

## Self Awareness

As Iris tossed and turned, a muffled and indistinct voice resonated in her subconscious, interrupting her rest. She shifted uncomfortably, feeling the weight of the world pressing down on her body. It was as if the voice came from all around her, a disembodied presence that she couldn't quite grasp.

**[Storm Warden – Step 45 attained!]**

**[Conditions Met: Trait – Self Awareness obtained!]**

Iris's eyes shot open, her heart pounding in her chest as she sat up, blinking away the last remnants of sleep. The voice had jolted her awake, and she looked around the dimly lit stables, trying to get her bearings. Mocha shifted underneath her, the horse was still asleep.

“What the hell?” she muttered, rubbing her eyes.

*Wait...*

She gasped as realization set in. “Holy shit!”

Mocha jerked awake and Iris had to dive away before her horse crushed her by accident.

“*What? What is it? Attack?*” Mocha neighed, her eyes wide with alarm.

Iris shook her head, still processing what had just happened. “No, no attack. I just... I think I gained something special,” she said, all thoughts of the charged night she just had getting shoved down deep. *Those feelings can be unpacked later.*

Mocha cocked her head, and her ears perked up. “*What? This couldn't wait until morning?*”

Iris ignored the horse. “I think I just received my first notification from the system,” Iris said slowly, her mind racing. “The system... it said I attained step forty-five and met the conditions for a trait called **[Self Awareness]**.”

Mocha snorted. “*What does that even mean?*”

“I don't know... but clearly it gave me the ability to hear updates on my status. I was step forty-four during the Ceremony of Paths at the Temple. Something I did helped me gain a level and get this trait.”

“*Maybe I should do this Ceremony of Paths...*” Mocha nickered.

Iris laughed at the thought. A horse strutting into the temple and getting the Umbral Seers to perform the ceremony for her... “Oh man, that would be hilarious,” Iris said, wiping the tears from her eyes.

Mocha snorted, seeming to appreciate the joke in her suggestion. “*Well, if it gets people to take me seriously. Sign me up. It may come with more apples.*”

That had Iris rolling.



It was several town bells later when Iris made her way to the common area for breakfast, feeling much more refreshed after a bath. The sleepy innkeeper had taken the money without much of a word, but Iris didn't care as long as she could get rid of the stench of the stables. She smoothed down her tunic and straightened her hair, feeling much more presentable as she walked into the busy room.

Sera and Tanith were already there, chatting and laughing over mugs of steaming tea. They looked up as Iris approached, and Sera waved her over.

“Good morning, Iris! You look nice and refreshed. I also noticed that you didn't return to the room last night,” she said slyly. “Was your night... eventful?”

Iris sighed. “No, I did decide that a bath was in order after sleeping in the stables all night,” she said, leaning her sword against the table and sliding into a chair at their table.

Tanith lifted his tea to his lips before hesitating. “The *stables*?”

“Yeah...” Iris said as she poured herself a cup of tea. “Mocha and I had a nice chat followed by me falling asleep.”

The two elves shared a glance while Iris sipped on the hot beverage, sighing in contentment. The warmth spread through her body, chasing away the aches from sleeping in such an uncomfortable state.

“That said, I had something happen,” Iris said slowly. “Something important.”

Sera shifted in her seat so that she could face Iris fully. “What happened?”

“I received a *notification*,” she replied. When the two didn't seem to understand, Iris continued, “The system *told* me that I had gained a level... step and that I had gained a trait. **[Self Awareness]**. If I'm right, that trait is what enables the notifications.”

Tanith squinted his eyes. “You explained and showed us the excerpt from your Ceremony of Paths at the temple. This is like that?”

Iris nodded. “Yes, except I don't have to go to the temple, the system *told* me as I fell asleep.”

“That is amazing, Iris,” Sera said, her eyes widening with excitement. “It's like the gods themselves are speaking to you, guiding you on your path.”

Iris rolled her eyes at the elf's words. "The gods, Sera? Let's not get carried away. It's just a system."

