

Epilogue

Grandmaster

Weeks passed by and everything had begun to return to a semblance of normality by the time winter arrived. Quests were submitted, Iris did paperwork, and Sera kept things running smoothly. She managed to keep her spirits up by knowing that Kaira and her sisters would be back soon.

Entering the guild hall one crisp morning, Iris was greeted by the repaired structure whose hearths were roaring and keeping the winter firmly outside.

“Good morning, Iris!” Neri’s upbeat voice rang out from the front counter.

A smile automatically pulled at Iris’s lips as she approached the eager receptionist. “Morning, Neri. How’s everything?”

“Fantastic!” Neri chirped, shuffling some papers on the counter. “I have a couple of messages for you, but before that, are you thinking of grabbing some breakfast?”

Iris patted her stomach playfully. “Definitely. Falene isn’t swamped, is she?”

“Just Bree’s team at the moment. Sera’s in her office and Tanith is helping Lucille retrieve a shipment of goods from Fenren’s,” Neri informed, a mischievous glint in her eyes. “Ready to raid the kitchen?”

“Always,” Iris grinned. “But first, any notable quests come by?”

Neri nodded towards the grand wooden quest board mounted on the wall. Her eyes flitted over the parchments, smirking as an honest-to-goodness request to find a lost cat was there. But then among the multitude of quest parchments, mainly in the novice area, a fresh one stood out in the Bronze section. Intrigued, Iris approached and scanned the details. “A Bronze quest?” she quirked an eyebrow.

“Indeed! Kaira managed to persuade the City Guard’s commander about the merits of posting here,” Neri stated proudly.

Iris frowned. “But Kaira and the girls left last season. It took the commander that long to post a quest?”

The telv woman rolled her eyes in exasperation. “Well, the bureaucracy never claimed to be quick. But I reckon this issue just surfaced again.”

Iris let out a low whistle as she read the details. “More ember rats? Damn. Any casualties?”

“Fortunately, none so far. The Balladseekers are prepping for it. That’s what they’re hashing out over breakfast,” Neri pointed out.

Nodding thoughtfully, Iris replied, "I'll head over and join them, see if they need any assistance."

Neri's enthusiastic voice trailed her as she moved toward the bar area. "Sure thing! Holler if you need anything!"

Stepping inside, the savory aroma of Falene's cooking wafted through, and Iris was reminded once more of the little things that made the guild feel like home. She threw a friendly wave to Jonik, who was wiping down a table while Lyra was moving some bottles around behind the bar.

"Morning, Grandmaster!" Jonik's boisterous voice boomed, followed by Lyra's more demure, "Good day."

Before Iris could request her usual breakfast, Falene appeared in the doorway leading to the kitchen. The high elf's hands, covered in what looked like flour, brushed against her apron, leaving white streaks. "You're a creature of habit, aren't you? I'll get your favorite plate ready in a jiffy, Grandmaster."

"Thanks, Falene," Iris chuckled, her stomach already anticipating the meal.

Casting a glance over the nearly empty establishment, Iris's gaze settled on Bree's group, gathered around a table in the dead center. She made her way over, noting the spread of maps of the city, notes, and gear on the table—clear signs of a quest in the making.

"Morning, Balladseekers," she greeted warmly, pulling out an empty chair and settling down. "So, what's the plan for those pesky ember rats?"

Bree glanced up from what she was working on then caught Gryff's eye and motioned for him to talk. Iris chuckled.

"There's been four sightings, all in the same area where you found them before. We're trying to figure out the source, rather than just constantly having to be called in the future to kill more," the bearded telv man said.

"That makes sense," Iris replied. "Have you guys fought any yet?"

"Yes, we killed one over the weekend," Laken confirmed. "It... I'm happy for healing goop and Bree's **[Song of Healing]**."

Iris winced. "Yeah, trust me I know just how rough they can be to fight. You guys need any help?"

Bree looked up and shook her head before going back down at a map that she was circling different locations on.

"We think there's a concentration of mana somewhere that we haven't found that's causing it. Bree is looking for a pattern," Divaro said. The telv from Silstead had been invited to join the former

guards and was learning a lot. Iris was glad that they'd taken the man under their wing after his friend died.

