a cordial farewell by the grand doors, Iris watched them retreat into the distance.

Pivoting back towards the hall, she was met with the steely gaze of Sera, poised with an air of anticipation.

Iris quirked an eyebrow. "Something on your mind?"

Sera responded with a wry grin, "I believe it's my turn to chat."

Suppressing a laugh, Iris playfully retorted, "Should we go to some secret room to discuss some big conspiracy?"

With a wave of her hand, Sera motioned for Iris to follow. "No need for the dramatics. Let's take a stroll around and assess the repairs as we talk. Everyone else seems to have gravitated to the bar for some bonding. And hopefully some work, otherwise I'll get onto them when we're done."

Iris rolled her eyes but followed along beside her head administrator.

As they ambled through the guild hall, the hum of chatter from below and the occasional sound of hammering highlighted the myriad of activities and refurbishments underway. Navigating the corridors of the second floor, Sera halted by a window, sunlight streaming in, casting a warm glow as she looked out over the street of the city's center.

With a contemplative look, she began, "Remember when I mentioned that the Fenren Trading House was a subsidiary of a noble House in Avira?"

Iris nodded in recollection. "Ah, yes, the one tied to some royal, right? A terran princess, was it?"

Sera's lips twitched in a smirk. "Precisely. Now, the noble subordinates of this princess, through the Fenrens, have made an intriguing proposition. They wish to establish the first guild branches in Avira, specifically in the Duchy of Tilorol."

A chuckle escaped Iris's lips, catching Sera slightly off-guard. "What's so funny?"

"Well," Iris began. "The talk with Thalia was similar. The queen is dispatching some people to train here for a similar venture in the capital. It's like the universe is conspiring to keep us busy."

Sera groaned and rubbed her temples. "*Fantastic*. As if we weren't swamped enough." She resumed their walk, casting a wary glance at everything around them. "We need to expand the staff. And fast."

Exhaling deeply, Iris replied, "Quests. That's what we need. With those, we make money."

Sera nodded determinedly. "I have some ideas. I'll get on that."

A wry smile played on Iris's lips.

*And so, the adventure continues.*



The sun had sunk low on the horizon by the time Iris and Sera wrapped up their chat. The azure hues of the day gave way to the deep purples and oranges of twilight, casting the guild in a tranquil glow. As the bustling activities of the day simmered down, the heart of the guild—the bar—began to brim with life. Laughter and the clinking of mugs of the staff, adventurers, and even the workers who were helping fix all of the damage—like the hole in the wall of the bar—set a merry ambiance, a marked contrast from the day’s earlier frenzied pace.

Making her way through the hall, Iris’s keen ears picked up on the dulcet notes of a lute being strummed, a new addition to the evening’s soundscape. Intrigued, she traced the music to the bar.

The source?

None other than Bree captivated the small crowd which included Akane and Mocha. They were enthralled, their faces illuminated in the soft candlelight, hanging onto every note that danced from the strings.

Settling herself onto one of the bar stools next to Kaira who was nursing a mug of ale. The two exchanged a knowing smile, acknowledging the day’s challenges and the promise of new adventures.

“The day never seems to end, does it?” Kaira remarked, taking a sip from her mug.

Iris let out a chuckle. “At this rate, it feels like it’s just beginning.” Lyra slid a mug of Ale to Iris without prompt and Iris raised it in a toast. “To unexpected quests and even more unexpected tea critiques.”

“Tea critiques?” Kaira quirked an eyebrow, her ice-blue eyes sparkling with amusement.

Iris chuckled, slightly embarrassed, “Yeah, apparently my choice in tea was... less than stellar. Thalia was far from impressed.”

Kaira’s lips curled into a teasing smirk, her tone dripping with faux innocence. “Didn’t I mention—”

Iris interrupted with a playful scowl, “Okay, okay, no need to rub it in.”

With a gentle touch, Kaira placed her hand over Iris’s, her fingers giving a reassuring squeeze. “Just remember, love, listen to your girlfriend on these things. Sometimes it’s worth paying a bit more for quality.”

