

Ain't A Hero – Episode 10

by Bryan Schuder

A bundle of blankets twists and turns on the couch. After a few more shifts, a blanket uncovers a mass of golden hair. A hand reaches out from underneath the blankets and pushes the hair back to reveal Valavera's sleep-dazed face. She works the drowsiness out of her eyes and carefully examines the living room. The sunlight coming roughly overhead through the sliding glass door shows it is well past morning. Valavera lifts herself up to a seat on the couch and scans the room more intently. She abruptly stops her head when she catches sight of Aristespha in the kitchen putting a plate of breakfast food in the microwave. Aristespha presses a time into the microwave and taps the start button. "Good afternoon, sleep-deprived one."

Valavera snaps her head free to look out the sliding glass door and squints to comprehend the scene outside. She bites her lip in nervous anticipation and her voice shakes. "I- I didn't mean to sleep in so late. I just was so tired and well... I..."

Aristespha walks plainly into the living room, drops a mug of tea off on the table in between some papers, and stands in front of Valavera. "You were busy with your thoughts for most of the night. I heard."

Valavera sheepishly hangs her head low and sighs remorsefully. She sinks into a back cushion of the couch and continues to avert her eyes from Aristespha. Aristespha's expression softens, she gestures to Valavera. "Stand up."

Valavera pulls herself up off the couch and stands at attention to Aristespha. Aristespha looks at Valavera directly in the eyes with a soft smile and holds her arms out to the side. Valavera cringes with tears forming in her eyes and embraces Aristespha. She buries her face in Aristespha's shoulder and sniffles. "I'm so- sorry. I just got so- caught up in trying to make it work that- I didn't think about whether it could work... Or, even if I wanted it- to work."

Aristespha wraps her arms around Valavera and holds her motherly with light pats on the back. "It's okay. You have kicked yourself enough for now. There will be other times for that when you are older, and you need to save some for your mother in the near future. I'm just really happy we found you first. And, there's no harm done."

Valavera lifts her head up, takes a deep breath, and releases it with a tear choked shudder. "What did my mother tell you? She said she'd work out something with you. But, she didn't say anything more to me... Well, about THAT, at least."

Aristespha continues to rub Valavera gently on the back to soothe the child. "We talked, caught up, and hatched a plan. Your uncle Becker will pick you up later tonight. It works out. He just got done trading a few towns over and wants to acquire a few things to trade along the way back. And, we happen to have a variety of items we've collected that need to be sold to someone like him."

Valavera pulls herself back from Aristespha and wipes some of the tears from her eyes with a smile. "I haven't seen Uncle Becker in a year! I can't believe my mother would call upon him."

Aristespha shakes her head and sighs with grin. "Well, despite how far he stays away from the politics, he's the best bullshit artist I've ever known. He'll be able to weave a tale so thick no one is going to question where you've been for the last month or two."

Valavera rolls her eyes and smiles firmly. "After the first half hour, no one will want to ask anymore."

Aristespha tilts her head towards the dining table. "Take a seat. Let's catch up. I saved some breakfast for you."

Valavera nods and dries out the few remaining tears with the worn T-shirt on her. "That sounds good."

She takes a moment to search around and listen carefully with her long ears. "Where is everyone else?"

Aristespha pauses mid-way to the kitchen and points outside. "Outside. It's nice a day and they're getting ready for the mission tomorrow. They didn't want to wake you with the noise. They even have held off test firing their guns. So, I guess they are still checking armor and other gear."

Aristespha examines Valavera closely, looks her up and down, and smiles with a plotting confidence. "Speaking of which, we need to get some better clothing than that. I should have a few things that will fit you. And to fit with your cover story of self-discovery, we've got a plenty of old extra adventuring gear you can have your pick of."

Valavera rushes up and excitedly hugs Aristespha. "Thank you, so much!"

Aristespha pats Valavera on the back and then discreetly drags a tear off her face. "Consider it making it up to you for being so scarce for these past few years."

Valavera snuffles and squeezes Aristespha with a smile. "You saved me from a HUGE mistake and... You've been chasing and fighting Dark Lord Noxian... You were here when I needed you and that's all I care about."

