

## A Cursed War

“She’s going to be fine,” Bree declared. The sun elf medic ran a tired hand across her forehead, smearing away the streaks of sweat that had accumulated in the furrowed lines of stress.

Iris nodded. “That’s good.”

On the makeshift cot they'd fashioned inside a tent, the harpy woman slumbered, her avian chest rising and falling in steady, if somewhat ragged, rhythms. Her features were etched in tranquility, her violent flailing and piercing cries from earlier when Bree and Iris had tried to help her a stark contrast to the quiet creature resting before them.

When they had initially tried to tend to her wounds, the harpy had responded with panic, thrashing about wildly, her inhuman shrieks reverberating off the tent walls. But with Akane's soothing presence and uncanny ability to communicate with the distressed creature, they had managed to calm her down, allowing Bree to carefully extract the embedded arrows and administer treatment with their dwindling supply of healing goop.

Bree glanced back at the harpy. “Do you know why they can’t speak to us? She looks like she used to be Loreni.”

“I don’t know,” Iris confessed. “Maybe something to do with what changed them.”

“At least Mocha and Akane can understand them, no matter how strange *that* is,” Bree added with a sigh. “I’m wondering if I should even question anything related to ‘mana shenanigans’ anymore.”

Iris agreed with that sentiment.

Still, Iris wasn’t sure how the magical creatures could communicate so easily, but it definitely helped at times.

*Probably a trait or something like Mocha’s ability to let me understand her.*

She had long realized that most of the wild things that had happened since she arrived in this world could be attributed in some way shape or form to ‘Crazy Mana Shit.’

The arcane phenomenon seemed to change everything at a basic level, and Iris was nowhere near qualified to figure out the extent of it.

*I don’t have the patience for that shit.*

She sighed.

“Keep an eye on her,” she told the medic, offering a nod to the kitsune curled up in the tent corner, her form once again that of a three-tailed dire fox. Akane reciprocated the nod with a languid yawn, her mismatched cyan and violet eyes half-closed in the dimly lit tent.

Stepping out into the cool embrace of the summer night, Iris shivered as a soft breeze weaved through her hair. A chorus of insects serenaded the darkened forest, punctuated by the occasional hooting of an owl and other night creatures.

As Iris approached the warm glow of the campfire, Kaira looked up at her, her elven features illuminated in the flickering light. *Gods, she's so gorgeous, even when clearly exhausted.*

Her girlfriend offered a tired smile, her grey eyes shimmering with concern. "You alright?" she asked as she reached out a hand.

Iris let the woman pull her down to sit next to her and nodded as she settled in next to her. "Yeah. She's sleeping, finally. Bree really is a miracle worker."

Gryff, whose back was resting against a log, huffed in agreement. "That's putting it lightly. She's saved more people than I can count."

Owlie was huddled on the opposite side of him, the creature's large form reduced to a soft mound under the dark blanket of the night as it snored lightly.

Laken, who was standing near the fire, stirred the contents of a simmering pot before scooping some into a bowl. "Here, having some food," he said, offering it to Iris. "The poachers had some supplies that hadn't been damaged yet. May as well use them."

Iris accepted the bowl with a quiet word of gratitude. Laken then filled another bowl, presumably for Bree, and ambled off toward the tent.

Leaning back and letting the warmth of the fire seep into her bones, Iris released a weary sigh. "How are we looking out here?" she inquired.

Kaira shrugged nonchalantly. "The bodies have been dealt with. We shouldn't have to worry too much here in the camp." She gestured to one side of the camp that played host to an unfinished palisade. "The poachers started building defenses before they were wiped out. It only covers one entrance, but it helps. We'll take shifts tonight."

Iris nodded. "I'll take the first one with someone."

The sound of hooves approaching interrupted them and Iris turned, watching Mocha walk over and plonk down next to them. Her equine features were a mirror of their own exhaustion. "You alright, Mocha?" Iris asked, concern coloring her voice.