But Sera was undeterred. "You never know, Iris. Maybe this system, as you call it, is simply a manifestation of the gods' will."

Iris couldn't help but feel a little awestruck at the thought. Was it possible that the gods here were not only real but guiding her path? She shook her head, trying to dispel the thought. No, there was no way.

"Regardless of what it is, it's a good sign, right?" Tanith said, trying to bring the conversation back to a more grounded level, although his face betrayed his own private feelings on the matter. *He believes it is the gods as well.*

*Shit.*

Sera nodded vigorously. "Definitely! It means that Iris is making progress on her path," she said before looking at Iris. "Who knows what other gifts you might unlock?"

Iris smiled at the thought. "Yeah, who knows?"

She noticed the intense look on Sera's face and felt the tension building up in the air as the revelation settled into the two natives of Eona. Not wanting to deal with such a heavy subject at the moment, she decided to change the topic to something more lighthearted.

Iris set her cup down and leaned forward, a sly grin on her lips. "So, did you two have a good time last night?" she asked, her voice dripping with innuendo. "Was it... *eventful?*" she asked, echoing Sera's earlier question.

Sera's eyes widened as she was jolted from her thoughts. "We just had drinks!" she spilled out, her cheeks turning red.

Tanith let out a sigh and facepalmed. "Sera...."

Sera looked up at him, confusion written all over her face. "What?"

"I think she knows, Sera," he said with resignation.

Iris raised an eyebrow. "I don't know anything." She turned and looked at the woman next to her. "What do I know, Sera?"

Sera's face grew stern. "Nothing, obviously. Nothing happened," she said firmly, her eyes flicking up to meet Iris's gaze before darting away again.

"So, you have less tension?" Iris prodded the woman. Tanith groaned across from her.

Sera nodded. "I do feel a lot less tense, thank you," the woman replied.

Iris snorted while Tanith just shook his head.

The merchant's face scrunched up in confusion. "Wait, what did that mean?"

Tanith leaned forward, resting his arms on the table. “Let’s just say that Sera was feeling a bit... frustrated before we went out for drinks. But now, after a few drinks and a *relaxing* night, she’s feeling much better.”

Sera's gaze darted back and forth between Iris and Tanith, her eyes widening as she pieced the conversation together. A range of emotions played across her face, from surprise to embarrassment and maybe even a hint of pride. Iris couldn't help but laugh at the sight, feeling a sense of amusement bubble up within her, helping to better her mood after her spiral the night prior. Meanwhile, Tanith's lips curved upwards as he chuckled softly at the exchange. Sera's cheeks flushed, and she dropped her gaze down to her tea, suddenly seeming very interested in the swirling liquid within her cup.

“So, what’s on the agenda for today?” Iris asked, helping her friend out by changing the subject yet again.

Tanith looked at her while Sera returned to drinking her tea and quickly caught on to her intentions. “*You* need to stock up on supplies. I saw your armor after you left yesterday, it is nearly unsalvageable. You’re better off getting something new,” he suggested.

Iris leaned back in her chair and sighed. “You’re right. Shit. Where should I go to—”

“Fenren Merchant Company,” Sera answered quickly. “You should buy there, after all, they will be entering into a partnership with the Guild. It will be a good look if you go there.”

Iris nodded. “Sounds good. Will they give me reasonable prices?”

“Absolutely. It will definitely be the best deal you can find, the company will want to use you to showcase their products,” the merchant replied.

Tanith shared a glance with Sera. “Make sure you get enough supplies, we wouldn’t want anything to happen to you. You have to be safe.”

Iris smiled. “You just need me safe so we can make the guild.”

Sera quickly shook her head and placed a hand on Iris’s. “No, we’re friends now, Iris. We don’t want you to get hurt... again. Too much. Don’t—”

“Don’t die,” Tanith interrupted. “Convince the people going with you to join as adventurers.”

“I’ll try,” Iris said, chuckling.

The man nodded. “We’ll start preparing everything for the guild while you are gone,” he said. “We need to have everything ready by the time you return and have to meet with the Guild Council.”

