

Electrifying Moves

As the carriage made its way along the winding path through the estate, Iris and Kaira could see the grandeur of the Arden Manor come into view. The estate was surrounded by high stone walls, and the gates were made of wrought iron, intricately designed with the House's emblem. Beyond the walls, the estate sprawled out, with lush gardens, fountains, and ornamental trees dotting the landscape.

As they approached the large manor, Iris turned to Kaira. "Do you know why the ball isn't at the castle?" she asked curiously.

Kaira shook her head, "The castle is primarily for governmental purposes and doesn't have space for such events," she explained. "Besides, the House Arden estate is just as grand and offers a change of scenery."

As the carriage drew to a stop in front of the manor, a group of footmen appeared to assist them. Iris stepped out of the carriage, followed by Kaira, who immediately took in their surroundings with a practiced eye, scanning for any signs of danger.

The footmen escorted them to the entrance of the manor, where they were greeted by a butler who welcomed them and guided them inside. Iris found herself agreeing with what Kaira had said, the interior of the manor was definitely grand, with marble floors, ornate chandeliers, and luxurious furnishings.

They continued through the manor with Iris's arm in Kaira's, until they came to a beautiful set of double doors. The butler opened them and revealed a sprawling grand hall filled with people.

A woman stood resplendent in what Iris assumed were the House Arden colors, and smiled as they approached.

"Names please?" the woman asked, lifting a board with parchment on it.

Iris smiled. "Iris Stuart."

The woman's brow raised as she found her name. "Thank you, we will also inform Lady Arden that you have arrived," she said and then looked at Kaira. "And your escort?"

"Captain Kaira Harken," the elf said.

The woman nodded and turned to another servant, and whispered in his ear. Kaira guided Iris to stand together next to the man and pulled Iris's arm tighter into the crook of her arm.

The man squinted his eyes and then gave an assenting nod before standing straight and announcing the two with a deep booming voice.

"Introducing Miss Iris Stuart and Lady Kaira Harken," he bellowed.

Iris's gaze darted to Kaira as the woman remained looking ahead. Kaira leaned closer and whispered. "I'll explain. Head tall. Let's go."

"Magic time," Iris said with a smirk.

She drew mana and cast **Mana Conduit** on her dress as she'd done at Marlena's, before using her **Electromancy** to create an even more extravagant lightning show over the surface of the fabric.

As the lightning danced over her dress, Iris felt a rush of excitement. She loved showcasing her magic, and the reactions it elicited from people. The lightning bolts crackled and arced across the fabric, illuminating the intricate embroidery and casting a bright blue glow around her. She drew the magic into her eyes and smiled, knowing they were glowing rings of light that would make an arc reactor jealous.

Kaira let out a low whistle, impressed. "That's intense," she said, the corners of her lips turning up. "If that isn't the talk of the party, I don't know what will be."

Iris grinned, feeling a sense of satisfaction. "Thanks," she replied. "I always like to make an entrance."

Kaira chuckled. "I can tell," she said.

They made their way through the crowded grand hall, the sound of music and chatter filling their ears. As Iris and Kaira walked, people turned to stare at Iris's dress. Some gasped in awe at the sight of lightning flickering over the fabric, while others recoiled in fear. A few murmured their disapproval, clearly uncomfortable with the idea of magic being displayed so brazenly in public. Iris couldn't help but feel a pang of disappointment at the negative reactions. She knew that not everyone would appreciate her magic, but it still stung a little to see people recoil from her.

However, as they moved through the crowd, Iris noticed that some people were beginning to warm up to the display. A group of young girls giggled and pointed excitedly, clearly fascinated by the lightning. A few older noblemen even inclined their heads to Iris as she passed. She could feel their eyes on her, but this time their stares were filled with admiration and wonder.

Iris couldn't help but feel slightly overwhelmed by the opulence of the estate and the number of people present, but her magic surged and crackled over her body like a warm cocoon of safety. Kaira, however, seemed to navigate the room with ease, leading Iris towards a small group of people gathered near the refreshments table.

