

## Ain't A Hero – Episode 13

by Bryan Schuder

Through a golden, crackled haze coated helmet visor, Bach gazes up into the fast moving clouds above. The sun nears the horizon a bit more every minute. Bach takes a long breath in through his helmet's respirator and exhales slowly. He lays behind the concrete barrier on his back, hands resting on his stomach. A gust of wind blows through and sways the tears and char spots in his clothing. A few flakes of ashen cloth drift with the flow of air and away into the distance. Bach sees Sebastian fly overhead, scouting the area. He floats down closer to Bach and waves at him. "Hey! Bro! You alive?"

Bach gradually rolls a hand into a thumbs up and calls out through his respirator. "Yah. Wiped out. But. Alive, man. Some-fucking-how."

Sebastian smiles proudly, returns a thumbs up to Bach, and points around to the surrounding area. "Cool, bro. I'm going to look around and check the area again. Make sure nothing else is aiming to join in the clusterfuck of our day. You. You rest."

Bach sighs and looks side to side as his head gradually follows behind. "Not going to be a problem."

Sebastian flies up and off over the top of a small building near Bach. Aristespha rolls out a pack of medical supplies and directs Cideeda to lay back down on her stomach next to her. "Let me to work on those injuries more and heal them properly."

Sotalia flips open a pouch on her belt, pulls out a vial, and hands it to Dretphi. Dretphi narrows her eyes behind her helmet visor and sneers at the vial as she holds it away from her. Sotalia stands up with her hands on her hips and quirks her brow at Dretphi. "Oh, don't be that way. It's cherry flavored. Drink up. It'll cut the swelling down."

Dretphi groans with heavy hesitation, lifts her visor, pops the cork off, and slams the liquid back. Her face contorts and she mutters a number of Grath curses under her breath. Sotalia rolls her eyes and shakes head with a smirk. Aristespha takes a moment from tending Cideeda, makes eye contact with Sotalia, and points over towards Bach's location. "Could you check on Bach and make sure there isn't anything that needs my immediate attention?"

Sotalia glances over towards the concrete barrier near Bach. "Of course. It'll give me a chance to survey the damage."

Cideeda winces with an excited, toothy grin as she maneuvers her arms out of the top of her body suit with the help of Aristespha. "Keep an eye out for any big parts from that robot. I want its head!"

Dretphi pops the locks underneath her helmet and pulls it off, letting her platinum to dirty blonde hair air out in the breeze. "I call the armaments on the arms. If salvageable."

Sotalia nods with a confirming gesture of the hand and walks confidently over towards Bach. She moves carefully through the courtyard, casually eyeing bits of robot in new and interesting locations. She stops in front of the barrier and notices a number of golden stabilized magical energy shards on the ground. With a quick check side to side, she kneels down, picks up a few handfuls, and places them in her pocket. Her head stops upon Bach's plasma pistol. The plasma pistol remains with its magical modifications on the ground. Sotalia reaches out, picks it up, and gawks at it. After a few moments, she blinks back to her senses, snatches up the two power magazines into another pocket, and stands back up. She rounds the corner of the barrier and finds Bach laying down, looking up into the sky. His eyes shift under the visor and meet her face, as she raises an eyebrow. She places her hands to her hips and smiles out of the corner of her mouth. "Cloud watching?"

Bach's eyes search around. But, he resigns himself with a droop of his eyelids and speaks through the respirator. "Kinda."

Sotalia shakes her head, gestures with a free hand for Bach to get up, and begins to turn around. "Come on. Let's get back to everyone else. Aristespha needs to give you at least a once over."

Bach sheepishly mumbles as his eyes wander around. "You go ahead. I'll be right over. I'm going to need a few minutes."

Sotalia halts and tilts her head to the side as her curiosity overrides. She slowly pivots back around and lowers her intrigued gaze at Bach. He watches her step to his side and sit down right next to him. Sotalia gently places Bach's plasma pistol off to the side and focuses her attention at Bach. She reaches out to Bach's helmet, flips the visor up and detaches the respirator off to the side. She then cranes her head over and hovers her face right above his, with a devilish grin. "Let me guess. You tapped yourself out and your limbs are worthlessly weak right now."

A long sigh of embarrassment comes from Bach and he stops averting his eyes from Sotalia's. "Yes."