Sera nodded in agreement. “We have a lot to do. We’ll start looking for the staff, equipment, and supplies. And make sure everything is in order. We can handle it though.”

Iris smiled gratefully. “Thanks, guys. I really appreciate it. I can’t believe all you guys are doing for this,” She stood up from her seat and strapped her sword to her waist. “Well, I should get going then. Especially, if I want this armor ready before the others get here in two days. Gotta look the part, yeah?”

The other two also stood up. “Iris,” Sera said seriously. “We’re all partners on this. We’re all making something great. We’ll do our part.”

Tanith chuckled. “Look at us. Acting like you’re leaving now.”

Sera and Iris shared a glance before laughing.

Iris shook her head. “I’ll see you guys tonight!”



As Iris entered the Fenren Merchant Company, she was greeted by a spacious foyer with polished marble floors that glistened in the sunlight streaming in through the large windows. The walls were lined with shelves displaying various products, from exotic spices to expensive-looking jewelry. The air was thick with the scent of perfumes and incense, and the sound of merchants haggling with customers echoed through the halls.

The ceiling of the building rose high above her, supported by massive pillars carved from some kind of dark wood. The light fixtures hung from ornate chandeliers, casting a warm, yellow glow over everything.

Iris walked past several busy merchants, all dressed in fine clothing and wearing polite smiles. She could see that the merchandise they sold was of the highest quality, with attention paid to every detail. She couldn't help but feel a little intimidated by the grandeur of the place, but she knew that this was the best place to get her supplies for the upcoming adventure.

An orkun woman stepped forward donning a beautiful dress and a gorgeous tusk-filled smile.

“Good morning, welcome to Fenren Merchants. How may I assist you today?” the woman greeted politely.

Iris returned the smile, feeling a bit more at ease with the friendly welcome. “Good morning, my name is Iris Stuart, and you may know Sera Timrel. She said that this was the best place to come for quality and reasonable prices due to our upcoming partnership?”

The woman's eyebrows steadily rose the more Iris spoke. "Of course, Adventurer Stuart!" She caught the attention of another merchant and quickly gestured with her head. The woman darted off toward the back and it was all Iris could do to not laugh at the scene.

"I am Lucille. I would be pleased to help you in any way you need," the woman said with a touch of an accent that seemed different.

The name surprised Iris a bit, it was much different than the other orkun she'd met.

"Wonderful, where are you from by the way? I can't place your accent and name," Iris inquired.

Lucille smiled. "I hail from the Kingdom of Blightwych! My family moved here for business and brought me along. It's an island nation south across the Aegis Sea. We're known for our rich culture and traditions, with a strong emphasis on music, dance, and theater. The capital is also a major trading hub, with ships from all over the continent stopping at its port to trade in spices, exotic fruits, and other goods. I hope to transfer there one day with the company, actually!"

Iris was intrigued by Lucille's background and nodded in interest. "That sounds fascinating. I've never been to Blightwych before, or out of Lehelia," she said with a chuckle. "Maybe I'll get the chance to visit someday."

Lucille chuckled. "It's a lovely place indeed, but I'm biased. Now, what can I assist you with today?" she asked, gesturing for Iris to follow her deeper into the store.

Iris explained that she needed supplies for an upcoming adventure, including rations, camping gear, and most importantly, armor. Lucille listened attentively and led her to the appropriate sections of the store, making recommendations and explaining the features and benefits of each item.

As they walked and talked, Iris couldn't help but feel grateful for the warm welcome and excellent service she was receiving. The Fenren Merchant Company was truly living up to the reputation Sera had set for it.

An older elf walked up, the woman filled with smiles. "Adventurer Stuart! Welcome, welcome. We have been curious when you would make your appearance."

Iris turned to face the elder elf and smiled warmly. "Thank you, I'm glad to be here. Sera has said such nice things about the company she works for, and I can see now why it's so highly regarded," she said, gesturing around at the high-quality merchandise surrounding them.

The elf chuckled. "We take great pride in our wares and our services," she said. The woman looked at Lucille. "You are in good hands here with Lucille. She is one of our best partners."

