

# Ain't A Hero – Episode 11

by Bryan Schuder

The digital display flickers numbers of increasing value on the fuel station pump. Cideeda wipes a few remaining bits of sleep from her eyes, while she leans against the side of the humvee and holds the fueling nozzle. The pump clicks off and the hose shakes a bit. Cideeda stares at the display and nods. She lifts up off the side of the vehicle to a stand and spins around. She removes the fueling nozzle, places it back in the matching holster, and watches the display show a series of status prompts. After a few moments, a receipt prints and rolls out from a slot. Cideeda finishes twisting the cap on one of the fueling ports, closes the outer cover door, and takes the receipt. She steps to the open driver's door, stretches her arms and arches her back one last time, and hops into the driver's seat. The humvee's driver side door shuts with a tug from Cideeda. She pushes herself up the back of her seat, extends an arm over the head rest, and waves a paper receipt near Aristespha. "Here's the receipt."

Aristespha blinks and slowly raises her eyes up from the tablet. Her gaze locks onto the receipt. She reaches out with a hand, calmly pinches it between her fingers, and pulls it from Cideeda's light grasp. "Thank you. What's the tank odometer say?"

Cideeda slides back down in her seat and hovers her hand in front of the display in the middle of the console. She presses a series of buttons on both sides of the display and eventually navigates the on-screen menus to a page with fuel tank information and usage statistics. "Nine eight zero kilometers using that tank and filled up about fifty liters of synth-diesel."

Bach's eyes process numbers around his head. The results garner his attention and interest. "About twenty kilometers per liter? That's pretty good for something this size. Strangely good, actually."

Cideeda continues to tap the buttons around the console screen and shows off some statistics to Bach as he watches. "Well, the turbine powerplant is nowhere near stock anymore. But, the electrical drive system is pretty close to original. Batteries had to get replaced when we first found it. And there's solar panels on top that I added to give us some other power options. For an ancient military vehicle, she's still doing good."

Bach pulls himself forward and to the side of the front passenger's seat and focuses on the console screen. "Any particular reason you use synth-diesel? That stuff is not cheap."

Cideeda sneers and rolls her eyes as previous experiences pop back in her mind. "Quality. We use to use bio-diesel, but it seems like every place has their own special blend that either runs okay or tries to jam up the powerplant in this thing. Synth-diesel consistently works thanks to The Grand Library keeping a tight grip on the production."

Aristespha positions the receipt in front of her tablet and taps an onscreen button with her thumb. An image of the receipt appears on the tablet's screen and status icons about the analysis flash up. After a few seconds, a final prompt with a confirming notification, along with a numeric amount, shows up. Aristespha taps Bach on the shoulder with a sly smile on her face and reveals the front of the tablet to him. "Also, since I am a Master Sage under the

employ of the The Grand Library and the group is presently on retainer to defeat Dark Lord Noxian, a healthy rebate is VERY easy to obtain.”

Bach reads the information off of Aristespha’s tablet and slowly nods in surprised approval. “Wow! That’s hell of a discount in the end. Do you have to provide justification or some proof to keep getting it?”

Aristespha rests back in her seat, sets the tablet down in her lap, and gestures with her hands to Bach. “Yes. But, they aren’t very strict given the nature of what we are presently doing. We came to this region since it’s around a number of places Noxian was known to be at. And, while it’s an educated guess, this may be a region he would fall back to.”

The ethereal voice of Sebastian emanates from the sword near Aristespha. “But, Noxian has been REALLY quiet lately. The sword used to detect traces of his presence all the time. Especially, when he used any Elder energy fueled power. Even from great distances. But lately, nothing. No disturbances at all. So, either he’s gotten really stealthy or he’s currently really weak.”

Aristespha crosses her arms with frown and sighs. “Or... He may have unfortunately decided to go somewhere else. Honestly, we theorized he would at least visit an old hideout or maybe something meaningful to him in the past before going too far. That may have changed.”

Cideeda catches sight of Sotalia exiting the doors of the fuel station’s convenience store with a cardboard drink carrier in one hand. Sotalia holds the door open for Dretphi as she carries a large tank of water over one shoulder and maintains a tight grip onto large bundle of bags in the opposite hand. Cideeda quickly cranes her head around to both Bach and Aristespha. “Before Sotalia gets back, I STILL think we need to find and check out Noxian’s old home when he wasn’t a crazed Dark Lord.”

