

## Fury of the Storm

Mocha roared as she witnessed her human, her Iris, seized by a monstrosity of earth and slammed into the ground.

Mocha's eyes darted to the side as a flicker of movement caught her attention. There, the other mage had begun conjuring a sphere of intense fire, its heat radiating in all directions.

With a low growl and a wave of her tails, Akane stood, her fur bristling with raw aggression. Her magic swirled around her, an ethereal maelstrom of power. Suddenly, the world seemed to splinter and multiply as eight identical Akanes manifested, each one imbued with the same ferocity as the original. With a collective snarl, the horde of kitsunes charged, their eyes ablaze with a predatory resolve.

Meanwhile, the sound of steel leaving sheaths filled the air, a chilling symphony of impending conflict. The poachers, armed with swords, axes, and other various weapons, surged forward with a guttural war cry. It was a sight that would've struck fear into the heart of any observer.

But Iris's party, her group, they didn't falter.

Instead, they answered with a defiant battle cry of their own, a proclamation of their unwillingness to yield.

At the front was Kaira, her eyes ablaze with a resolute fury that resonated with Mocha on a primal level. It was the kind of anger that was born of a deep-seated sense of injustice, a wrath fueled by the determination to protect those they cared for.

The high elf woman brandished her weapon, her every stride a testament to her resolve. The battlefield was set, and as Mocha watched her friends engage in the dance of combat, a potent mix of fear and determination pulsed through her veins.

Mocha turned her head back to her friend, just to watch helplessly as a blue flare of light flickered and wavered through the earthen hand, only to be extinguished as Iris struck the ground a third time.

She always knew she was more than just a horse, more than just a creature for Iris to ride to and fro.

She was more than just a mount.

*Iris is my best friend.*

And her friend needed her.

Fury drove Mocha to action—her **[What Works for you, Works for Me]** ability flared to life, sparked by the connection she shared with Iris.

The familiar crackle of electricity her human used tingled through her, a sensation that had become a comforting part of their bond. Energy surged from her

eyes, racing across her body in a shimmering cascade, until it burst from her hooves in a brilliant display of power. The world around her seemed to still as she transformed, her physical form dissolving into an avatar of pure, crackling lightning.

The ground beneath her hooves vibrated with her newfound power. Mocha reared, her roar a deafening thunderclap in the stillness, before surging forward with **[I Am Speed]**.

The world blurred around her as she closed the distance toward the man in less than a single heartbeat, the one who dared to harm Iris.

The man used a spell that helped him avoid her initial rush, but Mocha didn't slow down. Her focus was razor-sharp, locked onto her target.

Just as Jonan dodged out of her path, Mocha landed, her form exploding forth in a *crack* and burst of lightning. The man was behind her, but Mocha **[Can't Even Spell Inersha]**, her body whipped around and charged toward him, but the squirrely fuck managing to avoid her again.

This time she was ready for it.

Just as she passed him she used **[Nothing a Kick to the Face Can't Fix]**, her hind legs lashing out with devastating force toward the man.

A wall of stone and dirt erupted from the ground with barely time to form before Mocha's kick pulverized it, sending a spray of shattered earth flying through the air.

Dust clouded around her, obscuring her vision for a moment, but Mocha didn't relent. She was driven by a primal need to protect Iris and nothing would stand in her way.

Amidst the swirling dust and debris, Mocha perceived the unmistakable whir of incoming projectiles. Acting on instinct, she nimbly leaped aside, her ethereal form glowing brighter against the obscurity as large rocks crashed down where she had been a heartbeat ago.

Another two rocks shot toward her, but it was no matter for they **[Can't Touch This]**, veering wide at the last moment to narrowly miss her.

Already, she was pivoting to face her adversary, every fiber of her being screaming to charge once more. Yet as she drew herself up, a shift in the atmosphere halted her in her tracks.

Her nostrils flared and her ears twitched as the telltale smell of Iris's magic filled her nose and the air around her bristled with a sudden intensity that made Mocha's hair stand on end.

Electricity crackled in a visible matrix, a pulsating web of raw energy radiating from a single point of origin—Iris.