Sera and Tanith turned around as the two women approached and Iris let out a sigh of relief.

"Hey, you two!" Iris greeted with a smile. "You both look amazing tonight," she said as she looked over the merchant's dress. Clearly, something her company had provided them just for this occasion.

Sera's dress was made of a rich burgundy fabric that flowed elegantly to the ground. The sleeves were long and fitted, ending in delicate lace cuffs. The neckline was modest, but the dress was cinched at the waist with a simple gold belt, giving her a flattering silhouette. The dress was embroidered with a pattern of leaves and vines in gold thread, indicating that while not a noble, Sera had wealth and status. At least as far as the nobles here were concerned.

Iris could imagine that the opportunity to attend such an event was good exposure for the merchant company.

Good ol' networking.

She turned and looked at the merchant guard who was curiously comfortable in his own matching clothing. Tanith's tunic was made of fine wool in a deep shade of burgundy, with ornate embroidery along the neckline and sleeves in gold thread. The tunic fit him snugly at the shoulders and chest, flaring out slightly at the waist, and was paired with fitted black trousers and black boots. The embroidery was subtle but added a touch of elegance to the otherwise practical and comfortable outfit that showed the two had taken extra care to coordinate their outfits.

I can get behind the optics.

Sera grinned. "Thanks, Iris," she said before giving Iris and her date a once-over. "You and Kaira look pretty dashing yourselves."

Iris smirked. "What, my look doesn't *shock* you?"

Tanith chuckled. "How long have you been holding that one in?"

She smiled. "I've had it on deck and ready to go since Kaira gave me the idea at Marlena's. Thanks, Sera."

The woman laughed softly into her hand. "I am glad I could be of assistance, Adventurer Stuart," the woman said regally.

Tanith rolled his eyes. "She's been doing that all night. She's completely out of her depth here," he said before turning to the table and grabbing two glasses of wine for Iris and Kaira. "Here you go," he said, handing them each a glass.

Iris chuckled at Sera's betrayed expression. Kaira came to her defense. "I think you fit in quite nicely, Sera. I certainly appreciate your company, you will have to tell me about your dress!"

The merchant smiled and gave Tanith a look. "See! I'm not acting silly," she defended herself.

Kaira and Iris politely laughed.

Sera continued, "These outfits were courtesy of the Fenren Merchant Company. After all, our Regional Manager made it clear that we are both representatives of not only our company but House Reinhart."

Kaira frowned. "I apologize, but I do not know a House Reinhart."

Iris's eyes widened. "Oh, I know this one! It's that Aviran House you told me about, the one with the princess."

Sera smiled. "That's correct. Speaking of, leadership sent out a courier to Strathmore with the request to assist in the founding of the Adventurer's Guild. We came up with a few ideas of how the Guild and the company can profit from such a venture."

"Oh?" Iris said, raising a brow. "Do tell."

The merchant's eyes glinted as she smirked. She almost looked like she wanted to maniacally rub her hands together. "Each branch of the Guild will partner with a local merchant company to sell supplies to adventurers at a discount based on the member's tier. Additionally, the company will purchase or process items that the adventurers find on their quests at reasonable rates. While we would of course like to be the exclusive company that works with the Adventurer's Guild, the company realizes that it simply wouldn't be feasible and would not speak to the impartiality that a guild needs. So, companies will bid on the opportunity in future branches. However, the headquarters here will work with the Fenrens as part of the support deal."

Iris nodded. "That's a great idea. I can get behind that."

Kaira looked contemplative. "That is shrewd. I wholeheartedly approve. Who's idea was this?"

Tanith chuckled. "It was Sera's. The manager was suitably impressed. I know I was as well."

Sera looked down as she couldn't hide her blush.

Kaira took the pause as a chance to change the topic. "What do you all think of the ball so far?"