Aristespha nods in agreement and takes a deep breath in. “I have to agree with you. It might take some time to search, but I doubt we are going to get lucky and find him anytime soon. Even if we do find signs of him, it going to be extremely difficult to track him down... Without the sword guiding us.”

Sebastian’s voice resonates with a solemn tone. “I’m certain he knows the sword can sense big releases of Elder energy. I’d wager he’s playing very safe and reserved until he feels he doesn’t need to anymore. So, we are just going to have to do some hard, tedious investigating in the near future and get some insight to what he may be doing. But, mission at hand first, we’ll debate it later.”

The back hatch door of the humvee opens up. Dretphi places the large water tank inside off her shoulder and hoists up the bags, too. Bach opens his door, hops out onto the pavement, and slides his seat forward. Dretphi walks around the side of the vehicle, nods at Bach with a smile, and lifts herself through the door to her seat in the back. Bach throws his seat back once Dretphi is clear, jumps onto his seat, and shuts his door. Sotalia finishes arranging everything in the back, closes the back hatch, and strides quickly to the front passenger’s side door. She opens the door, carefully steps up into her seat, and opens the drink carrier on her lap. “Okay everyone, I hope they got the orders right.”

Sotalia picks up a covered cup and examines the writing on the side. "One fruit tea combo for Cideeda."

Cideeda directs a claw tip to an empty cup holder in between her and Sotalia. Sotalia gently inserts the drink cup into the holder. She looks at another covered cup and reads. "Black tea with a shot of thick coffee for Aristespha."

Aristespha extends a gloved hand out and Sotalia places the drink in her hand. Aristespha quickly drinks a long swig of her drink and exhales with satisfaction. Sotalia checks out the next drink. "Hot spiced milk tea for Bach."

She waves it around Bach's open hand with a playful grin and mischievously gazes at him. "What do you say?"

Bach narrows his eyes at Sotalia and a wry smile creeps onto his face. "How far forward do you want your seat?"

Sotalia rolls her eyes, pouts playfully, and releases the cup in Bach's hand. She checks the writing on one of the two remaining beverage containers. She reaches an arm far back around her seat and down the aisle. "A Grath Black for Dretphi."

Dretphi shifts forward, extends her long arm out, and grasps the cup firmly. Sotalia turns her attention to the remaining container. She happily picks it up and cheerfully reads the long, complicated order. Everyone else pauses from enjoying their beverage of choice, as each individually attempts to process the convoluted creation in Sotalia's grasp. Sebastian's ethereal voice breaks the awkward silence. "So... There's coffee in it... Somewhere... Right? Or Tea? Maybe?"

Cideeda supports herself on the humvee door's window frame as she hangs out and watches the front tire roll on the edge of the overgrown path. Her hand cranks the steering wheel in sync with terrain and constantly adjusts to the contours of the narrow dirty trail. She focuses her stare and grits her teeth. "We might want to put a note in our report that vehicle access is QUESTIONABLE at best. I can't tell if the road is winding, or if it's just that overrun with the plants and dirt."

The humvee crawls on top the layers of dirt, gravel, chunks of ancient pavement, and other debris. Bach squints at small object in the underbrush of the forest bordering the rough driveway. He leans out his open window, points at the object, and turns his head briefly to face inside. "I think that's an old road marker over there. It just might be this overgrown. Anyone else seeing this?"

Sotalia swings herself from observing the front tire on her side and scans the area Bach points to. She slides her sunglasses down her nose and locks eyes on the same object. "That looks like a road marker to me, too. Seems like there was at least another full lane, this way."

Aristespha breaks from staring out her window, flips through her tablet, and zooms in on some text. "This was a major research base at one point. Old government records indicate it had a decent staffing. So, a two lane road would not be too surprising."

Bach sits back in his seat and quizzically eyes Aristespha with a tinge of hesitation. "What were they researching?"

Aristespha catches Bach's expression, draws a tight half-smile, and shows him the tablet. "Electromagnetic phenomena. Non-military. No cybernetics or genetics. I'm not going to say it'll be any better. But, hopefully some possible problems are not as likely to occur."

