

# Ain't A Hero – Episode 11

by Bryan Schuder

Bach stares at the end of a magical energy cord and concentrates his mind on the end point. Holding the cable in one hand, he hovers his other hand open near the end. Strands of individually colored energies solidify in a set arrangement. A form materializes around and fills in the gaps. Bach examines the new plug and compares it to port on the computer workstation. “I’ve only done this a few times this small, but it should be electrically sound.”

Cideeda gestures on holographic screen projecting from the holoplayer. She squints and hems as she checks the messages on the screen. “Well, it should be this connection standard with this plug and use this protocol. So... Plug it in.”

Bach guides the plug into the port, stops when it refuses to go in, rotates the plug over, and slides it into place. He pulls himself into a rolling chair and rolls near Cideeda. The two alternate between the holoplayer output and workstation display. Cideeda rubs her hands in anticipation and she grits her teeth as her eyes dart between. “System detected the device. It’s querying it. Holoplayer confirms the proper protocol and is emulating a data storage device. And... YES!!”

In her excitement, she wraps her arms around Bach’s arm and squeezes it quickly, before letting go to present a high five to Bach. Bach dons a grin, happily returns the high five, and points to the screen. “Nice! That holoplayer has got the largest data drive I could manage on it. Should be plenty for this system.”

Cideeda eagerly types up commands in the onscreen terminal prompt and bites her lip as she focuses. “I’ll repeat whatever commands Noxian did and dump the output to files. Then-”

Bach’s eyes flit wide as an idea jumps forward in his mind and gestures over the entire system. “Do a direct dump of the system drives! Maybe you have the permissions to grab other stuff on connected machines.”

Cideeda snaps her fingers, points at Bach, and nods in total agreement. “Yes! That will take a while. But, anything might help make sense of this all stuff Noxian pulled off. Right now, it’s just random numbers and graphs.”

Bach scratches his chin, glances over his shoulder to the others at the back security console, and sighs as he gazes back at the screen. “I get the feeling we’ll probably have some time here. I don’t think we’re in a rush to go outside. Anyway, once we do, I doubt we’re going to get a chance to grab data like this.”

Cideeda frowns slightly to Bach, with hints of concern “I know. I’ll get the transfers started. Go see what they’ve found out. I’ll be over in a bit.”

Bach stands up and navigates his way to the main central walkway. He steps over the junk equipment littering the area and arrives next to his brother. He scans over security area where Aristespha, Dretphi, and Sotalia are inspecting screens of images and video feeds.

Sebastian wears a contemplative expression and tilts his head towards Bach. “Any good news on your end, bro?”

Bach nods slowly as he shifts attention between security displays. “Yep. Conjured up a data cable and we got the holoplayer working with the system. Cideeda is recreating the commands Noxian used, saving the output, and then setting the thing to mass dump everything else on the system.”

Bach shrugs plainly at Sebastian. “Maybe there’s some other useful information. If nothing else, there should be some hint as to whatever the hell this data is. There’s a method to the madness, but damned if I know what it is at the moment.”

Aristespha rolls away from the console and leans into the back rest of the chair. She rubs her eyes and cups her hands over her mouth and nose. She sighs deeply and rests her hands at her thighs. “Well, that’s good to hear. I actually have some friends in the computer science department that might be able to help us.”

Bach gawks at the video of a large, armored robot. “OH. GODS. Is that it?!”

Sebastian nods slowly and groans with an ethereal echo as he sternly stares at the monitor. “Yes. And it’s not getting any better the more we look at it.”

Drephi taps the monitor. “Heavy armor. Fluid movement. Autonomous AI. Short barrel minigun. Plasma Projectile Cannon. It is DANGEROUS.”

Bach scratches his head and looks around for an explanation. “How did it reactivate? It was quiet and behind the doors before.”

Sotalia snorts out annoyance, grabs the monitor’s bezel, and turns it to Bach. “You can thank good old Dark Douche Noxian for that.”

She crosses arms and rocks her chair’s back rest with frustration radiating. “From the logs and the crappy time lapse video I found, whenever he forced open the doors, he triggered an alarm. The system woke up, started to wake the bot, and Noxian did... Something. Fuck! I can’t tell! Every time he does anything magical, the camera loses its shit.”

Bach rubs his eyes into a pinch of his nose’s bridge and groans as the pieces fall into place in his head. “Dammit. That makes sense. The magic on the entry door had decayed. It would only make sense the magic to stop the bot, cast at roughly the same time, would have decayed, too.”