Aristespha pulls in Valavera tight. The two hold each other for a minute. Valavera finally loosens her arms, pulls away, quirks a brow, and directs her eyes to Aristespha. "I really do appreciate everything. But, I have to ask... Was the shower with cold water really necessary?"

Aristespha perks a brow to match Valavera's. "If I told you another one of those experiences would be awaiting you if you EVER attempted a stunt like this again, would you think very carefully about committing another such stunt?"

Valavera slowly nods with wide eyes. "Yes."

Aristespha dons an evil smile. "Then, it was absolutely necessary."

Bach spins his helmet around and checks various parts of it. He places it down on top of the big wooden picnic table that he sits at. Sotalia watches across the table from Bach, with her head on top of her crossed arms on the table top. She looks at Bach and sighs with boredom in her face. She reaches her hand out and picks at a loose bit of wood on a tabletop plank with a finger nail. "So, what are you doing? The helmet looks fine to me. We should practice spells."

Bach scratches the back of his head and shrugs. "I'm going to try my hand at enchanting it. If I'm going to do anything with anyone's equipment, I should probably test it out on my own first."

Sotalia furrows brow and focuses her eyes on Bach with a curious expression on her face. "Wait, didn't you say that you enchanted the helmet for Sebastian?"

Bach blinks a few times, flips through recent memory, and then browses years past. A moment of realization dawns on him and he twists the corner of his mouth. "Well, I've never personally enchanted anything. I used a store bought kit on this helmet. So, unless you consider Elander's Econo Enchanting actual enchanting?"

Sotalia sneers, lifts her head up, and stretches back on the wooden bench seat. "Oh! Oh no. Not in a million years. You really used Elander Econo Enchanting?"

Bach rolls his eyes and briefly grits his teeth with a slight twist of the head. "Well... What else do you turn to when you are a nearly broke college student? And, it's actually held out decently enough."

Sotalia pokes the helmet and shakes her head in mild surprise. "Can't believe Elander's anything blocked the shots thrown at this."

Sotalia stops after a few pokes and then places her hand firmly on the helmet. She searches her mind and then turns her attentions to the helmet. "I'll be damned. That old spell is still there! How is that even possible? Those slow burner spells usually run out after a few years, at best."

A proud grin forms on Bach's face and he puffs up. "Well, I used to have some serious power to throw around. I remember dumping A LOT of energy into that kit. WAY MORE than they'd ever recommend."

Sotalia smiles slyly and props her head up with a hand. "Oh, really? You had power? How much?"

Bach looks up from the helmet and his eyes dart around the question. "Ah, um. A lot? I used to be able to cast a few good spells. Nothing too crazy."

Sotalia narrows her eyes and maintains her smile. "How many cells were you rated at?"

Bach takes the helmet in hand, redirects all his attention and focus to it, and gestures dismissively at Sotalia. "It's been so long, I've forgotten the exact number. I mean, it's been over five years since I've even thought about it. And anyway, it really doesn't matter what my numbers were at this point. I mean, do you remember your-"

Sotalia stares at Bach and concentrates on every move and sound he makes. "Eighty six, sixty nine. Slight bias towards elemental magic. First year of school."

A blank expression clears out Bach's face of anything previous. He feels Sotalia's glare bearing down on him and desperately thinks of a plan to go with. He awkwardly grins and begins to raise his head up to meet her scrutinizing eyes.

An ethereal voice echoes out near Sotalia. "Ha! I can't believe you forgot your score, Bach! After the scene you made at High Alton University's Grading Chamber?"

Sotalia sprouts an ear-to-ear grin and spins her head to Sebastian. "Really? Tell me ALL about it."

Sebastian floats down onto the picnic table top and recounts the tale. "Oh, man! I mean most people just throw a bunch of spells until they can't anymore. But, we both got this idea of just venting magical energy out like characters from this animated show we were really into. So, Bach goes first. And wow! He goes all out and blasts energy throughout that huge chamber, I remember some of it leaking out the door seals. The graduate assistant freaks the fuck out and nearly yanks the emergency energy siphon and purge lever. They were SO pissed at us. But, they counted Bach's score anyway, since they didn't want to rescore him again... And, he did pass out."

Sotalia's eyes develop an eager glint and she dons her most charming posture and voice. "So, do YOU remember his score, Sebastian?"