Bach's eyes follow the information on the tablet. Dretphi bends forward holding onto the backs of Aristespha's and Bach's seats and reads off the tablet. "Above ground. Wide open. A few small buildings. Multiple antenna arrays in cleared fields. Drastic change from the previous mission."

Bach shrugs with a faint bit of hope in his expression and then returns to searching the treeline. "I'm willing to give anything that's not a cybernetic horror filled dungeon a chance at this point."

Sotalia lifts her head back from staring down along the border of the path and the underbrush. "I'll second that. Never have been a fan of those underground bases. Too tight and cramped. And, they are really limiting on the spells I can use!"

Cideeda settles back into her seat as the overgrowth and treeline retreats away to reveal a far less constricting path. She adjusts her seat belt and accelerates the humvee. "I think we're good for now. Thanks for watching the road everyone."

She angles her head towards the group and directs her voice back. "And as much I don't want to run into a situation where I NEED them, I much prefer having the explosive option. So, I'm all for avoiding underground tunnels."

Dretphi nods in agreement and stretches her arms back onto the top of the bench seat with a sigh. "Dungeons are nostalgic. Today, I prefer to live in the present."

Sebastian's ethereal voice echoes from the sword near Aristespha with a tinge of sarcasm hinting through his voice. "Aww... Come on, you all! You got to love the classics! Dank, dark tunnels with enemies lurking around every corner. Traps everywhere you step and more where you don't."

Sotalia groans heavily as she dramatically rolls her eyes. "Oh yes. Please. Please, take me away to convoluted structural design that children would question. I don't know why people just don't fill all those tombs, dungeons, and tunnels with concrete once they clear them out."

Aristespha laughs and shakes her head as her memory retrieves a choice moment. "Remember that one governor that pestered us non-stop to clear out that old mage tower?"

Sebastian's voice emanates from the sword with an unamused tone. "Oh gods. That guy couldn't take a hint. No, we won't investigate the tower. No, we're not interested in whatever

you want to pay us. No, you ain't going to arrest us with those bogus charges. No, begging is not going to help. No, we don't care how many other adventures want this opportunity, too."

Cideeda snorts and sighs as she easily navigates the less overgrown and now wider road. "That governor was so slimy. Can't believe what he planned to do with that tower."

Dretphi briefly winces and sneers with a slight grit of her teeth. "He would not stop staring at my chest. His eyes followed me everywhere."

Sotalia twists in her seat and looks back at Dretphi. "Gods, I remember that. I think the only time he stopped staring at you was to leer at my ass."

Bach furrows his brow as his mind searches through recent history. He opens his eyes up in recognition and swings his head to face the group. "Wait, was that the guy who tried to pull a Sundial Tower Scheme a few years back?!"

Aristespha nods and rests her cheek on her hand, lifting her brow in thought. "We didn't know what he planned on doing. But nothing he proposed sounded good. It was so obviously bad. Especially when he tried to extort us with those ridiculous, made-up criminal charges. He was so desperate."

Dretphi twists her mouth and slowly shakes her head as she takes in a deep breath with her hands on her knees. "Remember when the news showed his picture months later. Pointed at it. Yelled to everyone in the hotel bar."

Sotalia frowns tightly in disgust and shudders. "I'm so glad we reported his sorry ass to the guild."

Cideeda tilts her head to the side and winces with roll of the shoulders. "At least no one fell for that scheme. Even if the tower was actually empty for all purposes, apart from paltry security measures."

Bach groans with annoyance and rubs the bridge of his nose. "See. That's what I don't get. Could have done it completely legit and had a perfectly fine tower, in the clear. Nope. Duped some investors. Decided to con as many adventurers as it took, to possibly their deaths, to clear the thing. Tried to destroy any known records of the tower. Forged the paperwork to register it as a new construction. And was planning on getting shady contractors to revamp it as theme hotel for the rich."

The sword sounds out Sebastian's ethereal chuckle and a sarcastic drone follows. "You know. It never really occurred to me that the month we spent in adventuring history class talking about the Sundial Tower Scheme was actually an instructional piece to commit such a scheme... Good gods, what the fuck?"