Sotalia lifts her head back and covers a giggle with her hand. "Wow! Throwing all that caution to the wind in a time of crisis. You ARE certainly Sebastian's brother."

She mockingly holds her arms out in a shooting pose and imitates Bach's voice badly. "Eat plasma shit! Motherfucking government surplus! Really? A bold leap from cover AND a one liner? We should put you on the Next Adventurers of Nexus if you keep that up."

Bach rolls his head away with a grumble as he feels his pride search for an escape route from him. Sotalia pats Bach on shoulder and he turns his head back to face her. She looks upon him kindly. "All that aside. You did good getting the heat off Cideeda and Dretphi. So... Thank you. But, next time you piss off a battle bot, head for cover afterwards will you?"

Bach weakly nods and then focuses his eyes on Sotalia's. "Um..."

Sotalia notices Bach's strange stare and puzzles at this odd attention. "Yes?"

Bach twists his mouth with a bit of uncertainty in his expression. "You know your eyes are gold on black at the moment, right?"

Sotalia momentarily frowns and groans with heavy annoyance as she looks away. "I do now. But, I'm not surprised."

She waves a dismissive hand around and drones on technical. "It's a Magically Reactive Biological Trait that is common with those of Emin lineage. Thankfully, it only happens when I dump a lot of magic out."

A pouch snap clicks off as Sotalia pulls the top flap open. She feels around inside and withdraws a vial with a label that she reads. She sets it to the side. Bach feels Sotalia's hand under his neck as she works his helmet off. She removes the helmet of the side and carefully lifts Bach's head up. "Let's get this down you, it'll help get the magical flow going and electrolyte balance right."

Bach barely manages a shrug and opens his mouth. Sotalia retrieves the vial, pops the cork off, and pours the contents into his mouth. Bach almost closes one eye in a wince and strains a swallow down. Sotalia immediately reads Bach's reaction, curls a lip, and sniffs the vial. "I thought I did okay with flavoring with this batch. I followed the instructions exactly as Aristespha wrote them. It even smells right."

Bach glances over at Sotalia. "What flavor is it suppose to be?"

Sotalia's eyes drop down to Bach and she dons a very unamused expression. "Cherry."

Bach's eyes drift away from Sotalia's developing glare and he twists his mouth. "How do you define... Cherry?"

Sotalia lowers Bach's head back down and crosses her arms with a pout on her face. "Dump all this magic into these potions and you are telling me the flavoring is off?"

Bach squints into his mind briefly and perks a brow of curiosity at Sotalia. "Speaking of dumping magic... You managed to freeze the air down and pipe liquid nitrogen at that robot. Correct?"

Sotalia sits up straighter with pride and beams at Bach. "Yes. That is correct. It's a composite spell I weaved a while back. Unfortunately, it takes a while and a lot of energy. But, I believe you can't argue with the results."

Bach nods with a bit more strength. "I certainly can't. Completely devastated that bot. Pretty sure Dretphi could have punched it to pieces with how brittle it was."

Bach returns his sights to the passing clouds overhead, and curls a lip with disappointment bubbling to his face. "Damn, I really thought D-Ball would take it out. But, I'm still not there yet."

Sotalia shakes her head, snorts, and aims Bach's head at her. "Bach. Take it from someone who always wanted to be THE one that saves the day... But learned otherwise. It's not important to land the final shot. It's important to make that final shot even possible."

Bach maintains eye contact with Sotalia. After a few seconds, she reaches out, puts her hand on top his long hair, and ruffles it, with a warm smile. Her eyes catch something along his collar line. She runs a finger underneath his shirt collar and lifts it away. "Looks like you got some burns there. I'm going to go check to see how far along Aristespha is in patching up Cideeda's ass. I'll get some burn cream for you at least."

Sotalia gets her feet underneath herself and pushes up. Midway through her transit to stand, her legs wobble. Her arms spread out and she braces herself against the concrete barrier. She glances around, shifts her weight against the barrier, and gently eases herself back on to the ground. Bach turns his head with a smug smile at her. "There's no rush. Sit down. Watch the clouds for awhile."

Grumbling to herself, she fetches a vial from her belt. With quick motion, she tosses back the liquid down her throat, contorts her face, and coughs. "Oh gods! Wow! I owe Dretphi an apology. This tastes awful!"