Sebastian starts to open his mouth and notices Bach moving around erratically just out of Sotalia's view. Sebastian's eyes briefly witness Bach as he makes cutting motions with his hand across his neck and mouth out the words, "Don't tell her."

Sebastian smiles with confidence and speaks with bravado. "Why, of course! It is..."

He drifts off mid sentence, drops his head down in thought, and scratches his chin. He attempts to say something a few more times and then places his hands to his sides in frustration. "Well, shit. I've forgotten, too. It's been awhile."

Sotalia drops her head back onto her folded arms with a huff and groans in aggravation. "I can't believe you two. Forgetting important things like this!"

Bach shrugs with a smile of relief at Sotalia and resumes working on the helmet. "It doesn't matter. I'd probably be lucky to break a thousand these days. Hell, I haven't been able to get all the spells I used to be able to cast working with how I have to do magic these days."

Sotalia slowly turns her head towards Bach gives him an inquisitive gaze. “Which spells?”

Bach rubs his hands together before placing them around the sides of his helmet. “Well, a number of small ones that I just haven’t been focusing on. And well, the D-Ball spell.”

Sebastian frowns slightly and crosses his arms. “Aww, man. No D-Ball still?”

Bach shakes his head and continues to keep his eyes on the helmet as magic energy forms onto it. “Nope. Sorry. I still haven’t figured out how to optimize it enough to even get past the start-up phase. I think I could do everything else, but that initial setup is complex and power hungry.”

Sotalia moves her head back and forth between Sebastian and Bach, and holds both her hands up as a point of attention. “Okay, what’s the D-Ball spell you two keep talking about?”

As a coating of magical energy rests upon the helmet and solidifies, Bach takes moment to speak. “It’s a ball form of the disintegration beam spell. Something I managed to hack together third year and was banned from ever using on any official tests.”

Sebastian rolls his eyes and chuckles while shaking his head. “Ha! One of the many Warwick rules instituted because of us. That spell would have made those team assessment exams so much easier.”

Sotalia’s eyes slam wide open and her mouth hangs open in astonishment at the concept. Her devious grin reemerges in full force and she slyly watches Bach with a certain charm to her voice. “So, that means you know how to cast the spell like you used to, correct?”

The magical energy sinks into the material of the helmet and disappears. A few faint glimmers of light flicker and fade as Bach tweaks the magical energies involved. “Yes, of course. I used to direct cast it often enough to-”

His thought process hits the emergency stop and words cease to come from his mouth. He slowly lifts his head up from staring at the helmet and turns to meet the winning smile of Sotalia. She happily stands up from the picnic table and steps over the bench seat. She places her hands at her sides and tilts her hips with smug sense of victory. “Well, looks like I have a spell to look forward learning from you. Don’t forget it any time soon. Hopefully, we’ll get back to training soon.”

She pivots and strides off to house with an air of accomplishment radiating out. Sebastian returns from watching her and looks at Bach. “Sorry, bro. That was all your doing. I couldn’t spare you there.”

Bach sighs deeply and shakes his head. “Bah. It’s okay. I’d rather her be obsessed with learning a spell than knowing my old magic statistics. She’s already competitive enough, I don’t need her to have numbers to justify it.”

Sebastian circles a finger over the helmet with a smile. “So how’s the old helmet coming along?”

The remaining bits of energy visibly fade and only the helmet itself remains visible. Bach picks up the helmet and stands up from the table. "Well, I meshed in a mix of some of the magical materials I've been working on and figured out some kind of energy storage system with an ambient energy recharging mechanism and- You stop listening after magical materials didn't you?"

Sebastian floats to stand next to the picnic table and confesses with a tinge of embarrassment. "Well, yes. You know I try to keep up, bro. But, I studied swords, armor, and psychology."

Bach draws his lips to a corner of his mouth and raises a brow to his brother. "You know, I always wondered why you went with psychology... But, I think I understand now. The strangest things that turn out to be useful, you know?"

Sebastian nods with a firm slight smile at Bach. "Oh. You don't know the half of it. I didn't realize how much I'd put those psychology classes to use."

He eyes the helmet and points at again. "So, how are you going to test that enchant? You going to shoot stuff at the helmet?"