Iris took a sip of her wine before answering. "It's certainly grand. I can't believe how many people there are."

Sera nodded and swept her gaze over the room. "There certainly are a lot of nobles. And then there's just us as the commoners."

"Kaira, here, is a lady actually," Iris said, side-eying her date as she did.

Kaira winced slightly, then smoothly shifted the expression into a small smile in response. "I am. My House wanted the status that came from having a daughter as a Captain of the Guard. But that hasn't stopped me from wanting to do a good job and protect those who need it," she explained, giving Iris a look that begged her to not look too far into it.

Iris nodded, still wishing the woman had told her, but decided that could be a topic for later. "I can respect that. But what do *you* want to do in life?"

Kaira's smile faded slightly as she considered the question. "I have my role in life," she said, taking a moment before sighing. "Honestly, I've always known that I wanted to serve my House and protect its interests, but beyond that..." she trailed off, shaking her head.

Sera interjected. "Maybe you'll find something that you're passionate about outside of your duties as a Captain. You never know."

Kaira nodded thoughtfully. "That's true. I suppose anything is possible."

"Protecting what you hold dear is still a noble pursuit," Tanith added. "I can respect you wanting to use a position you were given because of your name and make it something truly worth being proud of."

Iris reached over and grabbed the elf's hand, giving it a squeeze. "And from what I've seen, you seem to be respected. You're obviously doing something right."

Kaira smiled. "I appreciate that."

As the conversation died down, Iris turned her attention toward the ballroom floor, where the orchestra was starting to play a lively tune. She watched as couples began to take to the floor, joining hands and twirling around in perfect harmony. The dancers moved with fluid grace, their steps in perfect sync with the music. Iris couldn't help but feel a surge of excitement as she watched the spectacle unfold before her, it was unfortunate that she had no idea how to dance like that. Her idea of dancing was shaking her ass in a club.

A group of noblewomen walked together and approached the nearby bar, their dresses and jewels indicating their high status. One of the women, an imposing high elf, recognized Kaira and her expression changed to one of surprise.

"I didn't expect to see you here, Kaira," the woman said, her tone laced with a hint of disapproval.

Kaira raised an eyebrow. "Lady Imogen, I was invited by Iris, here," she said, gesturing towards Iris, who offered a small wave.

The high elf narrowed her eyes at Kaira's masculine outfit but said nothing about it. Instead, she turned her attention to Iris. "And who might you be?" she asked, her voice chilly.

"Iris Stuart, Adventurer," she replied with a polite smile, extending her hand. "Nice to meet you."

The woman hesitated for a moment before taking Iris's hand, giving it a brief shake. "Lady Imogen," she introduced herself before turning back to Kaira. "I had no idea you had such... connections, *Captain*."

Kaira narrowed her eyes. "Of course, one meets many interesting people when they broaden their horizons."

Lady Imogen sniffed. "It makes sense to see you mingling with... commoners, considering. Although, it begs the question of how you all received an invitation to such an exclusive event."

Kaira's jaw clenched slightly, but she kept her expression neutral. "Lady Arden invited Miss Sera and Iris to discuss business," she said evenly, her tone making it clear that the conversation was over.

Lady Imogen, undeterred by Kaira's tone, turned back to Iris. "I must say, Miss Stuart, your magical display is quite... impressive, for a commoner," she said, clearly not missing a chance to be rude to Kaira's date.

Iris raised an eyebrow, a hint of annoyance creeping into her expression. "Thank you," she replied coolly. "I would love to meet any noble, or anyone at all, that is more proficient in magic than I am. Please, show me the extent of what you can accomplish?"

The woman huffed. "One doesn't need magic when they have armies to command, I assure you. It's unfortunate your... escort is but a minor part of a *City* Guard. But at least she has your little light show to liven up her otherwise low status."

Iris rolled her eyes at the woman's remark. "Yes, well, some of us have to rely on our own abilities to get by," she retorted, her tone dripping with sarcasm. "And as for armies, they seem lacking from what I can see of this group." She gestured towards the other noblewomen, earning a few sharp gasps and glares.

