

Ain't A Hero – Episode 14

by Bryan Schuder

The television in the living room shows a historical documentary. Occasionally, a head turns to watch a brief segment before returning back to current projects. Aristespha flips her long, silvery blue hair back with a sigh and sorts through another stack paperwork. She lifts a stack off the coffee table and places it in another pile next to her on the couch. Cideeda squints her eyes to focus upon a small patch of torn fabric on her body suit, while she rests upon a nest of pillows on the other half the couch. She carefully weaves a needle between the fibers around a tear in the body suit and cinches the edges closer together. Dretphi sits on the floor nearby in the middle of five baskets, each with a name written on the side. She plucks an article of clothing off the top of the large pile next to her, briefly examines it, and tosses it to the matching basket. Sotalia slowly traces a finger nail along the text in a notebook, pouring full attention into each word. She eyes over at the various alchemy instruments and ingredients along the kitchen counter top, bites her lip with frustration, and grumbles to herself as she scrutinizes her notes more. The kitchen door opens and Bach backs into the area with a laundry basket in his arms. He pivots once clear of the door and continues into the living room with a grimace upon his face.

Dretphi glances over to Bach as he places the laundry basket down. “Any success with your clothing?”

Bach immediately shakes his head and snorts as a reflexive chuckle forces its way out. “Not really. I mean, the duster is salvageable. But... The shirt is total loss. And the pants...”

He kneels down next to the laundry basket, rummages through the mix, and pulls up a pair of very holey, burnt pants. Dretphi’s eyes follow the length of the pants and she can only blink while her lips twist slightly. She holds her face with a hand while covering her mouth, and nods in agreement. “Yes. Those are rags now. You will need a new pair.”

Sotalia lifts her head away from her notebook and looks across the way to see the hole, burn ridden garment hanging from Bach’s hand. She places her hands on her hips, rolls her eyes, and cracks a smug grin from the corner of mouth. “Rags?! Come on, don’t you recognize designer clothing when you see it? I’m sure some teenager would pay top coin for THAT.”

An eye brow perks on Cideeda’s face and her eyes turn up from her repair work. She examines the pants and her mind churns on an idea. Eventually, a scheming smirk grows on her mouth. “Hey. Fold those up and put them with the bot’s head.”

Bach quickly rotates to face Cideeda and tilts his head in mild confusion as he narrows his eyes. “Are you actually going to try to sell my holey burnt pants?!”

Cideeda shrugs as she focuses back on repairing her suit and drags a threaded needle up off the garment. “You’d be surprised what sells. Again, I don’t make the fads, I just sell to them. Anyway, Steve at the game shop put me on the local aethermail list and I just found out a fandom convention is happening in a week and a half.”

Aristespha pauses from calculating numbers on one of her tablets and leans back into her seat on the couch. She lightly taps the tablet stylus to her lips and she glances through thoughts in her head. "You know I haven't been to a decent convention in years. I actually wouldn't mind going."

Bach thinks for a moment and nods. "Same here. I haven't been able to afford to go to one for a really long time. Used to be a lot of fun back in school."

Dretphi shifts her gaze between Cideeda, Aristespha, and Bach with curiosity growing. "I have never been to one of these conventions. Heard of them. Never gone. Would not mind going."

Sotalia glares at the others through the opening to the kitchen, her jaw hangs open in astonishment, and she poses incredulously at what she's hearing. "You all DO realize, we literally do what those people obsess and act out at those places? Right?"

Cideeda perks an eyebrow at Sotalia. "This one is a general fandom convention. They have a little bit of everything. So, the whole adventurer fandom thing is only a part of it."

A devious grin creeps onto Cideeda's face as she continues her description. "I mean, this is a larger one. It even has a large ballroom just dedicated towards all the various vendors of small, unique items that many claim to be of a magical nature..."

Briefly, the cheek around Sotalia's eye twitches as the corner of her mouth draws upwards. She quickly directs her head downwards to her alchemy project. Cideeda pushes up into her pillow covered seat upon the couch and develops a toothy grin. "And, the writer and artist for a particular series is on a few panels."

A few moments of silence hang in the air, as expectant members of the group watch and wait for Sotalia to speak. While Sotalia looks down onto the counter top and goes through the motions of combining ingredients into the glass bowl, she bites her lip and contorts her face as her will loses restraint on desires. "Well, if you all want to go, I'm... Not against going. You might want to check with Sebastian."