Cideeda slinks next to Bach, assesses the monitors, and bites on a claw tip, thinking. “Are there any remote controls for it tied into the system? Maybe a remote shutdown or an alert cancel?”

Aristespha shakes her head as she gestures to a screen with a graphical menu. The menu shows two pictograms of the robots with status messages and color coding. Aristespha takes in a deep breath and rests her cheek in the palm of her hand. “I checked. There are all kinds of remote control features. But, the one robot that is still in contact with the system, happens

to be the useless pile of gutted parts. The system has a few books worth of error messages trying to contact the working bot.”

Bach finds a nearby chair, pulls it over to him, and sits with a firm frown. “Bastard probably fried or corrupted something, now this thing is either stuck in alert mode or worse.”

He pulls out his aetherphone, clicks the power button, and sharpens his frown as the “No Relay Found” flashes in the status bar. Sebastian eyes Bach’s phone and shakes his head. “I know. We’re too far out to easily call for help. We think we can radio for help if we get of the bunker and-”

Cideeda raises her hands abruptly and waves them in alarm. “Whoa! We might not want to do that this close to it!”

Everyone pays attention to Cideeda and dons a mix of quizzical expressions. Cideeda moves closer to a screen with a video feed of the robot walking outside. She taps a button on the console, freezes the video feed, and circles a claw tip over the head and shoulder section of the robot. “This thing looks to me like some kind of government hand-me-down and this here looks like some kind of antenna array. If we key up the radios on our phones, there’s a good chance it might home in on the source expecting a fight.”

Bach narrows his eyes, leans forward, and spins a dial on the console to zoom in the freeze frame. He drops his head in begrudging realization and looks back up groaning. “Shit. That looks like serious sensor equipment in the head and chest, too.”

Dretphi nods in agreement and crosses her arms, the hard plates of her armor clack as they contact each other. “Yes. Possibly can see into multiple bands. Maybe radar. Probably thermal and ultrasound.”

Sotalia curls a lip in a sneer and huffs, shaking her head with an eye roll. “Figures. No amount of invisibility magic is going to obscure anyone that good from that thing.”

Sebastian floats above the group and coughs ethereally to attention. “Okay, everyone. Calm down. We can do this. Here’s an idea. From what I’ve watched, this thing has a rough patrol pattern. If we can plot it out and time it, there might be a few windows of opportunity we can use to get out of this bunker, move through the courtyard, and then clear the outside antenna array.”

Bach’s nod builds up momentum as the concept dwells in his mind more and more. “That could work. These buildings are concrete. We could keep out of its line of sight and probably not show up on any kind of radar, so long as we keep in the shadow. Don’t know about sound, though.”

Dretphi presses buttons on the security console to iterate through a number of external cameras. “Windy outside. Storm could be nearby. It would be difficult to pick out footsteps with this noise.”

Sebastian begins to crack a proud grin on his mouth and he looks to everyone. “Exactly! Ideally, we would get to the humvee, drive off, and put as much distance between us and this

place as possible. Get to an aethernet relay, call the guild, and let the military have fun with his thing.”

Aristespha narrows her eyes, pushes back in her chair, and analyzes the plan in her mind. “The open antenna array will be difficult, but... If even if we are seen, the distance would hopefully buy us time to counterattack.”

Sotalia rubs her hands together and an evil grin emerges on her face. “Hopefully plenty of time for some powerful spells.”

Sebastian drifts back to stand on the floor and directs everyone’s attention to the security console. “Okay! It’s a plan. So, let’s get to studying this metal monster and figure out our escape.”

A harsh gust of wind blows ferociously through the courtyard. Distant rustles of leaves chorus the air with a wavering drone. The white fluffy clouds of before jet across the sky in long, thin trails. Constant, rhythmic thumping steps out from behind the corner of a small building near the bunker. The metal behemoth rotates its upper body, aims two weaponized arms down the path to the courtyard, and adjusts its walk to a strafe. Each step executes with a strange grace as the rest of the thickly armored body moves with exact coordination. The head of the security robot briefly turns, scans the area, and returns to facing its previous course. The body smoothly aligns with the head as it passes by. The robot continues along the side of the bunker, moving away from the courtyard area.

