The trio reappeared in the abandoned side street smoothly and John's lips twisted into a satisfied smile.

"Not even a second of discomfort or disorientation," he announced. "Think I've got a handle on getting in and out of Barriers."

"John, your armor," Vivian said, pointing at his still equipped helmet. John felt his face warm as he quickly opened his Inventory and unequipped the composite gear.

"Well, that's embarrassing," John grumbled as he closed his display. "Good thing nobody's around."

"Picked this spot for a reason, remember?" Vivian remarked. "Even with Gaia giving us a short grace period, it's always better to pick a location mundanes don't frequent just to be safe."

"Have either of you seen what happens if someone, ya know, breaks the rules?" John asked his companions as they slowly walked back to Vivian's car.

"No," Aeolia responded first, her voice slightly muffled as she settled into John's bag.

"Me neither," Vivian added, a thoughtful look crossing her face. "Nor have I heard of any credible accounts."

John hummed, "Wonder if there hasn't been anyone dumb or reckless enough to do magic stuff out in the open. How long has the whole 'do magic, get smitten' thing been a thing?"

"A few millennia," Vivian answered, though her tone carried a hint of uncertainty. "Though given the number of things mundane history and mythology record regarding things like gods and magic, perhaps it wasn't always as stringently enforced. Abyssal history isn't any less complicated than mundane history, especially since there are powers that could wipe out whole civilizations with ease. I suspect after a few large scale instances of Gaia enforcing her will, people fell in line and fear has kept us from breaking her rule."

"Makes sense," John mused. "A few displays of power and cultural inertia keeps people from risking it."

Their conversation lapsed as they turned onto the main road, which had enough people walking down the sidewalk to warrant a prudent pause on their discussion of divine wrath. Switching topics, John asked, "So, any requests for lunch?"

Vivian shook her head. "I don't have any real preference. To be honest, I haven't really checked out the dining establishments. I've mostly just been getting simple meals."

Before John could respond, he felt a poke on his back. He cast a glance to the bag slung over his shoulder then said, “I think Aeolia has a suggestion. Pause the convo until we reach the car?”

Vivian nodded and the pair walked the rest of the way in comfortable silence. Once they reached the car and pulled out of the lot and onto the road, Aeolia popped out of the bag and flew down to the center console.

“Okay,” she started. “First, I’ve come around to the invisibility thing. I really am sick of that thing. Second, I know a place where we can eat.”

“Like an actual restaurant?” John questioned.

“It’s more of a diner, but yeah,” Aeolia answered, her voice growing quiet. “It was kind of a favorite place for us. A few of our jobs came from them.”

Vivian frowned at Aeolia’s sad tone. “We don’t have to go there if it makes you uncomfortable. I’m fine with getting fast food.”

“No,” Aeolia firmly stated, her fingers digging into her palms. “The owners deserve to know what happened. They’re good people and I don’t want to leave them high and dry without us being able to do jobs for them. And while they’re not really a guild, I want to give them the heads up about what we’ve figured out. Just in case, ya know.”

“I understand,” Vivian said quietly.

“Haven’t been to a diner in forever,” John added. “What’s the address?”

Aeolia’s directions led them to a side street on the lower westside. The area wasn’t as rundown as where they had come from, but it still was a less than pristine neighborhood. Aeolia had them park near an old building, its sign too faded to make out what had been sold there. After a quick survey of the area, John opened the car door and Aeolia flew down to the sidewalk, where she promptly vanished into the Barrier.

As he followed after her, John felt for the Barrier with **Mana Sense**; detecting the edge just beyond the rim of the sidewalk. It steadily pulsed with a calming energy, one that conjured old memories of hot chocolate after a playful day out in the snow.

He willed himself into the Barrier, Vivian following a second later. The scenery shifted; the worn-down building next to them was restored to freshly constructed condition, the sign above the door proudly proclaiming ‘Diner’. Fresh red bricks framed clean windows that looked into

classic diner interior: black and white tile floor, plush bench seating, a bar with several well-polished stools before it and a jukebox sat in the corner, neon lights flashing on and off.

You have entered the Cammie's Diner Illusion Barrier

Aeolia stood before the door in her full size, eyes fixed on the handle.

"Ya know," she said softly, "I didn't think coming here would feel so heavy."

She inhaled deeply, took hold of the handle and pulled the door open, causing a bell attached to it to chime. The open door allowed the fresh scents of classic Americana, a mix of brewing coffee and freshly cooked comfort food.

"Just take a seat anywhere," a booming voice sounded from the kitchen. "We'll be with you in a moment."

John took a step towards one of the booths but stopped when Aeolia remained rooted in place. She took one more deep breath before striding towards the counter and rapping her knuckle on the laminated wooden surface.

