

## Storm Under a Clear Sky

Iris found herself sitting next to a fire with the guide harpy and the harpy queen who wore a persistent scowl. The queen bore Iris's presence with thinly veiled disdain while their guide filled the air with an incessant stream of chatter. In a moment of quiet, Iris saw her chance to steer the conversation toward their primary objective.

“So, what's the plan? Where can we help? You know this forest the best,” she said, hesitating before adding, “Our objective is the Marauder Prince.”

The queen's scowl deepened as she met Iris's gaze. “You killed my people, lightning bitch. You don't make demands.”

*If she calls me a bitch one more time...*

Iris shook her head, adamant in her defense. “No, you don't get to act all high and mighty. Your people attacked us and we just defended ourselves. We were literally just passing through.”

The queen looked away, but the other harpy chattered insistently at her, almost pleading. It was then that Iris asked, “Who is she to you?”

Their guide stilled at the question, glancing between Iris and the queen, before squawking out a response.

“This is my sister, Lavi, and you are only allowed to be here because you saved her life,” the queen grumbled reluctantly. Another squawk from Lavi, and she added begrudgingly, “...Thank you.”

There was a brief exchange of looks between the sisters, and then the queen sighed, seeming to collect herself before turning back to Iris. “Fine. We thought you were with that bastard. He was moving wagons that were protected by other... what do you call your kind? The ones with round ears?”

“We're often called terrans.”

The queen considered this, tilting her head thoughtfully in a decidedly bird-like gesture. “And you?”

“I consider myself human.”

“And what do you call us?”

“Harpies.”

A sense of satisfaction seemed to settle over the queen at this. “We were once elves. Most telv. Now... *harpies*.” She paused, seeming to test the word in her mouth, “This name. Is good.”

Iris ventured a question then. “Did the mana that changed you also take away your people's ability to speak?”

The queen's eyes softened, a trace of sadness marring her fierce demeanor. "Yes. It changed us greatly," she confirmed, lifting her winged arm. "My magic... My magic kept me more like before. In here," she pointed to her head, an undeniable touch of sorrow in her eyes.

Iris found her gaze drifting, taking in the scene unfolding around them. Harpies were going about their tasks, some were soaring overhead while others scurried on the ground, their movements hinting at a harmony Iris hadn't expected in such a chaotic setting.

Away from them, Iris's party huddled together and spoke quietly amongst themselves. Mocha and Akane were engaged in a seemingly cordial chatter with a few curious harpies.

Meanwhile, one of the youngest harpies Iris had seen was showering affection upon Owlie, her youthful enthusiasm was positively adorable.

Her eyes caught Kaira's gaze. A wink from her partner sent a blush rushing to Iris's cheeks, a sweet interlude amidst the brewing storm.

The queen, noticing their interaction, asked with a small tilt of her head, "She your mate?" Her head noticeably twitched a few times before the bird woman corrected herself, "L-Lover?"

Iris nodded, a soft smile dancing on her lips. "She is."

Her gaze strayed to the branches where a handful of male harpies were perched, their hostile eyes fixed on them. A pang of curiosity pricked at her mind. "What happened to the men?"

The queen's sigh weighed heavy with melancholy. "The men... Changed the most. They are precious. No child born since... this..." she said with a gesture at her body. "has been a boy. They are all we have. Precious. Must keep safe."

A surge of sympathy coursed through Iris.

She knew the stories.

But actually seeing the situation the harpies found themselves in... it was beyond tragic, it was devastating. When she had seen the men for the first time, she had a bit of hope despite being attacked... If they had males, surely they would be okay.

It seemed reality begged to differ.

Her joke about Tanith so long ago seemed quite prescient now.

*What will happen when the men aren't enough? Will they start abducting men to use for... purposes?*

When Iris didn't respond, the queen heaved a sigh, her gaze turning inward before she nodded to Lavi. "You may help. If only so less of my people die."

Iris sat straighter on her log, her grip on the opportunity tightening. “Where can we help?” she asked again.

