

## Stop Flocking Around

Harpies. It all made sense now. Or actually... No, it didn't. Iris had no clue where they had come from, how they had come about, or really anything about them. She had a hard time believing that an entire... flock... of harpies had gone unnoticed in this forest, but it appeared that they had.

Iris and Mocha rode next to the wagon as Sera urged Tanith to drive faster. The harpies were gaining on them, their sharp talons and piercing screams causing panic in the horses pulling the wagon. Iris turned her head to look back and saw the harpies swooping down, their brown and grey feathers ruffling in the wind. Others wore an array of colors, but those looked similar to the ones from earlier.

Her eyes widened. *That's it! The colorful ones are males!*

The revelation was proven a few moments later as the harpies flew close enough to discern their... figures. She could see the harpies' faces clearly now—they looked like telv women, with short pointed ears and soft features. The females actually had sort of hands at the end of some really long and spindly winged arms. However, it was the sight of their large breasts bouncing with every flap of those wings that made Iris roll her eyes in annoyance.

*Really? Even they have bigger ones?*

As she watched the winged thirst traps, the creatures seemed to gather into a formation as they dove toward the wagon. Iris could see the fear in Sera's eyes as the woman cowered on the bench, trying to make herself as small as possible.

Tanith, on the other hand, was focused on getting the wagon out of harm's way. He urged the horses to go faster, whipping the reins with a sense of urgency.

Iris let loose two arrows as they descended toward the wagon, but these harpies were quick and agile, unlike what she now figured were their male counterparts. Both of her arrows were dodged, but with the third one she used her **Unerring Shot**, which still almost missed completely. Instead, the ability clipped through one of their wings, causing the female harpy to roll and plummet in a cry of pain and a shower of feathers.

As she shot a few more arrows, she felt herself draining with every ability used, so she quickly put her bow down and drew in a deep breath, letting mana flow through her.

"Okay, Mocha. Let's get serious," she said.

Her horse let out a series of neighs as she pounded down the road.

"Look, I didn't want to exhaust myself, okay?"

Mocha snorted, her nostrils flaring as Iris **Focused** on the creatures attacking. The harpies were diving in and out as they tried to attack the wagon. She had to act.

She launched a **Spark** at the nearest harpy.

The bolt hit its target, causing a bright flash and a deafening crack that made Iris wince. The harpy screeched in agony and spiraled out of control, crashing into a tree. Two more harpies swooped in to take its place, but Iris was ready for them.

She channeled **Arcane Capability** through her and felt herself strengthen both physically and magically.

She continued firing **Sparks** at the dive-bombing sky harlots, but only managed to hit one more. The harpies kept a close eye on her and were quick to move away. It was almost as if their speed was—

Her eyes widened.

“Shit, Mocha! They have abilities!”

Her faithful steed seemed to focus as well as she put her head down and slow down, moving behind the wagon. She let out a series of neighs that had Iris groan.

“Fine! I’ll stop flocking around!”

Iris activated her **Rushing Wind** and jumped up, landing on the saddle as she stood on her horse’s back. Her reflexes quickened and she snap-fired a **Spark** at another harpy, *altering* the spell midflight to twist and hit it right in the chest.

A morbid sense of satisfaction surged through her right alongside the rush of a level-up, even as the female harpy crashed to the ground in a heap of smoking feathers.

Mocha let out a loud warning cry, and Iris instinctively ducked, barely avoiding the talons of one of the beaked males.

She started windmilling as she felt herself start to fall over, but then a white sheen pulsed over Mocha’s back and Iris felt her balance steady as if she were standing on the ground.

“Thanks, girl! Let’s get these mother flockers.”

Mocha did not respond.

“Come on! That was a good one!”

A derisive snort was the only reply as Iris channeled more mana and let a **Chain Lightning** loose, hitting a male before the spell zigzagged between three others.

She launched spell after spell at the aerial savages with steadily diminishing success. As Iris continued to fight off the harpies, she realized that they were becoming more organized and coordinated in their attacks. They seemed to be communicating with each other, using their abilities and tactics to try to overwhelm the group. Iris could feel herself becoming drained as she used more and more mana to keep up with their attacks.

Sera and Tanith were doing their best to keep the wagon moving, but the harpies were relentless in their pursuit. Iris knew that they needed to come up with a new plan, or they would be overrun.

She quickly scanned the area around them, searching for any possible advantage they could use against the harpies.

That was when she saw her. The queen naked bird bitch, with a crown of feathers so cliché, she would have laughed if it wasn't for the circumstances.