"So impatient," the deep voice rumbled, sounding more amused than offended as heavy footfalls echoed from the kitchen. "Can't wait to try some of our food, yes?"

The door to the cooking area swung open and a large man with a mane of red hair and matching beard strode out. His apron bore a few old grease stains and his rolled sleeves displayed his well-muscled forearms. Despite his jovial expression, John tensed at his appearance. Not helping the first impression were the cleaver and straight razor clenched in the man's hands.

![mason](https://i.imgur.com/4KUwc8Y.png)

"Mason," Aeolia said, her serious tone causing the towering man's brow to crinkle, distorting the tattoo branded above his eyes, "is Cammie here?"

"Aeolia," the man responded, his booming voice growing softer as he took in the grim face of their semi-regular customer. "Cammie is doing some experimenting. I'll go get her."

He hurried through a door leading further into the building, leaving the three of them alone. They could hear his footfalls venturing into what was presumably a backroom. Muffled voices just barely reached them, too blocked by walls and distance to make out. Then, the heavy steps began back towards them.

The door opened, and for a second, John thought the large man had returned alone, but then he shifted out of the doorway to reveal a petite, dark-haired woman, her short stature enhanced

by the extreme height of her companion. She wore a simple white hoodie that hung to her knees, black leggings and simple flats.

![cammie](https://i.imgur.com/zY6rHCx.png)

“Been a while since you’ve come around here, hun,” the owner said in a soothing voice. “Something happen to you guys?”

“They’re gone, Cammie,” Aeolia answered after taking a breath. “We got ambushed and everyone died. Only reason I’m alive is Zeph wizarded up a pocket in the Barrier and shoved me in.”

Cammie gasped and Mason’s fists grew tighter around the sharp implements he carried. The short proprietor quickly took a step forward and embraced Aeolia, who stiffened slightly but slowly returned the hug.

“I’m so sorry, hun,” she consoled the slightly shorter woman before pulling away. “Come with me to the back. Mason, whip up some lunch. On the house, and I won’t hear any words about trying to pay.”

She hurriedly pulled Aeolia out of sight, leaving John and Vivian with Mason. The imposing man let out a tired sigh, his red mane flying about his face as he shook his head.

“Such sad tidings,” he muttered before turning his attention to his guests and gestured towards one of the booths. “Please, take a seat. You look like you’ve had an exciting morning.”

Neither John nor Vivian were going to protest that order and they quickly sank into the plush red seats opposite of each other. Mason let out a sharp whistle and a pair of menus floated up from the counter and flew over to their table, landing before them.

“If there’s something not on the menu, don’t hesitate to ask about it,” Mason announced, turning back towards the kitchen before he abruptly turned back to them. “Oh yes, drinks! What would you like to drink?”

“Just a water, please,” Vivian said.

“Ice tea for me,” was John’s choice.

“I’ll be right back,” Mason nodded and strode back to the kitchen. Once the large man was out of sight, both John and Vivian relaxed.

“Well, this is going very differently than I thought it would,” John said quietly, eyes shifting from the menu to Vivian.

“How exactly did you expect things to go?” she asked as she pursued the food choices.

“Not with a giant of a man wielding knives greeting us,” John answered in a deadpan. “Doesn’t really say, ‘Come in, grab a seat and take a load off’.”

“It is a little off-putting,” Vivian agreed, “but they are Aeolia’s friends. And your scrying spell painted him as a good person.”

“Well, **Observe** hasn’t really steered me wrong yet,” John said. “Sometimes doesn’t give me all the info that would be useful, but hasn’t led me off a cliff.”

Their conversion lulled as Mason returned, a pair of frosted glasses floating behind him and his hands now occupied by a simple notepad and pencil. The drinks drifted past the large man, gently floating down to their intended recipients.

“Have ya settled on what you want to order?” Mason asked, bringing his pencil to paper.

John quickly returned his attention to the menu and picked the first thing that spoke to him, “I’ll just take a cheeseburger, medium.”

Mason jotted down the order and turned his attention to Vivian. “And you, miss?”

“I’ll have the chicken Caesar salad,” Vivian answered.

“Cheeseburger and chicken caesar,” their waiter repeated. “Alright, we’ll get right on that.”

The pad floated out of his hand towards the kitchen and John eyed it while activating **Mana Sense**. A sensation like a barely-there breeze grazed against his face, growing weaker as the pad drifted away. Before whatever magic could escape his range, John cast **Observe** on the unknown phenomena.

Minor Spirit of Wind
A weak spirit of wind, bound to Mason Sweeny’s will. It can only manifest as a small tempest, capable of moving lightweight objects.

John held his tongue until Mason retreated to the kitchen before he shifted to give Vivian a better look at the **Observe** display. “Any idea what all this means?”

