

Time's Up Let's Do This

Stunned silence fell over the group as they watched Mocha and Akane stand their ground against the fort's bandits. Iris felt her heartbeat pounding in her ears as the bandits rushed the gates, their weapons and armor glinting ominously in the fading light—these were no second-string bandits like at the camp.

They were geared for battle.

“She stole my damn sword,” Iris grumbled under her breath, her gaze fixed on the vulpine thief. She discarded the stick she'd been holding and drew her dagger instead.

The others just stared as Akane and Mocha stopped just outside of the gate and stared down the bandits that hesitated at the kitsune's brazen display.

A burly dwarf clad in intimidating plate armor stepped forward from among the bandits, an imposing axe clutched in his hands. A hulking orkun man followed suit, hefting a claymore as though it were a mere stick. Iris could see a wicked sneer cross the dwarf's face as he taunted Akane.

“Looks like we got another one of them *twisted*,” the dwarf sneered. The man hefted his axe and rolled his shoulders. “You keep pointing that blade at me, girl, and I'll remove the hand holding it. Tell me, which forest do you come from? Alumval?”

The kitsune seemed undeterred. With a sly tilt of her head, she let out a defiant bark. The dwarf's sneer faltered, replaced by a look of wide-eyed horror. “It's *her*. Get her!” He commanded, thrusting his axe forward in a show of bravado.

The orkun didn't waste a moment. With a fierce battle cry, he charged toward Akane, his claymore cutting a deadly path through the air. Just as he neared her, Akane made her move.

With an agile leap, she launched herself skyward, tossing Iris's sword mid-air toward Mocha, the magical warhorse catching it skillfully in her mouth. Then, with an almost hypnotic grace, Akane's humanoid form shimmered and shifted as a cloud of mana obscured her figure. A moment later, a massive dire fox with three tails emerged mid-air from the cloud of dancing motes. The orkun barely had time to register his shock before Akane was upon him, her jaws closing in on his throat.

Suddenly, Iris's voice broke through the stunned silence. “Shit! Alright, let's do this!” she shouted, urgency seeping into her voice. She broke into a run, channeling her **[Rushing Wind]** and **[Arcane Capability]** as she sprinted toward the ensuing chaos. “I'm getting down there, follow behind me! Stick to the plan!”

Gryff's voice carried back to her. “Alos's charred sausage! What's the plan?” Gryff cursed.

She didn't break her stride. “Whatever doesn't get us killed!” Iris shouted back.

Kaira's retort followed her, "That's not a plan!" But the elf was running too, the entire group following Iris's lead.

As she ran, Iris's mind was singularly focused on the scene unfolding before her eyes. Bandits with spears and shields were rushing out of the gate, their focus on the massive fox.

The dwarf bandit leader darted forward and swung his axe at Mocha, but the mare was already on the move. Mocha lunged with an agility Iris rarely saw, swinging the sword down on the dwarf. The man's eyes widened in surprise as he just barely managed to redirect his axe, blocking the horse's unexpected attack. This was the strangest sight Iris had ever seen.

A sword-fighting horse versus an axe-wielding dwarf—and it was only just the beginning.

With the dwarf momentarily taken aback by the sword-wielding horse, Mocha didn't waste any time. She reared on her hind legs, her powerful front hooves thrusting through the air and keeping the dwarf at bay.

As soon as her front hooves returned to the ground, Iris's sword, tightly held in her mouth, maneuvered with surprising finesse, defying the seemingly ungainly grip. Each thrust was met with an equally aggressive parry from the dwarf's axe, creating a surreal, dangerous dance in the dimming twilight. The dwarf, though initially bewildered, was no novice to combat. He twisted and turned, his plate armor clinking with each movement, as he tried to navigate Mocha's unexpected onslaught. Yet, Mocha responded with a swift adaptation to his moves, her equine agility combined with a newfound warrior spirit making her a formidable opponent.