Bach hoists up the helmet and shakes his head to Sebastian. "No. I kind of like this helmet and I'm not THAT confident about my abilities. The firing range that Cideeda and Dretphi set up over in the yard off to the side of house has a bunch of steel plates. Figured I could enchant those the same way I did this."

Sebastian rubs his chin and gives a nod of approval. "Sounds like a plan. If nothing else, maybe the metal plates will last a bit longer."

Bach walks up from the end of the field next to Cideeda and Sebastian. "Well, got the same type of enchantment on that first metal plate. So, um. Fire away?"

Cideeda squints down the improvised firing range and releases the locks on the laser pistol holsters on each hip. She draws a laser pistol out from a holster, activates the power switch, disengages the safety, and takes aim at the metal plate. The sights line up and she slips a finger in front of the trigger. With a slow squeeze, the trigger clicks, and a beam of light hits the surface of the metal plate. The beam diffuses off a golden, transparent magical barrier right before the surface of the metal plate. The laser pistol cuts the beam off and the barrier visibly fades away after a few seconds. Cideeda nods and glances at Bach out of the corner of her eye. "Not bad. Not bad at all."

A sense of pride wells up in Bach and a confident smile forms on his face. "Well. It's an initial draft, but it is similar to the barriers I put up when we encountered the cyber-"

Cideeda flashes a wicked grin and fast draws the other laser pistol from the other holster. "Let's see if it can handle two beams."

Both triggers engage and two rays of blue erupt from the ends of the laser pistols. Both accurately contact the barrier and splash their energy upon the area. Smaller threads of light reflect off the surface of the barrier as it becomes more opaque. Both laser pistols discharge the last bits of energy for the shots and shut off the emitters. Bach's eyes slowly guide the rest of his head to face Cideeda's expression of dark glee. She perks both her eyebrows at Bach and shines a toothy grin. "I approve. So far that is. We'll have to see what Dretphi brings out."

Sebastian hovers behind the two and glances around the corner of the house, biting his lip in a wary anticipation. "Well, she seemed really happy when you told her to hit it hard. I wonder what she's-"

Sebastian trails off mid sentence and his eyes stare off into the distance while the rest of his mind addresses an unexpected epiphany. He blinks and cranes his head towards Cideeda. "She just got that scope sighted on her rifle, didn't she?"

Cideeda winks at Sebastian with a smug smile. "Might as well throw a real test at it."

Bach catches the exchange between the two and quickly figures what rifle they are referring to, with his confidence withering. "Oh. OH-"

A loud, heavy mechanical sound echoes into the area as the large rifle bolt disengages. Dretphi strides around the with a hint of a skip in each step. She hoists the anti-material rifle up and pointing into the air with one arm. She reaches into a satchel hanging at her side, removes her hand, and playfully twirls a large rifle round in her fingers. Bach examines the long barrel of the rifle and feels his pride search for a place to hide as his mind calculates the physics. Dretphi stops in front of Bach and levels her eyes at him with a slight smile. "Doubting your abilities?"

Bach nods slowly with a bit of unease. "Yes. Oh yes. Especially with THAT much firepower."

Dretphi examines the first metal plate in the distance and glances back at Bach. "A little doubt is healthy. So, we test."

Bach crosses his arms and contorts his lips side to side with a grumble. "Yes. I know. I was hoping to enjoy a few smaller tests before shattering the thing."

Dretphi walks over to a mat on the ground and stack of sandbags. She kneels down, places the rifle on the ground, and slips the satchel off. She readies the rifle to fire, lays down next to it, and places the butt of the rifle to her shoulder. She turns her head to look over her shoulder at Bach, with a slightly warmer expression. "With what I have seen, I am not assuming the outcome. You should not either."

Bach meets Dretphi's glance. He puzzles a moment, eventually cracks a short smile, and relaxes his arms to his sides. "Well, okay. It could... Possibly... Withstand that. I ain't putting my money on it though."

Cideeda entertains a thought with her eyes for a moment and gets Sebastian's attention. "Sebastian? Could you warn everyone inside real quick?"

Sebastian flits his eyes wide for moment and flies off towards the wall of the house. “Good call, be right back.”

A minute passes with the bright sun beaming down on the region and a gentle wind blowing through. Sebastian phases through the brick wall of the house and gives everyone a thumbs up. “They’ve been warned.”