Lady Imogen bristled at Iris's words. "How dare you," she hissed. "I'll have you know that my House has a strong military presence."

"Is that so?" Iris said, her voice dangerously calm. "Well, I'm always up for a good challenge. Shall we take this outside and see what you can do?" She cracked her knuckles, her eyes flashing with electricity as she spoke.

Lady Imogen's face twisted in anger at Iris's challenge. She opened her mouth and then closed it before turning her attention to Sera. "And who might you be?"

Iris stepped in front of her friend. "No. Either you and I settle this outside, or you get to stepping."

The woman's eyes narrowed. "You will regret this."

Iris rolled her eyes. "I seriously doubt that. There is literally nothing you can do to me except huff and puff. Unfortunately for you, I just don't care."

The woman glared at her for a moment before turning on her heels and striding away without a word. The other noblewomen looked at Iris with a mixture of fear and anger before quickly following Lady Imogen's lead.

"I didn't even get to zap her," Iris mumbled. Her eyes narrowed.

Next time...

Kaira let out a low whistle. "You really know how to make an impression, don't you?"

Iris shrugged nonchalantly. "I don't tolerate insults to my abilities or my friends," she replied. "Besides, I've been itching for a good fight."

Sera huffed. "You just fought a bunch of monster rats!"

"And got blown up for the pleasure," she said with a sigh. "...That wasn't really an enjoyable quest."

Tanith shook his head. "Well, look alive. It seems you created quite the show, more people are coming."

Iris turned her head and saw two people approaching. Her eyes bulged as she realized one of the two was a terran.

As the two drew closer, Iris saw that the two were both older with the terran man accompanied by a high elf noblewoman. The woman was tall and regal, with long silver hair that was done up in an elaborate hairstyle that *had* to have taken *hours*.

Iris was impressed. She didn't have nearly enough patience for that shit.

The noblewoman wore a flowing gown of deep blue velvet that complemented her complexion, and her eyes sparkled with warm intelligence.

The terran with her was a stark contrast, with short grey hair and piercing green eyes that flickered with a curious light. He wore relatively simple clothing compared to the rest of the nobles around, and for one, she was impressed that he actually wore the semblance of a suit.

Maybe he had someone recreate what he is used to, like me.

The elf woman spoke first, her voice smooth. "Good evening, we couldn't help but notice your wonderful display with Lady Imogen. I am Lady Delphina of House Darrow, and this is my husband, Lord Reginald. He—"

"Just absolutely wanted to meet you! I don't get to meet other hu—terrans very often, so I couldn't help myself," the man interrupted with a bright grin. Iris couldn't help but smile at his enthusiasm.

"Nice to meet you both," Iris replied. "I'm Iris Stuart. This is my escort, Lady Kaira of..."

Kaira smiled and bowed her head. "House Harken. It is a pleasure to meet you both."

Iris then gestured to the other two. "And this is Sera Timrel of the Fenren Merchant Company and her escort, Tanith Aldridge."

Lady Delphina smiled. "I am pleased to meet all of you," she said before looking at her husband who stood unfocused.

She huffed in amusement as the man stood there.

“Stuart...” Lord Reginald repeated thoughtfully, stroking his chin. “You wouldn’t happen to be from the United Kingdom... No, your accent doesn’t fit. The United States of America?”

Iris smiled. “I am from the US! What *year* are you from?”

The man chuckled deeply. “That’s a question I will not get used to, I assure you,” he said with a smile. “I am from eighteen ninety-four, in Cambridge.”

“Cambridge?” Iris confirmed. “And wow... you’re from the Victorian Era...”

The man raised a brow. “They named an entire era after the Queen?”

She smiled. “They sure did,” she confirmed.

