

CHAPTER 15:

FIRESIDE CHAT II

Naturally, the talk soon turned toward their stats, and what everybody should do with their allotment.

Sam was still digesting the information about affinities. It felt odd that he had an affinity for Fire mana, but not for Void mana. Considering that, as far as he understood, he couldn't *create* Fire mana. Ever.

Or any other mana, for that matter.

So how in the hell was he ever going to be able to *use* his Fire affinity? An affinity that he couldn't gain an attunement for.

It seemed utterly backwards to have an attunement that prohibited others but didn't give an affinity for itself.

Sam realized he had zoned out of the group conversation and listened back in.

"...don't think you can go wrong by doubling down on what your Job already gives you," Kale said. "I picked Fighter, so I gain 2 Strength, 2 Vigor and 1 Agility per level. It's all Agility for me. Just call me Sonic, 'cause 'I gotta go fast' baby!"

"But there are far more than just three stats to choose from," Kai said, bowing his head. "Surely the intent for Bonus Points is to spend them elsewhere. In a place where our Jobs do not current support us."

"Maybe, but we don't have the luxury of carefully weighed decisions right now," Sam pointed out. The campfire burned

brighter and hotter at his intensity. The First Flame echoed his mood. “We’re in the middle of a *forest*, with an *ogre* coming for us all in a day or so. Pick what you think will allow you to contribute to a fight best. Whether that’s hitting harder, surviving longer, or casting more spells.”

“What’d you pick?” Chris asked.

“I opted to enhance my Dexterity. It was pretty weak to begin with, and I didn’t like how awkward handling a greatsword was.”

“I see, I see.” Chris folded his arms. “So, what was your Dexterity at?”

“It started at six, probably one of the lowest next to Insight and Control.”

“Mine was quite a lot higher than that,” Kylie said. “Did we all start with different stats or something?”

“It makes sense,” Leilani said softly. “We all have different lives. Our experiences and bodies are different. Sam is solid and strong. I have seen the way he handles himself on the waves with the confidence of a native son.”

That comment immediately darkened Kai’s already tanned face.

“My Strength started at *three*,” Kylie added. “Quite pathetic, really. But my Dexterity was ten. I assumed it was because of my gymnastics. Everything else about my stats kinda sucks, though. The attendant girl told me I would be a nice fit for the Scout Job, so that’s what I picked.”

“What does Komachi pick? I got two Bonus Points,” she asked Sam, now munching on a hunk of meat by his feet. His cat looked up at him for guidance, green eyes shining in the firelight.

That was a good question.

Would Arcane enhance a Cleric's healing spell potency? Or would Mind be the better option for now? She did say that healing took a lot of mana.

Sam tried to think back to what the Cleric Job received as its stats for each level.

He seemed to recall it having a wider base than his Fighter.

"Clerics get 2 Mind, 1 Arcane, 1 Vigor, and 1 Insight per level," she reminded him, as if she could read Sam's mind.

Arcane, Vigor, Insight, and Mind were a bit more spread out than his Strength, Vigor, and Agility.

Being able to cast more magic spells over a limited period of time was incredibly important, but no one had gained additional MP from increasing their Mind yet.

Moreover, he had no idea if there was any sort of passive regeneration. His HP and MP surely didn't mention anything of the sort, though the singular wound he received—blunted by Komachi's spell—was something the cat had healed quickly enough.

On the other hand, he could just follow Kale's advice and tell Komachi to dump those Bonus Points into whatever the Cleric Job already naturally gained per level up.

"Well, what does your healing skill say?" Sam asked her. "Does it mention any stats?"

"For healing, I got two of 'em. [Restorative Magic Foundation] and the [Regen] spell. As for stats, there's—"

Sam turned to a sudden noise. Darren had surged to his feet. Sam could practically see one plus one slowly adding up in Darren's head.

Here we go.

“Hold on, this mangy cat leveled up *twice?*” Darren said, his voice rising in fury, heedless of the danger.

Monsters screeched in the forest.

Matt pulled Darren back down into a sitting position. “Be *quiet*, Darren.”

The others around the campfire glared daggers at him. It seemed to settle Darren slightly.

“Sam was the first person to see the threat,” Kylie said softly. “And Komachi was on him when he killed that first one.”

Darren’s eyes nearly bugged out of his head as he turned to Sam. “*You* got two levels as well?”

Sam merely shrugged. “I did.”

He wanted to ask why Darren had gotten *anything*, considering he wasn’t anywhere near the battle. In fact, by Sam’s own reckoning, only himself, Kale, Komachi, Kylie, and Chris should have gotten any experience for the kills.

Nobody else had lifted a finger.

Perhaps it’s proximity based, Sam thought. Then a darker thought crowded in, *or maybe it’s intent. I didn’t think about the group, only myself and meeting the monsters head-on.*

In either case, it didn’t matter much. Though Sam felt like he should test it out later just to be sure how it worked. Clearly, the Shard didn’t see fit to provide any further illumination as to how much of anything worked.

That was fine for Sam. He liked to figure things out for himself. It would be a lot less enjoyable if he had everything handed to him.