The horse nickered in response, *"This armor is so heavy to wear for so long."*

Iris chuckled softly. "I know, girl, but it keeps us safe. You're just not quite used to wearing it for extended periods yet. None of us are taking ours off—there's too much potential for danger."

A look of puzzlement crossed Kaira's face as she glanced between them. "Her armor?"

Iris nodded affirmatively.

Kaira then moved closer to Mocha, her hand resting against the Mare's neck. "You rest tonight, girl. We'll handle the watches."

Mocha lifted her head and turned to Iris with wide, questioning eyes. *'Is she sure? I can do it.'*

Iris shook her head in disagreement. "You've done great today. You rest for the night. Don't worry, tomorrow's going to be a tough day." She shot a quick glance at Gryff, who was intently observing their exchange.

Addressing the three of them, she outlined the framework of her plan. "Hopefully, the harpy woman will be well enough to leave tomorrow morning. I'm going to need you and Akane at your best, Mocha. We're going to assist the harpies in their fight against the Marauder Prince, so we'll need you to translate. If all goes well, they should know where he is, and we can scout him out for a potential strike tomorrow night."

Gryff yawned expansively, his hand coming up belatedly to cover his mouth. "It's going to be a busy day."

Iris silently agreed with him. Very busy indeed.



Mocha's gentle but insistent nudging roused Iris from sleep, her dreams fading away as the morning light pierced through the thin fabric of the tent. Her eyes blinked open to the sight of the horse's head poking in, her large eyes filled with an anxious urgency that instantly kicked Iris's instincts into high gear.

*'Iris,'* the horse urged, her large eyes filled with urgency as her ears flicked backward. *'Get up. The harpy is awake.'*

Iris jerked upward as she pushed herself to a sitting position, her eyes squinting against the bright light.

She nodded and moved to stand up, the horse taking a step back as she groaned while getting off of the cot.

*My poor back.*

Grabbing a nearby jug, she poured water into a basin before splashing the cold liquid onto her face to help herself awake. The shock of the cold water against her skin helped clear the last of her sleep-induced fog, the droplets trickling down her face like a baptism of the new day.

Pulling her hair back, she quickly tied it, her fingers working on autopilot as she kept her attention on Mocha. The horse's large frame was hunched in the entryway, the

normally graceful animal looking awkward and out of place as she tried to keep her head inside the tent.

A soft chuckle escaped Iris's lips. "You could have sent someone else, you know," she said, her voice warm with affectionate teasing.

Mocha snorted in response, her equine irritation clear. *'It's too frustrating trying to communicate with them. I need to...'* She paused, her expressive eyes thoughtful. *'I'll figure it out.'*

With a soft chuckle, Iris fastened her belt around her waist, adjusting her sword to sit comfortably. "Alright," she said, giving the mare a pat. "Let's go."

As they crossed the camp, she waved to Gryff and Kaira, both already awake and busily preparing for the day. Laken and Owlie were notably absent, but Iris paid it little mind. They approached the large impromptu medical tent and Mocha lowered her head to enter while Iris followed closely behind.

Inside, Bree and Akane were already with the harpy woman, who was propped up on the cot, her birdlike eyes were filled with fear and her body tensed as if ready to flee.

When she caught sight of Iris, the harpy tried to scramble away, but Iris quickly raised her hands, hoping her non-threatening gesture would help soothe the panicked creature.

"Easy," Iris said calmly. "I'm here to help."

The harpy's eyes darted to Akane and she chattered something in her melodic bird-like language.

Mocha translated. *'She asked if the lightning goddess is here to finish what she started.'*

The confusion on Iris's face was clear as day for a moment before the pieces fell into place. She remembered the earlier encounter with the harpies on the road, where she, Mocha, Sera, and Tanith had barely managed to escape.

The harpy woman must have been present during that encounter.

*I killed a lot of them that day...*

"Listen," Iris began while trying to maintain a compassionate tone. "We are here to help. I want to stop the Marauder Prince from hunting and harming your people."

At this, the harpy's eyes widened, the hint of fear being replaced with a glimmer of hope.