Bach stares unamused at Sotalia. She glances over Bach and swallows her pride. "And, sorry to you, too. I had no idea."

Sotalia scoots over and places her back up against the concrete barrier and looks up into the sky. Bach returns his eyes back to the sky also. "Next time we train, could you do that spell again? I'd actually like to examine one that up close."

Sotalia dons a wicked smile and provocatively eyes Bach. "I'll show you mine, if you show me yours."

Bach closes his eyes hard and opens with an awkward uncertainty. He lifts his head up to meet Sotalia's face, but she quickly turns her face away to a passing cloud. Bach lowers his head back down and meekly responds. "Sure."

Sotalia simply nods, hiding her sheer amusement from Bach.

Through the waving sheets of rain, the Pancake Shed sign faintly illuminates the lone highway intersection. At this time just after midnight, the traffic lights simply blink red and swing along with the storm. Lights inside the Pancake Shed restaurant shine in stark contrast to the night and cast a glow upon the parking lot surrounding the building. An older Grath woman with gray-streaked black hair scrapes the grill top effortlessly and guides the refuse into a hole off the side. A middle-aged human woman plays with her curly hazel hair as her eyes trace various figures on a clipboard. "Well, Triti, I think this is it until Havok's bar closes at three. This storm is something else."

Triti nods as she finishes cleaning off the last bit from the grill top. "Big storm. Happens rarely."

The human woman taps menu buttons on her aetherphone and a radar weather map cycles through an animation. She shakes head and gazes out the window store front. Flashes of light erupt in the distance and spider across the sky. Her eyes drift back to the clipboard full of sales figures and supply notes. "The storm probably picked up something when it passed over that damn weird zone. Oh well. It'll be a nice break after dealing with those adventurers with the camera crew."

A long growling groan fills the air near Triti and she stabs the scraper tool corner first into a wooden knife block... but not in any slot for a knife. She steps to the side to a sink, turns on the water, and washes her hands. She faintly mutters a variety of curses under her breath. The human woman spins around and narrows her eyes Triti. "Hey! I thought we agreed. If you are going to say something bad about a customer..."

The woman picks up her clipboard and slides next to Triti with a devious glint in her eye. "Say it so I can hear it."

Triti cracks the start of a smile from the corner of her mouth and speaks her mind a little above a whisper. "They were not natural."

The other woman laughs and lifts the clipboard up a bit higher to hide sight of her mouth. "Oh, they HAD to be magically enhanced. With the way she was flaunting them? I've paraded around dresses I got on sale less shamelessly than her."

A pair of headlights shine down the highway and through the rain. A yellow light blinks out of the front corner of the shadowy, rain-breaking mass. It turns into the lot, pulls into a spot close to the entry, and releases a fading whine as the powerplant spins down. The rear driver's side door cracks open, a gloved finger pokes out, and a thin sheet of magical energy expands outwards. In a few seconds, a floating rain barrier stretches over the humvee with a path to the front door.

The human woman giggles and snickers. "I almost wish that Rekeeka worked today. She would have flipped seeing how that Fvalian girl was dressed up."

An electronic door chime rings out from a box above the entrance doors. Both human woman and Triti shift their attention to towards the entry. Aristespha, Bach, Cideeda, Dretphi, and Sotalia stand in the small entryway as the door closes with another chime. Aristespha takes her gloves off and tucks them away in a pocket. She attempts to in vain to straighten up her attire and then just accepts the state of her clothing. Bach rubs the bandage around the base of his neck and pulls a worn t-shirt away. He brushes some dirt off his pants, but stops when flakes of charred cloth break off along with dirt. Dretphi stretches her arms and back out in small motions with a wince. She pulls on her long sleeve shirt and looks underneath with a slight frown. Sotalia slouches forward as she covers a yawn with her hand. She blinks repeatedly and drowsily scans around the area, fighting off the urge for another yawn. In shorts and a tank top, Cideeda holds on to Pancake Shed card as she tucks a pillow underneath her shoulder. The human woman and Triti exchange glances with sparks of recognition. The woman walks to the front register, places her clipboard down, and gazes at the group. "I say this not just out of Pancake Shed policy, but you all can take whatever seats you want. I'll be right with you."

