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## Merely a Setback

Peals of laughter spilled from Iris as she and Kaira confidently strode side by side, their hands intertwined, towards the inn. The evening sun danced off their armor, causing sporadic glints that illuminated their path. The street was filled with people going about their day, but as the two armored women passed, heads turned, conversations paused, and eyes widened in mild astonishment.

Iris shot a playful smirk at Kaira, eyebrows raised, thoroughly amused by the spectacle they had unwittingly become. Iris leaned closer to Kaira, her voice tinged with mirth. "It's as if two armored women holding hands is something worth watching."

Kaira, with an amused sparkle in her eyes and a playful smirk on her lips, replied, "But it is though, Iris. It's like they've never seen two badass armored ladies looking this good before."

Catching her reflection in a nearby window, Iris couldn't help but chuckle. "Okay, maybe you're right. We are both fine as fuck."

With a sly wink, Kaira responded, "And if they haven't, they have now. And honestly, they should count themselves lucky." She squeezed Iris's hand tighter, reveling in the delightful absurdity of the moment.

Continuing down the path, the delightful aroma of cooking began to waft toward them, pulling them along like an invisible thread. The cobblestone street gradually widened, revealing a line of colorful street food vendors, each stall more enticing than the last.

Steam rose from pots of bubbling broths, skewers sizzled over open flames, and vendors shouted out their specials, competing with each other in a merry cacophony of promises of deliciousness. The townsfolk bustled about, children with sticky hands ran past, their mouths smeared with the remnants of sweet pastries, and couples huddled together, sharing dishes and laughter.

Kaira's stomach rumbled in response, betraying her hunger. "Oh, this is perfect. After all that attention we garnered, I think we've earned ourselves a feast."

Iris smirked. "From warriors in love to food critics in a blink. Let's get something."

"Don't forget, we got to be back for dinner!"

"Let's find something... Wait... Do you smell that?"

"What?"

The two, still hand in hand, navigated their way through the vendors, as Iris led them as she searched, their armored presence continuing to draw curious glances from the locals.

A tantalizing aroma wafted through the air, drawing Iris's attention like a bloodhound. Then, she saw it. A street vendor was delicately pulling out long, fried sticks from bubbling oil, sprinkling them generously with a mixture of cinnamon and sugar.

"Churros!" Iris exclaimed, eyes wide with recognition and glee.

Kaira glanced at the enticing treat with curiosity, her brow furrowing slightly. "Chu-what?"

Iris laughed, pointing at the crispy sticks. "These! They're called churros where I come from. Oh, the memories! Late-night festivals, fairs, and the sweet, sweet taste of home."

Intrigued by Iris's enthusiasm, Kaira wasted no time approaching the vendor, quickly exchanging some coins for some of the golden-brown delicacies. "Well then," she said, handing one to Iris with a grin, "let's see what the fuss is all about."

The first bite was everything Iris remembered and more. The outer crunch gave way to the soft, doughy inside, all perfectly balanced with the sweet mix of sugar and cinnamon. Beside her, Kaira's eyes shone with newfound appreciation. "Mmm... these are good," she admitted, taking another eager bite.

They continued their stroll, churros in hand and smiles on their faces. Kaira, wiping a sprinkle of sugar from her lips, looked thoughtful. "With all these new experiences, are you ready for all the administrative work you're about to dive into?"

Iris let out a playful groan. "Not in the slightest. But, you know what? I'm excited to learn, to grow into this role. Sure, there'll be hurdles, but I've got a good team, and amazing people like you by my side."

Kaira chuckled, shaking her head in amusement. "And churros, apparently. Who knew they'd be the secret to bolstering morale? I wish I'd known this when I was still a guard captain."

Iris grinned, raising her churro in mock toast. "To new adventures, and sweet surprises along the way!"

"Come along, my sweet addled lover. We need to change and get back."

Strolling leisurely, churros in hand, the day seemed perfect, the type where memories are etched with golden tinges.

"You know, with all the guild duties ramping up, I've been thinking..." Iris started, taking a bite and enjoying the sweet and crunch in equal measure, "about getting a place of my own. It might be time."

Kaira tilted her head, clearly surprised. "A house? For the grand and mighty Guildmaster Iris?"