"There's got to be something! I just..." Bree *growled*. "The Guard cleared out the sewers weeks ago. There was nothing... so what the..."

Iris's brow furrowed slightly, her memory tugging her back to the woman's basement where she first encountered those damned ember rats. "Have you checked near where I initially stumbled on them?" she pressed, leaning forward.

Bree's green eyes met hers, a glint of curiosity within them. "We didn't. I mean, you got rid of the ones there, right?"

Resting her arms on the table, Iris sighed. "I did. But going back to ground zero, if you will, could give you a lead. It's always worth retracing our steps."

Pursing her lips, Bree cast her eyes over the map again, her slender fingers drawing a deliberate circle around a specific area. "You have a point," she conceded. "Alright then, revisiting 'ground zero' it is." She glanced up at the team, her usually soft features now determined. "We set out as soon as we're geared up. Everyone on board?"

A series of affirmatives echoed from the team, their nods filled with renewed purpose. Iris wished them luck, and after a few pats on the back, or a hug in Bree's case, the quartet began their preparations, before leaving Iris in a temporary bubble of solitude in the bar.

As Iris moved to a table closer to the bar, the methodical motions of Jorik clearing the remnants of the earlier meal caught her eye. He worked with a practiced ease, stacking dishes with one hand and wiping the table with the other.

Lyra brought over a teapot with hot water and a mug for her along with two varieties of tea. She drank the root tea first, wincing slightly at its bitter taste, before moving to a more palatable black tea that had a bit of oil from a fruit that flavored it with a sweet and slightly floral note.

She sat there and just relaxed, trying to come up with a plan for the day, when her contemplation was disrupted as a hearty plate of food was placed before her, the tantalizing aroma causing her stomach to grumble in response. Looking up, she met Lyra's amused eyes. "Hungry, Grandmaster?" The bartender teased.

She chuckled, feeling a blush creep onto her cheeks. "Apparently more than I realized. Thanks, Lyra."

Lyra winked, her smirk playful. "Always here to serve, Iris. Have you heard from Kaira?"

Iris shook her head. "Nope. But she and my two sisters should be back this week sometime."

“Good, I know we all miss Akane and Mocha around here. And I can tell you miss your partner.”

Iris smiled longingly. “Yeah... I do.”

Lyra left her to her breakfast and went back to working behind the bar.

As Iris took her first bite, the blend of flavors melted in her mouth, making her close her eyes briefly in a silent foodgasm. The sausage was tender and perfectly seasoned. She scooped up a bit of egg, the yolk golden and runny. It was breakfasts like these that she savored—those fleeting moments of quiet and a well-cooked meal before the day's chaos truly began.

She smiled, taking a drink of her tea before her hand moved to pick up her fork, piercing a succulent piece of meat, dripping with a hint of gravy.

It was great.

As Iris was delving back into her food, the ambiance of the hall shifted. The wooden doors creaked open, bringing a burst of laughter and chatter into the room as a quartet of people entered. Recognizing them, Iris's eyes lit up.

The first was an imposing orkun woman, her arms adorned with intricate tattoos, along with a pair of contrasting telv men—one wiry with swift, assessing eyes and the other with a bulk that suggested he was no stranger to the front lines—and lastly, a regal high elf woman, her silver tresses falling like a shimmering waterfall, eyes sharp and poised.

Each had a red tattoo of a wolf head on their arms, something they'd gotten as a commitment to their team. Iris thought it was silly.

What if they break up? Never get a tattoo like that. Relationship tattoos are such bad luck.

But still, she knew they had known each other since they were young. The best of friends.

These were the former House Guards who had heeded Lady Arden's call, forming a party of adventurers now known as the 'The Redwolves of Brightburn.' The team's camaraderie was honestly a bit inspirational, and as they conversed and joked, their unity was unmistakable. It was heartening to see such a solid unit form.

They approached the counter, bantering amongst themselves but not before the orkun woman waved at Iris and gave a tusk filled smile. The woman, whose height and muscular build were definitely contrasting with Lucille's despite their similar country of origin, greeted her with quite the animated tone, “Good morning, Grandmaster! Looks like another busy day for us all!”