“You speak truth? You want to kill the Marauder Prince?” the queen asked, her voice betraying a hint of caution.

“Yes. He is the reason for our quest,” Iris affirmed.

A thoughtful silence hung in the air as the queen mulled over Iris's words. Lavi broke it after it dragged on a bit too long with a rapid-fire stream of chatter, drawing her sister into a heated debate. The animated conversation was punctuated by sharp gestures and an occasional accusatory point in Iris's direction.

The tension escalated until the queen threw her clawed hands up in exasperation, her gaze landing on Iris with a finality that left no room for arguments. “Lavi will guide you. You will strike at the prince from behind so his magic cannot be used against my people. After you attack, we will follow and attack from the front.”

Iris pursed her lips in thought.

After considering it, she held up a hand. “Tell me more of this plan, I need to be sure we aren’t rushing headfirst into a suicide charge.”

With a solemn air, the queen lowered herself to the ground, her sharp claws carving intricate paths in the dirt.

Iris watched intently as the harpy queen traced their paths, marked the potential ambush points, and sketched a rough layout of what she presumed to be the Marauder Prince's camp. Her every gesture, every sharp line and curve, depicted a strategic plan that was as ruthless as it was precise.

The queen’s detailed explanation of her plan, coupled with the occasional heated exchange with her sister, made the better part of an hour whittle away before Iris could even realize it. It was a complex operation that involved stealth, diversion, and a concentrated strike—a strategy that required careful coordination and timing.

When the queen finally finished and raised her gaze to meet Iris's, her eyes held a question.

Iris responded with a nod of agreement.

The harpy queen then divulged everything she knew about the prince, making Iris keenly aware of the monumental task that lay ahead of her. The evidence clearly pointed to the poachers and bandits having a hierarchy, with the strongest ruling at the top. Iris reasoned that anyone capable of bossing around Jorim, who himself had been a strong opponent, must indeed be a force to be reckoned with.

The Marauder Prince was a potent fighter with both magic and physical abilities.

A hybrid.

Like Iris.

And according to the queen, he'd gotten stronger by killing a veritable horde of beasts and monsters... And harpies.

The revelation underscored the magnitude of the challenge, but it also steeled her resolve.

The plan itself had merit and it seemed that Iris and her party filled a void that was deeply needed by the queen. A team that could take the fight to him, because despite their numbers and plenty of strong individuals, the queen was the only one with true magic.

The Marauder Prince had at least five remaining after Iris killed the beam caster.

So, while Iris and the others hit the prince himself, the queen could focus on whatever casters worked with the poacher's well-equipped troops.

Despite the risks and the palpable tension in the air, this was their best shot at ending the conflict.

Iris was all too aware of the fact that they had been drawn into a larger conflict, one that had already claimed numerous lives on both sides. If they could take out the Marauder Prince, they might be able to turn the tide in favor of the harpies and end this conflict sooner.

And Iris knew, whatever the outcome, they were ready to face it.

The lives they could potentially save seemed worth the risk.



Under the protective cloak of the fading day, Iris and her companions followed Lavi, their harpy guide, away from the frenetic activity of the harpy camp. The gentle rustle of leaves and twigs beneath their feet was the only sound that broke the eerie silence of the forest that lived in the shadow of the retreating form of the sun god.

Lavi, with her otherworldly grace, flew ahead, navigating the dense forest with ease. Akane and Mocha were both in humanoid forms, to make them as small as possible, while the owlbear simply had the illusion of having no saddle. A single owlbear moving through the woods would not be out of the norm if it were seen Akane and Lavi swore.

An hour into their journey, they came upon a rather large patrol, which had them quickly hunker down and hide. Akane responded swiftly, her magical illusions shrouding the group, rendering them all but invisible to the passing threat.

Upon reaching their destination, the sight of the Marauder Prince's camp looming ahead brought them to a halt. Iris studied the massive camp that not only filled out the clearing but weaved in between the trees and was significantly larger than the

fort they had previously encountered, its numerous wooden watch towers held scorpion siege engines that scanned the skies and merged seamlessly with the surrounding forest.