Dretphi returns her focus forward to the target. She squints down the way, dials in a distance to the scope on her rifle, and lines the crosshairs up on the first metal plate. She picks up the rifle round, places it into the chamber, and carefully closes and locks the bolt. She fetches a set of ear plugs from the satchel and puts them in. She holds her hand out from the grip and calls out. “Cover your ears!”

Cideeda presses her palms against the sides of her head and seals up her large fuzzy ears at their bases. Bach plugs a finger in each ear and watches Sebastian. Sebastian hovers with his arms crossed and catches Bach’s glance. He raises a brow with an unamused expression on his face and gestures with his hands to his ethereal form. Bach drops his head momentarily with a bit of embarrassment and smiles awkwardly apologetic to his brother. Sebastian puts his hands up in air, and nonchalantly shrugs. “It’s cool.”

Dretphi wraps her fingers around the grip of the rifle, rests a finger on the trigger guard, and checks her shot one last time. She slides her finger on the trigger and squeezes down. A loud boom resonates throughout the area, vibrating any surface it washes over. A bright yellow flash shines out and soon a crash rings out. Glimmering speckles of bullet fragments and magical sparks scatter away from the target. Silence hangs over the region before normal background noises return in force. Dretphi pulls the bolt open and locks it back. Bach removes his fingers from his ears and notices Sebastian staring at the target. Sebastian floats in place, crosses his arms, and holds his chin in puzzlement. “It was strange, bro. I think I heard... crackling? Almost like glass or something.”

Cideeda uncovers her ears and aims her eyes at the metal plate, unsure of what she sees. “The plate is still there, but the magical barrier is really easy to see. It looks cracked?”

Dretphi engages the safety and leaves the barrel of the rifle pointing up and away from the first metal plate. She pushes herself off the ground and stands up with confusion on her face. “We need to get a closer look.”

Bach, Cideeda, Dretphi, and Sebastian walk as a group down the field to the metal target. As they close in on the destination, their curiosity only increases. They gather around the enchanted metal plate. The golden, magical barrier is almost fully opaque. From the point of impact, a meshing web of cracks spider out from the center. The severity and depth of the cracks wane the further from the center point they stretch. While the magical barrier resembles broken safety glass, the surface of the barrier remains smooth with no detectable gaps. Underneath, the metal plate survives without any new damage.

Bach drops down to a knee, lifts up the bottom edge of the hanging metal plate, and angles the plate for a better view. “Holy. Shit. I think it actually held. Looks like hell, though.”

Cideeda squats to the side of the target and cranes her head to peek behind the plate. “No signs of denting on the back side. Probably shook the plate around, but it seems just fine to me.”

She sits down on the grass and examines the front of the plate. Her eyes widen and she points out with a claw a disappearing fault line in the barrier. “Is it- Repairing itself?”

Bach scrutinizes the spot Cideeda points out and rocks his head side to side. “Well, sort of. Technically, it didn’t break enough to need big repairs. But, I did put in bits to recharge the barrier and maintain the internal alignment with any ambient energy. So, it must be using all the sunlight to recharge and realign itself.”

The cracks shrink slowly as the seconds pass on by. When the lines fully retreat and clear the edge of the barrier, the golden magical energy visibly fades towards full transparency. Dretphi kneels down and spots a few bullet fragments in the grass underneath the target. She pinches onto the largest and lifts it up for a better view. She examines it carefully as a grin attempts to sneak into her smile. Bach feels a strong hand grasp his shoulder and follows it back to face Dretphi. She cracks a slight grin. “When can this be put on my armor plates?”

Valavera timidly approaches the dining table where the team sits around eating. Everyone scoops and picks out their choices of food from the huge collection of large takeout cartons and aluminum trays laying out on the middle part of the tabletop. Valavera stands nearby and now wears a nicer outfit made out of Aristespha’s old clothes and left over adventuring gear. She coughs a few times to garner everyone’s attention and visibly tenses when she gets everyone’s full focus quickly. “Um. Before I leave with my uncle, I just wanted to properly apologize to everyone. I made a huge mistake and I am forever thankful you stopped me before I did anything REALLY stupid. And, I am very sorry I called you such terrible terms and attacked you.”