Iris lifted her fork in acknowledgment, a piece of her breakfast still skewered on it. “Indeed it does. Good to see you, Yvonne. And the rest of the Redwolves. Ready for another day of adventure?”

The high elf, Iselene, gave a polite nod. “Always. We’re discussing the available options now. We heard that the Balladseekers managed to grab the Bronze quest that popped up. That means we’ll likely be spending the next few days knocking out all of the more... busy work.”

Iris shrugged. “That’s the life of adventurers. Don’t worry, things will pick up as news spreads.”

The two telv men, one lean and the other bulkier, both greeted her with friendly nods. The lean one, Jareth, said, “If the ember rats are any indication, I have a feeling we won’t be waiting long. Our first quest is one out in the farms.”

Iris winced. “Be careful. Sometimes those can get away from you. Don’t be afraid to make a strategic decision to come back for help. I don’t mind joining if it’s more than the quest giver thought. Always assume it’s worse than the information given.”

The man’s companion, Borin, nodded. “That is sensible. Don’t worry, we’re not completely new to this, Grandmaster. After the last quest, we’re definitely loading up on that healing goop Lucille sells.”

Iris chuckled. “That stuff has helped me through so much. Still, good luck out there. I know Sera’s working on expanding our reach. With that, we should get more quests.”

Borin grinned. “Well, maybe toss in some word about my impressive hammer skills—”

Yvonne smacked him on the back of the head. “Oi! That’s the grandmaster. None of that. Plus, she’s sensible. She likes women.”

Iris choked on her sausage and looked up. The orkun woman winked at her.

“Woah, easy there killer,” Iris said with a chuckle after she regained her ability to breathe. “Kaira would kill us both.”

Yvonne let out a hearty laugh, her voice filling the bar room. “Only if she catches us, Grandmaster!”

Iselene raised an elegant eyebrow and lightly elbowed the orkun woman with a teasing smirk. “You love courting danger, don’t you Yvonne? It’s all in good fun, but we do need to decide on our quests. And perhaps keep our flirtations at a minimum when in the company of esteemed guild leaders.”

“Especially when they’re currently eating,” added Jareth with a teasing glance toward Iris.

Iris merely waved them off, resuming her meal. “Please, continue. I’ve endured more awkward conversations before breakfast than this with Akane around.”

The bulky telv man, Borin, tried to hide his chuckles behind a sip of a drink that Lyra had given him, though it wasn’t particularly successful.

“Well,” Iselene interjected with a slight glare at her party mates. “We will leave you to your meal, Grandmaster.”

The Redwolves of Brightburn nodded and began their trek toward a more secluded corner of the room. Yvonne, with a final nod of acknowledgment and a wink towards Iris, followed behind them.

That woman... Yikes. Kaira, get home quickly.

Taking another bite from her breakfast, Iris couldn't help but observe the camaraderie amongst the guild members. They only had three at the moment, so parties like the Redwolves and Balladseekers brought a sense of unity and ambition that was much needed in the guild's founding teams.

The third will be back soon...

She took a moment to appreciate the atmosphere as the Redwolves started laughing and enjoying their breakfast while discussing quests. It wasn't much yet, but she knew the Guild Hall would soon be a hub of community, connection, and camaraderie. And at its center was Iris, guiding and nurturing it all.

Just call me the mother of adventure.

She winced.

Okay, that was bad even for me.

She took another bite from her plate, feeling content with the progress they had made so far.

Upon polishing off the last remnants of her hearty breakfast, Iris gracefully stood, feeling the familiar satisfaction of a well-prepared meal. She made her way towards the counter, pausing briefly to share a warm nod of gratitude with Jorik, and a wink towards Lyra, who chuckled in response.

Pushing the wooden door to the kitchen open slightly, she leaned in, the scent of roasting meat and fresh herbs wafting out. “Thanks, Falene!” she called. Falene, in the middle of cooking her next meal, barely took her eyes off her task, giving a cursory wave in response. The dance of sizzling pans and the aroma emanating from them had always caught Iris's attention. It was like watching a master conductor at an orchestra.

We'll need to get her some help soon.