As the last glimpses of the huge backpack unit and whip antennas leave sight around the corner of the bunker, Sebastian eases his face through the doors. His head emerges and he glances to corner. He waits, listens, and ventures the rest of his ethereal form through the doors. Cautiously, he floats up to the bunker’s roof, crests his head above eye level, and watches the security robot continue its patrol. After a minute, he quickly zips down, shoves his head through the doors, pauses, pulls his head back, and flies back up to the roof line. The bunker doors slide open with a sputter. Bach and Dretphi swing outside to each side of the doorway while maintaining their grips on the doors. Cideeda leaps out onto the concrete walkway and swivels her head around while her ears hunt the area. Sebastian holds his arm out, points out a direction opposite of the security robot, and aims his voice down. “It’s still on course. Clear to move.”

Aristespha and Sotalia rush out from the bunker and assume defensive casting stances near Cideeda. Bach and Dretphi simultaneously release the bunker doors to a final hiss that mutes when the bunker seals. Both swiftly walk up near the group. They all form a loose line as they sweep carefully across the courtyard, paying attention Sebastian’s guiding arm. Over the minutes, the group navigates the debris littered courtyard and stay within the sensor shadow cast by the bunker. Sebastian judges the path of the security robot. He drifts away from the roof and keeping level. He glances over to the group with a reserved grin, gives a thumbs up, and quietly voices to himself. “Keep it up. You’re all doing good. Just a little while longer to the array.”

Something catches Sebastian's eye, and he rotates to the tree line. He puzzles at strange wave of swaying treetops. A massive gale forms a wall of air and draws up debris from the bent over trees. A few treetops drop below the green canopy and roots momentarily flip into view. Sebastian waves an alarm and points. Cideeda's ears find the oncoming roar and she alerts the rest of the group. "A huge gust of wind is coming. Get behind the concrete barriers."

The group gathers down low behind a chain of concrete construction barriers in the middle of the courtyard just as the wind speeds up through the alleyways of the buildings. The wall of wind blasts through, sending dirt and sticks from the nearby forest soaring through the area. A strange, loud noise grinds into the air, slicing through the drowning din of the gale gust. Rust chunks crumble off a tall antenna tower assembly. The clangor their impact to ground gets the attention of Cideeda as she gawks wide-eyed at the tower. "Oh gods. No..."

An explosive snap of a support cable thunders out. The heavy steel line yanks the tower as the wind carries it out. Everyone witnesses the last support cable go limp, as the tower tilts too far and flings the last support anchor with its broken off concrete base into the sky. The massive structure of steel flexes as the bottom half catches up with the free-falling of the top half. The tower smashes into the ground and erupts into a cacophony of metal screeching and crushing upon the surface of the earth. The gust passes through and leaves an eerie silence... That a repetitious thumping replaces, increasing in volume with each passing second. Sebastian spins around to face the source, his eyes slam right open with narrowing pupils, and he bellows out an ethereal scream. "HIDE! IT'S COMING!"

With a powerful sprinting run, the robot clears swathes of ground with each thunderous bound. Every impact presses into the dirt and leaves deep indents behind. It powers along the other side of the bunker and rockets around the corner. In fractions of second, the head of the robotic monster scans the area and all targets. Cideeda sprints behind a barrier in front a tall pile of steel beams. Dretphi forcefully ushers Sotalia and Aristespha around to the back of a collection concrete barriers behind a pile of gravel. Bach's eyes glow as he flees to another barrier at great speed. Sebastian hovers in the air, assessing the dramatically changing situation. The robot settles its focus on Sebastian as it slides to a bracing stance and spins up the barrels of the minigun. Sebastian hears the spin up and glares down at the robot. He charges, flaring up his ethereal form. "FUCK YOU, SHIT HEAP! TRY TO SHOOT ME!"

With blind speed and absolute precision, the minigun erupts fire and mass at Sebastian. The rounds zip through Sebastian's form and he dramatically dissipates. Seconds later, he reforms behind Aristespha, Dretphi, and Sotalia with an anxious demeanor. "Okay! Um! Ah... Ideas?!"

The robot positions itself equally distant from each hiding spot, both weapons seeking a new target. The minigun barrel winds down and the robot waits. Aetherphones chirp. Aristespha retrieve hers and puts it on speakerphone. Sotalia reaches into the collar of her cloak and slips a compact headset over an ear. Dretphi taps the underside of her helmet. Cideeda's voice crackles through the speakerphone. "Well, it knows we are here. So, we might as well use the radio. I think it's trying to jam us, but we're too close for that to work. Is everyone okay?"