It didn't have walls, but it did have what looked like... *spikes* that were planted and pointed outward into a raised earthen mound that encircled the entire camp.

*I guess when your main opponent can fly, the necessity to build a wall becomes moot.*

Gryff's face set into a serious line. "Those towers are going to see us and target us with those bolt-throwers from far away."

In response, Laken's shrug was both resigned and matter-of-fact. "We can take out the closest ones before we enter."

With their attention refocused, Lavi swooped down from her aerial vantage point and gestured toward the camp's rear. The group, now alert and focused, trailed deeper into the forest, skirting around the fort's perimeter to avoid detection from the towering watchtowers.

Their target, as outlined in the plan, was a section of the camp's earthen ramparts where a stream flowed into the fort from a nearby river. Having reached their designated point of attack, they hunkered down, prepared to strike under the cover of night. In the background, Akane stood watch, her illusions at the ready, providing an extra layer of protection against prying eyes.

Now all they could do was wait.

And so they waited.

As twilight descended, a sense of heightened anticipation hung heavily in the air. Within the fortified walls of the Marauder Prince's camp, fires were kindled, braziers ignited on the watchtowers, and the shouts of men echoed through the still forest air.

It was almost as if they knew an attack was imminent.

*Maybe the harpies have tried attacking often.*

Kaira crept closer to Iris. "How do we know when to attack?" Kaira asked.

Iris simply shrugged, she didn't know. "We'll go soon, the big thing is that we make a scene."

Drawing the attention of her companions with a soft hiss, Iris beckoned them closer, outlining her plan in hushed whispers.

"Laken, how about you and I scale one of those towers? You could use the scorpion and your bow against the poachers while I take out the nearby towers with my magic," Iris proposed.

Laken, his gaze briefly shifting between the watch tower closest to them and his owlbear companion, agreed. "I can do that. Gryff, can you stay with Owlie?" he asked the telv, to which Gryff nodded in agreement.

“Of course, my friend,” the man replied easily.

Next, Iris turned to the kitsune. “Akane, think you can put an illusion on me and Laken?” she asked.

Akane tilted her head for a moment then shrugged. “...Yes.”

Iris then directed her attention to Mocha, who was still in the sun elf illusion. “Mocha, when we do this, I'm going to provide overwatch until the Marauder Prince takes the bait. Can you and Kaira work together? Akane can drop your illusion after we get into the camp itself.”

Kaira looked affronted, her brows furrowing as she shot Iris a reproachful look, her girlfriend opened her mouth and Iris just knew she wanted to disagree with having to be protected.

Iris, however, cut her off with a shake of her head. “It's the best idea,” she reassured her. “Mocha works better with someone else, I will be with Laken until the Marauder Prince appears. You, Mocha, and Akane will be the fast movers rushing and hitting whoever you can without getting bogged down.

“Gryff, Bree, and Owlie will stay close together and draw the attention of the larger groups. I'll hit them with everything I've got to hopefully get his attention and as soon as he gets close... I'll pounce. If he's too strong, Akane, I may need your help. Mocha and Kaira, focus on any secondary casters.”

Lavi tilted her head and Iris winced. She had forgotten about the harpy.

“Lavi, I want you to fly low, you don't want to be a target for those siege weapons on the watchtowers, okay? So what you need to do is work at disrupting and control. Move from person to person to knock them off balance, make them lose their weapons, you don't want to stop moving, prioritize anyone that can be eliminated by someone else in the group. You're there to keep them unable to form up.”

The harpy nodded seriously.

Everyone fell silent as they absorbed the plan. “Okay, let's get ready. As soon as Laken and I take the first tower, I'm going to wreck the second. That's the signal for everyone else to attack,” Iris instructed.

Seeing their determined faces, Iris felt a surge of hope. “Let's do this, people. Don't get split up. We're crazily outnumbered until the queen attacks the front.”