Exiting the kitchen, Iris ventured back into the main hall, the ambient noise of chatter greeting her. However, what caught her eye was the unusual line forming in front of the desk where Neri was stationed. It wasn't the line itself that was surprising, but the humans at the front of it.

Iris's gaze sharpened, scrutinizing the men before sweeping over the queue.

Approaching with an air of authority but keeping her demeanor amiable, she offered, “Need some help, Neri?”

The young receptionist met Iris's gaze with visible relief. “I'd be ever grateful, Grandmaster. Could you perhaps take over the evaluations? Tanith is still gone, but I can manage the quest submissions.”

One of the human men, attractive, dark-skinned, and possibly of Hispanic descent, turned to her with evident surprise in his eyes. “Wait, you're the Grandmaster? But you're... human?”

The man beside him, with paler skin and sharp features, shot his friend an annoyed glance. “She's *terran*, Carlos, like us.”

Carlos frowned, retorting, “You, maybe. I'm—”

Iris's patience thinned. With a pointed clearing of her throat, she intervened. “Gentlemen, there's a line waiting. Over here, please.” Her gesture indicated the opposite end of the counter. Turning to the waiting crowd, she declared, “Anyone else here for Guild evaluations, join me. Quest submissions, speak with Miss Pereth.”

Neri's grateful smile beamed at Iris from the counter, and Iris responded with a cheeky wink.

As a high elf and human Asian woman also approached for their evaluations, Iris straightened up, her demeanor shifting from casual to professional. “So, eager future adventurers, let's begin, shall we?”

With the situation now in control and a task at hand, Iris reached over the counter, her fingers skimming over a neatly stacked pile of papers. She pulled out four of the detailed adventurer applications that the guild esquire had made, the topmost sheet crisp under her touch.

Casting a brief glance over the group, she assessed them: Carlos, still somewhat bewildered but trying hard to mask it; his friend, cool and aloof, the classic veneer of someone accustomed to control; the high elf, standing tall and poised, exuding an air of nobility even in such a mundane setting; and lastly, the human woman, her curiosity evident as she tried to take in everything around her.

“This way,” Iris motioned, her voice carrying a mix of authority and encouragement. Leading them away from the main hall, she moved towards one of the side doors that branched off the cavernous space. The door itself was fairly ornate, a holdover from the hall's more luxurious past.

Opening the door revealed a more intimate setting: a room designed for smaller gatherings, discussions, and of course, initial evaluations. A long, wooden table stood in the middle, surrounded by cushioned chairs. It wasn't yet decorated, but she and Sera had discussed it.

She was a fan of swords and axes.

Sera shot that down.

A pity.

“Take a seat,” Iris invited, gesturing to the chairs. As the prospective adventurers settled in, the atmosphere grew slightly tense, filled with anticipation. With applications in hand, Iris prepared to delve into the next phase—the evaluation of Brightburn’s potential new adventurers.

With a steady and assertive tone, Iris inquired, “Has everyone visited the Church for the Ceremony of Paths? Have you obtained your adventurer’s details?”

Four heads bobbed in affirmation.

A glint of satisfaction flashed in her eyes. She’d collaborated extensively with Praetor Hana and the Hierophant to devise this process. It allowed adventurers to share general information about their abilities, giving the Adventurer’s Guild insights into their potential without breaching any personal boundaries. Starting them at a low rank was not a slight; it was a precautionary step to prevent eager newbies from biting off more than they could chew.

“All right, then. Here are your applications,” she declared, distributing the sheets across the table. “If you have any questions, please ask me.”

“How did a human—”

“That isn’t what I meant when I said ‘any’ questions,” Iris cut Carlos off.

He’s gonna fit in quite well around here. I wonder who’s gonna punch him first.

The documents were simple but comprehensive. They asked for basic identification and any pertinent excerpt information acquired from the Church. This was not only to guide adventurers on their path but to legally shield the guild from the possibility of admitting criminals or those with ill intentions.

The human woman’s brow furrowed as she looked at a particular section. “Hi, I’m Naomi. What’s this about my... party? Is this mandatory?” she asked, her tone laced with genuine curiosity.

This inquiry also seemed to resonate with the high elf, who paused and glanced up, keenly awaiting Iris’s response.