Aristespha sits up in her seat, leans out into the aisle, and focuses to some distant structures through the front windshield. After a few seconds, she returns to her seat and flips through a few maps on her tablet. "I think we are getting close. A few of these landmarks are on the map we got from the guild. We will probably reach the main entry in the next half hour."

Cideeda scans the horizon and watches the scenery go by as she drives. She wryly smiles as she adjusts the humvee's course along the scattered bits of proper road. "You know if I didn't know this road lead to yet another abandoned relic of the past, that probably contains some unmentionable horror, this would actually be a nice drive."

Bach glances out his window and eventually nods at the observation. "If the road was a bit better, I'd take my bike out for a trip. Need to do that anyway next break we take."

Dretphi reaches down on the floorboard, hoists up a hard shoulder plate of her armor, and works on securing it to the under-armor suit she wears. "If the mission proves easy, we should enjoy the remaining day. If the mission permits us."

Bach hears a combination of hook-loop pads and mechanical fasteners behind him. He turns around to see Dretphi locking in the shoulder plate. Bach then examines his own equipment and checks his plasma pistol in the holster. "So how much do we have to check and verify at this site?"

Aristespha flicks through various documents on the tablet and stops on one article. "Thankfully, most of the facility is explored and there's a lot of notes about anything important to know. Only two buildings on site are still sealed, but they only require inspection to make sure they are still sealed. The only hard part will be comparing how the antenna arrays look with the pictures on file. We'll probably have to take all new ones."

An awkward silence looms inside the cab of the vehicle. Again, Sebastian breaks it. He grumbles momentarily and forms his ethereal visage in the aisle. "Okay. I'll say it, so no one else has to... Sounds simple enough. "

A collection of eyes rolls, groans, and sighs fill the air in the cab. Sebastian drops his head and then lifts it up with a smile and emerging bravado. "But, we all know how that usually goes. So, let's keep the group together when we get there. It'll take longer to check everything out, but I think we're okay with taking our time on it. Correct?"

Dretphi nods in agreement, leans forward, sweeps up another armor plate from the floor, and puts it in place. Aristespha gives a singular nod and continues to analyze the maps of the site. Cideeda removes a hand from the steering wheel, gives a brief thumbs up, and returns her hand to the wheel. Sotalia nods and inspects her belt of pouches. Bach shrugs at Sebastian. "Sounds good enough to me, brother."

Sebastian grins proudly and sets his sights ahead into the distance. "Good. Let's what we got today."

A strong wind blows through the decaying metal structures. The remaining runs of rusting cables and tethers sway slightly with the breeze. Many of the steel framework towers lie in on the ground. The anchors in their concrete bases show where they should be. But, a significant number of the more unique designs still stoically rise above the tops of the trees nearby. Another gust rolls through the sparse stretches of thin, high grass rooted in between

the cracks of the treeless asphalt lot. Six smaller buildings reside in three rows of opposing pairs with equal wide spacing. The collection leads up from the antenna array field to a large, single-story, bunker-like building. A paved courtyard joins all the structures and serves as a storage yard for concrete barriers, steel girders, and other construction fodder.

The party rounds the corner of a smaller building next to the large bunker. Sotalia throws her head back while plodding along and seeks something of interest in the clouds above. "I think I'm not going to mention this mission to my mother next time she calls."

Cideeda stops investigating one of the small building windows, pivots, and faces Sotalia with a grin. "What? Don't want mother to hear about all your exciting adventures in comparing pictures of metal heaps and debris piles in abandoned buildings?"

Sotalia shakes her head slowly and holds her hands up in the air. "I try to keep it interesting for her. Have to justify the years of magic courses and adventuring school somehow."

Cideeda steps back over to group, shrugs slightly, and tilts her head at Sotalia with a smile. "Fair enough. Thankfully, my mom is happy to hear my voice... And getting any pictures of the random artifacts and trinkets I find. Dad just loves to hear about the deals I've worked out of people."

Bach puzzles a moment and aims his gaze down to Cideeda. "What do your parents do for a living?"