Lavi chattered excitedly to Mocha who translated for the group. *‘As soon as your magic is seen, my sister will attack! She will, you'll see!’*

Iris nodded, and Akane worked her magic.



With their illusionary guise in place, Iris and Laken moved stealthily toward the Marauder Prince's camp. Their shrouded forms were just whispers against the twilight, unnoticed amongst the shadows and the thicket.

Iris used her **[Mana Sight]** and was able to barely discern where Laken was in order to stay within arm's reach.

As they approached, they saw groups of armed and armored men and women patrolling the encampment. These were clearly the most professional soldiers the Marauder Prince had at his disposal and it appeared he spared nothing to ensure they had equipment.

*They look like they could be part of an army...*

They carefully moved through the line of spikes followed by a slow crawl as they crested the raised earthen rampart.

Iris had to pause to take in the sight.

The camp itself was sprawling, with tents and the few structures stretching as far as their eyes could discern in the dim light. Fires flickered all around, casting a warm, orange glow on the tents and wooden buildings. The camp had been meticulously organized, revealing a disciplined force capable of housing hundreds.

She patted Laken's arm and slowly rose to her feet and crept forward into the camp, and quickly made their way to the closest watch tower.

Just as they were about to climb the ladder to the watchtower, the crunch of boots on gravel halted their progress. Two men approached and above them, a man, began descending from the tower.

Iris and Laken quickly stepped under the tower where crates and supplies were stored.

And waited.

Once on the ground, the man was joined by the two others. Their hushed whispers carried through the cool night air.

"The prince's seer believes there will be a storm tonight," the first man muttered sarcastically. "She says there will be lightning."

"On a clear sky like tonight? Her magic must be something else." The second scoffed, a hint of disdain in his voice. "That priestess has been trying to lead us astray for weeks. The prince needs to just get rid of her," he added with a sneer.

The third man pushed the second, heat lacing his voice. "Do not anger the gods. We're not heathens."

The first man merely shook his head, his words carrying a note of grim acceptance. "If that was true, then we wouldn't have attacked the carriage of the Church. We were lucky there was only one paladin... and we still lost seven men."

The conversation sent a shiver down Iris's spine but the men soon moved on, leaving the path to the watchtower clear.

Iris let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding, and with Laken by her side, they moved to the ladder. Their ascent was slow and cautious, every muscle tensed as she expected someone else to either hear them or start to descend.

Reaching the top of the watchtower, Iris hoisted herself onto the platform, her movements muted in the hush of the night.

A solitary figure stood guard by the scorpion, his gaze fixed on the perimeter of the dense forest surrounding them. Iris glanced at the other watchtowers in proximity, all constructed as elevated platforms without barriers, likely to provide a downward angle for the scorpions if need be.

She smirked.

They certainly would be needing that tonight.

With silent precision, she drew her dagger from its sheathed home of her lower back.

Iris moved toward him, each step she took was measured, careful not to alert the unsuspecting guard.

A brief glance confirmed that Laken had joined her at the top of the tower.

His presence was marked only by the subtle glow of mana.

*Thank the gods this guy isn't a mage.*

Laken's figure shifted slightly, his hand reaching for his back where his bow rested.

Iris could feel his readiness as his arms lifted and moved in the motion of an arrow nocked and waiting for release.

She turned her eyes back to her target.

With her gaze fixed on the guard, she tiptoed towards him, every step making her heart race. She couldn't have that.

Iris **[Focused]**.

She cast **[Arcane Capability]** and finally, **[Rushing Winds]**.

Just in case.

If anyone saw her, they would need to react quickly.

Just as she was close enough to reach out and touch him, Iris rose to her full height and looked down at the shorter telv man.

She had no doubts that her luck was amplified by the guard's lack of **[Mana Sight]**, allowing her to remain undetected in his vicinity.

Her **[Danger Sense]** was quiet.



The moment of action arrived, and as swift and sure as a predator's pounce, Iris reached out with her illusion-swathed hand and covered his mouth, muffling any sound the guard might make as she yanked him down.

