

Ain't A Hero – Episode 15

by Bryan Schuder

Bach pulls the humvee door shut and settles back into his seat. Cideeda swings her head out her window and guides the steering wheel. Aristespha glides her finger across a tablet surface and carefully browses pictures of various items. Bach leans over and catches glimpses with honest interest. “I’ve never been to a Merc-Mart. I’ve heard they have everything and anything.”

Aristespha shrugs with a slight side to side motion of her head. “They have good a marketing department. But, their selection overall is better than most places. Unfortunately, they are a bit proud of their prices.”

Sotalia happily cranes herself around her seat and excitedly smiles to Bach and Aristespha. “Which is why Free Fridays are THE BEST! I can’t wait to see what they have on their point tables!”

Bach blinks and eyes between Aristespha and Sotalia. “Point tables?”

Aristespha stirs her mouth for a moment before she glances at Sotalia and signals with a hand gesture. Sotalia takes in a breath and subdues her excitement enough to explain. “Okay. Merc-Mart keeps a huge inventory of many things. Once every while, they will clean out the old inventory and put it on display tables out front. Depending on how much you buy during their Free Fridays, you earn points. You can use those points for cash back on your purchases, OR you can redeem them to get things on the tables. Everyone calls them point tables because that’s where you spend your points.”

Aristespha raises her tablet near Bach’s view and he examines the pictures of items on the screen. She scrolls through a pages of inventory. “To help advertise the event, they post many of the point table items on their Aethernet page. This store actually has a few interesting items.”

Cideeda glances into the rear view mirror towards the conversation. “As pricey as Merc-Mart is usually, they actually discount the point tables A LOT. So, you can get decent deals.”

She aims her eyes back to the road ahead of her. “One time we found the carbon fiber plate kit to Dretphi’s armor suit. I think it was only missing one plate?”

Dretphi holds up two fingers and calls out. “Two plates. Not important plates. I use the old plates instead without problem. That was a good find.”

Sebastian materializes in the aisle. “Not a bad place, if you go at the right times. We have a team membership and we get a few perks. The after-hours order and pick up has been handy in the past.”

Aristespha shakes her head with a slight chuckle. “Still can’t believe you managed to get all those sandwiches.”

Bach quirks an eyebrow and turns to his brother. "There's a story here, isn't there?"

Sebastian rubs the back of his neck with a proud grin. "Well. Yes. It was a few months after Aristespha joined up and we just got done combing through these old ruins looking for Noxian. It was really late, and we were lucky to find a Merc-Mart with an overnight parking lot."

He holds his hands out to the sides and continues. "Our finances weren't organized as they are now, so we only had a little bit of money on hand to buy some food. But, the vending machine stuff wasn't looking that great. So, I had an idea."

Bach stares at Sebastian with corner pull of the mouth. "Well, that's always a dangerous situation."

Sebastian eye rolls and returns the stare to Bach. "Come on, bro. I occasionally get a good one. Anyway. We pooled our money together and I went to the after-hours window. It took some negotiating, but I managed to get a great deal on all the deli sandwiches before they cleared them for the night. Even had change leftover."

Sotalia snorts as she covers mouth and speaks under her breath. "Negotiating? So, that's what you're calling it."

Sebastian turns his head towards Sotalia and crosses his arms. "Well. Uh. Yes? It took some convincing to get such a good deal."

Cideeda shakes her head with a smile. Dretphi cracks a slight grin. Aristespha rotates her head to Sebastian and gazes into his eyes. "You can tell everyone what really happened, dear. It's okay."

Sebastian briefly grimaces and squirms. He shrugs it off, unfolds his arms, and places his hands on his hips. "Well, okay. I may have used my charms on the lady at the window. There's nothing wrong with a few choice compliments to make someone more agreeable with you."

Aristespha draws a sinister grin across her face as she continues to maintain eye contact. Sebastian's eyes dart around at the attention upon him. "Hey! I got a lot of good food at a really good price, when we needed it!"

Aristespha shifts to a sly smile and resumes browsing on her tablet. "We know. I saw the numbers on the receipt."

She pauses a few moments and finishes with a playful tone. "Especially, the hand written numbers on the back of the receipt."