Iris rolled her eyes. “Oh, stop it. But yes, something modest, with a garden maybe. Enough room for me, Mocha, and Akane. Just a cozy spot away from the chaos of the guild. ”

Kaira’s expression turned thoughtful. “Sounds wonderful. A sanctuary for when things get too hectic. Do you have any places in mind?”

Iris sighed wistfully. “It’s on the agenda. I’ve just been swamped. But I’ll get to it.”

As they strolled, Kaira’s mood became teasingly reflective. “Would there be room for a certain armored lady to visit in this dream abode of yours?”

Iris chuckled. “Only if she promises not to eat all my churros.”

“I recall you focusing quite hard on my own home. And when Mocha and Akane went off on their adventure, we didn’t get a chance to talk about it. Why the change of heart?”

“I’ve thought about it a lot,” Iris admitted with a sigh. Kaira moved behind her as they stepped around a man placing some crates down on the sidewalk and kept going. Kaira back by her side, she continued, “But, we’ve come really far really quickly. I think me finding a place of my own with those two scoundrels, will do me and *us* some good. I want to do this right, Kaira. I... care about you. Our worlds are different. Moving in together is a big step in your world, and I want to do this courting thing right. I want to woo you, to make you fall in love with me. Then, when the time is right I want to take the next step if you’re willing.”

Kaira’s breath hitched. “That... That sounds lovely, Iris. I would love that.”

“However! You are of course welcome any time, stay the night. Bring some underwear over to keep in my drawers...” She added with a wink. “Maybe when we want some extra privacy, we can swing by your place. You know, without a shifty fox and a silly horse around.”

Her lover chuckled and nudged her. “They’re not too bad. I’ve always liked Mocha, and Akane has grown on me. Especially now since I don’t have to be the one to deal with her shenanigans!”

Iris chuckled.

Their laughter and banter continued as they walked, the world a beautiful haze of joy, until suddenly, without warning, a searing pain shot through Iris’s head. It felt like a bolt of lightning, white-hot and agonizing, and she bent over, clutching her temples.

Kaira, alarmed, gripped her arm as she tried to steady the now trembling Iris. “Iris?! Speak to me! What’s happening?”

The pain ebbed slightly, and it gave way to a dizzying swirl inside her head, like being caught in a whirlwind. Then, just as suddenly, a clear mental image formed, almost like an arrow, pointing directly behind them.

Rubbing her eyes, Iris tried to clear the fog of confusion. She pressed a hand to her temple as she winced, her fingers trembling. "My [**Adventurer's Compass**] just activated on its own."

Kaira's grip tightened around Iris, eyes clouded with worry. "What does that mean?"

Iris swallowed hard, her complexion paling. "It... It's supposed to lead me to my quest objectives..." She hesitated, the words catching in her throat as realization struck like an icy blade.

Kaira's voice was almost desperate as she asked, "What is it?"

Drawing a shaky breath, Iris replied, "The only unresolved quest that I could have had... is the Marauder Prince."

"But he's dead," Kaira retorted quickly.

Iris shook her head, "We never found his body."

She froze.

"Oh fuck, Kaira. The compass is pointing directly back to the guild." Time seemed to compress, urgency overtaking them. Iris tightened her grip on Kaira's arm. "We need to move. Now!"

Without wasting another moment, the two armored women broke into a sprint, a new urgency propelling them forward.

"Go!" Kaira yelled. "I'll catch up! I'm getting the Guard!"

Iris didn't hesitate.

With a nod, Iris shot forward, her armored form cutting a swift path through the sea of people on the streets.

The rhythmic pounding of her boots on the cobbled stones matched the frantic beating of her heart. As she wove through the throngs of startled townsfolk, their voices melded into a chaotic hum around her.

*Faster. I need to be faster.*

Suddenly, with a deep inhale, Iris summoned the mana for her [**Lightning Step**]. A flash of azure energy enveloped her, and in the next heartbeat, she hurtled forward, resembling a streak of lightning more than a human being.

The sheer velocity of her movement was breathtaking.

But her tactical mind raced even faster.