The group moves towards the largest table. Bach slowly eases himself into a seat, and cringes when his back settles against the chair. Dretphi slowly works her way to the seat and briefly grits her teeth as a few movements irritate her. Aristespha slides out the chair and sits down. Sotalia lazily drags out the chair and slumps down, placing arms on the tabletop and resting her head down upon them. Cideeda turns her chair around ninety degrees, places her pillow on the chair, and carefully lowers herself. She leans her side on the chair back and throws an arm over the top, her tail waving slowly. The woman arrives with menus in hand and looks the group over. "Welcome to Pancake Shed, I'm Clara. I'll be your server this fine early morning. Is some coffee in order or anything else to start with?"

Sotalia lifts her head up and yawns. "Coffee. Please."

A unanimous agreement chains around the table to everyone else in the group. Clara nods with knowing smile. "I'll bring a few pots just for you all with all the fixings."

Cideeda hoists up her Pancake Shed card near Clara. Clara plucks it out of Cideeda's hand, perks a brow, and smiles. "Shed Stack for you. Anything else before I get the coffee?"

Dretphi raises her hand up and gets Clara's attention. "May I ask your cook a question?"

Clara shrugs and waves at Triti. "Hey, Triti, the lady has a question for you."

Triti slowly turns her head to Dretphi. Dretphi bows slightly and speaks a long elaborate sentence her native language. Triti thinks and her eyes search her mind. With a single nod and a grin she responds back. A smile sneaks onto Dretphi's face and she gives another slight bow. Aristespha glances over at Dretphi with curiosity. "What did she say?"

Dretphi smiles in full now. "It is not a stone top. It should still get honorably close."

Clara steps away from the table and walks straight to the coffee machines. The group rests at the table in silence. Everyone individually drifts in their own minds about the events of the day and mindlessly drift eyes upon the menus. Clara and Triti chat briefly and the two look over a few times. Clara returns to the table with two pots of coffee, mugs, and extras. She spreads them out to everyone at the table. Clara examines the group, sighs, and address them. "Okay. It's none of my business, but I got to know what you all did today. If nothing else, the coffee is on the house. You all seem to need it more than it needs to sit in the brewing tank."

Sotalia draws a slow grin as she perks up. "Eat plasma shit. Motherfucking government surplus."

Bach sinks into his chair and groans as the laughter erupts from the rest of the table, even a quiet ethereal chuckle from the sword at Aristespha side. "I'm never going to live that down. Am I?"

Clara takes orders in between hearing the different perspectives of the latest mission with Triti listening nearby.

“A near maelstrom stage storm passed over the town of Amaranth Valley from the borderlands. Local authorities report that no casualties or injuries. The mayor of Amaranth Valley went on to praise the efforts public services and the Greater Azure Alliance specialists that have been serving in the area lately to assist in the local guild office efforts to manage nearby ruins. Authorities still warn citizens to be on alert for flooding and to avoid travel in flooded or flood prone areas for the next few days until the water table settles-”

Cideeda lays belly down on a pile of pillows upon half the couch. Her ears flick a few times and sighs. “Okay. I can’t stand hearing the same news stories over again. Could someone next to the remote change it? I think the Research Channel is doing a marathon of Tech of the Ruins.”

Dretphi eyes the remote on the coffee table from her seat on the couch. She stares at the remote and sighs. Her tank top and shorts cover barely any of the various bruises and welts across her body. She grimaces and readies herself to lean forward. Just as she starts to get up, Bach pulls himself out of his chair, plucks the remote off the coffee table, and aims it at the television. “What channel is it again?”

Dretphi settles back down into the couch and exhales in relief. Cideeda rolls her eyes around the top of her head and thinks. “Four dash two nine? I know it’s around there.”

Bach presses a few buttons on the remote and rubs his back with his free hand. After a drifting between a few channels, the Research Channel title pops on the screen. Bach reaches over the coffee table and hands the remote to Cideeda. “I’ll let you handle this. Anyone need anything while I’m up? Wanted to grab a drink anyway.”

Dretphi retrieves a cold pack from behind her back, unwraps one from around her shoulder, and strains to pull one off her leg. She holds the bundle of cold packs in the air and looks at Bach. Cideeda slips a hand behind her shirt, unstraps a pack, and hoists it up in the air, too. Bach grabs all the packs in his hands and glances over at Sotalia. “You need anything, Sotalia? ... Sotalia?”