She chattered something in her melodious language, an urgency in her tone that Mocha didn't miss. *'Don't judge me for this, I'm just repeating what she says,'* Mocha warned. *'Prove it! Prove it! Let me see the fury of the skies in your eyes, the resolution of your power.'*

Taking a deep breath, Iris tapped into her inner mana reserves, calling forth her **[Electromancy]**. The raw power flowed through her, accumulating in her eyes, making them spark like a live wire, crackling with energy.

The harpy woman watched, her gaze wide and eager, and when the blue lightning sparks danced in Iris's eyes, she screeched in delight. Mocha interpreted her enthusiastic chatter. *'Yes, yes! We must help the queen! She needs you.'*

Iris narrowed her eyes, her gaze still flickering with the traces of her magic. "Where is the queen?"

The harpy woman chattered and Mocha translated, her voice grave. *'She attacks the evil elf, it is a sure death, but she must! She must! Too many have been killed. Too many taken.'*

Akane, in her dire fox form, watched the exchange with a low growl rumbling from her throat.

Iris's heart sank.

They were no longer going on a recon mission; they were stepping into the middle of a war.

"Are you okay to go? Can you show us where the queen is attacking? We don't know where the Marauder Prince is." Iris's voice was steady, holding onto her resolve.

Nodding, the harpy woman stood, stretching her wings and giving a few tentative flaps. However, as she began to move towards the tent entrance, Mocha interjected, her nickering carrying a sense of urgency. *'Wait! We can't fly!'*

The harpy paused, looking back with a huff. But after a moment, she nodded.

Iris looked at Bree who was watching with wide eyes, clearly not understanding any of it except the terran's side. "Get the others together and ready. We need to leave soon, apparently, the harpy queen is going to be attacking the Marauder Prince soon, and they know it's suicide. They'll need our help."

Bree nodded and rushed out of the tent. Akane caught Iris's eye and gave her a slight nod before she too dashed around them and out of the tent.

Iris glanced at the harpy, moving to hold the flap open for her before she gestured with her head to the exit.

The harpy gave her a searching look and seemingly made up her mind on something and walked outside with slow, hesitant movements.

As Iris emerged from the tent, everyone was already moving. Gryff was holding a pike and conversing with Bree before he handed her his spear. The man examined the pike for a moment, getting a feel for its weight before he hefted the new weapon to his shoulder.

While Laken prepared the owlbear's saddle, Kaira came and handed Iris a bowl.

With eggs.

A sense of unease washed over her. Iris glanced at the harpy and down at her eggs. "This isn't..."

Kaira snorted. "No! Oh gods, Iris. Why was that your first thought?"

"Well, uh," Iris started. She didn't really have an answer for that... "Nevermind."

Iris allowed herself a quick bite of food and a sip of water and her stomach churned almost immediately with anticipation but she forced herself to eat, knowing they needed all their strength for what lay ahead.

The high elf just shook her cute head before walking away and gathering her own gear. She picked up a couple of small axes and strapped them to her back before grabbing her sword and shield and rolling her shoulders.

When she finished, she grabbed her bow and her quiver of arrows, along with two more pilfered from the camp, and attached them securely to either side of Mocha's saddle. The act was a familiar, almost soothing routine that helped her focus, and she talked quietly to her friend as she made sure her armor was nice and taut.

As she turned back to look at her party, she noticed them all waiting for her word. Their faces reflected the seriousness of what lay ahead, their focus held an unwavering determination in their eyes.

With a nod, Iris signaled that it was time.

The harpy woman, now their unexpected guide, flapped her wings once before taking to the sky. Akane darted after her, keeping the bird woman in sight.

Despite her earlier fears, she flew confidently and kept low enough to lead them through the dense forest.

The party moved out and followed the harpy woman.

Iris turned and gave the camp one last look, wondering how long it would be before the forest reclaimed it, before she led Mocha into the forest.

Following the harpy through the thick woods, the daylight was slowly becoming brighter, causing the forest to become increasingly hot and sticky. Sweat trickled down Iris's back and forehead.