The comment prompted a resigned sigh from Iris. They continued to sip their drinks, as they fell into a companionable silence while listening and watching the others. As Bree’s strumming took a brief hiatus and she wandered off to refill her mug, Iris’s attention shifted back to Kaira.

Her voice tinged with concern, Iris broached the topic that had been lingering in her mind. “Thalia told me what quest she gave you. When are you guys heading out?”

“Day after tomorrow,” Kaira replied thoughtfully, swirling her drink in its mug. “Need to prep the girls with some gear, supplies, and whatnot. With Akane and Mocha in their true forms, we should make good time. Mocha even mentioned I could ride.”

A soft smile tugged at Iris's lips, appreciating the foresight. “Good to hear. And Kaira..?” she trailed off.

Kaira's teasing nature was momentarily replaced with earnestness as she reassured her girlfriend, giving Iris a gentle nudge. “Hey, don't fret. I'll make sure the girls are alright. We've got each other's backs.”

Iris's shoulders visibly relaxed, her relief palpable. “Thank you. That means a lot.”

Kaira studied Iris for a moment. “You seem to have a lot on your mind, love. The attack bothering you?”

Iris took a deep breath, shaking her head slowly. “It's not just that.” Her gaze drifted towards Laken, seated contemplatively between Gryff and now Bree while Akane and Mocha told them about their quest. “Laken seems... distant. I wonder if it's related to a trait or some system shenanigans since Owlie died.”

As if on cue, Divaro and Audrielle joined the table, dragging a second table next to the two magical girls to accommodate everyone. The scene warmed Iris's heart—her guildmates and friends coming together.

Yet, her concern for Laken remained.

Kaira followed Iris's gaze, nodding understandingly. “Bree and Gryff are on it. They've noticed too. Don't worry, we look out for our own.”

Iris took another sip from her mug, the cool liquid soothing her lingering worries. Around her, the atmosphere of the bar began to lift as Bree returned to her lute, the notes playing a tune that was both melancholic and hopeful.

*We're really building something here, aren't we?* Iris mused internally. A ragtag group of adventurers and staff—people who might never have crossed paths otherwise. *And yet, here we are, a guild... a community.*

She felt Kaira's hand squeeze hers. When their eyes met, Iris knew that her sentiments were shared.

Kaira shifted on her stool, brushing a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “You know,” she began hesitantly, “this will be my first quest with Mocha and Akane without you by my side. I’m excited, but a bit nervous too.”

As if on cue, Bree started another song. The first chords she strummed felt like the beginning of a new tale, the musical notes rising like a phoenix from its ashes.

Iris gently squeezed Kaira’s hand, her eyes reflecting a mix of pride and concern. “You’re strong, Kaira, and with those two, you’ll handle anything that comes your way. Just promise you’ll come back safely.”

Kaira chuckled, leaning in to plant a soft kiss on Iris’s forehead. “Always, love.”

They lingered in the moment, the reality of their responsibilities pulling them back. Iris straightened her posture, her tone growing thoughtful. “Once you leave, I’ve got a mountain of paperwork waiting for me. Between Thalia’s people, the Queen’s, and now the Avirans, we’re about to have a bustling guild.”

Kaira’s eyes twinkled with mischief. “And who would’ve thought, our little guild becoming the hub for people from all corners.”

Iris smirked. “Seems we’re setting trends. But it’s a good challenge. It’s time we made our mark.”

Kaira nodded, taking in the bustling bar and their growing family. “To new beginnings then.”

Iris raised her glass, a determined glint in her eyes. “To the Adventurer’s Guild and to those closest to us in our lives.”

The two of them drank deeply from their drinks. Across the room, Gryff began to join in with Bree, his voice harmonizing with the lute’s melodies and the bard’s own beautiful vocals. The song spoke of battles fought, of friendships tested and found true, and of hope that lingered even in the darkest nights.

Soon, the others gathered were joining in and she felt emotions rise within her.

Iris leaned back, her arm finding its way around Kaira’s shoulders, pulling her close. For all the unknowns that lay ahead, for all the plans that still needed to be made, all the kittens that needed rescuing from trees, and all the tea that still needed to be properly brewed, one thing was certain...

The Adventurer’s Guild would face it together.