Simultaneously, her dagger plunged into his body multiple times, its cold steel meeting warm flesh in a deadly dance of controlled, pinpoint movements.

Behind her, the twang of Laken's bow releasing an arrow was the only accompaniment to the grim ballet they had set into motion.

And then the seer's prescient observations range true.

A storm arrived.



The vibrant arcs of electricity danced through the night air, illuminating the area around the watchtower. The bright streaks of lightning were as thick as Kaira's arm, each bolt ricocheting off its target, a figure on another tower, and back to its caster with deadly precision. With each connection, orbs of crackling energy, each roughly the size of her fists, sprung into existence and raced into the night toward other targets.

The spectacle unfolded in a blink of an eye, but in Kaira's mind, it stretched out, each detail carved into her memory. A storm of lightning orbs formed an intimidating barrage overhead, then shot out towards the other towers, soon followed by two spears of lightning. It was a display of raw, untamed power. It was beautiful. It was their signal.

"Move!" called out to the others as she lunged forward, her focus narrowing to the task at hand.

She followed the creek into the camp with Mocha next to her as she sprinted into the camp, the sounds of everyone else close behind.

As soon as they entered the camp, Akane dropped her illusions.

In a blink of an eye, the vulpine twin of her paramour, along with Mocha, were both obscured by a fog of mana before they both emerged in their true forms.

Once Mocha was alongside her, Kaira clambered onto the warhorse's saddle with practiced ease and smoothly unsheathed her blades and held them at the ready, her shield secure on her back.

The chaos of Iris's assault had taken the enemy by surprise, and Kaira was determined to exploit their confusion.

With a swift movement from Mocha, they surged forward in a blur and she took advantage of the speed as two of the marauders fell to her blades, their hesitation proving fatal.

As they advanced, Kaira risked a glance at the watchtower, where Laken was rapidly launching scorpion bolts at a distant tower.

Iris was in her element, launching more magic than Kaira had ever seen her use, launching bolts and orbs of lightning at anything and everything, causing fire to sprout from the tents as stray bolts found their mark.

Mocha was a force of nature unto herself.

She moved through the frenzied mass of Marauders as effortlessly as the wind through a grove, her agility and raw power cutting a swath through the enemy ranks.

It was as if the very laws that bound the world had chosen to exempt her.

With uncanny grace, she abruptly halted her forward charge only to spin and kick out with deadly precision, her iron-shod hooves connecting with devastating impact.

Lavi, their harpy guide, became a whirling dervish of fury from above. With a deafening shriek, she swooped down from the night sky, her long talons gleaming ominously in the firelight. She fell upon a cluster of archers with savage precision, her razor-sharp claws slicing through their leather armors and leaving them in agonized heaps on the ground.

Before any could react, she was back in the air, rocketing forward like a living arrow to seek out her next targets.

From her vantage point atop Mocha, Kaira had a clear view of Lavi's aerial assault. She watched as the harpy veered up and streaked alongside a watch tower, her talons reaching out to snatch an unsuspecting marauder from the top.

With a heave of her mighty wings, she tossed the man into the void, his terrified scream echoing in the chaos before abruptly ending in a sickening thud.

As Lavi made her sharp descent, a scorpion bolt whistled past her, barely missing the harpy by inches. The source of the threat was a watch tower further down, its scorpion swiveling to take aim once more as the man attempted to reload.

The response was swift.

From his position in the tower they'd commandeered, Laken—with Iris's hand resting on the ballista—sent a retaliatory bolt that crackled soaring through the air. The deadly projectile crashed into the siege weapon with a thunderous impact, sending splinters of wood and debris flying along with crackling orbs of lightning.

The threat of the scorpion was silenced, its operators either dead or scattered from the force of the blow and the subsequent magic.

Kaira couldn't help but feel a surge of relief as she saw Iris giving a thumbs-up signal, indicating all was well before resuming her magical onslaught.