Not wanting to cause undue harm, she quickly modified the spell to minimize its explosive impact upon arrival. Every time she emerged from the burst of electricity, there was a collective gasp from the bystanders. Shouts of surprise, screams of fear, and calls for guards echoed through the streets.

But she had no time to explain or apologize, using the spell repeatedly to cover as much ground as possible.

As Iris rounded the final corner, the Adventurer's Guild Hall came into view.

Yet, as she approached the entrance, a sinking feeling washed over her. The large doors, which had previously stood tall and inviting, lay broken, scattered fragments blown inward by a violent force. Through the jagged doorway, an ominous icy mist crept out, its chilling tendrils licking the ground and curling into the air.

She halted abruptly, breathless not from the run but from the realization of what this might mean. The words slipped from her lips in a hushed whisper, filled with dread, "Oh no..."

Iris knew what she had to do, and these were her closest friends.

She couldn't be distracted.

She [**Focused**]. Her vision narrowed as the surroundings became sharper, more defined.

Darkness, silence, and icy dread filled the air, and within this quiet, Iris's determined steps echoed loudly. Drawing her sword, a gleaming beacon amidst the mist, her resolve crystallized.

Then, with a surge of mana, her [**Storm Skin**] activated. Each strand of her hair stood on end as electricity coursed along her body, making her skin crackle and spark, almost humming with raw power.

With [**Rushing Wind**], her every move became graceful, swift, like a dancer's fluid motion carried by an unseen breeze. As she channeled [**Arcane Capability**], her muscles tightened, and her senses amplified, enhancing both physical strength and magical potential. And finally, with [**Arcane Conduit**], her blade began to crackle with lightning, becoming not just an extension of her arm but also her will.

With heightened senses and fortified strength, she made her way through the mist-filled guild hall. The scene looked like the aftermath of a snowstorm.

Icicles, not naturally formed but rather thrust violently, jutted out from walls, their pointed tips glistening ominously.

Amid the wreckage in the main area, the first motionless forms came into focus. Her heart clenched. One particular figure pulled her closer. It was Findal—the optimistic high elf from Stilstead, who had ventured here with hopes and dreams. Now, he was still, the life extinguished from his form, rendered another victim of a merciless onslaught.

*Damn it all.*

Kneeling beside him, a torrent of sorrow threatened to consume her, the weight of loss nearly overpowering her resolve. But with a guttural breath, she anchored herself back to the grim reality, staunchly reminding herself that every second mattered.

*There'll be time for grief, but not now.*

Further into the gloom, Owlie lay pierced with icy spikes. Its once bright eyes were clouded, the spark gone, leaving a void that spoke of a fierce life cut short. Yet, amidst the sorrow, the absence of Laken offered a slender thread of hope.

*He could still be alive. I have to keep going.*

As she stood, a distant shout snapped her attention back. A male voice, sounding both triumphant and enraged, was followed by a feral growl, and then a pained yelp.

*No, not them...*

Iris's vision blurred as a wave of anger flooded her.

She nearly blacked out as a veritable torrent of mana surged through her. More than she had ever felt before, but instead of being consumed, she let it flood throughout her body. She used her **[Electromancy]**, twisting her **[Storm Skin]**, and became one with it.

What was blurry turned white. Then, in that instant, she became not just a conduit for the energy but the energy itself, her very essence distilled into pure, furious lightning.

Her sword was no longer steel, instead, it had been transformed into an arc of pure electrical energy, an unbroken circuit flowing from her core to its electrified tip. She glanced at her hand, now not made of skin and bone, but a swirling dance of blue and white currents. Iris had become a living tempest, a force of nature made of pure lightning. She was no longer merely harnessing the storm; she was the storm.

The raw, thick stench of dread suffocated the air as Iris burst into the bar, and the scene that greeted her bore the weight of a crushing darkness. The aftermath of the assault was far graver than any battlefield she could have imagined.

Worse than the aftermath of the various camps she'd assaulted.

Akane, in her dire fox form, was pinned to the ground by a glacial spear through her side, each shallow breath she took echoing with pain. Her vibrant essence seeped out, staining the floor beneath with a heartrending shade of crimson.