*Let's not even talk about what's going on under my chest armor.*

She couldn't wait for the cool bath she would take once they returned to civilization.

*Maybe with Kaira...*

She blushed.

Shaking her head, she forced those thoughts out.

Now was not the time to be distracted, they had a quest to carry out.

The trek through the forest was rather uneventful, other than a few small animals darting in and out of the underbrush. The sound of their movement, although tiny, echoed in the dense forest and constantly kept everyone on edge.

After several kilometers of walking, they reached another harpy camp.

It was barren.

But at least it did not seem like it had been cleared out by the poachers.

Their guide landed gracefully beside them, her face filled with an urgency that Mocha translated. *'They are gone, gone. Queen has called all to war.'*

Iris could see the worry lines etching deeper into the harpy's face, her eyes glassy.

She nodded at the harpy, her voice filled with determination. "Lead the way."

With a swift nod, their harpy guide took off again, her wings creating a gust of wind that blew leaves around them.

Akane gave Iris a long look before bolting after the harpy, her red tails disappearing into the greenery.

Turning back to the others, Iris saw Kaira walking up to her. The elf gave her a pat on the shoulder and a reassuring nod before heading after the others. Iris took a moment to compose herself before joining them.



After two relentless hours of trekking through the forest, the piercing screech of their harpy guide sliced through the stifling humidity. It was a sound that immediately set Iris's senses on high alert, her every instinct recognizing it as a warning.

Like storm clouds manifesting in a clear sky, two more harpies emerged from the foliage, their feathered bodies blurring through the dense trees. They swooped down, their talons glinting menacingly in the dappled sunlight. Iris felt her heart tighten as she took in their aggressive stance, their eyes sharp and focused on the party.

In response to the impending threat, Iris invoked her **[Arcane Capability]**, her muscles flexing as a surge of power rippled through her. It was like a jolt of electricity, causing her hair to stand on end as she channeled mana into her body. Her hand instinctively moved to call upon **[Rushing Winds]**, the spell that would bolster her speed and agility.

If a fight was coming, she would be prepared.

Meanwhile, the rest of the party reacted with equal promptness.

Kaira raised her shield and hefted her sword, the curved steel glinting in the sunlight while Gryff readied the pike with a determined grimace etched on his face.

Laken already had an arrow nocked and pulled taut on his bowstring, his sharp eyes trained on the harpies, while Bree stepped in front of Iris with a shield raised and spear angled upward.

Just as Iris braced for an attack, their guide landed in front of the party, her wings flaring out as she screeched a sequence of sharp and staccato sounds.

The two new harpies paused mid-flight, their wings fluttering as they hovered in place.

It was as if the very forest held its breath as an intense exchange unfolded—or at least Iris's party as the two landed and an intense exchange unfolded, the screeches and squawks echoing through the otherwise silent woods.

Iris watched tensely, her adrenaline pumping as Mocha translated their conversation next to her.

Eventually, it seemed their guide's words had some effect.

Mocha's nickering carried a tone of amusement, *'They're arguing about us. Oh, the one that likes us just called you the lightning goddess come to help them. They...'*

The intensity in the harpies' eyes faded slightly, and their wings lowered in a less aggressive stance.

Mocha paused as the two turned to look at Iris, their eyes widening in recognition. *'Yup, they're convinced.'*

Her friend nudged her, prompting Iris to hoist herself onto Mocha's back without protest. Secure in the saddle, the group continued on with the two additions flying above as the group below moved at a brisk pace toward where the fighting was occurring.

The further they ventured, the more devastating the evidence of the ongoing war became. The forest, once teeming with the songs of birds and rustling of leaves, was now eerily silent, the air thick with an undercurrent of dread.

Then the first tangible sign of the battle came into view; a ruined encampment, where the remnants of a poacher's camp lay in ruin.

Iris could only gawk at the sight.

Massive stones and gnarled vines seemed to have sprung from nowhere, crushing tents and equipment beneath their weight.