Lady Delphina spoke up again. “Forgive my husband, he can be quite charming but sometimes forgets his manners in Lehelian society,” she said with a chuckle and an expression that betrayed her true opinion on the matter. “We were curious about your magic, Miss Iris. Your display as you entered the hall, and with Lady Imogen was quite impressive. May I ask what all types of magic you specialize in?”

Iris shifted a bit, curious about where the woman was going with this. “Oh, it’s nothing special really,” she said modestly, not wanting yet another situation where people want to use her. “I mostly focus on electricity... err, lightning magic.”

“Fascinating,” Lord Reginald said with a small smile. He looked at his wife. “That’s another one. We really need to fund research into this, it’s clearly not as rare as you suspected.”

His wife smiled. “Oh, husband of mine. Let’s not speak in front of Miss Iris as if she is not here,” she gently admonished the man before focusing on Iris. “My husband appeared in a Flash and quickly captured my heart. His fascination with magic and industry is so endearing.”

The woman turned her attention to her husband and smirked. “But not really appropriate for such settings.”

Reginald rolled his eyes. “Appropriate this, appropriate that. My dear, magic is more important than your nation’s silly customs.”

“Oh, Reginald. This is your kingdom now too, my love,” she said.

Iris laughed. “Sorry, you two are adorable. How did you two meet?”

Reginald huffed a laugh while Delphina’s face filled with mirth. “He literally appeared in my bathroom as I was bathing. The surprise the both of us had...” the older woman started chuckling.

“She nearly drowned in her own bath,” Reginald said, taking over. “Naturally, I had to save her.”

“And save me he did. It didn’t take much to woo me after that,” Delphina said, smiling fondly at her husband. “It was fate, I suppose.”

Iris smiled at the couple's love story. "That's amazing. It's not every day that you hear about a love story that starts in a bathroom," she joked.

The two nobles smiled and gave each other a look that made Iris want to gag.

It's like watching two love-struck grandparents.

The group chatted for a few more minutes before Lady Delphina excused herself, promising to invite Iris over for tea at a later time. Lord Reginald stayed behind for a bit longer, asking Iris more questions about her lightning magic and the technological advancements of her time. Iris was happy to answer and found the man to be a delight. She couldn't express how much relief it brought her to find another human who was just... nice and didn't want to take advantage of her.

As they spoke, she found that Lord Reginald was quite knowledgeable about science and technology, even for someone from the Victorian Era. Eventually, Lord Reginald had to leave as well, but not before he gave Iris a friendly pat on the shoulder and thanked her for the *enlightening* conversation that left her groaning and Kaira laughing heartily.

Iris smiled as she saw the man rejoin his wife and immediately put his hand on her back, effortlessly joining in the conversation she was having. It made Iris feel grateful for the chance encounter, and hopeful that there were other terrans out there that would be worth meeting.

Maybe this princess that Sera keeps talking about.

Iris turned back to her group and they returned to various chats, laughing as they enjoyed each other's company. Iris found herself feeling more relaxed and comfortable than she had been all evening. It was refreshing to talk to people that didn't seem to be focused on their own gain. As the night wore on, the music grew louder and more people began to dance. Iris was content to stay there and watch, but before she knew it, Kaira was holding out a hand toward her.

"Come on, Iris," Kaira said, gesturing with a come hither motion. "Let's dance."

Iris hesitated for a moment, feeling self-conscious. She didn't know *any* of the dances, and she didn't want to make a fool of herself in front of her friends. But Kaira's infectious smile and gentle urging were hard to resist.

"Okay," Iris said, taking Kaira's hand and letting herself be pulled onto the dance floor.

Iris pulled mana into herself even as she moved, casting **Rushing Wind** to make herself as graceful as the breeze.

"Don't worry, just follow my lead," Kaira assured her with a whisper and put a hand on Iris's waist that made her tingle.

The next song began and Kaira took an exaggerated movement to begin the dance, and Iris easily moved in sync with the high elf.