Across the room, Mocha was propped up against a wall with her eyes closed. Sera and Tanith, despite bearing grievous wounds of their own, had thrown their bodies protectively around her, acting as a living barrier against any further harm.

Laken was not moving as Bree and Gryff staggered themselves so that they would protect each other. Both of them, battered and bruised, had placed themselves as shields, the determination evident in their bloodshot eyes.

The newer adventurers, unfamiliar with such carnage, were huddled together, their faces masks of terror and disbelief. Among them, Neri's tears streamed freely, each drop a testament to her despair, while Lyra appeared shattered, her spirit broken.

*And in the midst of it all stood him.*

His silhouette, a dark specter amidst the icy mist that now filled the room, was the embodiment of malevolence.

The Marauder Prince was here to finish them all. And the only thing standing in his way was Iris.

“Corin Syllar.”

He turned. The first thing she noticed were the wounds. The grievous injuries on his face, claw marks and bites, should've been signs of his defeat. But instead, they were filled with a cold, haunting mist, making him look even more monstrous.

Corin Syllar, the Marauder Prince, met Iris's gaze with cold, unyielding eyes.

“As you did to me, everything you built will fall. Everyone you love will die—”

Yet before he could form any further words, his predatory intentions betrayed by the slightest narrowing of his eyes, Iris moved.

It was a blur.

With the swiftness only [**Lightning Step**] could grant, her form didn't even change as she surged towards him, aimed straight at his heart.

But Corin seemed to predict it.

As if dissipating into the very mist he had conjured, he transformed into an ephemeral form, evading her strike. Instantly, a spear forged from the cold bitterness of ice lashed out to meet the arc of her lightning blade.

There was a shattering sound, resonating like the breaking of a thousand crystals as her lightning blade made contact. The spear fragmented into a million shards only to reforge in an instant, now aimed with deadly precision at Iris's heart.

But she was ready.

Veering to the side, she fired off a [**Spark**], her elemental fingertips sizzling with azure energy. Yet Corin was quicker, an ice wall rising abruptly, severing the connection between them.

Frustration. Fury. Desperation.

These feelings coiled within Iris, manifesting as an ear-piercing scream of rage.

She channeled all that pent-up energy into her [**Chain Lightning**], watching as bolt after bolt ricocheted off the wall, lighting up the room like a tempestuous storm.

With a calculated fury, she then [**Lightning Stepped**] directly towards the barrier.

The wall, still sizzling and sparking from her previous assault, exploded outward in a brilliant cascade of light and icy fragments. Amidst the flying debris, Iris's electrified hands latched onto Corin's arm. Shockwaves pulsed through him, his pain evident even through the chilling facade.

But Corin encapsulated himself within an icy armor.

*Not this time.*

With a strength born from both rage and determination, Iris pivoted and, using his own weight against him, hurled the Marauder Prince through the adjacent wall. The sounds of splintering wood and shattering ice filled the air as the dust settled, leaving a palpable silence in its wake.

The shattering noise had barely subsided when Iris and Corin found themselves in the main area, the heart of the Guild Hall, their relentless duel continuing with a ferocity that seemed to engulf everything in its path.

Without missing a beat, Iris conjured a sharp [**Lightning Spear**], launching it directly at Corin. But he countered with blinding speed, suddenly sheathed in a curtain of white. As the mist descended, blurring her vision, she realized he'd disappeared again. Before she could react, a bone-chilling blade—an echo of pure frost—slashed at her from the side.

She used [**Storm Armor**] and tried to spin away but she was too slow. Even as her armor lashed out at her attacker, she cried out in pain as the blade struck her, leaving a searing cold wound on her arm that would have sliced it off if not for her [**Elemental Form**].

Gritting her teeth against the pain, she retaliated with [**Spark**], aiming directly where she suspected Corin to be. A satisfied grunt echoed back, confirming her aim had been true.

Yet Corin was far from finished.

An intense cold radiated around her, and suddenly she found herself ensnared, feet encased in thick ice. Looking down, jagged spikes of ice grew rapidly upwards, threatening to pierce her. With no time to lose, she summoned [**Arc Lash**], sending arcs of electricity down from her sword, fracturing the ice around her feet.

Freed, she prepared to [**Lightning Step**] for a surprise attack, but was caught off guard.