What followed was a spectacle of natural power Mocha had never witnessed before.

The ground beneath Mocha's hooves trembled subtly, an ominous undercurrent of the looming spectacle. And then, as if obeying an unseen force, chunks of stone and clumps of dirt began to levitate, rising in a spectral ballet above the earthen prison that held Iris.

The scene was uncanny, a defiance of the very laws that tethered the world, one that laughed at the man Iris had called Newton—whose apples were likely stolen from some poor horse.

For a heartbeat, everything held in suspense, a snapshot of reality poised on the brink of unraveling.

And then, it did.

With a thunderous crash, the earthen debris came plummeting down just as a bolt of lightning, colossal in its enormity, streaked down from the heavens, its landing punctuated by an explosive upheaval of earth.

The ground shook more fiercely as a makeshift volcano erupted amidst the battleground, birthing a force more fearsome than the landscape could contain.

From the heart of the maelstrom, the storm incarnate that was Iris emerged, a figure of terrifying magnificence.

Her eyes, once a window to her gentle spirit that only Mocha truly saw, were now replaced by an ethereal blue glow, the flickering and crackling of barely contained lightning. Her veins, coursing under her skin, glowed as if conduits for the raw electricity that thrummed through her. The sight was breathtaking, a testament to the untapped potential of her friend.

Twin spears of pure lightning coalesced in Iris's hands as if summoned by her sheer will and anger.

She turned to Mocha, her gaze falling upon the spectral lightning dancing over her equine form. The pride that flashed across her face then was a sight that warmed Mocha's heart, driving away the fear that had taken root.

A silent acknowledgment passed between them, an affirmation that they were both **[Close at Heart]**.

With the fury of a storm goddess etched across her face, Iris hurled the two **[Lightning Spears]** she had formed, directly towards the man. Jonan, quickly assessing the impending danger, conjured a solid wall of earth in the trajectory of the first spear. The spear crashed into it with an intense crackle, lightning searing across the surface of the wall but unable to penetrate through it.

Simultaneously, another massive hand burst forth from the ground, matching the trajectory of the second spear. However, unlike the wall, the earthen hand utterly failed

to halt the spear's path. The potent projectile of electricity pierced the palm of the hand, causing chunks of earth to explode from sheer force.

Despite this, Jonan was quick on his feet, or rather, with his magic. As the second spear continued forward, the man mustered his powers, ripping up a towering pillar of Earth right in its path. The spear met the pillar with a thunderous collision, lightning rippling across the monolith but ultimately halted, its deadly journey interrupted by Jonan's desperate defense.

The man stepped forward, earth and stone gathering around his hands as the pillar returned to the ground. His eyes darted between Iris, a goddess of lightning, and Mocha, her stormbound friend.

Then Iris began to speak, her voice echoing around the area with an electrified resonance that was impossible to ignore. The crackle and hum of her power infused her words, causing even Jonan to pause in his tracks. To Mocha, it seemed as though her human had transcended, becoming something more than merely mortal.



Iris glared at the fort leader as her **[Stormskin]** trait worked overtime with her **[Mana Conduit]** running through her own body.

“I really have to give it to you,” she started, her voice sounding as if running through a synthesizer, the man launching a stone at her that was zapped from the air with her **[Arcane Capability]** empowered **[Storm Armor]**. “You are the first person to actually give me trouble since I arrived in this shit world.”

Jonan's fingers twitched and suddenly, the earth around him rose from the ground and encased his body in a carapace of soil and stone, the armor an extension of his very flesh. His grim expression was set in determination as he squared up against Iris.

She retaliated instantly, flicking her wrist to conjure and launch a flurry of **[Sparks]** that shot toward the poacher-mage. Each one connected with a searing hiss, the stone armor superheating upon impact and sending up small plumes of smoke as the armor cracked and fused together in places.

Despite this, Jonan remained unfazed, his armored figure a grim monolith against Iris's electrical storm.

A raw war cry bellowed from his lips as he lunged forward, earth and stone magic rising at his command.

With a crackle and a hum, Iris invoked her **[Lightning Step]**, her form blurring into a surge of energy that sped toward Jonan and emerged beside him in an explosive burst of power, sending him sprawling backward.