Bach rolls his eyes and laughs. "Oh, he'll go. Hell, he'll probably could be in the open. We'll just say he's a hologram or magical illusion. By the way, anyone know where he is?"

Aristespha lifts her arm up and points her finger in a sweeping gesture towards the outside, while an unamused expression seeps onto her face. "He's outside trying to spy on THOSE adventurers. Nothing to speak of at the moment. Thankfully, they're staying on their property."

Sotalia groans and shakes her head as she pours a vial of liquid into the mixing bowl. "Still can't believe they picked the one place next to us."

Dretphi dons a stern expression as she flings a bundle of clothes into one basket. "That was not coincidence. Previous seasons, they kept adventurers in poor places. That house is very nice."

Aristespha crosses her arms with a twist of her mouth and eyes Dretphi with a confirming nod. "I thought about that, too. We're going to have to be careful if they're around. Don't need to give them any material they can put on the show."

Cideeda sinks down in her pillows and works the needle through another spot in the fabric mesh of her body suit. "Well, hopefully they'll find something else to do and let us enjoy the rest of the week off. I'd like to see if we can get the plasma projectile cannon and minigun working."

Sebastian's ethereal form passes through the sliding glass door and coasts into the room. "Anything new?"

Bach sets out the last article of clothing from the laundry basket and glances up to grin at his brother. "Up for going to a con in a week and half?"

Sebastian twists himself to face Bach mid flight excitedly and halts his drift through the room. "Hell, yes! It's been forever since I've been to one. Been so busy between getting a group together and chasing Noxian that last few years that the opportunity never came up. But... I don't know how much I'll be able to enjoy it... being a ghost and all. I'll make do."

A smile forms on Aristespha as she stares at Sebastian. He lands his feet onto the ground, pivots in place, and catches her eye on him. His eyes scan the immediate area around him before he raises a curious eyebrow at her. Aristespha continues to smile and gives Sebastian a sly wink. "Of course you'll make do. Guess who's going as a magical interactive illusion to the con?"

Sebastian stands in thought and his mind mulls over the concept. With a growing heroic smile, he puffs out his chest, brightens his visage, and puts on his best hero pose. "Hello! Welcome to the convention! I'm your friendly interactive illusion, state your command, and I will try to comply."

He releases his pose, places a hand on his waist, and scratches his chin with the other. "You know, that could actually work. No one would even bother to question such a thing."

Cideeda chuckles to herself and with a sly toothy grin. "And, we'll only have to pay for five passes."

Sebastian glances at Bach with a nonplussed expression and crosses his arms. "Is it strange that I'm honestly looking forward to seeing how much I can fuck with people in this form, bro?"

Bach shrugs and holds his hands up to his sides. "I don't know, man. Might as well have fun with it? It's not like many people get a chance like this."

Sotalia calls out from the kitchen. "Aristespha! Okay, I'm at the last part of this potion. It's seventy milliliters of the cherry flavoring? Correct?"

Aristespha blinks and shudders her head. She quickly snaps her confused gaze to the awaiting Sotalia. "No! Twenty milliliters of cherry flavoring! Where did you get seventy from?!"

There's a long silence afterwards, eventually broken by the sounds of notebook pages flipping back and forth. Sotalia mumbles out loud as she leans very close to her notebook. "But I wrote down seventy for some reason, why the hell would I write seventy but it actually be twenty- Oh gods dammit!"

With a quick, violent flick of the wrist, Sotalia sends a small plastic pen at the lid of the kitchen garbage can. The pen contacts the lid, bounces the lid open downwards, and falls into the plastic bag. Sotalia groans as she pours twenty milliliters of cherry flavoring into the mixing bowl. "Next time we go shopping in town, let's pick up some decent pens."

Bright columns of light pour through the forest canopy onto the mossy ground below. Small patches of underbrush shake their remaining beads of morning dew with the gentle wind as the light sways along. A Fvalian woman in a plain green blouse and dark blue skirt follows behind an Emin woman wearing a form fitting and revealing gray t-shirt and equally matching shorts. Both maneuver their ways through the trees and brush towards the edge of the forest. The Fvalian woman directs a whisper to the Emin woman. "Tassilda?! How close are you going to get?"

