

“Or is it five?” Teri asked, a perplexed expression on her face as she scanned over the group, her ears twitching.

‘She must be able to sense me,’_ Senka thought.

‘She does have some sort of emotion magic,’_ John responded. ‘Guess that means if someone’s got some skill in sensing magic, hiding you in partial manifested mode isn’t going to be easy.’_

‘You want to hide me?’_ Senka asked, her tone playful despite the accusation.

‘You know I don’t’_ John answered. ‘But I can’t ignore the tactical advantage this gives us.’_

John felt Senka’s approval at his idea as he addressed Teri, “That’s, um, a bit of a personal issue. Something Mason’s been working on with me.”

“Ah,” the goblin girl exclaimed, her head twisting back towards the kitchen. “He’s a bit busy at the moment.”

As if on cue, the harsh chipped cadence of the goblin language rang out from behind Teri in the kitchen, followed by Mason’s deep voice saying, “No, no, over there!”

Teri sighed, her ears drooping as she shook her head. “Very busy.”

“What’s the story with this anyway?” Aeolia asked, gesturing towards the cacophonous kitchen.

“How about we get you to a seat,” Teri deflected, “then I can give you the details. At least until I’m needed elsewhere.”

Then she focused her attention on Beth and smiled at the acrobat, extending her hand. “I’m Teri.”

“Beth,” the dark haired girl replied, accepting the offered hand. “The intern.”

“We never said you were an intern,” Vivian cut in as Teri led them to a booth. “Actually, now that I think about it, we need to figure out the exact structure of things.”

“As you say, boss,” Aeolia said. “This whole business thing’s your wheelhouse.”

Vivian blushed as they settled into their booth, her and John on one side, Beth and Aeolia across from them. “I’ll be honest, given the situation we’re in, I haven’t really put much thought into that. The whole life or death thing puts trying to make a profit on the backburner.”

Teri perked up at that, ears quivering, and asked, “Sounds like you guys are in pretty deep?”

“Yeah,” Aeolia answered. “We never fully explained what happened, did we?”

“If it’s too much, you don’t have to,” Teri said, as she handed out menus. “I don’t want to poke the wound.”

“We can later,” Aeolia assured their green friend. “Not really the place, not with all these people around. I do want to know how Mason roped you into being his waitress.”

“I wouldn’t say he ‘roped’ us into anything,” Teri muttered, awkwardly rubbing her arm. “He popped around to check in on us with some food. As much as we appreciated the gesture, the elders didn’t want to just accept it, so they struck a deal with him.”

“You work here and get food and supplies?” Vivian guessed.

“Bingo,” Teri replied. “As much as we’d been ground down, we still have our pride and there were only so many handouts they were willing to take.”

“I’m surprised those elders of yours let you guys do this,” John cut in. “The head honcho especially.”

Teri nodded. “Yeah, kind of took me by surprise too. I think Elders Bryjit and Tjkon managed to talk Vrexy down. Taking away our food after everything happened would have been a move too far for everyone to tolerate. So we reached a deal. We help Mason and Cammie here and they pay us in food and supplies. Everybody wins.”

“And how’s things working out with that?” Aeolia asked, eyes drifting to the now quiet kitchen.

“Well enough,” Teri answered after a moment. “The language barrier is a bit of a pain, but the cards we made are working well enough. And my people are happy to be doing something that isn’t running or hiding.”

Beth opened her mouth to say something, but closed it forcefully, her teeth clicking as she bit back whatever she was going to say. Teri glanced over to her, a small smile on her face.

“I’m going to guess you haven’t been told everything yet, huh?” Teri asked, mostly to Beth but addressed to the whole group.

“Intern, remember,” Beth said with a grin. “Only got the rough overview so far. To be fair to the higher ups, we did end up discussing other things.”

“And those other things involve Mason and Cammie in some way,” Teri surmised, her eyes flicking to John. “Does it have something to do with how you beat the Elders’ challenge?”

‘She’s certainly clever,’ Senka noted, a pleased sensation bleeding into John. Teri’s eyes widened slightly and John believed she felt Senka’s emotions.

“Yeah, it does,” John answered. “Not the same sort of thing, but part of the same general theme. It was something we were working on before meeting you guys.”

“Well, since things seem to be working smoothly back there, I’ll just go and make your drinks and inform Mason you’re here,” Teri said. “What’ll ya have?”

After quickly noting down their choices, Teri left to fill them and Vivian turned to face Beth.

“Want the rundown?” the redhead asked their self-proclaimed intern, prompting her to nod. They quickly filled in Beth on yesterday’s events, giving her the broad strokes. As the details unfolded, Beth’s expression grew more dour.