Jonan, to his credit, was quick to recover, his stone armor acting as a bulwark against Iris's onslaught. His magic pulsed and swirled around him, earthen tendrils snaking out and melding into a brutish hammer, matching the primal force of the storm with raw, unyielding strength.

He lunged at Iris, hammer swinging with a force that could crush a man's skull, but Iris was already in motion, the winds from her **[Rushing Wind]** spiraling around her to increase her agility. She danced around Jonan, her movements a blur of precision and speed. Each time he swung his hammer, Iris was already somewhere else, her form a storm-lit phantom, a flicker of lightning in the darkness.

Her **[Storm Armor]** crackled with untamed electricity, ready to strike at anything that dared to get close. Each time Jonan stepped into its sphere of influence, a bolt of lightning zapped off her and into him, his stone armor hissing and crackling as it absorbed the brunt of the attacks.

Each **[Mana Conduit]**-infused punch Iris delivered erupted with a **[Static Discharge]**, two masses of writhing electricity that danced around her fists, sizzling and popping as they met Jonan's armor. The stone creaked and groaned under the relentless electrical onslaught, crumbles of fused earth cascading with every step, but the man just constantly reformed it.

All around them, the battlefield was a cacophony of clashing weapons and cries of determination. Meanwhile, forms were lit up in the dark night as the fire mage threw fire all around the area as he sought the elusive kitsune.

Kaira, Gryff, and the others worked as a unified front against the poachers, their smaller numbers seemingly unimportant in the face of their well-coordinated attacks. Despite being outnumbered, they whittled down the poachers through calculated maneuvers and relentless attrition, each fallen enemy a testament to their teamwork.

Meanwhile, Akane was engaged in her own battle against the fire mage, her illusion and conjuration magic proving to be more than a match for his fiery spells. Each illusion she conjured drew his focus away, and with each attack he sent her way found nothing but air.

It was a game of hunter and prey, and the fire-wielding telv was a mere rabbit facing off against a horse-sized fox. The man didn't even realize that he was being slowly backed into a corner as the fire mage was barely holding her back. The fox, clearly maneuvering the man away from the cages of animals or even her party that could be injured by his magic kept on the man, the **[Pyromancer]**'s magic gradually flagging under her harrying illusions.

The battle between Iris and Jonan was a turbulent dance of electric energy and unyielding stone, both fighters relentless in their pursuit of victory. Jonan, harnessing his earth magic, unleashed a barrage of sharpened stones at Iris.

Her eyes widened, and she dove to the side, but try as she might avoid the deadly hail, two of the stones found their mark. One sliced open a gash on her cheek, while another slammed into her leg, causing her to falter.

“Fuck!” Iris cried out as she crashed against the ground.

Rising from her stumble, Iris barely had time to react as Jonan swung his earth-crafted hammer at her. With a swift duck, she narrowly avoided the devastating strike, the hammer's momentum causing Jonan to unbalance.

*‘Iris! Look out!’* Mocha neighed.

Iris ducked as Mocha seized the opportunity. The horse bolted forward, utilizing one of her own abilities to deliver a powerful kick to Jonan's back, launching him toward a cage.

He crashed against the wooden cage with a grunt, and his eyes widened a guttural growl came from the darkness behind the man. The earth mage scrambled and barely managed to evade a large paw that swiped through the bars, followed by the deafening roar of an owlbear.

Jonan, undeterred, conjured spikes of stone and launched them at Iris. Iris nimbly dodged as the two approached the other, but Jonan's next attack, a powerful swing of his hammer, caught her square in the chest armor. The force of the blow lifted her off the ground and sent her flying backward.

As Iris rolled to dodge the stones that peppered the ground around her, Mocha surged forward, crackling with her own lightning magic. Lowering her armored head, she rammed into Jonan, her steel spike unable to pierce his stone armor but successful in sending the man sprawling.

As he tried to rise, the poacher sent another stone spike toward Mocha, striking her in the shoulder. The blow didn't penetrate her armor, but it was enough to throw Mocha off balance.