Tassilda briefly eyes back at the Fvalian with a confident, smug grin. "As close as I can, Deedri. How close did you get?"

Deedri nervously turns her head back and points out a spot quite a distance away. "Over there. I just watched them briefly yesterday before they called us in for individual interviews."

With a quick roll of the eyes, Tassilda quickly returns her head away from Deedri's spot and focuses ahead to a patch of grass behind a concealing, short shrub. "Come along now. I want to get a good view of these practice exercises you saw."

Deedri glances to Tassilda and back before reluctantly walking to the same patch of grass. She carefully sits down and settles next to Tassilda, carefully peeking over the very top of the leafy plant. Tassilda guides a finger in front of Deedri and directs her gaze to three people stand in an open field. "There they are. Both the mages and the intern? Interesting. I wonder what poor examples of spells they are going to teach that... Intern."

Deedri shakes her head slightly and frowns gradually as her eyes remain fixed to targets in the distance. "I wouldn't call him an intern. At least, don't treat him like one."

Tassilda lifts an eye brow and draws the corner of her mouth to a side while her eyes shift over to Deedri. "Really? That's how they even referred to him and I haven't seen anything to the contrary. Is there something you haven't told me?"

Deedri blinks, pivots her head at Tassilda, and quickly shakes her head. "No. It just doesn't make sense to me. From the information Samantha gave to Chad, he just joined recently and never completed school. But, somehow he put up that barrier the military had to blast off. I mean, that magical barrier didn't dissipate, it actual shattered and continued to exist after that

weird magical cable was pulled off! Have you ever known an intern to do magic like that? Because, I sure haven't."

Tassilda's eyes drift back forward, away from Deedri, and guide the rest of Tassilda's head along. Her expression wanders as her mind ponders recent memories. She pulls a few strands of her black hair over a horn and squints her blue on black eyes into the distance. A few seconds later, her eyes flit open as something in the distance seizes her full attention. "They are practicing magic. Good. I wonder what... She... Is capable of."

Deedri concentrates her sight in the same direction as Tassilda. "She's pretty good. She's been practicing a fireball spell a lot, but it's strange. She's direct casting, but there's something else going on. Even with my mage sight magic I can't tell what exactly is going on from this far away."

In the distance, Sotalia stands with her hands out around a glowing, orange-red orb of flames. The orb fluctuates and gradually changes colors to an orange-yellow color, while Sotalia grimaces and her postures strains. She eventually drops her head down and exhales dramatically letting her shoulders droop. Bach takes a few steps to Sotalia's side, and gestures with his hands to the orb while saying something. Initially, Sotalia drifts her glare away from Bach as a pout forms and her hands slowly slide the orb from Bach's reach. He pinches the bridge of his nose, holds his hands out to his side, and speaks to Sotalia. Tassilda notices Deedri's ears perking and training upon the conversation, and she leans closer to Deedri. "What are they talking about?"

Deedri squints and her ears deftly aim themselves to the distant conversation. "He's trying to get her to use her mage sight spell, but she says she can't while focusing on casting this one. And he just offered to... Hold the spell for her?"

Tassilda blinks hard, cocks her head to the side, and mumbles in confusion. "Hold the spell? He does he expect to do that-"

Bach slowly extends his arms out, positions his hands at the ready around the flaming orb, and speaks again while craning his head around to gaze at Sotalia's face. She briefly eyes Bach. With a sigh and growing appreciative smile in the corner of her mouth, she pivots her body towards Bach and carefully slides the orb between Bach's awaiting hands. The orb momentarily shudders slightly as it remains still between Bach's hands when Sotalia draws her hands away. She shakes her hands, stretches her arms and back, and walks around taking time to work out the tension in the rest of body.

Tassilda stares wide-eyed with her jaw creeping open. Deedri directs her eyes over to Tassilda, raises an eyebrow, and twists her mouth. "So. He's the intern. Who never finished school. And just started adventuring with a group a few weeks ago."

Tassilda slowly nods as her eyes continue to track the events before her. Her jaw rises back to close her mouth as her expression charts out her contemplation. "I think I understand your suspicions, quite clearly now."

Aristespha stands up from a seat upon a bench near Bach and Sotalia. She moves to a spot near Sotalia, catches her attention, and alternates pointing at each others eyes while talking.