Sotalia snores loudly, startles briefly, and then rolls over in the couch chair. Her subconscious mind directs her hands to pull the blanket back securely over herself. Bach quirks a brow and looks between Cideeda and Dretphi. “Wow. She is out for the count.”

Cideeda crosses her arms on the pillows and underneath her head with an eye roll. “She’ll be fine around dinner. This only happens when she really goes all out and drains her reserves.”

Dretphi chuckles quietly, shakes her head, and flashes a smile at Bach. “She was given an opportunity. She wanted to show off.”

Bach shrugs and pivots around to walk towards the kitchen. He opens the refrigerator, tosses the warm cold packs in, and digs around for fresh ones. He quickly puts a hand on his lower back when he leans forward a bit too far and slowly straightens back up with a cringe. “Not that I don’t appreciate the wonders of magical medicine, but damn I wish there was something for the aches.”

Dretphi nods slowly and lifts her feet up on the coffee table. Cideeda tucks the remote between two pillows under her and carefully stretches her arms out. “You and me both. But, sparing use of the powerful pain management magic is the best practice. I knew a guy who got addicted to healing potions.”

Bach hands Dretphi two cold packs and slowly leans over to place a third on her leg. “Really?! That’s a pretty expensive addiction. I bet that didn’t win him any friends.”

Cideeda shakes her head wide-eyed as she remembers. “Well, he was fine... Until he started stealing from party members.”

Bach secures the wrap around Dretphi’s leg and hands the last fresh cold pack to an awaiting Cideeda. “What happened to him? I don’t think any good can happen if you are doing crazy shit like that.”

Cideeda secures the new cold pack under her shirt and wraps her arms around the piles of pillows. “Ah, he eventually got help. Had to go through some pain tolerance reconditioning for the withdrawal hyper-sensitivity. From what I heard, it’s usually a one time thing for most people. Most don’t go for a second time.”

Bach blinks a few times and eases back into his chair. He stares at the television screen.

“On this episode of Tech of the Ruins, we take an in depth look at security robots, drones, androids, and cyborgs. How were they created and what were they used fo-”

The channel on the television changes mid sentence and flips to another show. Cideeda slowly brings her arm back and returns the remote between the pillows, while the twitch in her eye fades. “We’ll try that marathon later.”

The front door opens and Aristespha strolls in gripping a large sack in each hand. She presses a foot on the door and closes it. She quickly walks into the dining area, hoists the two sacks on the tabletop, and takes her hat off. “Took three times and a manager to the get the order right, but we have the finest greasy burgers this town can offer.”

Cideeda cranes her head around to Aristespha with a toothy grin. “Any new dents on the humvee?”

Aristespha places her hands on her sides, sways her hips, and bites her lip as her eyes wander. “No. But. I may have cut off one of Next Adventurers of Nexus vans. I may have also used choice language and gestures, too.”

The ethereal voice of Sebastian echoes, as his visage materializes. “To which I fully approved of. You did signal anyway.”

Aristespha removes various bags, cartons, and containers from the two large sacks. She spins around, steps over to Bach, and hooks a finger around the collar of his shirt. She examines around his neck and nods. “Looks like most of the burn has healed. Back and chest feeling any better?”

Bach shrugs and waves a finger behind him. "Much better. Still sore when I move certain ways."

Aristespha releases Bach's shirt with a smile. "It should be safe for you take a few aspirin. We'll have to wait and see to see if there's a muscle group that needs more attention."

She directs her attention at Dretphi and sighs. "Looks another dose of the anti-contusion and anti-swelling mix for you."

Dretphi curls a lip and sneers as she grumbles away from Aristespha. Aristespha crosses her arms and shakes her head. "Now. Now. My potions have the proper amounts of flavoring. You'll feel and look a lot better. I promise. You can also mix it with your drink."

Aristespha gracefully steps around to Cideeda, slowly flips the back of her shirt up, and then lifts the waistband of her shorts up. She quickly assesses and returns the garments to their original positions. "Probably another day and the swelling should go down. Still touchy on the upper back?"

Cideeda slowly nods and sighs. "Yes, doctor. Trying to keep it elevated. It seems to help a bit."

Aristespha nods and eyes Sotalia with a wry smirk. "Has she moved from that spot since this morning?"