Cideeda returns a nonchalant glance to Bach. "Mom's a metal sculptor most of the time, but does contract specialty repair work for large machinery to pay the bills when no one is buying art. Dad is the owner of one of the larger scrapyards in that part of Nexus."

Aristespha turns her head and voice back to Cideeda, taking a break from studying pictures on her tablet. "Has your mother put another batch of her Second Period styled statuettes?"

Cideeda scratches a long, furry ear, twists her mouth, and squints an eye as she recaps the last conversation she had with her mother. "I think so? I'll have to double-check. She was excited about a finishing up a few big projects last I talked to her, so she didn't spend a long time talking about what she had in stock. Why do you ask?"

Annoyance gently bubbles into Aristespha's face as she exhales reluctance and her eyes look above with a corner frown. "I have a cousin getting married. I am expected to send a gift in lieu of my absence. They fancy themselves art snobs, but I don't know when and where they got that idea into their heads."

Cideeda slinks up to Aristespha's side with a toothy grin and gives her sly wink. "If nothing else, I could get my dad to bolt some random junk, from the almost Second Era, onto a nice wooden stand. He'd even gift wrap it for you."

Aristespha bites her lower lip as her eyes search her mind in vain for a reason for this scheme to not work. "That is actually really tempting. I honestly doubt they would know the difference."

The group arrives in the middle of the courtyard in front of the large bunker building. Dretphi alternates her stare between the closed bunker and the remaining small, sealed building opposite the previous. "Two remain. Both should be sealed. Large or small?"

Sebastian hovers away from the group with casual stance and points a thumb over the shoulder to the small building. "I'll do a fly by of this one real quick. It looks locked up as it is. I'll make sure no one has tried to crack it open or cut a hole in the side."

Everyone else gives some form of agreement. Sebastian aims his ghostly self and holds a hand out with a finger up. "You all wait here for a minute, I'll be as fast as I can."

He flies off across the courtyard and floats down the space between the sealed small building and another small building. During his flight, he directs his gaze at the aging concrete wall. As he rounds the corner, he keeps a close eye for anything that looks unusual along the back side of the structure. He finally inspects the other side and drifts out towards the large front doors. Sebastian's head follows the outline of the huge doors and makes an entire circuit around. He looks briefly at the door's dead and lightless control panel. With a shrug, Sebastian spins to fly away, but halts abruptly as his eyes search himself.

Aristespha squints with her arms crossed. She quirks a brow when Sebastian reverses his course and puts his ethereal head through the large front doors. "What is he doing?"

Bach tilts his head to the side and focuses his sight towards his ghostly brother. "Maybe he heard something inside?"

Sebastian withdraws his head from the metal doors and coasts back a few meters. He holds his hands out and shakes his head with a defiant expression as he dramatically mouths "No". He glides back to the group and lands in a standing position. Sotalia crosses her arms and puzzles at Sebastian's actions with a nonplussed expression on her face. "So? What DID you find in there?"

He straightens his back and works a grimace off his face before speaking. "Well. I got this weird feeling and thought I should take a look inside. Good news. The building looks sealed up. Bad news. There's two security bots in there of the three meter tall, armed and armored variety."

Cideeda opens her eyes more and darts her head between staring at Sebastian and the small, hopefully sealed building behind him. "So, what's the condition of the two bots?"

Sebastian bounces his head between shoulders with an uncertain expression emerging on of his face. "One looks like it was parted out a LONG time ago. So, that one is sitting in a pile of pieces. The other looks together, but I don't know how functional it is. Don't really want to find out today, if that's okay with everyone."

He shrugs as he glances over his shoulder at the small building. "But, I didn't see anything online and active in there. It might be in a sleep mode, but I'm okay with leaving it alone for now."

Aristespha pulls out her tablet, swipes to a note section of the report she is writing, and adds some new updated information to the document. She grits her teeth briefly and draws an uncomfortable breath in through her teeth. “Well, that’s good to know. I will add that in the report. They’ll probably get the military to try to secure and salvage that. But, I don’t think we should linger much longer here.”

Bach blinks blankly before his attention focuses at the large, closed doors of the small building. He snaps his head to Aristespha with a nervous frown and squirm in his posture. “Uh... I thought you said this was a non-military research base?”