Sotalia nods attentively after each key point in Aristespha's instruction. Aristespha stands right beside Sotalia, gestures towards the flaming orb Bach maintains in the space between his hands, and both close their eyes after Aristespha's cue. Aristespha opens her violet glowing eyes first and carefully watches Sotalia. With an initial struggle, Sotalia manages to open her golden, glowing eyes and keep them consistently bright. Bach tucks the flaming orb closer and hovers it conveniently close to Aristespha and Sotalia. After a minute of debate between them, Bach's eyes flash to a bright blue. The flaming orb's color changes slowly from orange-yellow to bright blue-white. Sotalia and Aristespha scrutinize each second of the orb's transformation and Bach takes moments to rotate and adjust the orb's position to demonstrate some aspect of the process. The orb compacts down in a smaller ball and the waving flames disappear to a thin jet veil that covers the surface of the orb. With a final nod from both Aristespha and Sotalia, Bach swings the orb away from Aristespha and Sotalia and aims it towards a large boulder in the field. With a flex of the of the hands, the orb flies from Bach, darts across the open field, and explodes upon impact with the boulder.

Tassilda sits back upon the ground, straightens her back, and crosses her arms. She takes in a slow, deep breath, and exhales just as slowly. "What just happened there?"

Deedri draws her head back from watch over the top of the shrub and gazes at Tassilda. "I don't know. I didn't catch anything he did there. That may have been direct casting. Maybe some form of it that I've never seen before? It's too far away even if I did use my mage sight."

Tassilda shakes her head as she lifts a hand to place upon her cheek and rest her face against. "Maybe."

A devious grin widens from the corner of Tassilda's mouth and she turns her gaze directly upon Deedri. "Regardless, I believe WE WILL be visiting this spot quite bit more often in the future."

Deedri dons a weak smile and darts her eyes nervously around before settling upon Tassilda. "O-Okay. I don't have any problems with that."

A thickening front of clouds coasts overhead and occasionally obscures the sun, drawing patches of shadow upon the field. Sotalia, Bach, and Aristespha stand in a rough group near the wood plank table. Sotalia interlocks her fingers, flips her hands around, and stretches her arms out with a content grin beaming on her face. "I think I'm getting the hang of this low level stuff."

She slyly shifts her eyes to the side and gazes at Bach. Her eyes gently narrow and her grin tinges with a sinister motive. "Maybe someone will teach me that wonderful disintegration ball spell in the very near future."

Bach averts his eyes to one side and then another and puts on a wary smile. "Ah, you know... All in good time. Right? How about we sure up those low level basics and then cover some slightly more advanced topics. Then, we'll definitely get to that spell."

Sotalia pivots upon on foot to face Bach, focuses a frown lead glare upon Bach, and breathes out a low growl of building frustration. Bach blinks as Sotalia places her hands on her hips and postures with obvious irritation. He slowly directs his attention to Aristespha and motions with his eyes to Sotalia trying to maintain an honest smile. Aristespha rolls her eyes and takes a few steps to stand in between the two. "Bach. You should teach her the spell..."

A smug smile pushes the frown off Sotalia's face and her pose gradually changes to a more triumphant one. Aristespha catches sight of Sotalia's posturing, flashes a wicked smile, and rotates her head to Sotalia. "BUT. Sotalia, you need to get MUCH better at controlling your magical energy flows."

Sotalia immediately snarls her lip, crosses her arms, and turns her head away with a pout forming quickly. Aristespha claps her hands together and her expression brightens as her eyes look to both Bach and Sotalia. "And I have a way of helping you learn and teaching a valuable skill that is normally reserved for medical mages."

The pout on Sotalia gives way to an unamused expression that thinly hides her developing interest. She returns her gaze to Aristespha and awaits with a slight sway of the hips. Aristespha smiles and gestures with her arms for both Bach and Sotalia to come closer. "Since we have three major magic users in the group, with different levels of magical energy reserves, I think it would be prudent to teach you two about energy transfer between people."

Sotalia perks a brow, cracks a smile, and unfolds her arms placing her hands on her hips. "Now we're talking. It's about time! I forgot how many times I've asked you to show me that."

She narrows her eyes quickly at Aristespha and her smile fades back. "And I almost forgot how many times you said you were too busy to show me."

Aristespha continues with a happy grin as she holds her hands out to her sides with a shrug. "Well, things have changed. We have some time now and we have a third mage in the group which will make this a lot easier to teach."