The orkun woman beamed. “Thank you, ma’am. Miss Stuart was just telling me how she requires new armor.”

“Well then, we maintain a close relationship with various blacksmiths and the Smith’s Guild within the city. If we do not have what you need, we can get you sized and something made for you quickly. How soon do you need it?” the woman asked.

Iris winced. “I need to start preparing to leave in two days. So... morning, two days from now?”

Both women sucked in a breath and shared a glance. “Let’s get you situated,” the elf woman said. “I–We’ll make it happen. Don’t you worry a bit. Lucille, can you help her see what we have and take note of everything else she needs?”

Lucille took a deep breath. “Of course, right this way Miss Stuart. Then we can have the rest of your items prepared.”

Iris felt a wave of relief wash over her at the elder elf’s reassurance. She followed Lucille deeper into the store to look through their stock and get measured for her new armor, feeling grateful for the efficiency and dedication of the merchants.

In the end, she was able to find most of what she would need, the only exception was the breastplate and helm. Lucille promised they would have it ready in two days, and gave her ideas of some of the other things it may need when finished, namely fabric to finish it.

“We have several contracts with various seamstresses within the city. We can–”

“It’s quite alright. I know just who to take it to,” Iris assured the woman.

Lucille nodded, smiling. “Of course, I am glad you came in today, Miss Stuart. Let’s get the rest of what you need.”

The two went through the list of necessary items, Iris couldn’t help but feel grateful for the guidance Lucille provided. It was clear that the orkun woman had a deep understanding of the different products and their uses, and even showed Iris several items that would be beneficial. Then the woman stopped at a counter near where a man was accepting payment from another customer.

Lucille reached into a locked cabinet and pulled out a small steel container and started to remove the lid. “I have one more thing that I think would be beneficial, Miss Stuart. It’s a special magical poultice that–”

Iris’s eyes went wide. “Healing goop! I completely forgot.”

Lucille chuckled. “Yes, that’s one way to put it. Our healing poultices are quite popular among knights and nobility of the area. From what the knights say, it works wonders in the field,” she said, opening the container to reveal small jars filled with a green, gel-like substance.

Iris couldn't help but feel grateful for the reminder. She had been so focused on her armor and supplies that she had completely forgotten about the healing goop. "Trust me, I know *exactly* how well it works. Thank you, Lucille. I'll take the entire container along with everything else," she said, reaching for her coin purse.

Lucille shook her head. "No need, Miss Stuart. This is on the house. It's the least we can do for such an esteemed adventurer," she said with a smile.

Iris was touched by the gesture. "Thank you, Lucille. I really appreciate it," she said, feeling a warmth in her chest.

The two finished up their business and said their goodbyes. Iris left the large store feeling well-prepared and grateful for the excellent service she had received.

She looked around and smiled. Preparing for a new quest always made her feel a bit better. She shoved her thoughts of Kaira down and hoped for the best, she'd see the elf in two days. No big deal.

*Right?*



Two days later, Iris rode Mocha through the streets of Brightburn, the morning sun just beginning to peek over the horizon. She had picked up her armor, getting the shop's help to put the plate on, and other supplies from the Fenren Merchant Company and was now on her way to Seamstress Marlana's shop.

Mocha's hooves clacked against the cobblestone road, the sound echoing through the empty streets. Iris was glad to have the cool morning air on her face as she rode Mocha, it would be Autumn soon, and she was glad the hot summer was ending.

It would definitely make her upcoming traveling more bearable.

As Iris approached Marlana's shop, she noticed a new wooden sign hanging from a post above the door. It showed a needle and spool of thread with a few stars around it with the title *The Mystic Needle* in fresh paint prominently displayed.

"That's new," Iris mumbled. "Apparently, she's not keeping her magic secret anymore."

*"Probably because everyone knows you got your dress from here,"* Mocha nickered.