Dretphi maintains a careful watch of the area as mild concern creeps into her voice. “Likely a third party defense company security robot. Possibly bought along with construction of the site. Surprised it is together now.”

Cideeda rests her hand underneath her chin, closes her eyes to contemplate, and nods slowly. “If they did part out one of them, it’s feasible that the other could be functional. And, it has been stored in a good shelter for all these years. I think this falls under stuff we can talk about on the drive home.”

Dretphi focuses a quizzical quirk of a brow to Sebastian and momentarily hums low in thought. “What weapons did you see?”

Sebastian closes his eyes and rubs the temples of his head as he contorts his mouth attempting to remember a clear picture. “It was dark and I only got a quick look. But... Uh... Two arms. One had a minigun on it. The other looked like a plasma particle cannon? It wasn’t a railgun, gauss rifle, or a laser. Big port, lots of venting.”

Sotalia sighs as she drops her shoulders in mild disappointment and groans as a sensible, conservative aspect of herself wins for now. “As much I would love the chance to test out some spells... I’m perfectly fine with leaving that much opposing firepower alone. I’m okay with checking out this last building and going home for the day.”

Aristespha closes her eyes, rubs the bridge of her nose, and nods in full agreement. “I will gladly second that.”

Sebastian puts his hands on his sides and dons a slight smile for everyone as he lifts his head back towards the large bunker. “If no one else objects, let’s head for the doors, check them out, do a quick look around, and double-time it home. Probably make it to town before all the nice restaurants close.”

Bach chuckles with a sarcastic twist as a dry grin emerges on his face. “What? And not help to keep Pancake Shed in business as usual?”

Sotalia bites her lip and sways her hips as her face wrestles with temptation. “Damn it all. We did pass one on the way here.”

Cideeda pats around her hip and finds one of the pockets in her body suit. She pushes her fingers inside, grips hold of something, and retrieves a stack of small rectangular cards. She

flips through a number of them and stops on one, Pancake Shed branded. “I am one stamp away from a free Shed Stack.”

Aristespha rolls her eyes with a reserved smile and directs everyone’s attention to the large bunker. “Okay, everyone. We’ll debate THAT after we take care of this last part of the mission.”

The group reassembles behind Aristespha and Sebastian and the two lead towards the front sliding metal doors of the large bunker. Aristespha and Sebastian step onto the walkway directly in front of the bunker-

“HE. WAS. HERE.”

Aristespha’s tablet drops onto the pavement, bounces off the ground in its protective case, and settles a meter shy of the front sliding metal doors. Aristespha grips the sword at her side and stares forward in shock. The sword vibrates in its scabbard as an ambient background noise rises up to nearby ears.

“TRACES. FADING.”

Bach, Cideeda, Dretphi, and Sotalia collectively skid and slide to a halt behind Aristespha and watch the sword with anticipation. Sebastian’s ghostly visage warps and waves for a few seconds. His ethereal form stabilizes as the sword drifts off to silence along with the ambient background sounds. Aristespha cautiously removes her hand from the hilt of the sword. She kneels down, grabs onto her tablet, and stands back up to face everyone. Glances exchange and tensions rise between everyone in the group. Dretphi readies her sub-machine gun. Both of Cideeda’s hands simultaneously hit the power buttons for both her holstered laser pistols. The fading high-pitched whine of Bach’s charging plasma pistol joins the chorus of Cideeda’s charging laser pistols. Sotalia and Aristespha gradually shift their stances to textbook defensive magic casting positions. Sebastian scans around the immediate area for anything blatant and returns his eyes to the group. “Okay. Nothing obvious right now. Everyone, take a minute and scout it out. Call out anything.”

As everyone seeks something out of the ordinary, Bach pauses. He stays still, closes his eyes, and waits. His cheek twitches and his head leads the rest of his body to rotate towards the metal doors. He opens his eyes and they work their way up from the ground to the top of the doors. His body tenses and his full attention focuses onto the top arch of the door frame. He frowns as his eyes glow blue and concentrates his stare. His pupils shrink, eyes open wide, and a grit yanks his frown down with a reflexive gasp. He blinks, shudders his head, and his eyes dart around to see what the others are doing. After watching Aristespha, Cideeda, Dretphi, Sotalia, and Sebastian continue their searches facing away from him, Bach’s initial reaction remains unknown to anyone else. He takes a deep breath in, exhales out his tension, and slowly raises his arm to point at the top of the door frame with an inquisitive, uncertain tone. “I see something up there?”