“Damn,” she muttered, eyes focused intently on the table. “Sounds intense.”

“You okay?” John inquired, taking note of her somber shift in mood.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” she replied softly. “It’s just even the summed up version of things sounds super intense. I know we’re going up against some big baddies, but hearing how some random fight you stumbled into went is a bit, you know.”

“Eye opening?” Vivian supplied.

Beth nodded. “I’m not sure what I could have done if I was there. I mean, I wasn’t doing so great against those vine dudes.”

Aeolia lightly rapped Beth on her head, drawing out an indignant, “Hey!” from her.

“Everyone’s gotta start somewhere,” the winged woman preached. “And your sticking ability might have been useful in keeping that thing’s tentacles pinned. Being strong doesn’t just mean being able to smash something until it’s dead. It’s about using what you can do the best way possible.”

“Good words!” Mason’s cheerful voice boomed as he approached, their drinks held aloft by his spirits. He slowed as he reached their table, critical eyes locked on John as he placed the drinks down.

“Your aura certainly has taken on an interesting shape,” the large man said to him, clapping him on the shoulder, a brief flash of his mana pulsing through John. Mason’s eyes widened a fraction and John got the impression that his mentor could make out Senka’s appearance, at least in some fashion.

“Very interesting,” Mason muttered. “But not unexpected. I think we should have a private chat once you’re done with your meal. On that note, what’ll you lot be having?”

After a moment of deliberation, they decided to just share an appetizer plate, so that they could get to the meeting in a reasonable time without shortchanging the establishment.

‘Is this alright?’ John asked Senka as they waited. ‘Eating without you, I mean.’

Senka let out a small chuckle. ‘I appreciate the thought, but I don’t really need to eat. Plus, you should be able to share the taste with me. I imagine that if I were to eat, the resulting mush of chewed food would just sit around until I was returned to your aura or my domain. I don’t think anyone would appreciate that splatting onto the floor when that happens.’

John grimaced at that mental image, drawing a hearty laugh from Senka. His reaction didn’t go unnoticed and Aeolia asked, “You ok?”

“Yeah,” he answered. “Just a bad image popped into my head.”

“So,” Beth spoke up. “After this is done, what’s the plan? Are we going to do a proper team Barrier? Figure out the whole team dynamic thing?”

“I think a quick run to end things today should be enough,” Vivian supplied. “Just a low level one to figure out how we should operate as a team. Especially since our number jumped up even more.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Aeolia said in agreement.

“Yeah, a small run just to get our groove sorted out makes sense,” John added. “Don’t want to go too crazy. Small steps. Just enough of a challenge to make us work for it but nothing that’ll take hours to do. We can do a longer thing tomorrow.”

Beth pulled out her phone and checked the time. “Yeah. Something quick probably is the best idea. Really don’t want to risk my sister calling in the middle of a fight. That would be a pain to explain.”

Before any more talk of battleplans could be said, Teri returned with their order. A few grateful and friendly words later, the party dug into their meal.

Once the meal was done and paid for, Mason discreetly led John into his office. During the meal, the girls decided that they weren’t needed for the meeting and elected to wait in the car. Once Mason closed the door, Senka manifested between them.

“How nice to finally meet you,” Mason greeted her cheerfully, holding out his hand.

“Likewise,” Senka said, taking his hand. “You’ve been a great help to John.”

A flicker of something John couldn’t read crossed Mason’s face. “I see. If I may, I’d like to pick at your connection to each other. And if you could explain what you already know about it.”

John quickly began to recount what he considered relevant information: how he initiated the bond, the fight in Senka’s domain and how his powers interacted with her, focusing mostly on how he was maintaining her manifestation and how she cost less to keep out than the wind spirit.

“Hmm,” Mason hummed as he mulled over John’s explanation. “I can see why it would take less mana to maintain her physical form.”

“Because I have my own, correct?” Senka asked.

Mason nodded, a thoughtful smile on his lips. “Yes. The fact that you have mana is the only conclusion I can reach that makes sense. Our elemental spirits and Cammie’s animals require the flow of mana to power them, which you don’t need. Effectively, John’s mana acts more as a tether for you, anchoring you out here.”

“That makes sense, I guess,” John said.

“What I find most interesting is this ‘domain’ thing,” Mason confessed, stroking his chin. “From what I understand of elementals, when their summoner can’t maintain them for whatever reason, they return to the plane of their origin until they’re summoned again. But those are more akin to Kingdoms than anything else. But this domain is more like a pocket space, created from the interaction between you and the knife.”