Just as Iris reached the fringe of her spell's range, she pulled in a deep breath, briefly closing her eyes to focus on the surge of mana that bubbled up within her. As she released the breath, she cast her **[Lightning Step]**. In an instant, her body was engulfed in a crackling sheath of electricity, and her physical form vanished. A bolt of pure lightning took her place, surging forward at an astonishing speed.

The lightning collided with the ground near Mocha and the dwarf in an explosion of blinding white light and an audible crack that echoed across the fort. Materializing from the energetic display, Iris stood tall, her eyes blazing with determination. The battle around her seemed to freeze for a moment, everyone, friend and foe alike, momentarily stunned by her dramatic entrance.

But Iris didn't hesitate.

Her hand lifted, fingers poised to cast **[Spark]** at the dwarf, when Mocha made her move. With an agile twist of her head, she deftly disarmed the dwarf, sending his axe flying before making a swift, lethal strike. Iris watched, her spell momentarily forgotten, as the dwarf's head toppled off his shoulders and rolled away.

Iris rounded on her friend. “What the hell is this, Mocha? We had a plan!”

The horse lowered her head and then tossed the sword to Iris, who deftly caught it and swung it around.

‘Less complaining and more fighting! We’ll talk after!’ her horse whinnied. *‘Toss the sword back.’*

“No! That is—”

‘Give me the damn sword Iris,’ Mocha neighed. *‘Akane needs our help. Now.’*

Iris' eyebrows furrowed, and her mouth opened to protest further, but the urgency in Mocha's tone made her hesitate. With a reluctant growl, she gave a brisk nod, and with a practiced twist of her wrist, tossed the sword back to Mocha. The warhorse caught it skillfully in her mouth and charged into the fray, her battle armor glistening in the scattered light from the campfires.

Iris spared a glance over her shoulder, catching sight of the rest of her party as they followed her lead and charged into the melee. Kaira was at the forefront, her sword cleaving a path through the bandits. Gryff and Bree were close behind, the two spear wielders side by side as they rushed forward. Suddenly, Gryff's shield raised high to deflect a flurry of arrows that whizzed their way from inside the gates.

Laken drew his bow with one hand, while the other retrieved and nocked an arrow before launching it back toward the source. Without hesitation, another three followed in quick succession as the **[Ranger]** found weak points in the enemy's armor.

Suddenly, Iris noticed a group of archers lining the watchtowers that overlooked the gate, their bows trained on her companions. With a narrowing of her eyes, she channeled mana into herself, calling upon her magic as she drew her hands together and cast **[Lightning Spear]**. A bolt of lightning shot out from her hands, slightly zigzagging through the air as it streaked toward the left watchtower.

The archers barely had time to react before the magical spear pierced through them, their screams echoing throughout the fort as they toppled over the edge.

With minimal mental effort, the spear redirected toward the second watchtower, where it quickly took out two more archers despite their attempts to flee. Her spell left a lingering scene of ozone in the air as it dissipated, and the once-threatening watchtowers were now silent and still.

Having dealt with the immediate threat, Iris turned her focus back to the ground battle. Akane was wading her way through bandits that were attempting to stop the party from entering the fort as if they were nothing more than a fluffle of bunnies.

With a deep breath, she channeled her **[Lightning Step]** spell once more, her form becoming pure energy as she darted through the gate, past the men setting up. Materializing inside of the fort with a crack, she immediately swung her dagger at a nearby bandit, using her **[Arc Lash]**.

Energy surged from the blade of her weapon, extending the reach with a two-meter-long whip that crackled with lightning. With a fluid motion, she whipped it across the nearest bandits, the electric lash leaving a trail of scorched armor and searing pain in its wake.

Men were rushing out of a small building just to her left, shields, and spears raised. With a swift motion, she thrust her palm forward, launching a **[Chain Lightning]** that arched toward the nearest bandit. The electricity crackled and surged, jumping from one bandit to the next in a brilliant display of raw magical power.