The rest of the group notices Bach’s arm extending and hand pointing to the top of the door frame. Both Aristespha and Sotalia catch glimpse of Bach’s glowing eyes. Aristespha closes her eyes briefly, pauses to focus herself, and reopens her eyes with a violet light. Sotalia

closes her eyes, too. She winces, cringes, and grits her teeth straining. Eventually, she opens her eyes and they emit a very dim golden glimmer. “This is REALLY hard to maintain.”

Aristespha studies the top of the door frame and draws the corner of her mouth in into an understanding smirk. “It gets easier. Eventually. I think I see... Yes!”

Her hand whips up with a finger out and traces a path across the top. She takes a step closer and squints as bewilderment flushes to her face. “It is really faint, but this is definitely left over vapor from the use of Elder energy magic. It’s really decayed, so it was some quick cast spell of sorts. Or just raw energy manipulation? But... What could he have done to the door, that would have it still be here?”

Cideeda nose twitches and she sniffs the air. She narrows her eyes, repeatedly sucks in more air through her nose, and her head drops down and forward. She steps near to Aristespha, squats down, and focuses on an odd patch of dirt at the bottom of the doors and on the concrete in front. Her claw tip lowers into dirt and she swirls the patch to reveal an oily, reddish-brown fluid hidden underneath. Cideeda lifts her head back, glances up at the top of the doors, spots the control panel in the wall at the side of the door, and cracks a cornered grin. “This is hydraulic fluid. Noxian must have forced the doors open and blown out the hoses. This pool is leaking from the other side of the door.”

Sotalia blinks a few times as the golden light dims out completely and quizzically gestures at the closed doors. “If he forced them open, why are they closed now?”

Bach scratches his head, carefully walks up to the side of the doors, and cranes his head around to examine the area between where the top of the frame and the top of the doors meet. “This doesn’t look like heavy, high-security doors. It’s probably spring loaded enough that without the hydraulics locking them in place, they moved back once the magic decayed.”

Dretphi moves her finger in the air up and down in front of her towards the door. She slightly twists her head to the side as her stare settles on the intersection between the two sliding doors. “An uneven junction. The gap is wide for this type of door. I could attempt to open it with my hands.”

Sebastian drifts to the doors in thought and nods. “Well, if it’s been opened, we need to investigate for the mission AND we need find out what is going on here. Let me check the other side and see if there’s anything waiting for us.”

Dretphi moves to the side of the doorway opposite to Bach. Sotalia and Aristespha get behind Bach and Cideeda hops over behind Dretphi. Sebastian gives a confirming thumbs up and floats through the doors. The group waits in silence for a few minutes. Sebastian pops his head out the doors and signals both groups in with a perplexed expression on his face. “It’s clear from what I can tell. But, gods damn. Some one turned this place upside down, so it’s a bit of mess in here.”

Dretphi positions herself in front of doors, forces her gauntlet covered fingers in between the gap, and cracks the two doors apart. With modest effort, the doors slide apart. Air hissing and liquid sputtering echo from inside the bunker. Bach grabs hold of the edge of one door and pulls with his weight leaning back. Dretphi releases Bach’s door, puts both hands on

hers, and shifts her mass to force the door further open. “Not hard. Not easy. We will have to coordinate going through ourselves.”

Bach nods and strains as his door moves slowly to inside of the frame. “Agreed. Okay, watch the hydraulic fluid. I think more got pumped out.”

Cideeda draws both her laser pistols, aims them down the dark hallway leading deeper into the bunker, and hops into the bunker over the oozing pool of hydraulic fluid. Sotalia braces her self on Bach’s shoulder as she awkwardly steps over the muck. Aristespha gracefully leaps over the obstacle and lands solidly inside. Bach looks at Dretphi and sways his head towards the inside. “After you.”