Bach, Cideeda, and Dretphi shake their heads. Aristespha moves over to the dining table, picks up a carton, and returns to a spot next to Sotalia. She cracks open the box and gently fans the scent of food towards Sotalia. A second after the smell enters her nose, she sniffles loudly and stirs in the chair. She sits up and squirms around as sleep releases her to consciousness. Her hands drift to her face and she rubs the sleep out. Her eyes flutter open and she lethargically gazes at everyone. "Hey."

Aristespha covers her mouth with her free hand and stifles a giggle. Cideeda presses her jaw down past her crossed arms into the pillow. Dretphi tightens her lips as her eyes search the other reactions. Bach and Sebastian exchange looks, and Sebastian ethereally snorts while Bach laughs. Sotalia awakens fully and glares for clues. "What?! Are my scleras still black?"

Sotalia fishes her phone out of her robe pocket, presses a camera app open, and stares at the screen. "What is so funny- OH GODS DAMMIT!"

She narrows her eyes at the screen as she sees herself. One eye has a black sclera. The other has a white sclera. She puts her phone away and crosses arms with a pout. "Always! Can't fade to shades of gray. Or change back in sync. Nope! Has to be one before the other."

Bach stares at the pile of cartons in front of Sotalia and wanders his gaze at the pile in front of Dretphi. The two piles share a similar height upon the dining table top. The objectively

curious part of Bach's mind raises a good question and seeks the vocal centers to relay this thought to the outside world. Common sense and self-preservation cross tackle curiosity and remind it that some questions are best left alone. Aristespha retrieves her aetherphone from her pants pocket and places it upon the table with a sly grin. "Since everyone is here, I wanted to share this interesting voice mail I got from Captain Hackle of the Greater Azure Alliance Specialist Squad."

Everyone exchanges looks at the table as Aristespha taps the play button on the phone's menu.

"Hello. This Captain Hackle of the Greater Azure Alliance. I apologize if this is not the correct means of contacting your group, but it was the only means granted to me by the local guild office. First, I would like to congratulate you on a... Successful operation in handling the rogue security robot. We are currently securing the site and surrounding areas as indicated by the guild's request for containment assistance. This brings me to the reason for this call. While we have collected most of the security robot, we are missing some components. Namely, the head and both arm mounted weapon systems."

Cideeda and Dretphi glance at each other and then to the wall behind them. A security robot head lays on its side with a plasma projectile cannon and minigun propped upon it. Dretphi pulls smug smile. Cideeda returns with a wide, toothy grin and whispers loudly. "They may be looking for a while."

"As per local, state, and other such laws, you are not under any obligation to assist any further than the initial requirement of your contract with the guild. However, I would recommend that you consider providing assistance as a professional courtesy that I would happily repay when the time comes."

Another irritated voice rises up from the background noise of the recording.

"Wait a minute... Are the same assholes from that cyborg den?! ... What the fuck did they do to this thing?! Plasma burns, part of it is... Disintegrated?! Holy shit! They froze this thing and blew it up! Motherfucker. And thought the dick who put that barrier around that base entry was troublesome enough. Where are they finding these people?!"

Captain Hackle grumbles over the sounds of a microphone readjusting.

"As I've been... Informed... by Specialist Theyal... You are the same group that rescued the... Unfortunately titled adventurers. Again, I would strongly recommend at least a meeting between my group and yours at your earliest convenience. I strongly believe that we may be able to assist each other in future endeavors. Please contact me at the number and aethermail I have attached to this voice mail. Thank you and have a nice day."

The phone silences and returns to another menu prompt. Sotalia muffles a burp and barely contains her sheer prideful amusement. "Wow. We're making friends in all kinds of places."

Bach warily eyes Aristespha's phone and tilts his head away. "Uh, I think friend is a strong word. Maybe, associate? I suggest if we do meet them, we do it somewhere public?"

Aristespha shakes her head and rolls her eyes as she brushes back her long hair. "It'll be fine. They're a very decorated, but very offbeat group. They're just adventurers under the military umbrella for all purposes. I'm curious if they have some information we don't have."

Sebastian hovers over Aristespha's shoulder and gazes at her phone as she flips through messages. "Dear, speaking of information, any word from your friend Nash over at the Grand Library?"