Bach scratches the back of his head and puzzles at Aristespha. "Why does a third mage this easier?"

Aristespha glances over to Bach with the happy grin now hinting a sly, ulterior motive. "Because, with your ability to manipulate low level energy flow, I fully expect you pick up any lesson I give very quickly."

She turns a gaze directly at Sotalia and perks an eyebrow at her. "Then, you'll be able to help Sotalia get the practice she will need."

Sotalia stares back sternly to Aristespha. The two maintain eye contact for a few seconds before Sotalia breaks off to huff and sulk. "Damn it. I'm getting better."

Aristespha places hand on each of Sotalia's shoulders and lowers her head slightly to look Sotalia in the eyes. "You most certainly are. Just keep in mind how much more you'll do with your massive reserves of magical energy when you learn more about energy control. I think I

know a simple enough way to demonstrate the potential to you, that will certainly motivate you.”

Sotalia contorts her mouth until her pride subsides, cracks a smile, and sighs. “Okay. Let’s see it! I’m curious as to how this is suppose to motivate me.”

Aristespha lets go of Sotalia’s shoulders, takes a step back, and holds an open, palm up hand to both Bach and Sotalia. “Okay, you two. Put a hand in mine and get ready to cast a spell. It’s getting a bit dark from the clouds, so let’s make it the simplest light orb spell. I am going to compare the energy efficiency between how you two cast spells.”

Both Bach and Sotalia place hand in one of Aristespha’s. Aristespha closes her eyes briefly and reopens them with a glowing violet light. She turns her head to Sotalia and eyes down to her hand. “Go ahead and cast.”

Sotalia watches her hand and she quickly gestures with very small motions of her fingers. With a smug, confident expression, an orb of light appears above Sotalia’s hand in mere moments and hovers there. Aristespha nods and then rotates her head to Bach. “For you, I want you to keep on casting that light orb spell of yours until I tell you to stop.”

Bach simply shrugs as his eyes illuminate blue. He looks down at his hand and a glowing orb floating above his hand greets his gaze. He reaches with his other hand, plucks the glowing orb away, and releases in the air nearby. He repeats this process for the second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth orbs. Sotalia slowly removes her hand from Aristespha’s and crosses her arms as her mouth opens slightly at the scene. Bach continues to create the seventh, eighth, ninth and tenth orbs. Sotalia squirms while resettling her crossed arms and tilts her head as her mouth hangs open in an indignant confusion. Bach removes the eleventh orb from his hand, quickly scans the immediate area around him filled with other orbs, and flicks the orb in hand towards the tree line. He sends off the twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth orbs off roughly towards the tree line. As one orb drifts over a low, short patch of bushes, it drops sharply behind the bushes and disappears out of sight. Sotalia’s indignation gives way to sheer astonishment and she dramatically mouths in a quiet whisper to Aristespha. “Really?!”

Aristespha glances over to Sotalia and slowly nods with a tight smile on her face. As Bach readies for the sixteenth orb, Aristespha calls out quickly. “Stop. That’s about the same amount of energy used.”

Sotalia taps her fingers on her arms and twitches her mouth while she processes the demonstration. Bach gazes up the darkening skies as the lighter clouds of before are now the dark, heavier variety. He fans off the orbs near him and pinches one in hand to wield around. Aristespha’s eyes dim back to normal and she drops her hands to her sides. “I hope that was informative for the both of you.”

She glances over to Bach, but rests her remaining gaze on Sotalia. Sotalia briefly narrows her eyes at Aristespha, but releases a sigh and nods a few times with an uncomfortable smile. “Yes. It was.”

An eager grin cracks upon Sotalia face and her confident aura seeps back up to the surface. “So? About this energy transfer skill you are going to teach us.”

Aristespha's eyes track a drifting light orb and she gently coaxes it into her hand. "Let's go inside, first. It will take awhile to explain the basics and I don't want to be interrupted by the rain."

Bach and Sotalia agree. Bach and Aristespha both walk towards the house and use the light orbs to shine light ahead on their paths. Sotalia takes a few steps, stops, quickly pivots, and snatches an idle light orb. She tags behind the other two and examines the light orb more often than using it for a light source. A loud rumble of thunder rolls over the area from the distance and motivates the three to speed to and through back sliding glass door.