The world around her turned white and disorienting as she was enveloped in what felt like a storm of ice and wind, obscuring her vision and numbing her senses.

She had to react quickly.

Trusting her instincts, she launched her [**Chain Lightning**], letting its branching energy seek out Corin.

A thunderous sound resonated, followed by a sharp cry of pain. It had found its mark.

For a brief moment, the icy mist cleared. Iris, seizing the moment, lunged forward, aiming a [**Lightning Spear**] directly at Corin's heart.

But he was faster, a sudden barricade of ice rising between them, intercepting her attack.

As the two magical forces clashed, the resultant explosion sent them both staggering back, wounds evident on both fighters. Iris, with slashes that bore the chill of the deepest winter, and Corin, with burns that danced with electric blue.

Determined, Iris used her [**Chain Lightning**] again, the jagged bolts of electricity seeking their target.

Corin, though wounded, was not to be outdone. The ground beneath Iris shifted, spikes rising to impale her. She barely dodged, but one found its mark, piercing her side.

She cried out, not just in pain but in defiance.

The fight was brutal, the atmosphere thick with tension. Every move was countered, and every strike met with equal force.

As they continued, a realization settled in Iris's heart: she wasn't just fighting for herself, but for every person Corin had hurt, for every tear shed, and every scream silenced.

This time there was no banter, no joking. Neither would be leaving until one was dead.

She was the shield against this monster, and she wouldn't yield.

Not now, not ever.

With each passing second, the Guild Hall seemed to echo with the haunting resonance of their duel. The hall bore witness to a contest of unfathomable power in a struggle for survival. Shadows danced wildly, distorted by the shimmer of lightning and the ethereal glow of encroaching ice.

Corin, though wearied and bearing multiple wounds, moved with a relentless cold fury. Each blow he delivered seemed to pull from the very marrow of winter, forcing Iris to muster every bit of her willpower to respond.

Her once luminous figure, a beacon of lightning, was now streaked with chilling blue, each wound testament to the price she was paying to protect those she loved.

A sudden onslaught of cold hit Iris as Corin unleashed a flurry of icy shards. Instinctively, she countered with [**Arc Lash**], splitting the projectiles in mid-air. But as one shard broke, two more formed in its place, a never-ending barrage that tried to overwhelm her [**Storm Armor**].

Each evasion drained her, each near-miss took its toll. He was stronger, with new spells. Clearly surviving the fall had done much to give him a boost. It took everything in her to keep up.

But Iris was far from beaten.

Drawing deeply from within, she sent a cascade of [**Chain Lightning**] towards Corin. As the arcs made contact, Corin screamed in agony, his defenses momentarily broken.

Sensing an opening, Iris gathered her energy, aiming to finish this with a single, decisive [**Lightning Spear**].

Yet, just as victory seemed within her grasp, the ground beneath her crystallized. Looking down, her heart sank as she saw her feet encased, immobilized. Her spear was avoided, once, then twice as he dove out of the way then formed a wall to stop the spear in its tracks.

She fired [**Spark**] after [**Spark**] but he either dodged or intercepted them while one of his hands stayed splayed out toward her, growing the ice around her legs.

She screamed and tried to hack at it, breaking off pieces. Then, just as she was almost free, Corin, without uttering a word, formed a glacial spike of ice.

Iris could see it, glistening and sharp, a monolith of ice with edges that promised a cold, unforgiving end. With a forceful motion, Corin sent it hurtling toward her.

Time seemed to slow.

Iris tried to muster another [**Lightning Step**], hoping to evade the inevitable, but her body, drained and wearied, didn't respond fast enough. The icy monstrosity found its mark, piercing her abdomen.

The force of the blow knocked the breath from her, and for a moment, all she could feel was the biting cold. A hush of silence enveloped the room, punctuated only by her sharp gasps—each one drawn from pain-laden lungs that sent waves of agony through her.

Her [**Elemental Form**] flickered and then went out like a light, turning her back to flesh and blood. Her transformation into an elemental force had helped her weather so many wounds but with its wane, vulnerability struck hard.

She coughed, her blood coming out in a spray.