Aristespha lifts up the phone stares the screen and quirks an eye brow. "Nothing new since last night when he responded to my initial message. But, he's probably just waking up. I'll send him an aethermail to call me."

Sebastian scratches the back of his head and puzzles at Aristespha. "Why not just call him?"

Aristespha taps the last few characters of the message and sends it out. She places the phone back on the tabletop. "Won't work. Being a head of a department his official phone gets constantly rung by everyone. So, it's usually on silent. He has a personal phone he only lets family know of. For everyone else, the best route is an aethermail."

The phone plays a new chime and vibrates on the table. She grins deviously as she answers and places the phone up to her ear. "Let me guess, passed out in front of the console after watching videos waiting for something to process?"

A long silence follows before the speaker on the phone sounds out a response. Aristespha maintains her grin and takes the phone away from her ear, pressing a button on screen. "Well, wake up, you're on speakerphone."

Nash's voice resonates out Aristespha's aetherphone. "Damn, woman. Wake me up and already put me out in front of an audience. Slave driver. So, who's all there?"

Aristespha rotates a point to everyone at the table and each says their name. Nash yawns loudly and grumbles to a more aware state. "Okay! Suppose you all want my expert analysis of the bits and pieces you send over? I mean, I got some really good soup and hot sauce recipes I'm willing to share, too."

Aristespha eye rolls and sighs. "Your culinary wisdom will have to wait. What have you found out?"

Nash dramatically sighs back over the speakerphone. "Fine. Some day, though. Well, when it comes to the tidbits you sent. All I can figure after looking it over... It's GOT to be some mapping data. The formatting and patterns just scream it. Unfortunately, I don't got much more past that. Have to figure out the exact time period, which government had their hand in it, and all the other factors. Then, there's this whole thing with all these extra vectors and dimensions it's tracking."

Cideeda leans forward and directs her voice to the phone with a bit of curiosity in her expression. "Could it be just part of the data set or maybe an index?"

Nash responds with an equally intrigued tone. “You know I thought that too, but the formatting isn’t right. It’s strictly header then data, repeating. So... What is it indexing? But, anyway. I’ll see what I can do. I think we might have a system that might be a close match, given we get the rest of the system dumps?”

Aristespha nods, placing her head on her intertwined fingers. “I think we can do that. Send me the transfer account and link?”

Sounds of keys clack in the background while Nash hems. “Yep, I’ll get that to you right about now. I keep a few anonymous accounts for such reasons. I’ll see if I can sneak you all some Finder’s Reward from the department acquisitions account. Might take a while...”

Aristespha lowers her head closer to the phone and speaks in a lower tone. “What did you DO this time?”

A long pause hovers in the air around the phone, before a long drawn out groan echoes through from Nash. “You know. I make strides in nurturing inter-department cooperation and worked with the materials science guys to buy a mass document incinerator since they were a bit short at the end of the budget year.”

Aristespha maintains her tone and questions again. “What was it REALLY?”

Nash takes a long breath and exhales equally long before slipping a response at the very end. “... a military surplus flamethrower...”

Cideeda snorts and breaks out laughing. Dretphi’s eyes open fully as she stares at the phone. Bach and Sebastian nod at each other with a mixture of amazement and respect to such a feat. Sotalia glares at Aristespha and mouths, “Who the fuck is this guy?!”

Aristespha sits back and simply shakes her head with a chuckle. “Did the deans ever stop being mad at you for smuggling those kegs of beer through the department purchasing system for the graduation party?”

Nash laughs and chuckles for a few seconds. “Mad? Well, officially they do not condone such misuse. Unofficially, they’ve been using that same trick with that same local brewery. That place has the craziest beer names now on their roster. It’s made them pretty popular.”

Aristespha bites her lip with a sly smile as her eyes look up into her memory. “That was a really good party, though.”

An office chair squeaks over the speaker and Nash gives a few last chuckles. “I know. Well, I won’t pester you all any further. I’m going to hunt down a few graduate assistants and press-gang them into actually doing some work. I’ll message you with the progress and call you if I get any breakthroughs. Don’t know how long it’s going to be. I’ll hopefully know more later.”

Aristespha nods. “That will work. You take care.”

Nash’s voice comes over the speaker phone one last time. “Will do. You all do the same.”