Aristespha sighs with relief at hearing Cideeda's voice and lifts her phone close to her mouth. "Dretphi, Sotalia, and I are okay. Sebastian is with us here. Bach, where are you?"

Bach's voice briefly distorts over the speaker, but recovers to sound out his excited, worried tone. "I'm okay. I'm down from you all and opposite from where I think Cideeda went. Concrete barrier closest to the middle building. Any ideas so far?"

Sotalia pulls a menacing grin across her mouth and flexes her hands. "How about a good hard hitting spell?"

Sebastian shakes his head with a grimace at Sotalia. "No. Sorry. I'm going to have to veto that. Your hard hitters take time and positioning to cast. It's not going to give you that chance."

Sotalia sneers in frustration at Sebastian, takes deep breath, and releases it with an accepting nod. "Dammit! You're right. It took no time to target you and fire at you."

Cideeda presses her back against the middle of the concrete barrier, puts her atherphone in a front upper chest pocket near her neck, closes her eyes, and lets her ears search the air. She opens eyes after a few passes and bites her lip. "This thing isn't using servos or hydraulics. I can't hear them. It has to be polymer muscles. So, it's got a ridiculous reaction time."

Dretphi growls and clenches a fist tightly as the material strains audibly. "The right rifle for this is in the humvee. Too far. Too fast."

Cideeda searches through her gear and eventually retrieves a rectangular bundle of a yellow clay substance. A devious grin cracks from the corner her mouth as she finds a few other items. "Well, I remembered to bring my block of breaching explosives. Got a mounting magnet and remote detonator with controller, too."

Cideeda listens to the silence on the radio and focuses on attaching the remote detonator and mounting magnet on the small brick of explosives. She tilts her head close to the phone and speaks in a lower, determined tone. "Permission to proceed?"

Sebastian responds over the radio with an eager hint in his voice. "Permission granted. Let's see if it'll fall for me again. Let me know when you are ready and I'll make a run at it."

Cideeda shakes out a plastic mesh bag from a small pocket and tosses the explosive assembly inside, giving a light test swing. "I doubt I'll be able to stick it, but if it lands close enough I'll trigger it. Hopefully, the concussion will knock it down and give us a chance to get further away. I'm about ready."

Sebastian prepares himself and watches Aristespha as she holds her phone. Cideeda's voice hisses over the phone. "Ready!"

Aristespha keeps her eyes on Sebastian and speaks into the phone. "Okay. Sebastian is going to draw its attention. He'll yell out if it is distracted. Then, you toss the explosives."

When they detonate and the robot is down, everyone is to regroup and head straight into the woods to the west. Confirm Bach, Cideeda.”

Bach voice distorts again over the phone as the interference strains the signal. “Sounds good to me. That bulky bastard should have some trouble getting us in there.”

Cideeda chirps excitedly over the static hiss. “Let’s do this!”

Sebastian gives a thumbs to Aristespha, Dretphi and Sotalia as he lunges out from cover. He waves his hands in the air, flames up his ethereal form, and screams. “I’M BACK FOR YOU FUCKER! YOU CAN’T HIT ME! OOGITY BOOGITY!”

The robot’s head tracks Sebastian and both arms immediately align. The minigun’s barrels spin up. Sebastian mid-stride with a wild look in his eyes, yells out, “IT’S WATCHING ME! NOW!”

Cideeda stands up and vigorously swings the plastic mesh bag around with her arm in large vertical circle. When it gets to the right speed, she hold her free arm out to aim and launches the package in a lofty arc. The bag soars through the air, reaches the apex of its trajectory, and flies downwards at the robot. The robot breaks lock on Sebastian and its head snaps upwards. It pauses. Without any warning, it crashes down to a squat and springs into the air. It lands securely with a loud earth-shaking whump over ten meters away, while the head tracks the bag. Cideeda’s jaw slams to the ground in shock and she covers behind cover. “FUCK! ABORT! Stay in cover! It jumped out of the way!”

The robot redirects its attention at Cideeda’s area. The minigun spins down and a new low rumble resonates. Cideeda’s ears twitch and she nervously grits her teeth. “What is that noise? That sounds like an energy charge up of some kind.”

Cideeda sneaks a peek out the side of her barrier and yanks back in fright. “Shit! It’s charging up the plasma cannon! It’s aiming at my position, but I can’t see exactly where!”