She refocused her attention back on the fight at hand, her blades once again finding their targets in two men that sought to attack Mocha from the side when out of the corner of her eye she saw a man charging the horse at the front.

Suddenly, Mocha let out a neigh that could only be a warning and Kaira felt her stomach lurch as the horse seemingly flipped around in place instantaneously, but some magical ability kept the elf's rear firmly planted in the saddle.

Mocha then focused her power into a single, brutal kick that sent a man flying backward, the front of his armor visibly dented inward from the sheer force of the horse's blow.

As Mocha moved to the next group, Kaira caught sight of a skulk of three-tailed foxes harrying and attacking the enemy with deadly efficiency and leaving a trail of bodies in their wake.

Yet Mocha and Akane were not alone in their onslaught.

Upon the horse's back, Kaira was a storm of blades.

Every muscle, every movement, was honed by years of training and battle-hardened experience.

She would not make the mistake she had in that camp again.

Her twin blades danced in the light of the flames and magic, their edges a blur of steel as they cut down enemy after enemy. As Mocha darted and weaved through the chaotic battlefield, Kaira was constantly in motion, striking out at any enemy that came within the reach of her deadly swords.

Mocha's movements were fluid and anticipatory, adjusting her course and speed to keep Kaira within arm's reach of their enemies.

This unspoken coordination between them, a feat the horse had clearly honed over countless battles with Iris, allowed Kaira to focus on her own lethal dance of blades, secure in the knowledge that Mocha would keep her in the heart of the fight.

However, the marauders weren't simple pushovers.

Despite the chaos and sudden assault, smaller pockets of them managed to regain their bearings and organize themselves, rallying together to mount a counterattack. They braved the storm of Iris's magic and the ferocity of Mocha's charges, their eyes burning with the stubborn determination that came from having their backs to the wall.

Their bravery, however, was short-lived.

Owlie, the towering owlbear, lunged forward with a roar that shook the night.

His powerful claws closed around a heavily armored man that would have looked like a knight anywhere else and lifted him off his feet as if he were a mere ragdoll.

With an almost casual swing, Owlie transformed the unfortunate marauder into a deadly makeshift club, using the soldier's own armor as a weapon against his comrades.

The screams and clatters of metal were only drowned out by the crackle of electricity and the sound of battle.

Meanwhile, Bree and Gryff, who had been watching the owlbear's back, launched into the fray.

The spear-wielding Bree moved with a dancer's grace, her weapon a lethal extension of her body. Each thrust, each twist, was aimed to maim or kill, her agility and precision proving a deadly combination.

At her side, Gryff wielded his pike with the strength and discipline of a seasoned warrior. His strikes, although less flashy than Bree's, were no less deadly.

The pair worked in perfect harmony, their weapons forming a barrier of steel around them, deterring any marauder brave or foolish enough to attempt to flank the owlbear.

Their presence ensured that Owlie could continue his assault unhampered, and the marauders quickly learned the price of ignoring this formidable trio.

And then the first mage made their appearance.



Iris caught sight of a newcomer in the chaos just before Kaira did.

A high elven man forged a bubble of magic around himself and a nearby group, followed by a third to protect a group being attacked by Owlie.

Laken immediately fired the scorpion imbued with her **[Static Discharge]** at the man. The transparent barrier stopped the scorpion's bolts mid-air without as much as a crack and dispersed Iris's two static orbs along its surface.

A glance confirmed that Akane was entangled in her own battle, an illusionary dance with six men who swung futilely at her doppelgangers.

The real Akane stalked from behind, her fangs bared in anticipation of an attack.

Before the men could even react, the kitsune struck.

Narrowing her eyes, Iris decided to try and help as a second bolt fired by Laken also did nothing.

Iris fired a **[Spark]** at the man, but the orb just splashed against the shield with no visible effect, however, the sight of more men rushing Gryff and Bree tore her focus away.

She drew mana and threw her hands forward, casting a **[Lightning Spear]**, the resultant bolt of energy rocketing forward with deadly precision. The first marauder

barely had time to register the attack before the spear punctured him and continued its path, arcing toward his companion.