Summoning a surge of mana to her core, Iris swiftly invoked her **[Storm Armor]**. A sudden explosion of electricity cascaded around her, forming an undulating sphere of pure, crackling energy. It danced and arced around her body, casting an eerie, bluish light that illuminated her surroundings with a pulsating glow. The electricity seared into any nearby bandits who were unfortunate enough to get too close, each arc producing a satisfying sizzle as it found its mark.

Simultaneously, she weaved through the battleground, launching **[Sparks]** and **[Chain Lightnings]** left and right with focused precision. Her hands were a blur of motion as they directed the electricity that surged from her core, the vibrant streaks of energy blending seamlessly with the protective sphere around her.

As Iris continued her onslaught, she became acutely aware of the reinforcements streaming in from all corners of the fort. The initial surprise of their assault had worn off, and the bandits were rallying, charging at them with a renewed vigor.

Iris gritted her teeth, her eyes darting across the battlefield as she tried to come up with a strategy or they would be overrun.

“Iris, this way!” Kaira yelled, causing Iris to turn her head and see the entrance to a larger structure to the right the woman was pointing at.

With a swift nod of acknowledgment, Iris signaled to Akane and Mocha before setting off toward the building. Laken, Gryff, and Bree fell into formation around them, their weapons at the ready as they carved a path through the chaos of battle.

Just as they neared the entrance, a fresh wave of bandits erupted from within. Without hesitation, Iris unleashed a flurry of **[Sparks]**, battering the bandits and clearing the way for the rest of her group that was hot on her heels.

Once inside, they quickly swung the heavy wooden door shut behind them. Gryff and Laken moved to barricade it, heaving tables and benches against it just as the first impacts from the bandits outside began to resonate through the wood. It was a crude but effective barrier that would hopefully buy them some time.

The interior of the building was large and spacious. It appeared to be a mess hall of sorts, complete with long wooden tables laden with half-eaten food and a large hearth dominating one wall. There was a lingering scent of roasted meat and stale ale, a stark

contrast to the metallic tang of blood and sweat that lingered on them from the battle outside.

Their sudden entry caused a minor tremor within the confined space. Both Mocha and Akane, in their larger forms, were cramped, immediately making the room seem much smaller. The horse snorted and shifted, clearly uncomfortable, while Akane simply flicked her ears and maintained a steady vigil on the barricaded door.

“Relena’s mercy, what’s the plan now, Iris?” Gryff asked, his voice echoing in the relative quiet of the room. The muffled sounds of shouting outside, and the increasing intensity of the banging on the door were a constant reminder of the shit they were in.

Iris glanced around the room, her gaze lingering on the heaped tables, the flickering hearth, and finally settling on Akane. Her mind was already spinning, calculating, formulating a plan. She could feel the familiar stirrings of hope mingling with her adrenaline. They were backed into a corner, yes, but they were far from defeated.

“All right,” she started, her tone firm and resolute, “Here’s what we’re going to do...”



Jonan’s eyes narrowed to slits as he emerged from the fort’s central headquarters. He was a large man, with a thick beard and a gnarled scar that ran across his cheek and down his neck, a reminder of the dangers that faced him in his current task given by the Marauder Prince. He was no stranger to battles and had a stern face that spoke of countless past conflicts. His men knew better than to challenge him.

Flanked by his lieutenants of the fort, a telv man and a dwarf woman—magic users both, he strode with a determined grimace across the fort’s grounds. The telv, a tall and lanky individual, clutched a gnarled staff that aided him in walking due to a previous injury the man had sustained in a fight against a merchant caravan, while the dwarf woman carried an axe, her eyes a stormy grey that spoke of her magical affinity.

Their attention was diverted by a man rushing towards them, his face a mask of fear and confusion. "Jonan! The attackers... they've... they've locked themselves in the mess hall!" he gasped, panting heavily as he struggled to catch his breath.

The dwarf woman's face contorted with concern. “And Kurril? Where is he?” she asked, speaking of her partner, and the man he had appointed as captain of the fort itself, while he oversaw the operations of their... project.