She holds her hands together low in front of her, bows forward gracefully, and remains in silence. Aristespha smiles gently at her and signals Sebastian in the seat next to her with her eyes. “That’s a very nice gesture. But, sit down and eat. I am not sending you out hungry.”

Sebastian floats up next to his seat, bows to Valavera with a gentleman’s grace, and slowly gestures his arm in a repetitious pulling motion from the chair. He aims an attention getting hiss at Bach across the table from the chair. Bach brings his head up from enjoying a hot wing and searches for the source of the noise. He finds Sebastian’s glare at him and finger point at the chair. Bach rolls his eyes, seeks out the chair seat with a foot, and sinks slightly under the table to push the chair out. Sebastian directs Valavera to her seat in between Aristespha and Dretphi. She gawks at Sebastian, blinks herself out of a trance, and quickly sits down. Aristespha places a translucent, dark green plate of stabilized magical energy in front Valavera. The strange plate immediately seizes Valavera’s interest and she carefully examines it. Aristespha gently pats Valavera on the shoulder and whispers. “Eat first, child. I’ll tell you all you want to know about it later.”

Cideeda chuckles and looks at Valavera. “Ah, don’t worry about it, girl. I’ve been called far worse with a lot more terrible intent behind it. Beast doesn’t even register with me anymore.”

Sotalia leans over the table, seeks out a target with a plastic fork, and stabs a large fried egg roll. As she returns to her seat, she cracks a grin at Valavera. “Don’t worry, kid. We’ve all made mistakes. Big ones.”

She takes a big bite out of the egg roll, roughly points the fork with the half eaten egg roll at Valavera, and flits her brow with a wry smile. “You try ending a contract with a group in a town full of backwater Emin purists as a second generation Half-Emin. Wow! I had heard stories of how bad some towns were, but I thought they were exaggerating the more extreme stories.”

Sebastian eyes open up as he remembers and laughs. “Oh gods. That was such a fucked up place. I still remember going through the door of that dive bar. Everyone was mean mugging me, except you. The one half-emin woman in the place, sitting alone at the worst table, with a dirty glass of water, and literally pointing me to the chair in front of her.”

Sotalia shakes her head, holds her free hand up, and bites her lip. “I know how cheesy and cliché this will sound... But, when I saw him come through that door, I thought... Oh thank the gods. A human. I might be able to work something out yet.”

Cideeda sits back in her chair, holds her chin, and looks up in her mind. “Is this that town that wouldn’t take your money?”

Sotalia energetically nods at Cideeda and then gazes at Valavera, punctuating with a wag of the forked egg roll. “YES! Oh gods. If someone warns you about the town a contract ends in, Take. Their. Advice. I didn’t and nearly paid for it dearly. Here I was in this little shit hole of a town, paid in cash from a successful escort mission as an independent contractor, and I couldn’t spend ANY of it!”

Valavera pauses in between shoveling rice into her mouth, blinks from confusion, and then draws her head back in shock. “They wouldn’t take your money at all?”

Sotalia shakes her head wide-eyed and takes a deep breath in. “NO. These were racists with principles. Biggest storm to hit the area was a few hours out. Nightfall in an hour. All transit out of the place had already cleared out. And, I had only managed to find A dive bar to sit at with a dirty glass of water... Which I’m sure they spat in... and they were closing early because of the storm.”

Sebastian ethereally exhales in disbelief and rubs the back of his neck. “I had gotten a pretty shit welcome to that place, too. They’d at least take my money, even if they were gouging me. Long story short, I managed to get a room at this awful motel, sneaked her in during the start of the storm, and we basically laid low until the start of my contract.”

Sotalia sighs, sinks into her chair, and lifts her head solemnly to Valavera. “Every time I think about those few days, I get chills. There were a few people looking for me. I was SO lucky. Turns out Sebastian’s contract was the next part after my contract. After I explained everything to them, they were completely fine with me tagging along.”

Sebastian grits his teeth briefly and sneers with a brow quirk. “Turns they didn’t have the best time of with that town either, and wanted to leave for the next one with as much as they could get.”

Valavera loses herself in thought as she places herself in that situation and squirms a bit in her seat. “I just don’t know what to think about all that.”

Sotalia finishes the remaining egg roll off the fork, puts her hands up in the air, and shrugs with a grin. “It was an enhanced learning experience. You’ll have plenty more of those, kid. You just hope the next one doesn’t have as much to teach you as the last one.”