His desperate dive aside proved futile.

She moved on to her next target.

Iris loosed a **[Chain Lightning]** spell at a pair of assailants scaling a watch tower, a blur of feathers caught her attention.

Lavi, with a screech filled with fury, swooped past a third climber and effortlessly yanked him off his perch. His startled yell was cut short as he plummeted to the ground, landing with a resounding snap.

With those threats handled, she turned back to the abjuration mage to see if she could help.

She focused on the man just in time to witness Mocha and Kaira's assault.

Her friend blurred forward with Iris's girlfriend on her back, the horse's head lowered as she raced across the area. On her armored head, the steel spike pulsed with a mana-infused glow, before it collided with the protective barrier.

The force shattered the shield, allowing Mocha to pass through unhindered.

In a display of perfect synchrony, Mocha bucked, flinging Kaira into the air.

The gorgeous elf warrior soared through the night, a lethal missile homing in on her target.

The mage, still reeling from the sudden destruction of his shield, barely had time to react before Kaira slammed into him, swords first.

As he fell, Kaira landed atop him, effortlessly withdrawing her blades from his chest. Without wasting a breath, she launched into a new offensive against two approaching marauders, her movements fluid and deadly.

As the chaotic skirmish carried on, a new squad of marauders emerged from the smoke and confusion, marching in unison, led by a figure donned in black steel plate armor. His presence alone was enough to draw the scattered marauders in the vicinity, prompting them to fall into rank behind him.

Kaira fell back, her twin blades ready as Mocha and Akane moved to her side. Gryff, Bree, and Owlie closed the ranks, forming a solid wall of defense in the face of the fresh threat.

Up on the tower, Iris watched as Laken's gaze fixated on the man in black, his fingers itching on the trigger of the scorpion.

"Not yet," Iris told him.

He nodded.

Iris met the cold certainty in the eyes of the elf that could only be the Marauder Prince with her own coursing determination. The Prince's expression betrayed a flicker of surprise before hardening into a steely scowl.

Iris exchanged a look with the elf next to her. "You're almost out of bolts," Iris pointed out, "Switch to your bow and watch for people trying to climb up. This... is my cue."

With a curt nod, Laken responded, "Don't worry about me. I got this."

Iris flashed him a smile full of confidence. "I know. Good luck."

"Same to you."

In the next moment, Iris cast [**Feather Fall**] and stepped off of the edge of the platform, her form descending gracefully from the tower to land amidst her friends on the ground.

She barely had time to catch her footing before Lavi swooped down, her talons digging into the earth as she landed by Iris's side. There they stood, a united front against the Marauder Prince and his squad, ready to face the challenge head-on.

Before anyone could say anything, the quiet night was shattered by the cacophonous screech of harpies, followed by the unmistakable crash of a boulder striking the ground—the harpy queen and her forces had made their move.

The Marauder Prince's gaze flickered back towards his fort, taking in the unfolding chaos, before snapping back to Iris. His expression was one of thinly veiled contempt, a sneer twisting his lips.

Undeterred, Iris calmly drew her sword, a smirk of derision playing at the corners of her mouth. With a cool composure that belied the escalating chaos around them, she addressed him, "Well, *Prince,* your reign of terror on the people of Lehelias ends tonight."

The words had barely left her lips when the Prince's grip tightened around his claymore, his knuckles whitening with the pressure. The high elf with piercing blue eyes that glowed with mana, seemed almost familiar for some reason as his magic spread from him.

Ice crystallized along the elf's blade, spreading swiftly from his feet, and coating the ground immediately around him in a frosty sheen.

Iris's smirk widened as her own mana surged through her and crackled from her eyes and [**Mana Conduit**] took hold on her blade.

As the cries for vengeance and retribution of the harpies filled the clear night sky, a storm was about to strike all that the Marauder Prince had built at the expense of the blood and tears of the innocent.

And Iris, the tempest herself, was the herald of its arrival.

*“You,”* he spit out.