Iris and Kaira moved gracefully across the center of the grand hall, their steps in perfect sync as she **Focused** to ensure she could perfectly follow her date with the rhythm of the music. The melody was beautiful, with flutes and strings coming together to create an enchanting tune. As they twirled and spun, Iris couldn't help but laugh as her dress flowed in the air just as she had imagined it. Lightning sparked as she moved, and soon the others on the floor moved away to watch the display of magic.

As Iris let go of her anxiety and just gave into her instincts and magic, their feet glided smoothly over the wooden floor, and their movements were so precise that they seemed to be performing a carefully choreographed routine. The dance was elegant and sophisticated, and as the music reached a crescendo, Iris found herself spinning away from Kaira. The two ended up on opposite ends of the opening in the crowd.

Kaira gestured her over, and Iris couldn't help but return a mischievous smirk. She spun, pulling mana into her core before she used **Lightning Step**.

Mana surged within her until her entire being shimmered with electricity. With a mental nudge, she transformed into a being of pure lightning, crackling with raw energy as she hurtled across the floor toward Kaira. In an instant, she coalesced into solid form, gracefully coming to a halt right in front of her partner with her hands poised for the next step of their dance.

Her beautiful elf dance partner smiled broadly, eyes wide in amazement, as she took Iris's hand and they continued their dance in perfect harmony. As they continued the dance, all of the other dancers stood still. Their faces froze in awe as the two of them seemed to move effortlessly across the floor, their bodies meshing together as if they were made for each other. When the song came to an end, Kaira dipped Iris low, causing her to laugh in delight. The other dancers around them cheered, and Kaira helped Iris back up, grinning from ear to ear.

The elf leaned close and whispered into her ear, "That was amazing... *You* are amazing."

Iris blushed at the compliment, feeling her heart swell with happiness. Everything had gone so poorly since arriving, and until this moment, she thought she was relegated to a life cursed with bad luck and misfortune. Looking down at Kaira, she saw the warmth and admiration in the elf's eyes, and she knew she had made the right choice in inviting the woman to the ball.

"Thank you," she murmured back, a smile playing at the corner of her lips. "Kaira, I—"

Their lips met.

As their lips touched, it was like a jolt of electricity shot through Iris's body, igniting every nerve ending with a surge of raw power. It was like a lightning strike, fierce and intense, yet at the same time, gentle and tender. The kiss was charged with the same energy that had fueled their dance, crackling with passion and desire. Sparks

danced between them, casting a warm, electric glow that illuminated their faces. Iris's heart raced as she felt Kaira's arms wrap around her, pulling her in close. It was as if they were two halves of the same circuit, completing each other and creating a powerful, unbreakable connection. For that moment, they were lost in each other, enveloped in a storm of passion and love that was electrically charged, yet also peaceful and soothing. As they finally pulled away, Iris felt a sense of completeness wash over her.

Kaira smirked up at her. "Thanks for the dance," the woman said softly.

Iris smiled back at Kaira, her eyes sparkling. "Thank you for the kiss," she replied, feeling a blush creeping up her cheeks.

Kaira chuckled, tucking an errant strand of hair behind Iris's ear. "Anytime," she said, her voice low and sultry.

Iris felt her pulse quicken at the sound of Kaira's voice. She leaned in for another kiss, but Kaira gently pulled away.

A feeling of longing fell over her. *No...*

"Let's get back to the others, you still have your meeting," Kaira said with a tinge of disappointment.

As the next song began to play, and the other dancers returned to their festivities, Kaira took her hand once again and led her back to the others, where a tall woman stood.

The woman inclined her head and offered a small smile. "Adventurer Stuart?" she asked.

Iris tilted her head slightly, a soft smile spreading across her lips. "That's me," she said, meeting the woman's gaze.

"Lady Arden awaits you," she said in a calm and measured tone.

Iris took a deep breath and looked around at the others, seeing their determined faces. With a confident nod, Iris signaled her assent. "Let's do this."

She was ready for the next part of the main questline.