There were so many flying around by now, that Iris was starting to doubt their chances of surviving. Well, mainly just poor Sera. That girl had nothing on these harpies, and if she was right, the unfortunate high elf woman would be quickly killed off. Of course, the feathered floozies were likely to keep Tanith as prime breeding material, the high elf man may even like it before his usefulness ran dry and flayed by talons as large as her hands. Meanwhile, Iris was sure to get away. Mocha was too badass, her horse likely out-leveled the harpies and could outrun them if needed.

As Iris watched, the queen's eyes started glowing green. *Shit!*

"Tanith! Quick, move left!" she shouted.

The wagon instantly jerked to the opposite side of the small road, with one of its wheels even leaving the ground as the momentum threatened to tip it over. Several bags and boxes of supplies spilled out of the wagon as it slammed hard back onto the ground.

Mocha leaped just in time to avoid colliding with a bounding bag of apples, and Iris could have sworn she heard the horse cry out in disappointment.

The wagon's movement wasn't a moment too soon, and Iris stared in disbelief as a stone spike crashed into the ground where it would have been. She looked back up, still glued in a crouched position on Mocha's back, and into the eyes of the angry harpy caster. The creature was focusing on her and started casting another spell.

Iris fired three **Sparks** at the thing and watched as it had to stop its magic to dodge the spells.

It screeched and harpies flew in close, protectively circling the queen.

What followed was an exchange of spells that had Mocha dodging left and right as stone spikes as large as Iris's torso slammed into the ground. Mocha's own ability kept Iris's footing firmly planted to the saddle. It was a bit awkward, as the sudden jerking movements her horse had to perform to dodge the spells caused Iris to bend at the waist from the momentum, but her legs never moved.

*I'm not nearly flexible enough for this shit. Add yoga to the list of adventuring prep.*

"Iris! We're almost to the edge of the forest!" Tanith called out.

That was her cue. The adventurer extraordinaire needed to get the harpies to back off. She **Focused** and cast her **Arcane Torrent** spell at the attacking creatures. A purple and white cloud of energy formed around her and a barrage of purple projectiles streamed from within hurled themselves at the harpies. Shimmering splinters homed in

on the closest attackers in a constant stream of power, each hit bursting in a small surge of arcane energy.

Screeches from the falling harpies filled the sky around them.

The harpy queen's wings flapped fiercely as she soared through the air, her eyes fixed on Iris and Mocha below.

She raised her talons and focused her magic, conjuring a powerful gust of wind that swept across the ground, pulling up stones and debris in its wake.

The stones and debris spun around the harpy queen, forming a deadly vortex that hurtled the projectiles toward Iris and Mocha with incredible speed and force. The queen immediately cast a series of stone spikes to fill any gaps in her other spell.

Iris and Mocha exchanged a quick glance, knowing they had to act fast.

With a sudden burst of speed, Mocha spun and raced towards the harpy queen, weaving in and out of the earthen missiles as Iris focused her magic and summoned her **Storm Armor**. Arcs of lightning shot out to deflect the incoming stones and debris, pulverizing stone and wood as the smell of ozone and charred wood filled the air. With every jolt of the spell that deflected or destroyed something barreling toward them, she felt her stamina noticeably dip.

She grunted as she got an idea. Iris drew as much mana as she could without passing out, and channeled her **Static Discharge** into a **Spark** overcharged before twisting the spell enough to be used by her **Unerring Shot** ability. She let the combo spell fly, ignoring the massive wave of exhaustion that threatened to overcome her, and watched as it curved and tracked the diving queen, but at the last moment, a male harpy dove and sacrificed itself. Iris cried out in dismay, as the crackling bolt slammed into the harpy in a surge of energy that launched two projectiles, which also unerringly shot at the queen. Her luck returned as the royal hussy attempted to dodge the two crackling balls of energy. The harpy managed to avoid the first one, but not the second, as a fist-sized electrical orb detonated next to its outstretched wing.

A screeching cry of pain sounded as the paralyzing effect of the spell hit the wing causing the queen to topple and start a descending roll as she fell from the sky. Mocha didn't even wait as she turned and rushed to catch up to the merchant wagon while Iris slammed back into the saddle with a thud, a pervading soreness in her back and groin. She glanced back even as Mocha *sped up*, and watched as several other harpies dove, managing to stop their leader's fall, but not before the wagon sped into the plains with a magical horse right behind it.

Then in an act that surprised her, almost every harpy screeched and flew to a halt. It was as if the edge of the forest had an invisible wall, a barrier that they did not want to cross. A few kept coming but the rest remained at that imaginary line, the creatures hovered, glaring daggers at the fleeing wagon and horse. The ones that continued their pursuit appeared to have come to a realization because they shrieked in

panic before forcing themselves to turn and rush back toward the forest with extreme haste. As they rejoined the group, the harpies turned as one and flocked off.