Bach flips the visor of his helmet down and rises just over the top of his barrier. He studies the angle of the cannon arm and his mind screams forth in panic as the calculations finish. His eyes fly open and he screams as loud as he can. “IT’S AIMING BEHIND YOU!”

Cideeda glances at the tall stack of steel beams behind her. She pales with mouth agape and her ears perk at a loud release. A twenty centimeter diameter ball of blue-white plasma blasts from the barrel of the cannon and blazes across the courtyard at the stack of beams. Cideeda dives out from behind the concrete barrier as the plasma ball explodes a concussive wave of plasma that fills the space behind the barrier and tumbles beams down. She darts her eyes around. The barrel of the minigun spins back up. Cideeda spots small pile of concrete parking stops. The claws on her hands and feet dig into the ground and she panic scrambles to the pile. She desperately flattens herself against the pile and covers her head. A torrent of fast mass rains upon her position. Chunks of the dirt and concrete from the stops cascade down upon her back. The pile shrinks fast as the barrage continues. Cideeda feels the bullets ring pass her and flecks of ricochets impact near her. A hot searing pain cuts across the middle crest of both butt cheeks. Before she can manage to react, another

spattering of pain dots across her shoulder blades. She reflexively cries out fright and pain. "HELP!"

Sebastian's form blows out in a flaming aura and launches right at the robot. "FUCK OFF! JUST FUCK OFF WILL YOU!"

The robot briefly stops, aims at Sebastian. Bach pops out above his concrete barrier, points his plasma pistol at the robot, and quickly launches a series of plasma bolts. The bolts impact and lightly rattle the bot. It pivots and swings its aim at Bach. Bach plummets behind the barrier before a loud rumble of minigun fire speckles the area. Cideeda regains her senses, grits her teeth, and attempts to flex the muscles in her back and butt. There is pain, but she feels she can move, somewhat. She reaches an arm back and checks the extent of the injuries. She bites her lip, winces, but sighs in annoyed relief to find only grazes. Footsteps rush along the ground and close in on her with a familiar clank of armor. A shadow crouches over Cideeda and with a firm, strong hand lightly pats the top of her's shoulder. "Can you move?"

Cideeda smiles through winces and cringes. She lifts herself up, crawls around to the back of Dretphi, and forces her self up into a crouch. Cideeda taps Dretphi's back. Dretphi nods her helmeted, visor protected head and lifts her energy shield up. The two carefully move across the courtyard to an awaiting Sotalia and Aristespha. Bach stops hearing the impacts of bullets and radios through the headset in his helmet. "Look out! It stopped shooting at me!"

Dretphi watches as the robot's head trains upon her, its arms following. She holds her energy shield up and braces her shield gauntlet with her other arm. The minigun releases a spray of metal that bounces off the energy shield. Dretphi concentrates every bit of herself and keeps the shield in place as impacts rattle her. Stray shots from the spray force Aristespha and Sotalia into cover, as Dretphi and Cideeda edge closer. Sparks erupt from the shield gauntlet and the energy field wavers. Dretphi pulls in her arms, plants her feet, solemnly says, "Whatever happens. Stay behind me."

The shield disappears. Bullet slice through the air at Dretphi and they impact... a golden magical barrier. Metal careens at the plates of Dretphi's armor and bounce off barriers. Dretphi tenses herself and strains to slide her feet closer towards cover. Each hit shakes and rocks her. The barriers grow more visible and cracks form. Rounds contact Dretphi's helmet and throw her off balance. Cracks spider over most the plates. The bullets stop. Bach's voice booms out into the courtyard. "EAT PLASMA SHIT! MOTHERFUCKING GOVERNMENT SURPLUS!"

Bach stands out from cover, eyes brilliantly glowing blue under his visor. His voice blares from the magical energy covering his respirator. His magically modified plasma pistol overflows with energy as he levels it at a specific spot on the robot. A powerful ball of concentrated energy awaits inside the device. Bach pulls the trigger. The blazing white bolt screams out at the robot. The recoil forces Bach's arms up in the air and Bach stumbles back. The robot curls the cannon arm up to shield itself, but the bolt drops low and then rockets up to the minigun. For a brief moment at impact, a faint line of magical thread from the bolt to the pistol flickers. The explosive of heat and energy flings the minigun arm back and pulls the robot off balance. The minigun screeches to a halt. The minigun motor strains

in vain. Sebastian sets down next to Dretphi. "It's distracted! I'll keep an eye on it for you. Run for it!"