Iris looked up from the blood flowing from her stomach and at the approaching Marauder Prince, a spear of ice in hand and triumph clear in his eyes.

“I will take my rightful place,” he sneered as he raised his spear. “As is my true birthright. And my path starts with your death.”

But death would have to wait.

With a rasping growl of determination, Iris grasped the glacial spike impaling her and wrenched it free. It clattered to the floor, slick with her blood. Raw pain seared through her, yet it only fueled the burning defiance in her heart. She dug deep into mana yanking at it as if it were a life line followed quickly by pulling on her [**Electromancy**], drawing power from nature itself.

She ripped a spell from her mind and demanded the gods give her what she needed.

Her voice, hoarse and filled with agony, cut through the tension as she screamed with her hand raised, beckoning a storm to come.

The heavens answered.

A massive bolt of true lightning tore through the ceiling, striking with such fury that the ground quaked beneath them. Corin, unprepared for the raw force, was hurled backward. The ice encasing Iris’s feet shattered from the sheer impact, freeing her. Pure, unbridled lightning surged through her and she felt *alive*. Her eyes, once filled with pain and desperation, now glinted with the raw energy of a tempest.

Her [**Storm Armor**], imbued with the very heart of the storm, thrummed with energy.

Without wasting a moment, she lunged forward, every fiber in her being focused on her adversary. Corin, still reeling from the lightning’s assault, could only muster a weak defense as she again used [**Call Lightning**].

The bolt struck, targeting the center of his ice-encrusted chest. The ensuing explosion of energy sent shards of his protective armor scattering and sending him sprawling with a scream of anguish, leaving him exposed and vulnerable.

He stumbled, struggling to find his footing amidst the debris. But Iris was relentless. With a shout, she executed a perfect [**Arc Lash**], and her blade, emboldened by her spell, found its mark on his neck.

Corin’s defenses crumbled and, in a heartbeat, he was reduced to a lifeless form.

Iris stood there, sword still poised, breathing heavily. Her body, battered and bleeding, had reached its limit. The adrenaline that had been fueling her began to wane, and the weight of her injuries pressed down upon her. With a deep, shuddering breath, she allowed herself to finally give in to the exhaustion.

As the world around her faded, she collapsed, her battle finally over.



Kaira ran.

Her heart pounded against her ribcage, every fiber of her being urging her to push forward. With her lungs burning and feet moving as if on fire, she led two full squads of guards in a frenetic race against time. The sense of urgency was palpable in the air, sharp enough to cut through steel.

*Must go faster. Iris... She needs me.*

A dormant, raw energy stirred deep within her, beckoning her to tap into its latent power. The mana inside her pulsed, almost echoing her desperate desire for speed. *How can I use this?*

With a guttural scream, Kaira willed her body to move even faster, channeling that innate mana and focusing it entirely on her legs. An electrifying rush coursed through her veins, the sensation nearly overwhelming. And then, just as if a dam had burst, her steps multiplied in their efficiency.

One step became two, the pace at which she was moving now rendering the guards trailing her mere blurs. The world around her began to meld and smear as she [**Double Stepped**] repeatedly.

Once she finally approached the Guild Hall, she slowed down. Two City Guardsmen stood at the entrance while another pair held back a growing crowd. Recognizing her, a familiar guard warned, "There's a lot of magic being thrown around in there."

"I'm going in," she replied simply.

He stepped aside, cautioning, "Be careful, Captain. Found the sound of it, it's dangerous."

She looked at him sharply. "I'm not a captain anymore." As she moved past them, she called back over her shoulder. "I'm an adventurer."

Then the sight of the shattered doorway threatened to break her momentum.

But she deftly navigated the debris, ripping her sword from its scabbard and yanking her shield off her back with practiced ease. Without a moment's pause, she hurtled into the fray, her mind singularly focused on her mission.

On her lover.

As Kaira moved through the threshold, every muscle in her body tensed in readiness, her shield held steadfast, her sword's edge gleaming menacingly in the low light. Each footfall was deliberate, each breath measured, as she took in the scene around her, her eyes darting to each shadow, seeking out threats.

In the dim room, a body lay lifeless, still in the throes of its final, desperate struggle. Nearby, Owlie, a once-vibrant creature, lay unmoving.