Vivian peered at the popup, a frown creasing her brow as she read it.

“Spirits,” she muttered, chewing her straw before she took a sip of her water, “I don’t really know much about them. They’re kind of like an elemental, but generally weaker. Sorry, they never were something that caught my interest.”

“Not a lot of people are interested,” Mason’s voice boomed from the kitchen, reaching them above the din of culinary creation. “Bit of a shame that. Spirits might not have the raw strength or intellect of an elemental or full on ghost, but there’s some benefits they have over them.”

The temptation to learn more overtook John’s slight wariness of the imposing man and he couldn’t stop himself from asking, “How so?”

“Like so,” Mason’s response came not from the kitchen but from an empty spot of air next to their table. John focused his attention where their cook’s voice came from, feeling the same faint wind across his face.

“A nice little benefit, is it not?” Mason asked, a proud lilt to his voice. “Spirits are easier to gather than elementals and easier to command than ghosts, so we can multitask a fair amount.”

“We?” Vivian chined in.

“Aye, me and Cammie have similar talents,” Mason replied, the faint sounds of sizzling meat accompanying his voice. “She’s better with more complex ones though, and has a few talents beyond my skill. That’s how we met, incidentally. We were chasing the same rumor, a collective of rogue spirits making a mess of things. Not sure if either of us could have fully tackled that problem alone, so that was a good turn of fortune.”

“What exactly differentiates spirits and elementals?” Vivian asked, focused more on the arcane over their host’s personal history.

“Well, I’m not exactly an expert on these sorts of classification things,” Mason began, “but generally, spirits don’t have much in the way of will. They act on the impulses and memories of whatever spawned them. A bit like ghosts, but they aren’t really lingering aspects of a person, just residual psychic energy that ends up in control of some amount of mana. Sometimes they just burn off their energy and dissipate, but they usually form in areas with enough ambient mana to keep them running.”

Mason’s explanation paused for a moment as he focused on the cooking, the sounds coming in both through his spirit and from the actual location of their origin. When whatever his task was had been dealt with, he continued, “Elementals, on the other hand, are self-sustaining, assuming they get to ‘eat’ as it were. Don’t know if I’d be able to whip one up a mana steak, though.”

He let out a short laugh. “They do eat up a fair bit of mana, from what I’ve heard. Most of us with modest magic would only be able to contract one, and not a very strong one at that. I can hold over twenty spirits and get along just fine, even if they aren’t the most powerful.”

“Is the power difference between spirits and elementals really that great?” John asked, taking a sip of his tea, finding it had just the right amount of lemon.

“As far apart as a puddle is to an ocean,” Mason replied. “Well, maybe that’s a little bit of an exaggeration, but even the weakest elemental could handle one of my spirits without much problem. Or so I reckon. Never had to deal with facing one, by itself or with a summoner.”

John pondered over the information, shifting the knowledge around to pick out a good question.

“What makes elementals so much stronger than spirits?”

The sound of cooking was the only sound coming from Mason’s spirit for a few minutes and John wondered if the man was mulling over his question or was distracted by something in the kitchen.

“That,” Mason began, breaking the silence, “is a question I don’t really have a good answer for. Best I can answer is that elementals have souls while spirits don’t.”

“Souls?” Vivian queried.

“Aye,” Mason replied, sounding thoughtful. “Spirits don’t really have a will of their own. They just follow whatever impulses were imprinted on them. Things with a soul, you, me, elementals, elves, dwarves, even gods, have free will. They can act as they want, more or less.”

“More or less?” John repeated.

“An elemental’s emotions can be heavily influenced by what sort of element they are,” Mason explained. “A fire elemental’s more aggressive emotions are strengthened by their nature. Not necessarily something said elemental couldn’t work to mitigate, but something that does play a part in how they act. But since they can work to control their emotions and impulses, they have a soul. Same’s said about gods, but I’ve never met one to ask.”

The thought to implore about Gaia had barely crossed John’s mind when a pop up obscured his vision.

I can do whatever I want. Also, enjoy the fries.

The display vanished at the same time Mason’s voice sounded through his spirit, “Order up!”

The doors to the kitchen swung open and Mason’s imposing figure strode out, motes of swirling green wind holding aloft two plates, one a juicy burger nestled between two fresh buns and accompanied by golden fries and the other a salad of crisp-looking greens and nicely grilled chicken. The spirit user directed the food to their table and gently placed the meals before their intended recipients.

“Bon appétit," Mason intoned and gave a slight bow.

John eyed his cheeseburger and licked his lips. Before he reached for his meal, he cast his eyes towards the door the proprietor had pulled Aeolia through.

’I hope everything’s going alright back there.’