Regaining her own footing, Iris charged Jonan once more. From the corner of her eye, she saw Kaira hurl something toward her. “Iris! Catch!” she cried out. Iris's hand shot out, catching the thrown object—a sword.

A guttural snarl ripped from Jonan's throat as he leaped to his feet. He charged, raising his now-weaponless hand, but a surge of earth magic formed another stone hammer in his grasp.

Twin bolts of snapfired **[Chain Lightning]** connected them, but it barely even slowed the man as dark lines of fused stone formed down his chest.

As they neared, Iris shifted her **[Mana Conduit]** to her new weapon and funneled her **[Electromancy]** into it. With a fierce swing, she sliced through the hammer's handle, sending its head flying.

But Jonan was quick and he barely missed a beat, transforming the armor covering his arm into a stone mace. Iris winced as two rapid blows struck her, each one igniting a wave of pain that made her cry out.

Jonan spun on his heels, his earthen armor shifting and reforming into a massive two-handed mace. With a grunt of exertion, he swung at Iris, connecting solidly with her chest. Her armor buckled under the blow, denting inward and forcing a pained cry from her lips as she was knocked off her feet, hitting the ground hard.

*'I got him!'* Mocha whinnied as she barreled toward Jonan, her eyes blazing with protective fury.

The **[Earth Mage]** was ready for her.

He pivoted, swinging his massive mace around with a momentum that met Mocha's charge head-on. The mace connected with one of Mocha's front legs with a resounding thud, the sheer force of the impact sending her crashing to the ground.

Mocha whinnied in pain and surprise, struggling to rise, while Iris grappled with the impact of her own fall, gasping for breath against the pressing weight of her dented armor.

The man turned toward Iris, seeing that she was barely moving, the earthen armor rolling away to reveal the man's red, heavy-breathing face. "I agree with one thing you said..." he started, malice filling his tone. "This is the most I've also had to work in a fight."

He formed another stone over his hand, one shaped like a long spike, just as a shrill cry of pain sounded.

Both Iris and the man turned their focus to the source, only to see two illusions of Akane disappear as the kitsune's massive maw clamped tightly on the fire mage's throat from behind.

With a swift yank, the man's head was removed from his shoulders and his body dropped to the ground. Akane *howled* her fury, and her eyes focused on Jonan in front of Iris. The man scrambled several steps backward, fear coloring his eyes.

The sight of the disembodied fire mage triggered a startling response from Jonan. His eyes widened, filled with unmistakable fear as they darted from the lifeless body to the menacing form of Akane, then to Iris who was slowly getting back on her feet.

The stone spike in his hand trembled slightly, and he seemed to draw himself inward, his earth armor bulking up defensively.

In a desperate bid to gain some advantage, Jonan hurled the spike and a volley of stones at Akane, but they passed through an illusion harmlessly, leaving the real Akane untouched and nowhere to be seen.

With a snarl, Jonan forced his focus back on Iris. However, the earlier confidence had vanished, as Iris watched his expression fall as he was greeted by the sight of four

identical Irises. Quickly, the man used his magic to force stone to slide up from the rest of his armor and again cover his face, leaving two small slits for his eyes and mouth.

With a satisfied smirk, she drew mana into herself deeply, using her **[Arcane Capability]** to enhance her magic, and then launched a crackling bolt of **[Chain Lightning]** toward him that was mirrored by the other Irises.

He managed to avoid two of the bolts, but the third is revealed to be an illusion, while the fourth struck his stone armor, discoloring it as the source of superheated energy surged through it to the ground.

Jonan roared in pain as the intense heat seared his skin beneath the rock, but quickly retaliated with a frenzy of stone projectiles, each aimed at the four Irises.

The real Iris, however, danced away from the assault as she avoided each stone that whizzed past her and embedded into the ground. He formed another stone spike in his hand as he stared at her, the man's chest rising and falling in heavy breaths.

Iris gave him a defiant smile, her teeth glinting against the gloom. The electric energy surrounding her seemed to dance with renewed vigor, casting eerie shadows around her. Despite her wounds, there was a sense of exhilarating power radiating off her that filled the battlefield with electric tension.