Dretphi flashes a smile at Bach. She orbits around her half of the door frame, keeps pressure on the door, and shifts position inside. Bach attempts to mimic Dretphi, slides a bit on the hydraulic fluid when the force of the door nearly gets the best of him, but manages to recover to get inside. The two simultaneously release their respective doors and the doors quickly slide shut with another chorus of hisses and sputters from the broken hoses.

The courtyard remains silent. A breeze washes across the pavement and stirs up debris. Clouds above move slowly across the sky and project flowing shadows onto the earth below. No signs of life. Then, a previously lightless console returns to light.

Rows of computers fill the huge space. Various images and text display on the screens. At the front of the large room, huge flat monitors occasionally scroll with new lines of text or update an image. An omnipresent sound of idle computation equipment lingers. A glowing orb of light drifts up into the air, touches the ceiling, and sticks. Another similar light orb lands on the ceiling a few meters away. Bach readies another light orb and stops when he notices that the light levels are enough. “This must be the nerve center for the operation.”

Aristespha holds her hand up and projects a bright light across the banks of computers. “It is. There are station labels on these machines. The language isn’t that old.”

Sebastian floats over to a station and surprises himself. “Wow! It’s something I can read. The spelling is a bit weird, but it must be before phonetic spelling got popular. Looks these are the utility control and monitoring. Not much going on here.”

Sotalia shines her variation of a light spell over the nearby row of computers, perks a brow, piques her interest. “Ooo! Security monitoring station. Looks like some camera controls and other neat stuff.”

She taps the thin monitor, drags the system’s mouse across the desk, and finally presses the space bar on the keyboard. No response. She grumbles in frustration and continues investigate the system before stopping. She sighs, rolls her eyes, and clicks the power button on the monitor. The monitor lights up the area around her and she groans with an annoyed droop of the shoulders. “Of course, they logged out. Figures. Maybe they wrote it down somewhere.”

Dretphi scans the room while walking to Sotalia and spots an active station on the front row. "Front right station. It looks logged in."

Cideeda rushes over to the station, inspects the office chair, and carefully sits down. She squints at the screen and examines the current state of the computer. "It looks like a data visualization station? Wait! I recognize this operating system? It seems like an ancient ancestor of a few of the older ones today. Hey, Bach, could you come over here? Maybe you can help narrow it down."

Bach navigates through the strewn papers, stacks of extra computers, and layers of cabling littering the floor. He rolls a nearby office chair over next to Cideeda, eyes the seat of it, shrugs, and carefully rests his butt in the chair. "Well, they spent good money on the furniture at least."

He watches the monitor and analyzes the interface's layout and design. "It's definitely ancient, but I'm sure some of the old core commands haven't changed that much. See if the command log function works the same."

Cideeda rests her fingers on the keyboard and clacks in a command to the terminal prompt on the screen. Another window appears and shows a list of commands and times. Cideeda's eyes flit open and her jaw drops as she places a finger on the screen next to her recent command's date and the date of the last entered command. "Oh my gods... That command was entered TWO WEEKS AGO!"

Sebastian rockets over the computer banks and stops right over Cideeda and Bach. "WHAT?! Holy shit, he was here!"

Aristespha runs over, leaps over debris, and squeezes in behind Bach and Cideeda, excitement overflowing. "What was he doing here?! He was looking for something. He picked through everything in this place, logged into this station, and did something?! What was it?!"

Dretphi finishes checking a file cabinet with her flashlight and shakes her head. "Nothing."

Sotalia growls and firmly crosses her arms, unamused. "Dammit! We can't find an username and password for this fucking thing! I so wanted to get that bastard on video!"

Bach glances over his shoulder to Sotalia in the back and gestures a flipping motion with both hands over his head. "Have checked under the keyboard?"

Sotalia lowers her eyes down at the keyboard, lifts it up from the front, and lowers her head to the side to get a look. She grins ear to ear and carefully removes a laminated sheet with an username and password. "Good call! Now that's the security I've come to know and love."

Sotalia types in the information, the system unlocks, and number of monitors light up. Dretphi wipes dust away from the screens and watches the video feeds. She recognizes most of the camera locations, except one... An open exterior doorway. Inside is a robotic figure missing parts and an empty robotic dock for another. Dretphi slams her eyes wide open, immediately stands up straight, and yells out. "WE. HAVE. A. PROBLEM!"