The runner's eyes fell to the ground. “Killed outside the fort, ma’am. Slain by... by a horse, if you can believe it.”

The look of pain that crossed her features promised death, and she nearly raised her hand against the messenger.

Jonan raised a hand. “We kill them first. We will grieve our dead later,” he stated with calm surety.

The woman rounded on him, but before anyone could respond, another man approached, his face pale under the flickering torchlight. “It’s her again... The magical fox with three tails.”

Jonan cursed under his breath. That *thing* had been causing him issues ever since he’d tried capturing it the first time, an involuntary shiver that was shared by all those present went down his spine.

If it was here, that meant they had to lock everything down.

He turned to the two lieutenants. “We need to secure the cages. That creature is clearly trying to free them. And we need to breach that damned mess hall!”

His command echoed in the still air. The dwarf woman and telv man shared a glance. They had been part of Jonan’s crew for a while and knew their roles well. “I’ll handle the mess hall.”

“Careful ma’am, one of the intruders is a magic user. She casts lightning, killing at least ten men herself.”

Wind and moisture swirled around the dwarf as her magic took over. “I’ll show her what a storm looks like.”

Jonan nodded, satisfied that they would be taken care of. He turned to his other lieutenant. “You’ll be with me, we’ll secure the cages from that demon fox.”

“Understood.”

With a final nod from Jonan, the group split off. He gestured for more of his men to follow him as he headed in the direction of the cages, while his storm-magic lieutenant gathered others and made her way toward the mess hall.

The fear in his men’s eyes had unsettled him, but now was not the time for fear. Now was the time for action, and they had a fort to defend.

The Marauder Prince would not suffer any setbacks to his plan.



Heta was a poacher by trade and not an ordinary one. Ever since the Flash, she had found that her skills in capturing magical creatures were in high demand. She was fierce, adept, and unrelenting and when she had followed her husband out of Thon Garluhm on this job, she knew it was up to her to get things done.

He was an oaf, they always fought, but she loved him. They always joked that their dangerous new job would only get the two dwarves killed and that would be the only way they'd go home.

But now he was dead, and it struck her harder than she thought.

That initial shock quickly gave way to a cold fury, a wrath like no other. Her heart pounded against her chest, each throb pulsating with a vengeance that consumed her whole.

Together with a band of their men, Heta made her way toward the mess hall. A grim determination settled on her face, her dark eyes promising retribution. Each step echoed her resolve, a silent battle cry that resounded through the men scrambling to secure the fort.

Upon arriving at the mess hall, Heta studied the group of men who had gathered. They were trying to break down the door with a ram, but their attempts were clumsy, lacking in precision and efficiency. Her lips thinned in irritation. "Is anyone making sure they haven't escaped out the back?" she snapped.

Several men exchanged guilty glances before a group of them hastily took off toward the back of the building. Heta's eyes narrowed. She hated incompetence, especially at times like these.

"The rest of you secure the area. All of you," she said gesturing for the six men who had come with her. "You enter with me."

Turning her attention back to the mess hall door, she dismissed the men, her voice dripping with contempt. "Get out of the way." Ignoring the surprised glances, she closed her eyes and focused. The air around her stirred as she channeled her magic, a gust of wind whirling around her. She was no stranger to using the power of the storm, and it didn't take long for her to conjure a powerful wind.

With a flourish of her hands, the wind latched onto a large log nearby and lifted it into the air. Heta's eyes flicked open, and with a determined grimace, she sent the log hurling toward the door.

The impact was instant and dramatic, the wooden barricade splintering under the force and crashing inwards.

The path to vengeance was clear. And Heta intended to take it.

Stepping into the mess hall, Heta was met with an eerie silence. The interior was disheveled and abandoned, the remnants of a meal left unfinished on the tables. Her brows furrowed in confusion as she took in the empty room. "What in Erbium's name?" she muttered under her breath. The prospect that the interlopers might have escaped filled her with a seething frustration.