Mocha stepped forward to Iris's side, the horse's nostrils flaring with barely contained rage. On the other side, Akane, the once playful kitsune, now stood as a terrifying beast of death, the fire mage's blood still fresh around her snout, eyes burning with untamed fury.

With a fluid movement born from practiced skill and amplified by her magic, Iris **[Lightning Stepped]**, the world around her blurring as she traversed the distance between them in less than a heartbeat. When her form solidified, she was directly in front of Jonan but still altered the spell so that the momentum of her emergence caused an eruption of energy that blasted outward away from him, creating a miniature shockwave.

The fear in Jonan's eyes turned into horror, realization dawning on him too late.

Simultaneously, she thrust forward, the sword in her hand a blur of motion. Her **[Mana Conduit]**-infused sword flared with **[Electromancy]** as she drove the weapon forward. The sword met resistance at first as it impacted the thick stone armor encasing Jonan's chest, but it was not enough. With a crack that echoed through the area, the blade punctured the hardened shell and drove into the man's flesh beneath.

Shock painted Jonan's face as he looked down at the sword impaling him, his eyes widening in surprise and disbelief. The weapon was a tangible marker of his impending end, the tip glinting ominously from where it protruded through his back. His mouth opened and closed, gasping like a fish out of water as he staggered back, unable to tear his gaze from the blade piercing him.

Iris kept her hand on the hilt as she took a step forward, matching the man's movements. The stone that encased Jonan started to crumble and fall apart. Large chunks hit the ground first, followed by smaller fragments and finally, granules of dirt and dust that gave the illusion of a dissolving entity.

A man was revealed as the protective layer of earth dissipated completely. He was not the intimidating figure he had once appeared, encased in a solid armor of stone and earth. Now, he stood bare and exposed, his eyes wide and reflecting a primal fear.

Iris's blue-glowing eyes bore into him, relentless and determined. She raised her chin, her posture rigid, exuding an unyielding strength and confidence. His loss of the stone armor did nothing to dampen her **[Focus]** on him. Her grip on her sword tightened, the electric currents playing around her weapon, and then she used her **[Electromancy]** to draw lightning through the blade's **[Mana Conduit]**.

Electricity surged from her into the sword, creating a path straight into Jonan. The spectacle was terrifyingly beautiful—the radiant blue energy illuminating his silhouette from the inside, branching out into a network of veins of light that rivaled the most intricate of lightning storms.

Jonan let out a strangled gasp, his body stiffening as the powerful current coursed through him. Iris, her eyes still glowing with the cold, detached crackles of lightning, watched as the man's eyes widened in shock and agony. His body started shaking uncontrollably before his knees gave out, and he began to collapse.

With the agility of a seasoned warrior, Iris yanked her blade from his chest, causing him to stumble backward. His eyes still held a lingering spark of life, a desperate plea for mercy that went unheard. The light in them soon faded, replaced with a hollow, vacant stare, as he finally collapsed to the ground, lifeless.

As Iris turned around, she took in the sight of her party. Their breaths were ragged and their bodies were streaked with dirt, sweat, and blood, but they were standing. Gryff was supporting Bree, her leg was injured, but she was grinning triumphantly. Kaira, with a few scrapes and bruises, still held her sword firmly, her eyes glowing with the exhilaration of victory.

Around them, the bodies of their adversaries littered the ground, a grim testament to the battle they had fought. The smell of burnt flesh mingled with the scent of the earth and the tang of iron, the odors combining into the distinct smell of a battleground.

Iris turned toward the two sapient animals that had stood by her side. Akane let out a series of barks and yips at Mocha. Who turned and translated.

*'Akane says that we had to do this tonight,' Mocha nickered. 'I didn't know we came without you knowing, but she says the bad men were going to kill the animals. And, we have to hurry, because there should be something here about where the other bad man went.'*

Iris took a deep breath and looked around, the sound of the caged animals was still there, but the anger that had filled the night's air seemed to turn into a tense waiting game. Glinting eyes of the beasts stared at Akane as if waiting for her command, in the distance sounds of the rest of the poachers within the fort sounded.