“Wait! Tanith, stop the wagon!” She called out.

The wagon came to a sliding stop, the two horses huffing in exhaustion.

She directed Mocha to move alongside the wagon. “Let the horses rest a bit, the harpies are flying off. We will be right back. There’s something I need to get.”

Tanith narrowed his eyes and started to open his mouth, but she didn’t get a chance to hear his objection before she and Mocha rushed off.

She did hear Mocha complaining the entire way.



Iris groaned, feeling a dull ache in her body. She lay sprawled on the bench of the wagon while Sera was inside getting them rooms at the nearby inn. Mocha stood next to her, nudging her gently and ruffling her hair with her snout. Iris got the impression that Mocha was trying to comfort her.

Iris forced a weak smile and patted Mocha's nose. “Thanks, girl. But I feel like I got hit by a truck.”

Her horse gave a soft whinny. Iris had talked all about the formidable Truck-kun that had sent her to this world and how it hitting her was what caused the event. The two girls were best of friends, Iris knew Mocha didn’t want her to leave.

“Sorry, no. Not that kind of truck. I’m not leaving you.”

Mocha nuzzled her hand, and Iris couldn't help but feel a sense of relief wash over her.

As Iris lay on the bench of the wagon with her horse messing with her hair, she watched the people walking by in the bustling village. A group of children ran past, their laughter filling the air. They were followed by an elderly couple, their arms linked together as they walked slowly down the street. A young man carrying a basket of fruits over his shoulder hurried past, nearly colliding with a woman carrying a basket of flowers. She scolded him good-naturedly as they continued on their way.

Further down the street, a group of merchants were haggling over prices with a customer, their wares spread out on colorful blankets. A pair of guards in mismatching gambesons and spears marched by, their laughter at whatever conversation they were having filling the air as they passed. There was even a street performer entertaining a small crowd with juggling tricks and acrobatics.

Mocha let out a snort as she realized Iris was people-watching. "What? You don't find this interesting? All of these people just living their lives, not knowing all of the things they could have better..."

The horse nudged at her head and blew air in her face.

"Ugh, Mocha! Your breath stinks."

Just then, Sera emerged from the inn.

The high elf smiled at Iris and Mocha as she approached the wagon. "I got us some rooms. Let's get you inside and settled."

Iris pushed herself up, wincing at the soreness of her muscles. She swung her legs over the edge of the bench and stood up slowly, leaning on Mocha for support.

Tanith walked around the wagon from where he was checking and rearranging supplies that had been jostled in their escape from the harpies.

"I can help her, Sera," he offered. "The wagon is ready for you to start setting up as a stall."

The merchant looked between the two before she nodded at Tanith. "That would be great, thank you." She handed him the key to their room. "The room she and I are sharing is on the second floor, the one at the end of the hallway."

Tanith took the key from her and put a steadying arm around Iris. "Come on, let's get you inside and comfortable," he said to Iris.

Iris nodded, grateful for the help. She leaned on Tanith as they made their way toward the inn. Mocha followed behind them, whinnying softly.

As they reached the entrance of the inn, Sera turned to Mocha. "Mocha, would you mind staying with me for a bit? I have some things I need to take care of."

Mocha nodded, giving Sera's hand a gentle nudge with her nose. Iris turned and gave Mocha a pat on the neck.

"Don't worry, girl. I'm just sore," she reassured her friend. "Now's a great time to try that glowing goop."

Mocha snorted, seemingly understanding Iris's words. Iris noticed Sera's smile at the two before the woman headed to where the window in the side of the wagon was opened for her to set up her wares.

As Tanith helped Iris up the stairs to her room, she couldn't help but feel a bit awkward. "Thanks for helping me, Tanith. I think I can get it from here, it's just sore muscles."

Tanith smiled warmly at her. "It's no trouble at all, Iris," he said before his mood became more somber. "You're the reason we didn't fall prey to those creatures."

She just nodded in response.

As they entered the room, Iris was pleased to see that it was clean and cozy. She made her way over to one of the beds and collapsed onto it. Sighing in relief, she sprawled out, the bed creaking as it settled with the weight of her armor she didn't care to remove.

Tanith chuckled as he set her bag down in one of the nearby chairs.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

"A little," Iris replied. "I love Mocha to death, but some of our stunts have my muscles sore for days. I don't know how people ride horses for so long. I swear tomorrow, she's walking by herself while I relax in the wagon."