Iris was quick to reassure her. “No, it isn’t mandatory. That said, you’ll come across quests tagged specifically for parties, denoting a minimum member requirement. You’re under no obligation to permanently ally with a party. Sometimes it’s just for a single quest. The Guild Hall is a perfect hub for finding adventurers keen on teaming up for a while. Or you can simply focus on quests that do not require it. I suspect there will be many. That’s how I got my start.”

Carlos, enthusiasm evident as he looked at the Asian woman, chimed in, “You could join our party! We’re a duo already,” he added, playfully nudging his terran friend.

With a decisive shake of her head, the woman declined, “No, thanks.”

Before Iris could even register surprise at her flat refusal, the high elf, surprising everyone, addressed the two humans. “Should your offer extend to others, I might consider allying with you both—provided, of course, I find your skills up to par.”

Well, that's unexpected, Iris mused, her eyebrows creeping up. For someone who exuded an air of elvish nobility, this willingness to consider a partnership with two human men was intriguing.

Carlos, ever the talker, began to respond, but a subtle elbow from his friend silenced him. His terran companion, with a more measured tone, said, “We'd appreciate that. Let's hash out the—”

“Gentlemen,” Iris interjected with a tone of mild exasperation, “perhaps save the discussion for later. We have procedures to follow, and believe me, there's plenty on my plate after this. I have shit to do.”

The room quickly fell silent, punctuated only by the scratching of quills on paper. From her peripheral vision, Iris noticed the hint of a smirk playing on the human woman's lips, a silent observer enjoying the brief commotion.

In the dim glow of the room, as the four adventurers finished penning their applications, Iris stood upright, adjusting her stance, ready to deliver a speech. The ambiance of the room seemed to grow heavy with gravity.

“Now, before we proceed,” Iris began, her voice steady and clear, “There's a matter we need to address.” She exhaled deeply, her breath visible in the cool air. “By joining the Adventurer's Guild, you're taking on a set of risks. Life outside the city walls, in the wilderness, facing unknown foes... it's not a fucking stroll in the park. You have to take this seriously, or you will die. Now, you can easily take the fetch quests and never worry about danger, but there are monsters out there and some look like people.”

She gazed into each of their eyes in turn, ensuring the gravity of her words sunk in. “The guild won't be held liable if any of you decide to waltz into a dragon's den and become its afternoon snack.”

There was a pause, a moment of silence where only the soft rustling of parchment could be heard. *Damn, I hope I didn't lay it on too thick. Need them eager, but not terrified.*

Then Carlos spoke up, “W—wait, dragons are real?”

Iris rolled her eyes. “I wouldn't be surprised. But I *have* fought tiger-sized reptiles that could easily be their little cousins.”

The high elf nodded knowingly.

“Now, allow me to give a bit of information regarding what we're about here at the Adventurer's Guild.”

She gave them the spiel, breaking down the current benefits of the guild and what was required of them, such as how often they were required to complete quests. She introduced them to the ranking system and other items of note.

When that was done, Iris continued, "Now that the fun stuff is out of the way," she remarked with a wry smile, she grabbed all of their applications and gestured for the group to follow her out of the room.

She quickly scanned the applications, reviewing their steps and path names then handed them over to Neri who was with her last customer. Iris then grabbed her cloak from the hook behind the counter and slipped it over her shoulders before leading the group out back.

Outside, a light blanket of snow crunched underfoot, painting the world in a delicate layer of white. The cold air nipped at their faces, and the pale winter sun cast long, dramatic shadows.

Leading them to a pair of sparring rings, she made a broad gesture towards a small adjacent storage shed. "In there, you'll find a selection of training weapons and some training armor. Useful if you don't want to get skewered in the first round." She chuckled. "Who's first?"

Carlos, with a cocky upturn of his lips, quipped, "I'll give it a shot." He swaggered towards the shed, his boots creating a soft rhythm against the snow.

Within minutes, he emerged, clad in a hardened leather cuirass, gripping a sword that, although dull, hinted at the battles it had seen. He confidently entered the ring, his breath visible against the cold. He glanced at Iris with a smirk, asking, "So, *Grandmaster*, what's next on the agenda?"