Bach shakes his head away from Sebastian and pinches the bridge of his nose with a not surprised expression. Sebastian sighs as he weathers the amused looks of everyone else. "Well, no one's stomach complained, I know that for sure."

In a massive warehouse, rows of overhead lights illuminate the dozens of long, wide shelf-lined aisles below. Drove of people wander between the tall shelves and flow through from dividing walkways into other sections of the huge mega store, Merc-Mart. Bach's eyes gaze in astonishment at the facility. He takes moments to stop walking to process all that he sees. He scans around the area and spots Cideeda and Aristespha staring intensely at a display in the electronics section. He quickly moves across the walk way, swims between sections of space scattered in the flow of customers and carts, and arrives behind Cideeda and Aristespha. Aristespha glances back and nods to Bach. "Wondered where you got to. Did you find anything?"

Bach shakes his head and briefly grits his teeth. "Uh... No. To be honest, this place is bit intimidating."

From the sword sheathed on Aristespha's back, Sebastian's ethereal voice emanates. "I know what you mean, bro. First time I went to one of these places was with Sotalia. She basically just dragged me around while I gawked like an idiot."

Bach blinks his eyes and lifts his head to stare at the high storage shelves. "I thought UltraStop was huge. We'd spend hours in one of those on the weekends back in school."

Sebastian laughs with a ghostly echo. "I remember those days. Too much fun almost getting kicked out every other weekend."

Bach lowers his head back down and finally pays attention to the merchandise in the aisle. "I can't believe Amaranth Valley is big enough for a place like this."

Aristespha comments with an explanatory tone. "Merc-Mart actually doesn't count on surrounding towns to be customer bases. They pay attention to common guild mission locations, historical points of interest, and unclaimed zone borders. About the only reason they are near any towns is for the workforce to staff the store."

Bach nods and crosses his arms while he ponders the concept. "I guess that makes sense. All the ruins around here, the weird zone, and near a number of main highways. Huh."

He shifts his focus upon the display that Cideeda continues to study carefully. A number displays line the wall, each selling various electronic devices. This display showcases the pieces and parts for kit build headphones. Bach reaches out, lifts a cardboard backed plastic package, and examines the device within carefully. "Headphones?"

Cideeda nods, twists her mouth, and places her hands on her hips. "Yes. I've been wanting to get some new ones. And Merc-Mart actually carries most the F-Tech custom pieces."

Bach places the package back into the display and scratches his head. "I never knew there were so many different styles and designs."

Cideeda glances over to Bach with a grin. She brushes out her large, furry, tufted ears with a hand each, and points to both ears. Her ears lift up and drop down a few times and she winks. “Normal head phones aren’t comfortable on these.”

Bach acknowledges Cideeda’s point, and scratches his chin. He investigates the different parts with a new curiosity. Cideeda returns to analyzing the display. “F-Tech started out in old Fvalian territories. So, they’ve always designed with different ears in mind.”

Aristespha reaches out, plucks a package off the display, and brings it closer to read. “If I remember my history classes right, F-Tech was either the second or third foreign company to be granted distribution rights within Evuukian counties.”

She waves the package up and down and eyes Bach with smile. “As goofy as Evuukian politics are, they at least get it occasionally right for rest of us.”

Cideeda takes two packages, places them in a shopping basket on the floor, and lifts up the basket. “These should work. Same cup and headband styles as my old ones, but I’m definitely going for the softer padding.”

Aristespha places the package into the shopping basket. “I think I’ll do the same. My headband is still okay, but the cup padding has worn out. I’m getting tired of waking up to pinched ears.”

Bach perks a brow and quizzically looks to Aristespha. “Listening to music when you go to bed?”

Aristespha shrugs as she aims herself towards the opening of the aisle leading to the walkway. “Little bit. Depends on mood...”

She briefly eyes the hilt of the sword. “And, if I’m trying to drown something out.”

Sebastian’s quiet voice comes from the sword just loud enough for Aristespha. “Really? You know I haven’t been even able to snore.”

As Aristespha walks away from the other two, out of the aisle, she lowers her head momentarily with a longing smile and speaks underneath her breath. “I actually miss being woken up in the middle of night to that sound.”

Sebastian sighs and responds with a cheerful tone. “Don’t worry, you won’t miss it for long. We’re making progress. One day at a time, dear.”