Bach takes a break from his meal, his face explores an idea as it materializes in his mind, and he turns to face Sotalia. “Wait. So, you were the first one to team up with my brother?”

Sotalia loosely directs a plastic fork in her hand side to side, twists her mouth, and gradually nods. “Yes, I was. We were really limited with the jobs we could take.”

Sebastian catches Bach’s attention and holds a hand out towards Dretphi. “But, a few months later Dretphi joined up.”

Dretphi smiles and idly stirs some noodles on her plate. “Was in a bad situation. They gave me a great chance to move on. No regrets.”

Sebastian points both hands to Cideeda. “And after an awful run of contracted technical specialists, Cideeda got on board.”

Cideeda shakes her head and snorts. “I STILL can’t believe what passes for technical specialist these days. I was amazed they weren’t killed by those moronic fly-by-night contractors.”

Sebastian smiles lovingly to Aristespha and adopts a more proper tone. “And then the wonderful Lady Aristespha graced us a few months after that.”

Aristespha stirs a large spoon in a bowl of soup and tries to mute a humored smile. “Well, I blame the sword mostly for leading me to you. I still debate if following it was the best of ideas some days.”

Sebastian hovers next to Valavera, lowers his head near hers with a wry grin, and eyes Bach, giving him a wink. “All was well with our group, then misfortune happened a month ago. Hence, I am now a bit more transparent than previously. And two weeks ago, we picked up this scrub.”

Valavera stifles a snicker with her hand as she watches the exchange. Bach narrows his eyes at brother and perks a lone eye brow. “Scrub, eh? I think the word you are looking for is abducted, ghost man.”

Sebastian stands up straight, crosses his arms, and with a proud grin on his face. “Well, strong words from the intern.”

Valavera leans close to Aristespha and lowers her voice. "Is he really an intern?"

Aristespha rolls her eyes, sighs, and adopts a similar tone. "Technicalities. A long story. And, also why you should make sure you finish your schooling."

Bach and Sebastian stare at each other for a few seconds before both break down into laughter. Bach shakes his head and resumes eating with an amused smirk on his face. "I don't know how you all have dealt with this asshole for this long."

Dretphi calmly and solidly responds in between bites of her food with a hint of a grin at the corner of her mouth. "The paycheck helps."

A collection of snorts, chuckles, and snickers fill the air around the table. Sebastian gradually cranes his head towards Dretphi. "Ow. Good shot. And I thought Cideeda was the only one with claws around here."

A large truck rolls down the road and arrives in front of the ranch style house. The six large wheels slow to a stop and the back cargo unit rocks slightly on the suspension system. Loud mechanical noises clunk as the transmission disengages, the parking brake cranks into place, and the engine sputters to a stop. The drivers side door opens and a round figure steps out. Wearing a worn trench coat with multiple patches holding it together, the pot-bellied Evuukian struts off the road down the front lawn walkway. He reaches the doorway, moves his head to follow along the door frame, finds the doorbell, and presses it firmly. Seconds later, the front door unlocks and opens, revealing a smiling Aristespha. "Well, if it isn't Former Regent Becker!"

The Evuukian quickly holds up his hands, gestures them downwards, and respectfully shushes. "No titles here. But. I do appreciate that you still know them. Young Lady Aristespha."

Aristespha pulls a firm smile on her face and sighs. "Okay, Becker. Come on in."

Becker walks along side Aristespha, being roughly the same height, and gives a hearty laugh. "Strange times we live in. But, if I get see you and my niece, they are good times to me. I hope the little one has not been too much to handle. May there be habits she doesn't take from her mother."

As soon as Becker clears the archway into the living room, Valavera gleefully bolts from her chair at the table and throws her arms around Becker. "Uncle Becker!"

Becker gives Valavera a hug and says various things in a dialect of Evuukian in a warm and happy tone. He gently pushes her back and looks her up and down, taking careful notice of her garments. "You are dressed for the occasion! Very good! I am glad you took care of the clothes. Because..."

He pats his belly, shakes his head, and sighs. "... Your Uncle Becker has nothing that will fit you of his."

Valavera laughs and smiles at him. "I've got everything packed in this bag. I don't have much at the moment. Should I put it in your truck?"