Dretphi summons all her willpower, launches herself up, sweeps Cideeda into her arms, and sprints over to Aristespha and Sotalia. Sebastian hovers behind keep sight on the robot. Bach ejects the smoking magazine from his pistol, reaches into his duster for another, all the while grinning manically. "Thought you were a badass, huh!"

The robot stabilizes itself. The minigun drive motor struggles and groans, but the barrels do not move. Bach finds and retrieves another magazine. "Don't worry, fucker. I got seconds for you-"

A familiar low rumbling resonates. Bach's wide eyes are visible through his visor and hint to the hidden shock. The robot levels its cannon and a plasma ball flares out at Bach. Bach drops everything, extends his arms out, and braces himself. A network of magical energy spreads out in front of him and solidifies with a golden fill. Before the energy field contacts the ground, the plasma ball crashes into the shield, and smashes the shield into Bach. Bach's feet slide across the ground as the plasma ball explodes. The golden energy field crackles to full opacity. Plasma leaks blast through the cracks. A loud shatter rings out as the magical barrier fragments into hundreds of shards and a concussive wave of blue-white plasma washes over Bach. The plasma violently launches Bach backwards into the concrete wall of the small building behind him with a solid, dull thud. He slides into a limp heap on the pavement below, smoke rising from his armor and clothing. Sebastian pupils shrink to mere dots as horror drenches his face. "Bach? Bach! BACH! OH GODS! BACH! NO!"

Sebastian tries fly over and Aristespha seizes him with a hand as her eyes glow violet. "What?! I gotta get over there and check on him!"

Aristespha fiercely glares at Sebastian and growls intensely. "It. Still. Targets. You. It may fire at you and near Bach! Calm down and THINK!"

Sotalia crests her eyes over the top of cover, glowers at the robot, and start moving her hands to cast. Aristespha's other hand snatches Sotalia by the collar of her cloak and yanks her back down. "Don't you fucking dare! I know it's hard, but we need to lay low long enough to figure a way to get to him."

Sotalia grabs hold of Aristespha arm. She glares back at Aristespha and slowly breathes. With each breath, her grip loosens until she lowers her head and wipes her eyes. "Dammit. Okay."

Sebastian slowly lifts his head above the barrier and watches the robot. It waits with the cannon arm pointing at Bach. Sebastian sighs with an ethereal echo. "It still is targeting me. I don't think it has figured out that bullets don't work on me. I'll distract it. Get it to aim somewhere else. And, Sotalia, you go and at least drag Bach to cover."

Sotalia nods firmly and readies herself near the edge of the barrier. "Sounds good, let me know when to run for it."

Sebastian darts out in a run to another pile of debris. The robot's head swings in his direction and the body follows. Sebastian peers over the top of the pile and mumbles to himself. "Good. Pay attention to me you bastard. Just long enough so we can get over to Bach-

He squints over to a now empty spot. Sotalia peeks over to see Sebastian gawking in utter confusion to the building wall that- Bach ISN'T at. A voice distorts over the phones. "OWWWW! Gods dammit, that hurt. I'm sorry. I didn't want to do anything when it was aiming right at me. Oww. Shit."

Sotalia ducks behind the protective barrier with a firm smile. "Damn you, asshole! You had us scared."

Aristespha lifts up her phone and speaks with a happier tone. "It's okay. Good call. I've got to treat the grazes on Cideeda so she can move enough. Stay there for now."

Sebastian reforms next to Aristespha with sheer joy in his face. "Man, I know I'm some kind of ghost, but my heart really didn't need that. Apart from pain anything else wrong?"

Bach pats another smoldering spot on his duster and winces when he slides up on the concrete barrier. "Not really. Well, some burns, sore back and ass, and another shirt ruined."

Cideeda vocally eye rolls over the radio. "Oh? Sore back and ass?"

Bach sighs sarcastically. "Sorry. Forgot about that with all the plasma in my face."

The robot reaches over with its other arm, grips the barrel assembly with a hand, and torques hard and suddenly. Sotalia slides her head from the side of the barrier, squints, and quirks a brow at the robot's actions. "What is it doing?"

Cideeda crawls out enough to peer around the other side, Aristespha scoots along with her and continues treating her injuries. Cideeda's ear flick and she frowns. "Shit. It's trying to unjam that minigun."