The ground was a grim mosaic of fallen bodies, harpies and poachers alike strewn haphazardly in the aftermath of what must have been a fierce confrontation.

Her **[Danger Sense]** hummed slightly, but not urgently. She wasn't sure what it was, but she knew something was off.

Iris grabbed her bow and took a deep breath before she reached into her quiver and nocked an arrow onto the bowstring, her fingers brushing against the fletching with familiar ease.



With a mental command, she used her **[Mana Conduit]** spell, focusing a surge of mana into her weapon so that it would easily channel her magic through it.

At the same time, she cast **[Static Discharge]** into the arrow, watching as raw electricity crackled along the shaft with an eerie glow.

With the magic-infused arrow at the ready, Iris scanned the ruined camp from astride Mocha, gently nudging her friend forward. Akane, in her dire-fox form, prowled ahead of the group, her ears pricked and alert for any danger.

Kaira, Bree, and Gryff formed the center of the group, their weapons at the ready as they spread out slightly and moved through the camp.

At the rear, Laken riding his owlbear, guarded their flank as the two companions searched for any threats with sharp and vigilant eyes.

Their progress through the devastated camp was cautious and deliberate as they stepped around large stones and withered or burnt vines, the crunch of leaves, the flapping of wings above them, and the rustle of armor the only sounds in the tense silence.

Suddenly, the buzzing of her **[Danger Sense]** went wild.

A whistling sound tore through the air, followed by a pained screech of one of the harpies.

Iris looked up just in time to see the woman fall from the air, an arrow in her chest, and slam into the ground head first.

Her death confirmed by the audible snap that filled the area.

The other two harpies screeched in anger as a group of poachers surged from the shadowy forest, surprise causing them to stumble as they caught sight of Iris on Mocha's armored back, confusion evident on their faces.

She seized their moment of hesitation, her eyes cold and unwavering, and made them pay for their interruption.

Iris drew back and released the electrified arrow.

The crisp snap of Iris's bowstring echoed in the tense air as her electrified arrow took flight, her **[Unerring Shot]** guiding it towards a Bowman in the opposing line.

The arrow's path curved unnaturally, zeroing in on its target like a guided missile.

It punctured his throat with a wet crunch, the surge of electricity from the arrowhead bursting outwards as two balls of crackling energy erupted from the slain Bowman, striking another man at his side.

The suddenness of his comrade's death, coupled with the electrified shock, left him spasming in the dirt.

As the men crumpled, the remaining poachers jolted into action.

They charged forward, the forest floor crunching under their boots, but Iris was ready.

She swiftly nocked another arrow, her eyes focusing on her next target.

A sudden whizzing sound followed by the appearance of a protruding arrow from one of the poachers made her pivot.

She turned just in time to see Laken, his face grim, already drawing another arrow and letting it loose. A second poacher fell with the same ruthless efficiency she had demonstrated earlier.

Meanwhile, the rest of her party rushed headlong into the fight.

Kaira, her voice ringing loud over the clatter of combat, called out to Iris. “We have these ones! You get those!”

Iris spun around, her confusion giving way to alarm as she spotted a new threat.

Stepping out of the forest was a man in a sturdy breastplate and flanked by two men that looked like knights in plate armor, his hands glowed ominously red.

With a sinking feeling, Iris recognized the telltale signs of an imminent spell. “Mocha, dodge!” she cried out.

The horse responded with an agile leap, narrowly evading the fiery beam that seared the air where they'd been mere moments ago

Iris loosed another arrow, following it up quickly by using her bow to fire a **[Lightning Spear]**.

Her arrow clanged off the armor of one of the guards, ricocheting harmlessly into a tree and releasing its charged bolts into empty space.

The spear, however, initially seemed to reflect off of the second man's armor as well before it flew in a curve and found its mark, piercing through the shoulder of the other guard from behind.

He went down screaming, his body convulsing under the intensity of the electrical shock.

Capitalizing on the chaos, Akane darted forward, her illusions multiplying her form into a horde of dire foxes.