*Good point.*

Iris hopped down from Mocha and let her horse do her thing, not worried about the girl at all. She walked inside and was surprised to see a large group of customers and several workers rushing around. Marlana was standing there talking to a woman who



was clearly a noble, however, when she noticed Iris she held up a hand before turning toward her.

“Iris! Dearie, what brings you here?” the high elf woman said a bit loudly.

“I came to see if I can get your help with something,” she said, gesturing to her armor. “This is nice and basic, I want to add some nice fabric to it.”

The woman’s eyes grew. “That sounds like a wonderful project! I can whip this up quickly!”

Iris smiled. “How long is quickly? I see you’re busy...”

The seamstress waved her off. “I can do it right now,” she assured her before calling one of the assistants to help the noble. She turned back to Iris once the woman was situated. “Oh, I have ideas. A kama around your waist, yes. A shawl, and flowing fabric around your arms. Mmm... Yes. Come, come.”

The enthusiasm the woman had amused Iris.

She followed Marlana to the back room, where the seamstress began taking measurements and making notes about the armor. She then brought out different fabrics and colors, laying them out on a table for Iris to choose from.

As Iris perused the fabrics, Marlana chattered on about how the noblewomen had already started buying into the lingerie business and the seamstress was excited to see where it would go.

“I’ve had twenty orders already. Then after your little show at the ball that I have heard all about, I’ve been so swarmed with women that I had to hire the assistants you saw,” Marlana explained.

After a while, they settled on a scarlet and black ombré fabric to accent the armor, and a matching shawl and the partial kilt-like kama attached to her waist to complete the look. Marlana helped Iris out of her armor and immediately got to work. As Iris watched, she used her **[Mana Sight]** to observe the various flows of mana the woman’s magic weaved into her work.

Iris couldn't help but ask about the new sign outside while Marlana worked. “So, I see you’ve changed the name of your shop,” she said curiously.

The high elf nodded. “Yes, I have. I figured it was time to come out of hiding, so to speak. After your magic and how it fascinated everyone, it only made sense to advertise my own.”

“I think it’s a great idea,” Iris said with a smile. “Your work is amazing, and it’s great that more people will get to experience it.”

Marlana beamed. “Thank you, dear. It means a lot.”

Marlana went back to her work, humming to herself as she sewed the fabric onto the armor. Iris couldn't help but feel a sense of satisfaction at the sight. She had always

enjoyed creating things, whether it was with magic or her own two hands. Watching Marlena work and seeing the beautiful result was inspiring.

As Marlena finished up, Iris asked, "How much do I owe you for this?"

The seamstress waved her hand. "Don't worry about it, dear. Consider it a thank you for the business you've brought me and the attention you've given my work."

Iris protested, "I can't accept that. I want to pay you for your time and talent."

Marlena shook her head. "I insist. Besides, it was a fun project, and it's not often I get to work on something as unique as this. It's always dresses. Between the lingerie and this, you've renewed my sense of purpose. Now, let me give you what I have so far for your undergarments. I think you've been waiting patiently."

Iris couldn't argue with that. She thanked Marlena profusely after being handed the sack with more bras and underwear of various styles and left the shop, feeling pleased with the outcome. As she walked back to Mocha, she couldn't help but wonder what other projects she could work on in the future. The possibilities were endless, and the thought excited her.

"Alright, Mocha. Let's go meet Kaira," she said to her horse.

Her loyal steed huffed. "*You sure you want to do it in the inn? I can be there...*"

"I'll be fine, thanks though, girl."



Iris left Mocha outside the inn, leaving her next to a water trough as she made her way to the double doors. Walking inside, the warm aroma of cooked food and ale wafted over her, and she breathed it in deeply. The inn was busy, filled with people eating lunch, the patrons drinking and eating and chatting noisily. Iris made her way into the common room, scanning the faces for Kaira.

She finally spotted the elf by looking for her dark pixie haircut, seeing her facing away from her at a table along the wall near the bar. Also at the table were two men and a woman, the group deep in conversation.

Iris approached the table, and she recognized one of the men as the guard that had enjoyed talking to Mocha. He waved and Kaira turned her head, her eyes going wide as she spotted Iris.