Sebastian rubs his temples and grumbles as he thinks. "Okay. Let's all hit it hard at once. Hopefully, that will occupy it long enough, so we can get to the woods. I'll see how long I can distract it-

A sharp, metallic crack resounds. An electrical groan of a motor follows and an ominous cyclic scrape of steel shrieks, growing faster with each second. Bach's voice comes in through the radio. "Dammit! It broke the heat weld that plasma hit did. It's- WALKING RIGHT TOWARDS YOU ALL!"

The robot marches forward. Each step thumps solidly. Both arms aim forward. The minigun fights friction spin, but maintains a threatening speed. A glow lights the inside barrel of the cannon. Sebastian pops his head over the top of cover and drops back down. He solemnly exchanges glances with everyone and desperately searches himself for a plan, a route, or a solution. Cideeda winces and covers her ears. "The hell is that noise?!"

Sotalia blinks blankly and snaps her head wide-eyed to Aristespha. “Do you feel that?”

Dretphi feels the ground, waits for something, and puzzles. “It stopped walking.”

The crackling white noise launches out from the background and drastically pitches to a high piercing shrill. Sebastian flashes a manic grin with his eyes fully open. “HE. CASTED. IT!”

Heads peek out from the barrier. Bach stands behind his barrier. He struggles to maintain both his arms out and his hands together as a half meter spherical maelstrom of visual white noise swirls chaotically in front of his palms. Wind vortexes around the orb as countless streams of magical energy pour into it. Bach’s eyes spotlight blue through his visor and veins of magic flow brilliantly in and around. The robot slowly turns its head at Bach, then focuses on the orb. Bach finally tenses his body and the orb jets at the robot, leaving streams of magical energy. The robot leans away from the attack and raises its cannon arm to block. The orb adjusts course and contacts the upper arm. An explosive burst of fine powder and vapor billow out into a particle cloud around where the upper arm WAS. The fore arm with cannon crashes out of the mist. The orb leaves the cloud smaller and it sharply turns straight into the robot’s chest. A plume of particulate mass blasts out as the orb burrows. A heavy fog of vaporized material fills the air as it violently ejects out the gaping hole in the chest of the robot. Seconds later, the courtyard silences and the robot remains still. A small pin point of daylight pierces out the center of the deep conical void inside the robot. Bach’s eyes dim and he catches himself along the top of the barrier. He whispers to himself. “Please be dead.”

Sotalia gapes at the scene before her. Aristespha slowly rotates her head to Sebastian and stares thoughtfully at him. “I can see why that spell was prohibited.”

Sebastian beams with pride and casually shrugs. Cideeda drops her smile. “I hear something! It’s not done yet!”

Everyone drops back to hiding. Bach slides down the back of the barrier. “Gods dammit! I’m sorry. I thought that’d get it.”

Cideeda curls a lip as her mind processes the numerous noises coming from the robot now. “Don’t be sorry, that hurt it A LOT. It’s not doing well.”

The robot struggles with its footing. The minigun spins up and the arm sweeps repeatedly for a target. Smoke wisps out from the massive hole in the chest of the machine. Each struggling, sluggish action fans the haze out. Sebastian nods as he watches the monstrosity barely stand. “It’s still a threat, but not by much now.”

Dretphi studies the robot, squints her eyes, and growls in thought. “It is compensating. Better with each second. It will get better.”

Sebastian sighs. “Damn. We’ve already risked too much. I want to put this thing down hard with as little risk to us. That minigun may still be functional.”

Cideeda edges around the side of the barrier and spots the plastic mesh bag. She reaches into a pocket and retrieves the remote control. She flips a guarded switch and a green light blinks on the device. A second later, the light stops blinking and stays a solid green. A sly,

toothy smile pulls across her mouth and she hoists the remote control to Sebastian. “The explosives are still alive and there’s a big gaping hole to put them in.”

Sebastian points to Cideeda as his mind begins to piece everything together. “Okay. We need to get it there.”

Dretphi holds her hand up. “I can run it. Unfortunately. Bach’s barriers are worn. A few hits is all I can take.”

Sebastian nods and takes a deep breath in. “Okay. I don’t know if it will fall for me again and that will only work for so long. Dear, can you immobilize it with your magic?”

Aristespha grimaces as she considers thought. “Maybe for a few seconds? That spell was never meant to restrain machinery and even damaged, it can still easily overpower me eventually.”

Bach listens to the discussion over radio. He strains to lift himself up, but manages to place his back against the cold concrete of the barrier. His subconscious flings a recent memory straight to the front his mind. Bach’s eyes slam open and he calls out on the radio. “Polymer muscles! You said polymer muscles!? Right, Cideeda!?”