Turning to the men behind her, Heta barked out her orders, “Four of you, search the area. Make sure they didn't leave anything behind.” Four men hastily acknowledged her commands and dispersed from the hall, their footfalls echoing in the silence.

She glanced around one last time, her eyes catching on nothing out of the ordinary. Grumbling to herself, she began to turn towards the entrance. But then, a faint sound reached her ears, like a whisper carried on the wind. Her steps faltered as she stilled, her sharp ears straining to catch the elusive noise.

Turning back to the room, a glint of suspicion flashed in her eyes. Extending her hand, she concentrated, calling upon her magic. A swirl of water flows around her like rain caught in a funnel, she's about to fling it throughout the room when a sound makes her stop.

A guttural growl cut through the silence, a sound so low and threatening it sent a chill down Heta's spine. The vibration of it seemed to disrupt the mana she was attempting to manipulate, causing her **[Tempest Rain]** to flicker and die. She froze in place, every muscle in her body rigid with fear.

Turning her head slowly, she found herself looking at a dire fox standing menacingly next to one of her men, its three tails rigid. Beside the other, a high elf woman with short hair stood poised, a gleam in her eyes that sent shivers down Heta's spine.

Before either she or her men could react, the fox lunged forward, its jaws opening wide to tear into the throat of the man next to it. Simultaneously, the elf woman moved like a shadow, her sword slashing through the air to dispatch the second man. Both bodies crumpled to the floor, leaving Heta alone with the two attackers.

A tap on her shoulder made her whirl around, only to find herself looking up into the stormy eyes of a tall redhead. The terran woman towered over her, her gaze glowed white as bolts of lightning cracked from the corners of her eyes. Heta could only watch in stunned silence as the woman spoke, her voice cold and firm, “A real storm has more than just rain and wind.”

Suddenly, the air around them filled with a pungent metallic scent, a telltale sign of an imminent lightning strike. The terran lifted a hand, and Heta could see the tendrils of electricity dancing around the room, bouncing off the walls and illuminating the darkness. Panic surged within her as she scrambled to gather her magic, but it was too late. With a swift downward motion, the redhead summoned a bolt of lightning that crackled with divine fury, directing it straight at Heta.

She didn't even get a chance to yell out a warning to the men outside.

The world exploded in a brilliant flash of white, and a searing pain coursed through Heta's body. She gasped, her breath stolen away as the electricity coursed through her. In an instant, her vision went black, and she knew no more.



Iris took a moment to survey the scene, her gaze sweeping over the fallen bodies of the dwarf woman and the two other poachers. A sigh escaped her lips, a mix of relief and grim acknowledgment of the realities of their circumstances.

“Can you use your illusion magic on all of us? Make us look like them?” she asked, turning to Akane. The kitsune tilted her head in a sign of comprehension, then let out a single, determined bark.

Her vulpine eyes began to glow a swirling mix of yellow and black, and her tails shimmered with a magical aura. Small, luminous motes emerged from her form, dancing around each member of the party, Mocha included. Like a cloud of iridescent fog, the magic enveloped them, and when it dissipated, an uncanny transformation had taken place.

Each member of the party now bore the appearance of one of the poachers. Iris looked down at herself to find that she wore the visage of the dwarf woman. It was a disconcerting sight, to say the least, but she knew that the illusion was their best bet at navigating the chaos outside.

One of the men gasped, and quickly pulled at their waistband and looked inside. “I’m a man!”

Akane chuffed in amusement, whipping the back of the woman’s head with her tails.

Iris chuckled. “Bree or Kaira?” she asked the man.

The rugged telv smirked. “Bree, of course. I’m the one who actually has a fascination with the thing now dangling between my legs.”

Another of the men huffed, a blonde man with a ponytail. “They look like a wrinkly, limp mushroom.”

Iris started choking. “Well, at least I know which of you is Kaira.”