"Iris, wow. Your armor looks fantastic," Kaira said, jumping up and approaching her.

"Thank you," Iris said, smiling. "How are you?"

Kaira hesitated for a moment, and Iris could tell that she wanted to hug her but was holding back. They awkwardly embraced, and Iris wished she could feel Kaira's warmth against her own body through the armor.

"I'm good," Kaira said, pulling back from the hug. "Come, have a seat. Allow me to introduce you to the... party."

Iris smiled. "You remembered!"

The guard captain chuckled. "Of course, I did," she said with a smile. She hesitated for another second before pulling Iris in for another hug. She leaned close and whispered, "I missed you."

Iris felt her heart flutter at Kaira's words, feeling a warmth spread through her chest. She hugged Kaira back tightly, savoring the moment. "It's good to see you."

Kaira nodded before gesturing toward the open seat next to hers.

As Iris took a seat at the table, Kaira introduced her to the rest of the group. "Iris, this is Laken—who you have met, Gryff, and Bree," she said, pointing to each person as she spoke their name. They all greeted Iris with smiles and nods.

She looked at the high elf guard that had helped her after the clarus incident. The average-looking high elf, with dirty blonde hair styled into an undercut, looked excited to be there.

"Hi, Laken. You'll have to go tell Mocha hello after this," she greeted the man with a chuckle. "I'm sure she'll enjoy seeing you."

The man's face lit up. "Wonderful! I've told everyone I know all about her. She's amazing!"

The others laughed good-naturedly.

Bree was a sun elf with close-braided hair and a kind smile. She had a short spear and shield leaning against the wall, but it was clear that her main focus was on her medical supplies. Iris could see various bandages, salves, and herbs strapped to her belt and hanging from her backpack that sat next to the table.

*I need to let her handle the supply of healing goop.*

"It's nice to meet you, Iris. I heard all about you when I investigated what was left of the so-called Ember Rats," the woman said, her golden eyes filled with curiosity.

"Oh, man. I'm so sorry about that. Those... yeah they're bitches," Iris said with a shake of her head.

The others at the table laughed, and Bree continued, "They're fascinating! But yes, I can imagine *exploding* not being an event one would want to experience."

Iris nodded sagely. "The key is to kill them before they start using their magic."

The last man at the table huffed a laugh. “I think that will be the key to resolving many fights in the future,” the telv said. “Although, I can’t wait to see you in action with your magic, Adventurer Stuart.”

Gryff was a rugged-looking telv with short brown hair and a thick beard. He had a muscular build and also carried a short spear and shield. He seemed friendly enough, but there was a hint of seriousness in his eyes.

“*Iris*, please. We’re going to be a party,” she gently corrected. “A team. This isn’t the Guard.”

The three stole a glance at Kaira who shook her head and gestured to Iris. “Don’t look at me. She’s the team—I mean party leader. What she says goes. She’s the expert.”

The group nodded and after an awkward silence, Gryff smiled, the man volunteering himself to break the ice. “So, Iris. You’re a terran. Two questions for you.”

Iris raised a brow. “What’s that?”

“What do you think of our fine city? Oh, and what are your intentions with our Captain? She wouldn’t stop talking about the date to the ball,” he said with a mischievous glint in his eye.

Iris put a hand over her mouth as she laughed. She turned and looked at Kaira, whose face was beet red. “Well, now. I think she and I will just have to figure that out,” she said. The elf in question turned and faced her. Iris continued, “After all, aren’t the best endings to a story the ones where the hero gets the girl after completing a dangerous quest?”

Iris’s witty remark elicited chuckles from the three newcomers, yet Kaira’s cheeks flushed an even deeper shade of red as she struggled to conceal her smile.

Gryff raised his mug in a toast. “To getting the girl!”

The other two clinked their mugs together and joined in the laughter, their voices reverberating through the inn. Kaira rolled her eyes but couldn’t help but let out a small laugh as well.

Iris felt a warmth spreading in her chest as she locked eyes with Kaira.

And winked.