As the field darkens and the dark clouds completely coat the sky above, two figures rush across the open grass. Their march shifts to a full charge as drops of rain fall upon the area. The pace of drops increases and further obscures the figures as they halt around the wooden plank picnic table and drifting light orbs. The orbs move erratically to the figures, some disappearing completely while a few dim. The two figures dart off back into the tree line, with dim points of light tracing them the whole way.

The rain pelts the side of the sliding glass door and echoes soft patters into the living room. Dretphi aims the television remote at the television screen and flips through a number of channels. With a sigh, she drops the remote onto the coffee table and sinks into the couch cushions. Cideeda slowly blinks she fends off a fit of drowsiness and stretches out her arms and legs on the other side of the couch. She turns her head to eye Dretphi. Dretphi also turns her head to meet Cideeda's gaze. Cideeda simply nods once and dons a sly, toothy grin. "I think it's time. I'll get the adapter cables, you get the television ready and clear the area."

Dretphi cracks an equally sly smile and gingerly stands up from the couch. Cideeda pulls herself off the couch and walks fast into the hallway. A few seconds later, the faint sounds of shuffling and rummaging carry into the living room. At the dining table, Aristespha, Bach, and Sotalia sit on one end. Sebastian hovers over head and splits his attention between Aristespha's lesson and Cideeda and Dretphi's new project. Sotalia concentrates her mind and presses her open hand against Aristespha's. Sotalia contorts her face in genuine struggle as her eyes faintly illuminate a golden light. Meanwhile, Aristespha calmly watches Sotalia's antics and continues to keep her hand in place. After a few seconds, Sotalia carefully draws her hand away and small ball of magical energy emerges from Aristespha's hand. She continues drawing her hand back and a grin of sheer accomplishment flashes onto her face. As her fingers curl around the energy ball, Sotalia hoists her hand up into the air, beaming. "YES! Finally! Wow! That was much harder than before. Holy shit."

Aristespha smiles, places her hand down, and glides it over to secure a mug of tea. "Hence the difference between a cooperative and idle energy transfer. Your body and mind naturally want to avoid leaking magical energy everywhere. So, when you are not willing it, magical energy will tend to keep to established flow routes and avoid deviations. Also, established flow routes are typically the path of least resistance in comparison."

She lifts the mug up to her mouth and slips the hot, steaming brew. With a calm grace, she places it back down and continues. "There is another type of transfer. And that is confrontational energy transfers. Those are the type made when the mind and body are on a full active defense. We'll cover those another time. For now, you can practice the basics. If you need more of a challenge, you can use magical energy insulation techniques from basic spellcasting to put up a more active defense."

Behind Aristespha, Cideeda skips through the hallway archway and hauls a metal suitcase covered in various game and game company stickers. Dretphi withdraws her head from behind the television, nods at Cideeda, and returns to the back of the television. Sotalia swings her gaze to Bach and radiates a superior arrogance through a cornered smile. "I'll have you know, I was top of my class in all my spellcasting courses."

She presents her open hand up to Bach and focuses her eyes upon him. "I'll just use a number of those insulation tricks and maybe a few of my own to make it challenging to you."

Bach tilts his head to the side and meekly shrugs at Sotalia. "Umm... How about we just try a few of those cooperative energy pulls and maybe a few idle ones? Let's make sure we know what we are doing before making needlessly difficult."

Sotalia narrows her eyes at Bach and her smile morphs into a devious grin. She provocatively lowers her eyelids and her tone patronizes. "Aww. Are you too tired? Did those little light orbs run you out of energy today?"

She dramatically sighs and rolls her eyes dismissively. "Well, if that's the case, I guess I understand..."

Aristespha glares towards Sotalia and frowns. She begins to open her mouth when Sebastian flies down next to her and whispers into her ear. "Wait. Look at my bro."

Aristespha spots an odd, wry smirk hidden in the corner of Bach's mouth away from Sotalia. Bach places an open hand against Sotalia's and smiles. "Okay. I'll humor you."

Sotalia smiles eagerly, rolls her shoulders in a stretch, and settles into her seat at the ready. She focuses on her and Bach's hands. "Whenever you are ready. Don't hold back, because I want a challenge. Surprise me."

She closes her eyes and takes a long deep breath in. Bach's smirks erupts to a wicked grin. "Okay. I'll surprise you."