She looked around, seeing the signs of them being watched, but clearly the poachers were hesitant to attack. No one could have missed that battle, but even if Iris knew there were at least another thirty-plus men remaining, there was no way they were going to win against Iris and the others without magic users of their own.

But at the same time, Iris was exhausted, spent, and from the looks on her party's faces, they were as well. She knew she didn't have what it took to continue the fight.

They were in a sort of standoff, but one that favored Iris and the others. Fortunately, they were close to the fort's command building—they didn't need to clear the fort, just get the information they needed.

With a shake of her head, Iris turned back to the kitsune. "First, this was a dick move, you could have gotten Mocha hurt. If you're going to do shit on your own, do it on your own."

Mocha raised her head, but Iris held up a hand. "That said, we got it done. And honestly, I'm too fucking tired to yell at you right now."

Kaira stepped forward and wrapped an arm around Iris. "She's right. This was dangerous, Akane, but we cannot let these animals suffer."

Akane looked around at the various cages and the party before dipping her head slightly, yipping softly to Mocha.

*'She says she's sorry,'* Mocha nickered.

Iris nodded her head. "Thank you. Now, what should we do from here?"

With that, Akane lifted her head and howled, a fierce cry that echoed through the night, before turning and looking at the animals and letting out some barks.

*'She, Laken, and I will free the animals. Please go find out where the other bad man is,'* Mocha translated with a huff.

"Don't worry about me," Laken said, the man unable to hide his pleased expression. "I love animals."

Iris nodded. "Alright. Stay safe," she said, before turning to the rest of the party. "Let's move."

They made their way toward the command building, the sound of growls, roars, and the crackling of magic echoing behind them as Akane, Mocha, and Laken began to free the caged creatures. Iris had no doubt that those men left would soon be facing a horde of very angry, very scared animals and she felt no sympathy for them.

As they moved, Iris noticed Bree limping. “Bree, let me see your leg,” she demanded, coming to a halt.

“Iris, I’m fine,” Bree protested, but Iris shook her head, her gaze unyielding.

The Adventurer wasn’t having it.

Crouching down, she examined the gash on Bree’s thigh, muttering a few choice words as she saw how deep it was.

“No arguments, Bree. Use the healing goop,” Iris ordered, her tone brooking no argument. Bree scowled but relented, pulling out a small jar of the shimmering ointment. Iris turned to Gryff, the burly man standing at Bree’s side, adding, “Help her and catch up.”

Gryff nodded in agreement, his eyes filled with determination. “Don’t worry, we got this. Go.”

Iris and Kaira watched as Bree and Gryff worked together to treat her wound, then without another word, they turned their attention back to the command building. Its stone facade was looming and foreboding, a stark contrast to the chaos and ferocity of the battle that had just transpired at the animal cages.

Suddenly, roars echoed through the fort followed by the terrified shouts and screams of the remaining poachers.

The animals were enacting their revenge.

Without speaking, Kaira met Iris’s gaze, her eyes, always bright and fierce, held an unwavering resolve as she nodded.

Quietly, Iris and Kaira made their way through the building, every creak and echo in the dimly lit stone corridors threatening to betray their presence. Their steps were measured, their gazes focused, and their hands ready to spring into action.

Eventually, they reached a large room. It was markedly different from the other rooms they’d traversed. It was grander and better furnished, the centerpiece being a vast table littered with a myriad of maps and documents. On the table, a map of the surrounding area was laid out, marked with a series of symbols and lines that told a story that Iris couldn’t decipher.

As they began to inspect the map, a whimpering sound pierced the silence. Both women tensed, their eyes locking onto the source of the noise. Kaira’s hand instinctively gripped her sword tighter, her muscles coiled like a spring ready to pounce. Iris responded in kind, drawing on the magic that was ever at her disposal.

The sound came from a tall storage cabinet located at the side of the room. Kaira pressed a finger to her lips and gestured at Iris to stay back as she approached the cabinet. Iris nodded and remained silent as the woman quietly moved forward.

The elf positioned herself next to the cabinet, her sword raised high, ready to strike.

Then, in one swift motion, Kaira yanked the cabinet doors open.