The sight made her heart constrict.

And then, another body, gruesomely headless, the remnants of melting ice surrounding it told a story of a fierce encounter.

She stifled the gasp rising in her throat.

Devastation was everywhere.

Pushing past the weight of her anguish and the grip of the chilling scene around her, Kaira hesitated as the distant and mournful hum began to cascade gently through the dim room. It beckoned her, like a forlorn call cutting through the tapestry of silence and despair. Each echoing note was a fragile thread, pulling her closer to its origin near the bar.

With each step, hope—a fragile, incandescent ember—flickered and grew within her, fed by the haunting beauty of the melody that grew more pronounced and profound. It wrapped around her, a comforting blanket amidst the chilled air.

The melancholic hum soon blossomed, unfurling into a melody so profound and soul-stirring, it threatened to bring her to her knees. Kaira felt the raw weight of every note, each resonating with emotions she couldn't even begin to articulate.

*Could this truly be... the song of the Family above?*

*Eona?*

The voice singing this mesmerizing song was intricately woven of deep sorrows and unspoken longings, yet threaded with the enduring golden fibers of hope. The haunting lament was the embodiment of an age-old grief and a desperate yearning, echoing through the vast halls of time, reaching out to every wounded heart, promising solace.

*This sound...* she mused.

It was as if Eona herself had let her celestial tears fall, turning them into an auditory embrace. If the lofty sisters, guardians of the cosmos, were ever to voice their anguish over the world's heartaches and miseries, surely this is the soul-soothing balm they would offer.

The melody, in its empyrean beauty, acted as a powerful lodestone, drawing her irresistibly towards its source. Kaira felt a deep, almost magnetic pull, her usual warrior's instincts fading, grip on her weapons slackening. The once-solid and reassuring weight of the sword and shield now felt inconsequential, dwarfed by the enormity of the emotion the song invoked.

Guided solely by the ethereal tune, Kaira stepped toward the taproom, the dim surroundings seemingly dissolving into a serene, dreamlike blur. She almost missed the sight of a large hole in the wall, but the song soothed her, giving her hope where all else despaired. It felt as though she was journeying between realms, with every footfall taking her closer to the nexus of this celestial serenade.

Drawn as if by an invisible force, Kaira's grip on her sword and shield loosened. She ventured further into the bar, the world around her taking on an otherworldly hue.

Her distress ebbed, replaced by an overwhelming mixture of awe and desperate hope. The world around her, bathed in an ethereal radiance, felt both strangely distant and intimately close.

But then, her eyes landed on Iris.

There she lay, cruelly bathed in her own crimson, her usually vibrant form reduced to a haunting stillness. The shock of the sight struck Kaira like a physical blow, yanking her out of the spell she had been under.

Her heart, once hopeful and racing, now thudded with a painful weight, threatening to drop right from her chest. Beside Iris, Akane's form lay frail and diminished, her life force dwindling with every passing moment.

*No no no no no... Iris...*

She was stuck in place, her legs became lead, and it was as if her very soul was ripped from her body.

*I was too late.*

*I failed.*

“Iris...” she croaked, her eyes stung and her world crumbled.

But even as the weight of despair threatened to drag Kaira into its cold embrace, the room itself seemed to resist the encroaching darkness.

From the depths of the shadows, as the song continued, brilliant green motes began to emerge. These were no ordinary lights but concentrated essences of pure mana, glowing with purpose. Like luminescent fireflies in a moonlit glade, they flitted about, bestowing their touch upon the wounded. Every being they caressed seemed to pulse with new vitality, wounds closing and life force slowly but surely rekindling.

Kaira's gaze was yanked from Iris's unmoving form by the rising voice, so filled with sorrow, hope, and desperation.

And in the center of this luminous tempest was Bree.

Her form, though wracked with grief and exhaustion, stood tall and unwavering. Tears traced glistening paths down her face, but there was an undeniable strength there. Her voice, a conduit of raw emotion and powerful magic, lifted in a haunting hymn, weaving together threads of hope, despair, love, and longing. It was a song born from the deepest recesses of her soul, invoking the will of the gods that seemed to resonate with the very world itself.