Sotalia's eyes fly wide open as she reacts to the sudden, firm grasp of a hand on the back of her neck. She eyes the path and finds Bach to be the hand's owner. Before she can open her mouth, a sudden pull of magical energy stops her. Her jaw opens midway through a gritting her teeth and her lips twist in confusion. One eye nearly closes in a cringe as her head tilts to one side. Her shoulders tense up and her spine squirms into a near arch. Her toes curl and her fingers claw up. Finally, she howls out a mix of utter shock and girlish disgust. "The fuck- AIIIEEE!!!"

Bach quickly removes his hand free from the back of Sotalia's next with an orb of magical energy securely in his palm. Sotalia covers the back of her neck with her free hand and flashes death glare right at Bach. "WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT?!"

Aristespha tightly secures her mouth with a hand and can barely contain herself as snorts of laughter leak out. Sebastian keeps his mouth shut with the stiffest smile he can muster and avoids accidental direct eye contact with Sotalia. Cideeda stares over towards the living room table and blinks in confusion while she holds a game controller and its plug. Dretphi just finishes turning the television back around before she snaps her head to scan dining table area. Bach grins triumphantly and displays the energy orb. "Well, your surprise of course."

Sotalia's eyes flash with anger at Bach, but she quickly subsides to an amused smile. Immediately, Bach's grin decays to a much more wary expression. Sotalia lightly chuckles to herself and sighs. "Well. To be fair, I DID ask for a surprise."

She rolls her eyes and shakes her head. "And, I did goad you. But, your master plan has one flaw."

Bach darts his eyes around his mind in an attempt to locate what the flaw is. He feels four points of pressure pressing upon the back of his hand. Bach aims his head down to see Sotalia's fingers weaving between his and curling to press her thick black nails into the backside of his hand. Sotalia torques her hand forward and Bach seizes to attention. She extends her free hand, points to the energy orb in Bach's other hand, and gestures by opening and closing her free hand. Bach grimaces, grumbles, and places the energy orb into Sotalia's awaiting hand. In seconds, the energy absorbs back into Sotalia and she releases her grip of Bach. Aristespha rolls her eyes and shakes her head. "Okay. Are you two children done for the day?"

Sotalia nods simply with a content smile. "Yes, teacher."

Bach glances over while rubbing his hand. "I'm good. No more surprises."

Aristespha props her arm on the table top and rests her chin upon her hand with a sigh. "Good. I do have a question for you, Sotalia."

Sotalia curiously faces Aristespha and pays attention to her. "Yes? What is it?"

Aristespha presents an amused expression and lifts her mug of tea close to her mouth. "So, did it feel like a bucket of ice water going down your back?"

Sotalia nods very quickly and squirms a bit in her chair. "YES! Oh gods! It's like someone dumped the ice maker down the back of my shirt."

Bach eyes Sotalia and snorts with snarl of the lip. "Sort of like someone casted a freeze ray spell up your back?"

Sotalia opens her mouth, halts, quirks an eyebrow at Bach, and pulls her mouth to a corner. "I hope you aren't holding a grudge for that? I honestly missed that time."

Bach shakes his head and shrugs. “Nah. I just thought it was good point of comparison.”

Sotalia returns to Aristespha with a quizzical expression. “How did you know it felt like ice water down your back?”

Aristespha finishes a long sip of her tea and continues to smile with a tinge of nostalgia. “Oh, it’s something all the medical mage students would do to keep each other on our toes. If you got caught napping anywhere other than the break room or were late to your shift because you were napping in the break room, you could expect a VERY rude wake up. Honestly, that sensation is almost better than coffee.”

She places her mug back down on the table and casts a gaze to both Bach and Sotalia. “And, in emergency situations, that region is one of the easiest to access places to tap into the body’s major magical energy flows. It was not uncommon for a medical mage to snag a student for magical energy when the situations got dire.”

Her face dons a stern, dark glare and her tone turns serious. “That said, I would recommend you two stick to hands and arms for practice. You two aren’t medical mages and neither of your energy control skills are good enough to casually play around with major energy flows like that. Understand?”

Both Bach and Sotalia nod slowly, wide-eyed. Aristespha resumes a smile. “Very good.”