A terrified scream echoed within the room, a cry of pure, unadulterated fear.

Kaira didn't hesitate.

She reached in and pulled out the source of the scream—a woman, dressed in the attire of the poachers, an orkun by the looks of her. She looked horrified, her eyes wide with fright.

It wasn't the reaction of someone who was ready for a fight. Rather, it was the reaction of someone who had been hiding, scared, and alone. Iris looked at Kaira, her eyes reflecting the question that was on both of their minds.

*What the fuck?*



Bree and Gryff had soon joined them, and Bree, still wincing with every step, had clearly seen better days, but her healing goop had worked its magic for she was now walking with considerably more ease than before as she finished lighting a lamp and bringing it over to where the rest of the group stood.

With lamps now illuminating the room, the quartet was able to look over their captured poacher properly. The orkun woman's wide eyes flicked between them, her hands trembling where they were bound in front of her by a coil of rope.

Iris kept her voice even, masking the urgency of the situation with a calm facade. “Tell us what we want to know, and you get to live.”

“W-what do you want to know?” the orkun woman stammered out.

“Where is the Marauder Prince?” Iris asked her directly, her blue eyes boring into the woman's soul.

“I can't tell you! He'll kill me!” the woman whimpered.

At this, Kaira let out an exasperated sigh. “Would you prefer to definitively die today, or maybe die tomorrow to someone who *we* are heading to kill?”

The woman seemed defiant, but her courage faltered when a shimmering form of Akane appeared before her right next to Iris. The rest of the group jerked slightly in surprise, but Iris merely scowled as the massive kitsune leaned forward toward the orkun woman.

The large fox stared at her menacingly, growling deeply enough to rattle her bones as the woman started shaking and whimpering even more than before.

“Damn it, Akane, do not terrify the prisoner,” Iris reprimanded, while Bree let out a colorful curse as the woman wet herself from fear.

The sun elf glared at Akane. “Change your form or get out. Now.”

Akane tilted her head quizzically before a dance of mana obfuscated her form as she shimmered and disappeared before transforming into her humanoid appearance.

The kitsune girl with Iris’s appearance stood there with a scowl on her face and her arms crossed over her chest.

Iris let out a long sigh and turned back to the woman who was crying. “Just tell us where he is. You can come with us, and we’ll keep you safe.”

The woman's terrified gaze bounced from Iris to Akane to Kaira and Bree. She finally let out a whimper and began to speak, “I only overheard Jonan talking to him... He said he was going after the bird-like Twisted Ones. I don't know where they are.”

Iris cursed under her breath, realization setting in. “He's going after the harpies in the Cursed Forest.”

Akane's eyes brightened with recognition, her form shimmering as she prepared to transform. However, Iris was quicker. Seizing her by the shoulder, she pulled the kitsune closer, forcing her to meet her gaze.

“You... you are going to stay right here, by my side, in this form. No more solo fox antics,” Iris cautioned, her words a soft but firm hiss. Glancing briefly at the others, she offered a nod of reassurance. She then refocused her attention on Akane, her gaze intent on the kitsune's mismatched irises. “If I get a scolding for venturing off on my own without assistance, so should you. We're in this together, remember? And I think it's clear that I can hold my own. So, there's absolutely no reason for you to refuse the help we're willing to provide. Understand?”

Akane’s vulpine eyes narrowed as she silently assessed Iris's words. After a moment, she seemed to arrive at a conclusion. With an exaggerated eye roll and a resigned sigh, she finally nodded in agreement.

With the orkun woman in tow, the group exited the command building, immediately halting at the sight that greeted them.

Standing tall was a massive owlbear, with Laken seated proudly on its back, while Mocha stood nearby.

They watched, a mix of shock and amusement crossing their faces as Laken reached forward, patting the colossal creature with a gentleness that belied its fierce reputation. The owlbear closed its eyes and leaned into the Ranger's touch, emitting a low, contented sound that echoed softly in the quiet night.

Laken's grin broadened as he noticed his party's astonished faces. He laughed, his excitement clear as he gestured towards his new companion. “Hey, guys! Look who's decided to join me!”

Iris could only groan.