Kaira, caught between overwhelming grief and the hope emanating from Bree's song, found herself kneeling on the cold floor, her eyes unable to move from Iris's form.

Even as despair threatened to drown her, the symphony around her whispered promises of salvation and healing. And for that brief moment, within that ethereal cocoon, anything seemed possible.

Bree's voice, previously gentle and soothing, began to surge with a powerful energy. The haunting melody spiraled, turning raw and forceful. Every note echoed the gravity of life and death, every crescendo seemed to shatter the barriers of possibility.

Kaira felt each vibration as though it were a heartbeat, each note burrowing deep, resonating with her very soul.

The song, filled with Bree's own desperate plea, reached an ear-splitting climax.

As if compelled by the call of that piercing note, the emerald motes of mana swirled and danced even more fervently. Their glow intensified, turning the room into a veritable storm of light and magic. Their vibrant hue seemed to paint every dark corner, dousing the room in a sea of verdant brilliance.

And then, with a note that sounded like the universe itself mourning, the motes of mana began to move purposefully, no longer fluttering aimlessly but driven by clear intent. They began to descend towards the wounded, drawn like moths to a flame.

One by one, each mote seemed to find its chosen, sliding effortlessly into nostrils and mouths, reminiscent of a baby's first eager breath of life. Mocha moved, groaning as she leaned forward in Sera and Tanith's arms. Laken rustled as Gryff helped him roll to his side.

Those injured started moving, but the two most injured were taking more, sucking up the magic in increasing quantities.

Kaira watched, spellbound and hardly daring to breathe, as these manifestations of pure life entered Iris and Akane. They appeared almost to be drinking in the very essence of life, the very breath of Eona herself.

It was a sight both deeply intimate and profoundly divine, a dance of life and death on the razor's edge of hope.

Then, as suddenly as the crescendo had begun, Bree's voice shifted.

From the heartrending peak of sorrow and longing, it cascaded down to a soft, gentle note—one brimming with love, hope, and the sweet promise of tomorrow.

The very air seemed to hold its breath, time itself seeming to pause.

And with that final, delicate note, Bree's strength gave out.

Her form swayed for a moment, a silhouette against the lingering glow, before she crumpled to the floor, her magical song now a mere echo in the stillness.

The silence that followed was both heavy and sacred. It was the stillness after a storm, the quiet reverence of a world reborn.

Kaira's gaze, drawn back to Iris by an ineffable pull, saw the subtlest movement. Iris's chest, previously so distressingly still, now rose and fell into a rhythm of life. Akane's once limp form now stirred, her vulpine snout quivering as she drew a deep, rejuvenating breath. The fox's form shimmered and a kitsune appeared, her eyes locked onto Iris.

And then, with a sound that held the weight of a thousand unspoken words, Iris gasped, her eyes flickering open to meet a world forever changed.

The poignant stillness that permeated the room seemed to shatter in an instant. It was as if an unyielding chain that had been constricting Kaira's chest, holding her rooted in place, suddenly snapped.

Driven by an outpouring of emotion and sheer relief, Kaira's feet moved before she was even fully aware. Her every instinct, every fiber of her being, propelled her towards Iris. The distance between them, mere feet though it may have been, felt like miles. But in a heartbeat, she was there, collapsing by Iris's side, her hands reaching out to cradle her lover's face.

She gently cradled Iris's head in her hand as she parted those scarlet locks and locked onto those beautiful blue eyes. Her world was here.

*"Iris,"* she choked out.

Kaira's vision blurred as tears pooled. The suffocating fear, the gut-wrenching dread she felt upon seeing Iris unmoving—it all came crashing down in waves, threatening to drown her.

Iris, sensing the intensity of Kaira's emotions, lifted a shaky hand, lightly brushing Kaira's tear-streaked face. Even in her weakened state, that touch was filled with understanding and concern. They were two souls tethered by a bond that they were even now exploring. One that Kaira never wanted to let go.

"I thought I lost you," Kaira whispered, her voice thick with emotion.

Iris gave a soft, pain-laced chuckle, her eyes glinting with mischief. "Come now, love," she smirked, the twinkle in her eyes unmistakable even through her pain, "This? Merely a setback."