Without missing a beat, Iris flashed a mischievous grin. "Simple. Try to hit me."

Carlos, even with the weight of the leather and steel, managed to stand with a certain defiant pride. His eyes, however, gave away a sliver of doubt, settling on Iris's unarmored figure. There was an undeniable edge to his voice as he challenged, "You stand there, all confident and shit, with no armor, no weapon. I won't be the guy who hurts a woman, you know."

The terran companion's eyes widened in a mixture of surprise and realization. A sharp intake of breath sliced through the tense air, reflecting the tension that danced between the two figures in the ring.

Smart move. This one might keep Carlos out of too much trouble.

Iris merely cocked an eyebrow, her face a canvas of mock surprise and amusement. "Oh, how chivalrous," she teased, her voice dripping with irony. With a casual shrug, she added, "Well, your call."

Without warning, her fingers flicked in his direction, releasing a **[Spark]** of energy. The electric blue bolt darted forward, hitting Carlos squarely in the chest. Every muscle in his body contracted violently from the sudden jolt, and he collapsed to the ground, his sword falling beside him.

There was a heavy pause. The hush of the audience was palpable as everyone froze and not from the weather.

But Iris simply sighed, rolling her eyes with a tinge of exasperation as she trudged toward him. “Honestly, kid, it’s tough reining it in. Sorry ‘bout that. Now, come on, get up. I have to see what you can do.” She offered a hand with a smirk. “Believe it or not, I’ve zapped my own party members and sisters worse.”

“Y–Your sisters came here with you?” Naomi asked.

Iris shook her head. “No, they’re from here, but even the system acknowledges our relationship. They’ll be back from their quest soon. I can’t wait.”

She looked back at Carlos with a predatory look that would make her vulpine sister proud. “Now, are you ready to actually try?”

The man shivered.

She smirked and settled into her stance as he lifted his sword shakily.

A bell later, Iris calmly walked back to the back entrance of the guild, her footfalls soft against the snowy ground. The four trailed behind her, the winter air heavy and filled with slight sounds of pain.

Naomi, still attempting to process what she had just gone through, whispered, her voice a blend of awe and trepidation, “H-How... she... she turned into lightning. I couldn’t even touch her!”

The high elf man, on the other hand, responded with unmasked admiration, “She’s nothing short of a storm goddess. Alos strike me if I’m speaking falsely.”

Beside Carlos, his terran friend groaned. “Why the hell does every part of me hurt?”

Walking inside, Iris cast a glance over her shoulder, catching the consensus in their nods of affirmation. With a light, teasing tone, she remarked, “That was just a taste, guys. A mere appetizer. But hey, you all made it through. Congratulations!”

“W–We did? But, how?” the woman asked.

Iris led them to the counter where Neri was going through some things with Sera. “Hey, Sera. Neri? They all passed. Can you please give them the rundown again, just in case they’ve got some electricity-induced memory loss?”

Sera rolled her eyes but Neri chuckled and gestured for the four to come closer. Iris smiled at them. "You passed because I can tell you have a decent foundation. You each used your abilities and spells to the best of your... ability. While there's plenty of room for improvement, you guys are more than capable of being Novice Adventurers. Neri will get you set up with your badges. If you want to rent a room for the night, we have them available for cheap until you get set up in the city."

She stepped forward and shook their hands individually. "Welcome to the Guild. I look forward to where your path takes you."

After shaking hands with the others, Naomi stepped forward, her eyes showing a determination that had been slightly dimmed earlier. "I might not have a group, but I'll make it as a solo adventurer," she declared, her voice gaining confidence.

Iris met her gaze, a hint of admiration glinting in her eyes. "I believe you. And I can't wait to see what you can achieve."

As the new adventurers started chatting with Neri, Iris took a moment to survey the guild hall. The chatter, the laughter, the hopeful faces—her vision was coming together. *The guild is thriving, and this is just the beginning.*

She felt a profound sense of achievement and purpose. People would soon be arriving from the capital to get trained to set up a new branch. After that, they would spread across the entire queendom.

Then, the region if things go as planned with that contact from Sera's old company.

The Adventurer's Guild was well on its way to becoming legendary.