Cideeda’s voice crackles on the radio. “Yes? It does have them, I saw a few strands hanging out of the cut forearm. Why?”

Bach cracks devious smile. “They have a freezing point right?”

Cideeda directs a toothy grin to Sotalia. “Sotalia, how cold can your freeze spell get?”

Sotalia thinks a moment and laughs darkly. Cideeda chuckles back. “We’ll probably have a minute before it turns on the defrost, but it should work.”

Sebastian nods slowly as the plan comes together in his head. “I’ll distract. Aristespha will hold it down long enough for Sotalia to freeze it. Dretphi runs, snatches the bomb, and plants in inside. Cideeda triggers it. Bro, just sit back for now.”

Bach’s voice disorts over the radio. “Will do. I hope this works. I really don’t want to look that far up my sleeve for cards at this point.”

The robot sweeps its minigun arm left and right, seeking a target. The weapon arm steadies more with each pass. The head scans, shuddering. A few sparks roll out of the hole. Sebastian runs out from cover. The robot’s head tracks, the minigun swings out, and a roar of fire spews forth. Mass peppers the area around Sebastian. He runs, dramatically dodging out of the way. “Oh no! I’m all in the open! What will I do!”

Aristespha rises up, he eyes glaring violet at the robot. She precisely motions her arms and perfectly calls out her incantations, ending with wide swing forward of both arms. A massive wave of energy speeds to the robot. The wave impacts and surrounds the robot. Movement

slow as it strains against the energy enveloping it. Aristespha's body shakes as she concentrates everything in the spell. "Now!"

Sotalia hops out the barrier and flings her cloak to the side. She plants her feet, gestures her arms quickly in front of her, and yells out incantations at a feverish pace. Her eyes flash golden as magical energy flows around her to a point in front of her hands. The runic markings on her arms flare out and dissipate off into the air. Wind gusts into the emerging clear liquid orb in front of her and waves of heat thrusts behind her. The whites of her eyes blacken. With a powerful shove forward, a guiding stream of energy spirals out to the robot and a torrent of liquid deluges the machine. Clear liquid dryly steams and boils off upon contact with the metal beast, but more remains with each passing moment. Sotalia grins ear to ear as she directs the stream to each part of the machine's body. Seconds later, the stream cuts off, leaving a frost and iced coated robot failing to move. Sotalia stumbles to a knee and rolls back behind the barrier while Aristespha relaxes her hold on the bot. Dretphi tears out running straight for the plastic mesh bag. She coasts across the surface of the terrain, guides herself near the bag, and snatches it cleanly from the ground. She powers on at full speed at the robot, springs up to a jump, and climbs onto the chest of the metal beast. The robot's head turns to meet the visor-covered face of Dretphi. She bares her teeth in a menacing grin as her glare drills into the optics of the robot. She maintains eye contact for a few seconds, then rams the bag upside the robot, shaking it violently from the force. Dretphi kicks off with both feet, sticks the landing, and sprints to safety. The robot topples over on the pavement of the courtyard. Dretphi slides around the side and swings herself behind the barrier as Aristespha drops down. Cideeda disengages the main safety of the remote control and yells out. "ONE!"

The frost begins to fade from the robot with an electric hum. Cideeda clicks the trigger and a yellow light illuminates. "TWO!"

The robot slowly elevates its upper body up to a sitting position. Cideeda clicks the trigger again and a red light flickers to life. "THREE!"

The head of the robot cranes over to examine what fills the hole in its chest. It pauses briefly, lifts its head back up, and long beeps once. Cideeda clicks the trigger. A loud kaboom rocks the area, as the chest of the robot shatters and blows out. Thousands of small cracks ring out as ammunition riddles the backpack unit full of holes, exploding in large series. A loud piercing snap echoes in the area as jets of plasma erupt from a power core. A shockwave blasts across the ground and a massive bubble of plasma savagely vents up into the air, fading into the windy sky above. A strange silence looms over the courtyard. A small crater now marks the landscape. Larger bits of the robot are in new, interesting locations. No windows remain intact nearby. The silence breaks with a strange whistle that gets louder and louder. The head of the robot collides with the pavement and bounces poorly to a roll.

Sebastian floats up above and surveys the area. He hovers up higher and scans the greater courtyard area and releases an ethereal sigh of relief. "I think it's fucking dead this time!"