The large man let out a sigh. “Honestly, I don’t think there’s anything more I can figure out. You’re off the edge of the map.”

“And here there be monsters,” John muttered before quickly adding, “Not that you’re one, Senka! Just, um...”

The spirit let out a laugh, conveying she didn’t take his words as an insult. “I understand you were completing a saying. Though, it is strange what I do and don’t know. I presume some of John’s knowledge bled into me. Do you think that is an accurate idea of what happened?”

“I would say so,” Mason replied. “I would also hazard a guess that your appearance is from something he may have seen at some point. You don’t exactly scream ‘knife with dark magic power.’”

Senka's expression turned pensive and John felt a wave of nostalgia wash over him.

"I believe it is," she said softly. "My recollection is somewhat hazy when it comes to my form coalescing, but I do have a strong feeling that you saw something similar to what I look like at some point. Something that you associated dark powers with. I seized on that association and took it on."

A dim memory came to the front of John's mind. A samurai-like anime character with blades that let him hide and attack in shadows. He saw a fight on the internet between that character and some bandito like enemy, and later the same swordsman fighting the manifestation of his swords. That was the image Senka took after.

"I may have to look into my imagesake at some point," Senka cut through John's recollection. "But that's not some pressing matter that needs attending in the next few minutes. Is there anything else we need to address before we leave?"

"Nothing that I can think of," John answered. "The mana thing was what I was most curious about. Well, that and the domain space."

"I'm glad I could be of help," Mason said, moving to open the door. "Though I wish I could have done more. One day of mentorship and you've already done something I could never replicate."

Mason's cheerful tone kept John from feeling bad about things.

"My powers really throw a wrench into established things, don't they?" John rhetorically asked, a dry humor to his words.

"I do wonder about that," Mason muttered. "Are your powers really some reality warping thing that lets you casually, unintentionally, give rise to a spirit more complex than any I've ever heard? Or is there something else at play?"

"I mean," John carefully said, "there is someone claiming to be Gaia plugged into my powers."

"Yes, there is that," Mason relented. "But what if your powers are more in line with being able to bring out the best possible version of magic. Like at some point, the spirit magic Cammie and I use will be able to produce, or call out, spirits like Senka and you're just ahead of the curb."

John and Senka were silent as they took in Mason's hypothesis.

"So I may not be some unique entity," Senka murmured. "That is somehow both a relief and a bit worrying. No one wants to be alone, but if I'm not alone, why are my circumstances so alien to you?"

Mason shrugged. "The Abyss is a big, hell, maybe infinite, thing. Who knows what goes on in some isolated Kingdom the people living here haven't ever contacted."

John shook his head, not really feeling like pondering the origin and nature of his abilities. All he needed at the moment was the knowledge that they worked and would let him and those he cared about survive.

"Ah, but I can see you aren't in the mood to listen to my musings," Mason said affably, slapping John playfully on his back. "Perhaps as you level up, more will be made clear. Now, I believe you have other things to attend to. Best not to keep them waiting."

John nodded and Senka faded back into his aura.

"Say bye to Cammie, Teri and the goblins for us," he remarked as he departed, slipping out of Mason's office and back to the diner area. Between their chat and meat, the customers had thinned out slightly. As John passed the counter, he bumped into a tired looking dark haired man as he stood up from his stool.

"Sorry," the man quickly said in a worn voice, then rushed to the exit before John could say anything. Brushing off the encounter, John made his way to Vivian's car.

"So, back to the park?" he asked as he got in.

"Yeah," Vivian remarked, then frowned as she glanced in the rearview mirror. John tilted his head to better view the reflective surface, his brow furrowing when he saw the disheveled man looking in their direction.

"That guy bumped into me a second ago," he reported.

"You check your pockets?" Beth asked as Vivian shifted the car into gear and pulled away from the curb. "That sounds like some pickpocketing move."

"I've got everything in the Inventory," John said, pulling up his screen just to check. "Everything's still there."

He closed his display and noticed Vivian was turning down another side street. Before he could ask why, she pulled over, parked and looked intently at him.

"Maybe I'm being paranoid, but I'm going to see if that guy put anything on you," Vivian declared.

"You mean like a spell?" Aeolia asked, her tone gravely serious.

"Yes," the redhead answered.

'I didn't sense anything,' Senka chimed in. _'Though in this state, my perception is limited to what you sense, and you can't unless you use **Arcane Sense.**_ Better safe than sorry.'_

"It's not going to hurt, right?" John joked, a hint of worry creeping into his voice.