Tanith laughed. "Your horse is something else. It is uncanny... she really can understand us, can't she?"

Iris closed her eyes, enjoying the feeling of being able to rest for a bit.

"Yeah. I suspect it has to do with the flash and her leveling with me from all of the shenanigans we get into together," she explained without opening her eyes. "Mocha is amazing. If it wasn't for her..." she sighed. "Let's just say that I don't want to know what could have happened to me."

She was still sore from the battle with the harpies, but she was grateful for the chance to recover.

*Maybe I'll just rest. Shouldn't waste the Healing Goop.*

"I'll let you rest, Iris."

"Wake me up in an hour or two. I need to speak with the village's guards."

"I will. For now, relax."

Iris just nodded and soon, she felt herself drift off to sleep.



Sera stood outside with Mocha as she was showing a few of the villagers her goods. She caught Tanith emerging from the inn out of the corner of her eye and nodded in his direction.

Tanith saw Sera's nod and made his way over to her, weaving through the villagers who stood in front of her wagon. He smiled warmly at her as he approached.

"How's Iris doing?" Sera asked, setting aside a small vial of healing poultice.

"She's resting now, but I think she'll be okay," Tanith replied. "She's tough."

Sera nodded, relieved to hear that the woman was doing well. She was still in disbelief at the potency of the terran's magic. The way she was able to weave lightning and launch it at those strange winged creatures was awe-inspiring.

At least in retrospect. At the time, Sera was absolutely terrified as she saw the things Iris had called harpies.

Still...

“Good to hear. How are our supplies?”

Tanith sighed, pulling a list out of his pocket. “I made a list. We’ll need to get some more items before leaving. It’s only a day of travel, so we shouldn’t need too much.”

“Can you handle that,” Sera asked with a grimace. “We’ll need all the supplies we can get. But—”

A customer stepped forward, interrupting their conversation. Sera turned her attention to the customer, smiling warmly.

Tanith stepped back, allowing Sera to handle the sale.

The customer held up a small pouch. “Excuse me, ma'am. How much for this?”

Sera looked at the pouch for a moment before picking it up to examine its contents. “Ah, this is a pouch of crushed lavender, it is native to the southeast where it is less humid. It's good for warding off insects and smells quite nice. I can sell it to you for three large copper.”

The villager nodded, handing over the coins before taking the pouch and tucking it into his pocket. “Thank you, ma'am.”

Sera smiled. “You're welcome. If you need anything else, feel free to come back.”

The telv man nodded and walked away, and Sera turned back to Tanith. “As I was saying, we'll need all the supplies we can get.”

Tanith nodded. “Don’t worry. I’ll handle it and will be back soon. Iris wanted me to wake her up so that she can see the guards. I suspect it is because of what she recovered.”

Sera groaned. “She needs to get rid of it.”

“If she doesn’t after the talk with the village’s reeve, I’ll insist upon it.”

“Good,” she said with a curt nod, and she meant it. She refused to go into the back of the wagon until it was gone.



Iris woke to Sera gently shaking her. She groaned softly, rubbing her eyes as she sat up. “Already?” she muttered, realizing that she had only slept for a short while. She stretched her arms and legs, feeling the soreness from their encounter with the harpies.



With Iris sitting up, Sera handed her a cup of water and a small piece of bread. “Here, drink this and eat something,” Sera said, handing her the provisions. “You need to keep your strength up.”

Iris nodded, taking the cup and bread gratefully. She drank the water in one gulp, feeling the cool liquid soothe her parched throat. The bread was a bit stale, but it still tasted good to her empty stomach.

“Thank you, Sera,” she said, setting the cup and bread down on the nightstand. “I appreciate it.”

Sera smiled. “Of course. Are you feeling better?”

Iris nodded again, her head feeling a bit clearer. “A bit. I’ll be good to go by morning. I’m ready to go meet with the guards now.”

Sera stood up, giving Iris a hand to help her up as well. “I’ll be here when you get back. Take care of yourself.”

Iris stood up from the bed and made her way to the door. As she opened it, she turned back to Sera. “And keep an eye on Mocha, will you? I don’t want her getting into trouble.”

Sera smiled. “Don’t worry, she’s in good hands.”

Iris left the room and headed downstairs to meet with the guards, but first, she stopped by the wagon to grab the large sack and tossed it over her shoulder while channeling **Arcane Capability**.

Iris walked through the village, passing by small cottages with thatched roofs and gardens filled with blooming flowers. The streets had a line of stones on either side of them, and the occasional stray chicken or cat could be seen wandering about.