Kylie, being a Scout, was near the rest of the group, while Kale had come right up to help him. That was the easiest explanation.

“How is that fair? What’s your level?” Darren was practically spitting in apoplectic fury.

“Chill out, Darren,” Kale said. “What’s it matter? He took out one of those things all on his own and finished the others as well. I sure as hell didn’t react fast enough to deal with that first beast, and I know for a fact you were still flat on your ass with the rest of the group.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Darren said, tilting his chin up. “He should have waited so the rest of us can get the full Experience as well. Next thing you know, he’ll volunteer to do a perimeter so he can get in some extra Experience and out-level all of us!”

“Do you realize how ridiculous you sound?” Sam said wearily. He was just so *tired* of this shit. Petty squabbling that didn’t matter.

Here was *real power*, right in front of their faces, and you had somebody trying to micromanage. He wasn’t about to stand for it. Not here.

“What did you just say to me you little—!”

“Darren, keep your voice *down*,” Matt snapped. “Do we have to spell it out for you? There are *things* out there. If you keep whining like this, they’ll hear you.”

Looking like he just swallowed a cup of lemon juice, Darren shut his mouth and writhed in place. “I still don’t think it’s fair,” he said eventually, switching tack. “We’re all in this together, right? We’re basically a family. We should treat each other with proper respect.”

Sam looked down at Komachi and patted her head. He looked up calmly at Darren. “Then how about you start?”

“Oh, you think you’re going to be the leader?” Darren sneered. “A stocker that barely manages to be on time? Who would care about *your* opinions? Just another minimum-wage loser who plays fantasy hero with your fake swords beating on other losers.”

Komachi was the first to react in anger. Growling quietly, his cat's hackles raised. Claws out, she threateningly swiped at the air, just daring the idiot to pick a fight rather than cowardly slinging insults.

Leilani nearly got up before Kai and a lean Scout on the other side of her put a calming hand on each shoulder. Kai shook his head, and Sam thought he heard the other Scout whisper that it wasn't their place to interfere.

The young Hawaiian woman shot Sam a sympathetic look.

"I just want to go home," Lisa whispered to her knees.

"Me too," said the other Scout, a young man named Emmit.

Sam would have been glad for the distraction normally. He didn't like to rock the boat unless he was pressed into a corner.

He normally needed to stay on Darren's good side, even if only slightly. The man literally could—and had threatened to many times—fire him for nearly any reason he chose.

But here? He had no power, and Sam knew it. Perhaps Darren did too, and that was why he was so desperate to claw some semblance of it back.

Not to mention, Sam could see the way Darren's influence over the others spread like a sickness. Nearly every single time he spoke, it was negative in one way or another.

The mood always quickly soured from there unless somebody tried to lighten it.

I'm tempted just to go my own way, Sam realized.

With Komachi as a *literal* pocket healer, he didn't have so much to worry about. Top it off with his confidence with his greatsword, and he felt like he could quickly gain a few levels on his own without all of this posturing bullshit.

But Kale, Chris, Leilani, and Kylie were his friends.

And if he left, they'd have one less healer and one less frontline melee.

So what? said a little voice in the back of his head. *They could choose to come with you.*

Which Sam knew would be a death sentence for Darren and anybody who—for whatever reason—decided to stick with him.

Hope, even sadly misplaced hope, was a powerful thing.

“Earth is never going to come back,” Sam said finally. He reached out a hand and waved it through the tongues of fire. “It’s gone. At least, as far as any of us know it. And before you complain, just *think* for a moment, will you?”

Sam swallowed hard against the lump in his throat. He wasn’t a public speaker. In fact, he always hated talking in front of groups, and now he had 11 pairs of eyes on him.

But the only pair he cared about was his cat’s. Komachi’s emerald green eyes looked up with such hope and interest that he felt buoyed.

“Maybe Earth is out there somewhere,” Sam conceded.

“I saw a Starbucks on one of those distant floating islands,” Chris chimed in with a grin.

Sam nodded. “Right. But that’s just it. It was on a *floating island*. Think about that for a moment. We’re on a literal flying piece of land. Look up.” Sam joined the others, looking at the now starry sky filled with unfamiliar scudding shapes that were too jagged to be clouds and stars that were utterly unfamiliar.

“That is not the sky over Hawai’i.” Sam lowered his gaze to meet each of theirs in turn. “Our homes might be out there somewhere, I don’t know. But does it matter? If you get stranded on the side of

the road, you're still not safe at home in your bed even if it's still there.

“There are monsters, or at the very least animals, that don't care that we think we're at the top of the food chain. We will need to defend ourselves. And that's not even touching on the *literal* monster we saw at the center of the island. We have less than two days to get the hell off this place before that thing wakes up and starts rampaging. I don't know about you, but I've no intention of seeing that thing up close.”

“So what does the *haole* think we should do?” Kai asked with a snort.

Sam returned a forced smile. He and Kai had never gotten along. It only got worse after his sister hit her teens and began hanging around with him and Kale against their wishes.

He was the type of guy to fly into a rage if you said you didn't like his sister, and even more if you said you did.

There was no winning with some people.

Sam stiffened his spine. “I'm glad you asked. Here's what I propose we do....”