Becker scratches his short golden hair, that almost matches Valavera's in color, and brushes back the stray locks over the one intact ear and attempts to do the same with the ear missing the upper half. "Not quite, yet. I have been informed that I may be able to acquire a few more things to trade along the way home."

Cideeda steps forward and extends her hand to shake Becker's. "So, I've heard you are broker of unique and interesting items."

Becker reaches out, shakes Cideeda's hand firmly, and draws a sly smile towards the corner of his mouth. "I often engage in such activities."

Cideeda focuses her eyes on Becker's face, raises a brow, and her expression shifts to stoic. "What do you define as unique and interesting?"

Becker grins with bravado, reaches his hand into the inside of his trench coat, pulls out curious looking artifacts, and places them on the nearby dining table. "Why I just got back from an interesting adventure to the borderlands! And there, I met a strange character who claims to have lived near the heart of the Perimeter Weird Zone for untold years! He had an amazing collection of strange and wondrous artifacts... Many that should have never left so far from the zone. But. Here before you is just small sample of what I have."

Sotalia's pupils dilate as she watches Becker place the artifacts on the table and she subconsciously drifts closer to investigate them. Becker proudly grins as he effortlessly reads Sotalia's extreme interest. He returns his gaze to Cideeda and his expression becomes as stoic as hers. "But, I have other definitions, too. What do you define as unique and interesting?"

Cideeda steps to the side, places a hand into a backpack resting on a chair next to her, slowly draws out a drained cybernetic soldier power cell, and firmly places it on the table next to Becker's artifacts. She maintains eye contact with Becker and searches for his reaction. Becker remains silent and the neutral expression on his face shows no signs of wear. "Let us conduct some business."

Cideeda calmly responds with a number. Becker counters with an opposing amount. The two engage in a struggle of value, each debating the validity of the other's proposal with a new value. Everyone else stays back and witnesses the spirited financial sparring. At a key point, silence hangs over the two. Becker narrows his eyes and takes a deep breath in. "I do have buyers, but I would have far more eager buyers if... You had a fully charged cell."

Cideeda cracks an evil grin, reaches into the backpack, procures a brightly lit, charged power cell, and gently places it next to the first power cell. Becker nods blankly and speaks a new number. This sparks another battle of economic prowess. Aristespha leans close to Valavera with a sly smile. "He certainly hasn't lost his love of the haggle."

Valavera shakes her head as she continues to pay attention with everyone else. A few moments of quiet rise from another lull from the bidding between Cideeda and Becker. Becker confidently puffs his chest out. "For what you are selling, the number you say you have to sell, you have to admit that's the fairest price you'll get anywhere, anytime soon. And, I've given you my exclusive friends and family bonus."

Cideeda nods her head, aims her face down, and rests her lips on her fist in thought. Becker holds his hand out to shake Cideeda's. "I think we have a wonderful deal."

Cideeda lifts her head up and stares a toothy grin right at Becker. He pauses, turns his head, and perks an eye brow. She holds a finger up to Becker. "I'm curious how eager your buyers would be if they had something that USES those power cells."

She moves her foot back underneath the table, places it on top of a rectangular case, and slides it forward in front of Becker. She taps it with her foot and gestures with a hand for him to open it. Becker carefully gets down on one knee, releases the locks, and lifts the case lid to reveal the cyber commando plasma rifle. Cideeda firmly and confidently quotes a number. Becker examines the rifle in silence. He grumbles to himself as his mind calculates the margins and he eventually releases a long groan. Cideeda chuckles and shakes her head. "Oh, don't act all pained. I know you have to pass near The Grand Library and the end of the budget year is just around the corner."

Becker lifts his heavy self up, laughs happily with a smile, and points to the rifle. "It is not pain, but longing for a future session in which I get to surprise you with something as wonderful!"

Both Cideeda and Becker vigorously shake hands with satisfaction throughout their faces. Sotalia returns to ogling the artifacts on the table from Becker, pats for her wallet, and leaves quickly for her room. Becker bows slightly to Cideeda and resumes his normal posture. "Hopefully I don't have to fight you for this, but... Where did you get THAT chair?!"

Bach halts mid-step and gradually pivots around in a circle until he notices Cideeda staring at him with a toothy grin and a clawed finger gesturing him over.