Vivian smiled reassuringly. "I'm just going to run my magic over you. If anything that isn't you is there, it'll react."

John stilled himself, **Arcane Sense** kicking in. He felt Vivian's warm mana wash over him, caressing him like a shower of sunlight.

"Hmm, looks like there's nothing there," Vivian said, letting her magic fade. "Guess that guy really just innocently bumped into you. Since everything's fine, shall we get back to our training ground?"

"Guess fighting is a good way to burn off our snack," Beth remarked as she led around the party of Vine Men the woodland Barrier had set against them. They elected to use the same settings as before, though the level was slightly higher to provide a bit more challenge. After the short planning session, they decided to focus on establishing Beth's role and testing out Senka's abilities.

Given Beth's speed and ability, they had decided to try a hit and run strategy with her: quickly engaging the enemy then pulling back, either to a powerful attack from Aeola and John or a trap from Vivian. Between her footwork and yo-yo, Beth was easily able to aggro the whole troop of Vine Men and keep out of their reach, forcing them to endlessly follow her.

'She certainly looks like she's having fun,' Senka remarked.

'I'd say she likes being able to participate,' John noted, a twinge of sympathy running through him as he compared her situation to his. _'Are you sure you want to try using fire mana with your powers?'_

'If you're thinking about Beth's less than pleasant reaction, I should be fine,' Senka reassured him. 'I want to see if my abilities will benefit from the addition of other elements. Since my powers flow from yours, it stands to reason I can modify my abilities the way you can. And since we are in a testing sort of mood, I thought it would be appropriate.'_

"Are you two ready to try something?" Vivian asked, stopping John from responding to Senka's line of reasoning.

'If you're sure about it, we'll do this,' John thought to his spirit then nodded.

“Beth, start to bunch them up!” Aeolia shouted as Senka manifested.

The elegant spirit surveyed the field as Beth shepherded the Vine Men into a close group. Once she deemed them in the correct position, she said, “Alright. Let’s see if this works.”

John began to convert his mana, the fire mana warming him before he began to move it towards Senka. When the mana didn’t flow towards the spirit, Senka picked up on his confusion then let out a small chuckle after a moment of thought.

‘My mana is full,’ she thought, her humor bleeding through. ‘Can’t add mana to a full tank. I’ll fix that.’

She raised her right hand, darkness obscuring it, and fired off a ****Black Thorn****, easily skewering one of the Vine Men.

****10(1) EXP Gained****

The impaled creature flailed for a second before fading away. With twenty-five mana spent, John allowed the ten fire mana he’d built up to flow into Senka, the process effortless.

“Oh, that is a bit warm,” Senka remarked before quickly funneling the mana into ****Snaring Shadows****. Dark vines sprouted under one of the Vine Men, lurid red thorns digging into the plant creature. Smoke rose from where green met red and the Vine Man struggled against Senka’s hold.

John counted to five, knowing that Senka was spending two fire mana a second to fuel her spell, and once that mana was exhausted, the thorns returned to their usual dark color.

“Hmm,” Senka hummed, disappointment clearly displayed. “I’d hoped to be able to take it out with that.”

“I think your vines are more for crowd control than damage,” John said.

****10(1) EXP Gained****

“Or I could just be talking out of my ass,” John added as he watched the Vine Man and Senka’s vines fade away. “Probably could have killed it outright if I sent over two more fire mana.”

“I don’t think there’s anything more to gain using my abilities,” Senka reported. ****Black Thorn**** can kill these in one hit and I can’t see ****Cutting Shadow**** being any less effective.”

“So I can let loose and cut them up?” Aeolia asked. “Nothing else to do, right? Beth did her job alright so there’s no point in just letting her keep them all grouped up.”

“Yeah, I don’t see us getting anything more done,” John added. “Honestly, I’m feeling a bit worn down. Today’s been a different sort of exhausting.”

Vivian nodded, a touch of concern in her eyes. Aeolia took to the sky and flew towards Beth, mana gathering around her blade. The slightly winded girl noticed Aeolia before she could give a retreat order but quickly understood her intent and dashed away from the remaining Vine Men.

Aeolia let out a battlecry and swung her glaive in a wide, sweeping arc. The resulting wind blade easily tore through the plant monsters.

****50(5) EXP Gained****

****Level Up!****

****Five Skill Points Gained****

****All hostile entities defeated. Barrier will repopulate in five minutes.****

“Okay,” John said as Aeolia and Beth joined him, Senka and Vivian. “Let’s collect the loot and head out. I can deal with the level up after. Might sleep on it, actually. The points aren’t going anywhere.”

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