The phone switches back to the menu screen and Aristespha tucks the phone away in a pant pocket. "So, that's Nash for you."

Sebastian crosses his arms and shrugs. "Seems like an interesting fellow."

Bach lifts the remote at the television and flips through a few more channels. "There nothing on. I forgot how bad mid-week, mid-day television is."

Cideeda squirms into her pile of pillows behind her back and underneath her as she sits on the couch. "I know. But, until the holoplayer is done uploading everything into to that account Nash sent us, I don't want to bother it. Connection speed is slow enough as it as, I don't want to have to restart it."

Dretphi stretches her neck side to side and glances over to Cideeda. "Should we try the marathon again?"

Cideeda lowers her ears and groans with a frown. "Not yet. I looked up the schedule and the whole bots and cyborgs thing is a few episodes. Out of all the things to make a multi-part series."

Sotalia walks in through the hallway, no longer wearing a her house robe but a simple shirt and short combination. She gazes over at the group, the sclera in both her eyes now a typical white. "I've had enough robot and cyborgs to last me a while."

She glances over to her side and scrutinizes the robot head near the dining table. "I can guess the plans for the two big guns, but why did you take the head of that bot?"

Cideeda slowly puts her arms behind her head and pulls a toothy grin. "Mostly as a trophy. And, judging by how quick it was to target us, I bet there's some choice parts in there."

Sotalia shakes her head with a smile and slowly plods over to the sliding glass window. She looks out onto the backyard with the afternoon sun overhead. She squints her eyes, puts her hands on her hips, sways, and pulls her mouth to a corner. "Huh. Sebastian is rushing back here awfully quick."

Sebastian phases through the sliding glass window and flies through the room, down the hallway. He jets straight to Aristespha's room. "Dear, I need you to get the sword and follow me! There's something I think we all need to get a better look at. I can't get close enough to get a clear look."

A minute later with some awkward glances between Bach, Cideeda, Dretphi, and Sotalia. Sebastian glides out of the hallway in the living room and gestures everyone to follow him. "Follow me. I really hope I'm wrong about this."

Aristespha moves out from the hallway, holding the sword in scabbard. The group falls in behind Sebastian and they trudge across the large backyard. Eventually, they find themselves at the corner of the property lot. Sebastian points over to the lot diagonal and

gestures over at the house. “You know that house I mentioned that had someone going through it?”

Aristespha crosses arms and squints her eyes to the distant house. “Yes? The one I said someone was probably getting ready to rent out?”

Sebastian groans reluctantly and snaps a point to one of the vehicles near the house. “Well, looks like they’re moving in.”

Cideeda steps forward, puts a hand above her eyes, and focuses on the distant target. Her eye twitches and she grits her teeth. “No. No way. How?!”

Drephi quirks an eye brow at Cideeda and directs her attention in the same direction. She spots a tall, unfortunately familiar figure carrying adventuring equipment from a vehicle. She growls to herself and places her face well into the palm of her hand. “Of all things...”

Sotalia moves her hands in exacting motions and chants a quick incantation. She holds her hands in front with finger tips touching and stares through. Mere moments later she grimaces and grabs her horns swearing a few different languages. She steps angrily away and grumbles to herself. Both eyes Sebastian and slowly sighs with a wary frown. “I can’t exactly make it out, but I think the mass of people with recording equipment gives it away.”

Sebastian nods as his ethereal form pinches the bridge of his nose. “Yes. It was exactly what I thought. Well, at least we know where they’re at. Great. Well, let’s head back before anyone notices us. Dear?”

Sebastian hovers to side of Aristespha and drifts cautiously in front of her. “Hey. Dear? Let’s go back to the house. And...”

Aristespha’s facial skin tone reddens from its normally pale color and her grip shakes around the sword. Her head tilts to one shoulder with a crack and then tilts to other with another similar crack. She grits her teeth, hisses as air draws through, and screams out. “FUCK!”

Next to the house in the middle of the crews and adventurers, Samantha snaps her head to the direction of the angry voice with a smug smile. She waves with her free hand at the group in the distance and she holds her aetherphone close to her head. “Good news, Howie! Looks like the locals have just found about their new neighbors.”

A dark, ominous laugh bellows forth from the speaker of the phone, growing in volume with each passing second. Eventually, it rests and Howards voice speaks. “Good. Very good.”