‘I’m a person!’ a gruff telv woman *nickered*, causing everyone to laugh.

“That’s not disconcerting,” one of the last two men said. “Gryff, by the way. Mocha, I suggest not talking. They’ll see through your disguise in a moment, like when Akane barks in her person form.”

Iris nodded. “He’s got a point. Also, no more sword, Mocha. I’m going to need it.”

The horse begrudgingly returned the sword, which seemed to prompt change into the form of an axe similar to the dwarf’s. Iris inclined her head to the kitsune in thanks.

Akane used her magic once more, and the kitsune assumed the form of an orkun woman that she had... ripped the throat out of before entering the mess hall.

That fox really enjoys throats.

Akane's magic rippled once more, and the bodies of the three poachers morphed into gruesome facsimiles of Iris, Kaira, and Gryff. Iris's gaze landed on her own illusionary corpse, prompting a sardonic laugh. "Well now... never thought I'd look down on my own dead body. Gotta say I look good even then."

Kaira, illusioned with the guise of the blonde telv man, grumbled, "I gotta say, I do not like seeing myself like that."

Gryff, equally perturbed by his own lifeless duplicate, readily agreed. "Same, but it will throw them off. Let's get out of here before I have to see it too much more."

Iris glanced around at her party, committing their illusioned faces to memory. "Alright, we need to make our way to the cages, release the animals, then get into the headquarters for any information we can gather about the Marauder Prince's whereabouts."

The group spoke their acknowledgments and then fell into step behind Iris, as she made her way to the door. Exiting the mess hall, they moved cautiously. Iris, in her new dwarven form, projected a commanding presence.

Noticing a man staring, she barked, "What are you gaping at? Secure the gates!" Startled, the man stuttered, "Yes, Lieutenant Heta," before scurrying off.

As they navigated through the fort, no one questioned their illusionary disguises. Some even shot fearful glances towards Iris, reinforcing her assumption that the dwarf woman, this 'Heta', had wielded a great deal of fear and respect. She decided to lean into that persona, hoping it would offer them a measure of protection and authority.

The party continued their trek, doing their best to blend in while navigating towards their secondary objective—the animal cages. Releasing the animals should provide enough of a distraction to allow them to get into the command building. Iris kept her stern expression, emulating Heta's apparent demeanor. The illusionary disguises seemed to be working perfectly, allowing them to move freely without attracting undue attention.

They passed groups of poachers and bandits, none of whom seemed to suspect anything amiss. The illusion, combined with their commandeered attire, was convincing. The surrealism of the situation did not escape Iris. It was a strange experience, walking among enemies who perceived them as allies. Even her attempt to act in the camp hadn't been this easy.

Unnoticed and unchallenged, they pressed forward. With each passing moment, the tension within the group built up. But for now, they had the element of surprise and the deceptive power of Akane's illusion magic on their side.

Overpowered kitsune illusions... I wonder what level she is.

As they progressed deeper into the fort, a group of men strode up to them, stopping in front of Iris. “Lieutenant Heta, the gate is secured as per your orders,” one reported, giving her a curt nod. “Commander Jonan has requested your presence.”

These bitches really are trying to pretend at being soldiers, aren't they?

Iris, maintaining her stern expression, grunted in acknowledgment. “Where is he?” she asked, trying to keep the suspicion from her voice.

The man tilted his head in confusion. “With the cages,” he said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “I thought you knew...”

“Of course, I knew,” Iris retorted sharply, not letting him finish. “But with all the chaos, he might've moved. Can't expect everyone to stay put when there's a fight on.”

The man nodded, seemingly accepting her explanation. “Understood, ma'am,” he replied before signaling his companions to leave.

Once they were out of earshot, Iris shared a glance with her party. Without a word, they understood the urgency of the situation. They had company at the cages, and creating a distraction wouldn't be as easy.

Putting her focus back on their path, Iris led them toward the direction of the cages, her mind already racing with plans and contingencies. She couldn't afford to let this opportunity slip.