As the caster lobbed beam after fiery beam, each one pierced effortlessly through the kitsune's illusions, Iris urged Mocha forward. She launched an **[Unerring Shot]** at the caster, only to watch in dismay as his beam collided with her arrow mid-air, causing a fiery explosion.

Cursing under her breath, she slung her bow over her shoulder and began casting a flurry of **[Sparks]**, sending crackling bolts of electricity racing towards the caster.

Meanwhile, the remaining guard charged toward Akane and what remained of her illusionary clones, his shield held high.

Despite his armor though, Akane's massive form was an intimidating sight. With a timely reaction, he managed to put up his shield to brace himself as Akane collided with him.

Surprisingly, he managed to maintain his footing, his form sliding back through the dirt under the force of the impact.

Iris could only guess at what ability he had used to prevent himself from being completely bowled over by Akane's assault, but she refocused on her own opponent, her hands dancing as she cast her spells while Mocha jumped and weaved to avoid the beams even using her abilities to make some seem to *bend* away from them just before they would have made contact.

The fight had descended into a frenzied ballet of brutality, with every member of Iris's party engaged in their own furious battles.

Kaira moved like a tempest with her sword and shield, striking with a deadly precision that was at odds with the easygoing woman she usually was.

Gryff's pike was a blur, stabbing in and out of the melee, each thrust heralding another poacher's fall.

Their medic and bard, Bree, wielded her spear with a determination Iris admired, her shield expertly blocking the frantic swings of the attackers.

Lastly, Laken was a picture of deadly calm, firing arrow after arrow with the stoic demeanor of an experienced hunter while his owlbear tore through the poachers like a force of nature that none could withstand.

The harpies swooped down from the skies, their cries echoing over the din of the battle as they attacked the poachers from above.

As they fought, three more poachers emerged from the shadows of the forest, bows drawn and ready.

Their focus was on the harpies, but Iris was quicker.

With a sharp gesture, she let loose a **[Chain Lightning]**.

The electric bolt surged from her hand, jumping from one man to the next in a crackling dance of death. As the bouncing bolt dissipated, their bodies slumped to the ground in smoking heaps, and the spark of life extinguished from their eyes.

Akane was struggling as she grappled with the heavily armored man, the knight's abilities seemingly allowing him to hold his ground against her which forced the two to fight to a standstill.

However, Iris couldn't spare the time to watch.

She and Mocha had a battle of their own to fight, and she knew as soon as she finished it, she could turn and help the kitsune.

The battle caster, still standing, met them with a barrage of fiery beams. Mocha dodged behind a large boulder that sat on top of a crushed tent, and as they emerged from the other side, Iris narrowed her eyes as she saw the caster quickly down an elixir.

*What the fuck is that?*

She quickly sent a **[Spark]** at the man, but he deftly dodged to the side and sent another beam at them that curved at the last moment as Mocha used her ability.

The horse burst into a gallop and flicked her ears toward Iris. *'Get your dagger out!'* Mocha's neighing rang out.

Without questioning her companion, Iris yanked out the dagger from its sheath on her lower back and held it at the ready.

"Got it! Why?" she yelled, narrowly dodging another beam.

*'Be ready!'* came the urgent reply.

Iris felt a surge of mana pulsing from Mocha and suddenly wrap around the two of them.

Before she could voice her concern, the ability took hold.

The world around her seemed to pass in a blurred, slow motion as she and Mocha moved with an unnatural speed, closing the distance between them and the caster.

As quickly as it happened, it was over, and the clarity of reality rushed back in like the focusing of a camera.

Iris didn't hesitate.

Whipping out with her dagger, she cast **[Arc Lash]**.

A large crescent of lightning energy burst from the blade, slicing through the air and taking the caster by surprise.

The man had no chance to scream as his head was severed from his body.

Just as Iris turned her attention to Akane, Mocha surged forward with a burst of speed that almost made Iris topple over until another ability firmly stuck her to the saddle.