A melodic, electronic tune sounds out from the television. Aristespha, Bach, Sebastian and Sotalia shift their attentions over toward Cideeda and Dretphi. The two sit comfortably on the couch, each with a game controller in hand. Upon the coffee table, the holoplayer projects a status screen while a series of adapters and cables run to the television and an old gaming console. Sotalia’s eyes widen upon sight of the assembly and she slides back in her chair. “Well, that’s enough training today. We’ll continue tomorrow.”

She gets up from the chair, strides over to the couch, and perches upon a couch arm. “I call next!”

Bach turns back around in his chair, bites his lip, and faces his head to Aristespha with a quiet voice. “Ah... Sorry, if I went a little too far with Sotalia and trying to pull energy from the back of her neck and all.”

Aristespha softly chuckles and shakes her head slightly with a quiet response. “Oh, don’t worry. You have far better energy control and you wouldn’t have done anything to harm her. Also, someone needed to put her ego in check and you just happen to know the right way to do it.”

Sebastian leans in closer to the conversation with a proud grin. “And well, you had every right to show her up, bro. She called you out and you delivered.”

Bach nods calmly and lets out a breath of relief. “Okay. Wanted to make sure I didn’t do anything too stupid.”

Sebastian snorts and winks to Bach. “No worst than standing out from cover, raving like a madman, and taking pistol shots at a rampaging combat robot.”

Bach groans and partially buries his face into a palm. Aristespha gently pats Bach’s shoulder. “No need to kick yourself, it did that more than enough.”

Sebastian leans further and partially through the table to look at Bach directly with a sincere smile. “And you saved our asses. So, can’t fault you too much.”

Sebastian rights himself and watches a video game load up on the television screen. He drifts towards the couch and glances back. “Now come on, I can’t play so you’ll need to defend the family honor.”

Aristespha stands up from the table with her mug in hand. Bach pushes his chair back and joins the gathering. He watches the title screen appear and amuses in honest surprise. “Wow! Champions of Nexus. I haven’t play this since school.”

Aristespha crosses her arms with a slight grin and nods. “Yes. We found an old warehouse and for some reason there was perfectly good system and cache of games. I’ve been trying to get back to what I was back in my medical mage school days. Who did you normally play?”

Bach scratches the back of his neck and sheepishly admits. “Um. Ionis, actually.”

Aristespha blinks and cranes her head toward Bach with a trailing pivot of the body. “Ionis? Really? I could never figure out his power up chain and his energy use is ridiculously hard to manage...”

She stops talking and returns to watching the television screen. Bach watches the action on the screen and does not notice Aristespha musing.

Howard’s voice resonates through the speakerphone. “How are our adventurers settling in? Any good moments for show?”

Samantha stacks another pillow onto the bed and settles herself on top and into the pile. “They’re doing just fine. And plenty of moments when moving it.”

She rolls over closer to the aetherphone on the nightstand. “We got an hour clip alone of Chad, Tassilda, and Trakenthin in a yelling match at who would get the biggest room. The best part I think was seeing Mordoran and Deedri working together to sneak their stuff into two of the rooms off at the end of the house.”

An intrigued trill colors Howard’s voice through the speaker. “Ooo. That’s a possibility I hadn’t quite considered yet. Let’s leave it alone for now and see if something sparks. Also, is the crew enjoying the their house?”

Samantha smiles as she types notes into her laptop. "Yes we are! A really good vantage point, great reception with the wireless cameras, and plenty of room for us to stage."

Howard yawns as the creak of a bed frame echoes in the room on the other side of the call. "Excellent. Turned out to be much cheaper than the hotels. Anything else before I get some much needed sleep."

A plotting grin draws upon Samantha face, she leans in very close to the aetherphone, and speaks with a suggestive tone. "Yes. Quite. One of our cameras pointed to the forest near the other group caught Deedri sneaking off into the forest yesterday. Then today, Deedri and Tassilda went out together."

A quick sudden squeak of the bed frame and the sounds of covers fluttering sound out before Howard's voice grows closer with an anticipating breath. "And?!"

Samantha bites her lip and seductively tenses her voice. "When the rain fell, Gerald recorded them running from the forest carrying some kind of magical artifacts. They played off needing to change in their rooms to the others, but they actually were studying the artifacts."

A giddy chirp peaks out of the speaker. "Keep me updated. Watch in quiet for now."

Samantha grins deviously. "Will do."