As she made her way a couple of streets over from the inn to the center of the village, the air was filled with the scent of freshly baked bread. The few shops of the village appeared in a tiny row along the street, which ended at where she saw the Reeve’s House, a larger house made of stone with a thatched roof. The building stood out amongst the others, and it was clear that it held an important place in the village. A wooden sign hung above the door, bearing what she assumed was the village’s crest.

The sound of voices could be heard from inside through the open windows, and Iris could see a group of people standing outside, talking amongst themselves. She approached them, her large sack slung over her shoulder.

“Hello! I am looking for the guards?” she greeted the group.

One of the men, a telv, laughed. “We only have two guards in the village, lass. They’re out and about now.”

Iris’s face fell. “Oh, can you point me to—”

“Manny, are you bothering people again?” a loud voice said from inside.

The large door opened and a high elf woman opened the door.

The woman focused on Iris with a stern gaze. "And who might you be?"

"Hello, I am Iris," she introduced herself, bowing slightly to the high elf woman who stood before her. "I am an adventurer and I was looking to speak with one of the village's guards, but it seems they are not here right now."

The woman studied her for a moment, her gaze sharp and calculating. "I am the Reeve of this village. What is it that you need from the guards?"

Iris straightened up and looked the Reeve in the eye. "I have been hired to escort a merchant to Brightburn," she explained. "During our travels, today, we were attacked by a flock of harpies. I managed to kill a decent amount of them, but I wanted to both warn you of the remainder and request a reward for the amount that I did kill."

The Reeve looked Iris up and down, taking in her appearance and the large sack slung over her shoulder. She crossed her arms over her chest and raised an eyebrow.

"Harpies? What are those?"

Iris sighed. She should have expected this. "Well, they're these bird-people creatures, and they're not to be trifled with. They can be quite dangerous for travelers. One of them was even capable of using magic."

The woman glanced between the villagers present before her eyes narrowed. "Are you pulling my leg? What kind of woman do you take me for? To believe such a tale?"

"No, no, I swear it's true. My companion can attest to it as well, and I have proof."

The Reeve placed her hands on her hips, still looking skeptical. "And what reward do you expect for this supposed feat?" she asked, with a hint of amusement in her voice.

Iris hesitated. She hadn't really thought that far ahead. "Well, I suppose some gold would be nice, for my trouble."

The Reeve let out a laugh. "Gold? Lass, we're a small village. You expect me to reward you *gold* for a story about bird people? I'm afraid we don't have any gold to spare for such fanciful tales, my dear."

She dropped the sack she carried onto the ground and let go of her attribute-enhancing spell, sighing as she did.

The woman glanced at the bag in concern. "What's in the sack?"

Iris hesitated for a moment before reaching for the bag. "Perhaps this will convince you," she said as she opened the sack and revealed the body of one of the female harpies.

The Reeve's expression changed from amusement to shock as she peered into the sack. "By the gods," she murmured. "I've never seen anything like this before."

Several people gasped as they took in the appearance of the naked harpy. The thing's face was contorted into its final expression of pain, its sharp, feral teeth visible in its slightly ajar mouth.

Iris couldn't help but feel a small sense of satisfaction at the Reeve's reaction. "As I said, these creatures are not to be trifled with. They're a danger to travelers and could pose a threat to your village. There were dozens in the forest south of here."

The Reeve nodded slowly, still looking at the harpy's body in disbelief. "I see. Well, I wasn't lying about the gold. But, I suppose we could offer you some supplies or provisions for your journey as a token of our gratitude for warning us and for killing some. I... I will need to send a rider out to the lady..." the woman trailed off as she started murmuring to herself.

Iris nodded. "Thank you. I will just uhh..."

The woman fixed her with a stare. "Yes, leave this here. The lady will need to see it. I... No. Are you leaving soon?"

Iris shook her head. "No, we are staying the night. Honestly? I am sore from the fight and need the rest."

"I will join you for dinner. I am sure there is much we can discuss," the woman stated.

"Alright. We are staying at the inn."

The woman held out a hand. "I am Reeve Evelyn. Give me time to sort this mess, but I will be there tonight."

Iris shook Evelyn's hand and nodded. "Thank you, Reeve Evelyn. We'll be expecting you."

With that, Iris turned to leave. She made her way back to the inn. While she was disappointed that the reward didn't amount to much, she was sure Sera would appreciate not having to spend as much coin on supplies they needed. That negative feeling was quickly washed away by a feeling of relief that she had at least made some progress in warning the village about the harpies.

After all, it was her duty as an adventurer.