The horse lowered her head, her thirty-centimeter steel spike gleaming ominously as a pulse of mana surged over it. Without slowing down, Mocha rammed it into the armored knight's back, impaling him and lifting him off of the ground before she jerked her head to the side to fling the man's limp body away.

As she and Mocha turned away from the fallen knight, a sickening crunch echoed through the battlefield as the owlbear smashed a man into the ground before Iris caught sight of Laken, his bow aimed downward, and then fired into the pinned man through the ground.

Just as she thought it was over, a poacher's body fell from the sky, landing with a bone-crushing thud on the ground causing her to jerk in surprise.

Iris turned her head upward to see the two harpies descending from the sky and landing next to their fallen sister.

As the dust settled and the sounds of battle died away, she took a deep breath.

The fight was over.



After the harsh combat, everyone drank water as they caught their breaths or rifled through the dead for anything that could help them.

Meanwhile, The two harpies were chattering with each other while Mocha translated their conversation.

*'They say we need to hurry,'* she told Iris.

"We will," Iris replied, taking a sip of her water. "But we need a moment to recover. We were just ambushed."

Kaira soon returned from her inspection of the dead, her face thoughtful. "The equipment these poachers had... it's well made and more than they should have. We need to be careful. We should find and link up with the harpies instead of trying to fight separately."

Iris nodded absently as she looked over to see their medic by the headless mage.

Bree was examining what was left of the caster's body, her face a mask of concentration. She crouched down and opened a pouch at his side, her eyes narrowed as she pulled two vials and scrutinized them.

Walking over to the group, the sun elf held up the vials. "According to the handwritten labels, these are rejuvenation elixirs," she said, her voice filled with curiosity.

Iris's eyes widened in surprise.

*Wait, what? Really?*

"He drank at least one during the fight. Maybe it helps replenish his stamina? I was wondering how he was casting so many beams with only a single pause," she said.

Bree shrugged, tucking the vials safely away into her own pouch. "There were two slots missing, so you may have just missed him drinking the second. I will investigate these further when we return to Brightburn. It seems interesting, but not something we want to test here."

"Agreed."

*May be something that Sera's company will want to look into.*

Looking around and seeing everyone else ready to move, Iris gave a firm nod. "Alright, let's go, everyone." She gestured toward the harpies, who gave one last mournful look at the fallen harpy before taking flight.

It wasn't long until the signs of battle became more evident and it was clear that the harpies had been giving a fierce resistance to the Marauder Prince and his poachers.

Several screeches sounded in the distance and suddenly, their harpy guide landed next to them, squawking urgently.

*'Up ahead, the enemy camp. Evil man there. She will notify the queen that you all friends. Friends,'* Mocha translated as the second harpy soared off with a burst of speed that Iris hadn't seen yet.

Their guide took them away from the screeches and the increasing sound of distant battle and looped them around to the east.

The buzzing sound from Iris's **[Danger Sense]** combined with a warning bark from Akane alerted them that they weren't alone.

She heard Bree gasp. "Above us."

Iris looked up and saw dozens of harpies camouflaged in the trees around them, almost every large branch held one of the bird women and even a few of the more bird-like men with their actual beaks.

Entering a small clearing, a large, majestic harpy with vibrant plumage and a crown of feathers adorning her head landed in front of them with an audible thud.

It was the naked bird queen, herself with a demeanor as striking as her appearance.

The queen and their guide exchanged a terse series of chatting and chirps, and after a moment their guide bowed her head and stepped to the side.

The queen stepped forward, her eyes fixed on Iris.

As she dismounted Mocha to meet the queen, she felt the piercing gaze of the harpy and her entire flock scrutinizing her.

She couldn't mess up here, it would be a blood bath, even with them all working together.

Iris stopped a few steps away from the Queen and gave her a smile.

The queen's head jerked a few times before she paused with a slight tilt to the side and spoke with a harsh but articulate voice, "Why do you come, lightning bitch?"

Iris froze, caught off guard by the harpy's ability to speak.

*Wait...*

*Who's this bitch calling a bitch?*