As Iris and her party arrived at the cages, a chilling sight greeted them. A wide range of beasts, snarling, hissing, whimpering from their cages, awaited them. Drakyyd with their long, pointed horns and reptilian scales, wolves growling low in their throats, and to her disbelief, a terrifyingly massive owlbear. A few other less threatening creatures like deer were present too, but they seemed out of place in this dreadful menagerie.

A high elf man with a thick beard, a prominent scar stretching from his cheek down his neck, stood by the cages. Another tall telv with a staff adorned with a red gem on its head was by his side, an aura of magic emanating from him. Eight other men, armed and ready, were positioned strategically around the area, their eyes alert and on the lookout.

The elf turned, and his eyes landed on Iris. “Heta!” he called out, relief evident in his voice. “I heard you took care of the magic user.”

Iris nodded, stepping forward as she internally grappled with the situation. She was face-to-face with the bandit leader, Jonan, and presumably another magic user. The latter would undoubtedly prove a problem should a fight break out. Maintaining her composure, she replied with a grunt, “Had to be done. The damn fox was making a mess. Speaking of, seen it?”

She looked over the men present, her eyes eventually settling on the caged beasts. Her mind raced, forming strategies and counter-strategies, preparing for what she knew

was to come. If they were to have a chance, they would need to play their cards just right. Iris steeled herself, ready for the next move in this dangerous game.

“There's been no sign of that fox,” the bearded elf—Jonan, presumably—said, his gaze flicking over the men accompanying Iris. Jonan's gaze narrowed as he studied the men accompanying her. There was a moment of tense silence as his eyes lingered on each of them, scrutinizing their appearances. Finally, he gestured dismissively at the men. “The rest of you can leave. Secure the dead and search for the fox.”

Kaira glanced questioningly at Iris. Iris gave her a slight nod, indicating it was alright. As Kaira and the others started to turn away, Jonan's voice cut through the air, halting her in her tracks. “Wait,” he commanded, his gaze turning back to Iris. “Where's Kurril? Is he coming?”

Iris had to think quickly. She couldn't betray any uncertainty. She tilted her head, mimicking Heta's gruff demeanor, and responded, “I haven't seen him. I suspect he'll be here soon.”

The only warning was the blazing hum of her **[Danger Sense]** before the ground beneath Iris's feet trembled subtly, a barely perceptible shift, but to a seasoned mage like her, it was as loud as a thunderclap.

Magic.

Powerful earth magic.

She barely had time to register the realization before a colossal hand, wrought of stone and earth, erupted from the ground.

Iris tried to **[Lightning Step]**, but the man's spell was already closing around her; she had been targeted before even realizing it. The massive earthen grip clamped around her with crushing force, lifting her from the ground. Pain flared through her body, but she swallowed down the scream threatening to rip from her throat.

The illusion around her form shattered as she was held aloft.

As quickly as the hand had ascended, it slammed back into the ground, taking Iris with it. Her breath was stolen away as she crashed into the earth, the world spinning around her. She gasped, struggling for breath, but it was as if the very air had been squeezed out of her lungs.

With another rumble, the earthen hand closed over her completely, encasing her in a prison of dirt and stone. Darkness swallowed her vision, the weight of the earth pressing in from all sides. The muffled sounds of her companions' shouts of alarm and surprise reached her ears, their words unintelligible through the layers of earth.

She tried to breathe, but the heavy soil filled her mouth and nose. The pressure on her chest was unbearable, every attempted breath a struggle. Iris's mind raced.

Iris was a mage she could get out of this.

She was the hero.

She had to.

Iris [**Focused**], trying to find a solution.

But as the crushing pressure continued, and her struggles for breath grew more desperate, panic began to set in. The edges of her vision started to blur and darken, her body screaming for oxygen. As suffocation's cold grasp began to close around her, everything fell silent. The world slipped away into darkness, leaving her with the oppressive sensation of the earth closing in, the last remnants of her consciousness fading into the crushing black.