Cideeda’s ear flicks back away from Aristespha’s direction and returns to its resting position. She pulls a short, tight smile as she watches Aristespha from the corner of her eyes. A few seconds later, she works the sad smile off her face with a positive expression, and ushers Bach down the aisle. “Where to next, Aristespha?”

Aristespha taps a spot on her tablet and checks a box on a list. She searches the area and points over towards another section of the store. “Let’s join back up with Dretphi and Sotalia. Bach needs some new clothes and some proper sparring gear.”

Bach moves along at the pace Cideeda sets and grumbles. "Well, I don't need that much. Just a few shirts and pairs of pants really..."

Sebastian laughs ethereally from the sword and calls out to Bach. "Yah... No, bro. You need some new clothes. I actually recognize most of the socks and underwear you got from our school days. Seriously, bro. My treat. Actually buy some NEW clothes for once."

Bach sighs and shrugs with a hands out to the sides. "Okay! I guess I should to go along with all the other changes in my life."

Sebastian musters up some bravado in his tone. "That's the spirit! Also, I think we need to make sure Sotalia doesn't wander off to the point tables without us."

Cideeda snarls her lip and rolls her eyes as she flexes her claw-tipped fingers. "Gods if that woman spends all our points on magical crap..."

Aristespha, Bach, Cideeda, Dretphi, and Sotalia walk out of the rows of merchandise coated tables. Individual bags of merchandise fill a single shopping cart. Dretphi guides the cart with one hand and lifts up a small fluffy toy boar out of a bag with a happy smile on her face. Cideeda glares out of the corner of her eye at the single bag Sotalia carries while humming gleeful tune. "I still think the 5% overall discount would have been a better deal."

Sotalia flashes a pout at Cideeda and draws the bag up into her arms. "But, they had so many neat magical things with a really low point cost! You got that dock for the holoplayer. And everyone else, got something."

Cideeda shakes her head and sighs. "I know."

Aristespha pats Cideeda on the shoulder with a smile. "Don't worry. Merc-Mart would probably fight stacking that many discounts with my Grand Library discount."

Cideeda nods, shrugs, and opens her bag up to glance at the holoplayer dock box within. "True. And it will be nice to have a proper dock for that old holoplayer."

Sebastian chimes in from within the sword. "Hey, we found that copy of Zone Runners for that old console."

Bach closely examines the game box in his hand and blinks in stale surprise. "I've haven't seen a copy of this since back in school. Only one guy in the dorm managed to ever get a copy."

Sebastian laughs briefly. "All the hours we put into that one epic run."

Bach shakes his head slowly and places the game box in bag inside the cart. "We almost got to the Veil. Wouldn't mind trying it again someday."

Aristespha directs everyone's attention towards Merc-Mart's dining area. "If no one is against eating here, I'm a bit hungry. Anyone else?"

Drephi nods in agreement, returns the fluffy boar back into its bag, and turns the cart towards the exit doors. "I am not against it. I will put our bags in the humvee. Order a number five special for me."

Aristespha leads the rest of the group towards the order counter. Large displays showcase the common menu items and many of the daily specials. Aristespha, Bach, and Sotalia slowly scan the menu, each pair of eyes following rows of text. Cideeda quickly spots her choice and walks up to the counter. Bach scratches his head and twists his mouth. "Well, I'll give the house special a chance. I'm going to go find the bathroom."

He maneuvers around the numerous tables and chairs spread out in the dining area. Eventually, he goes around a corner and finds a walkway going down along a wall of external windows. The bathroom signs immediately catch his attention and he quickly moves through a doorway.

Minutes later, Bach exits the facilities and steps down the path. He gazes outside through the windows to the paved walkway running through a grass lot, surrounded by small bits of shrubs and other landscaping. As he returns his focus forward, he notices someone. Sitting a number of window side tables down, a man sorts through his order and checks each item. He wears chest and leg harnesses over a tough, padded jumpsuit. Along with instruments on the jumpsuit, a personal radio rig runs along the chest harness and technologically advanced goggles hang from his neck. He raises his head, brushes his hand through his bright, blonde hair, and exhales with relief. Bach halts and stares at the human man, as recognition trickles into his expression. The man shifts his attention up, catches sight of Bach, and opens his eyes up fully. "... Holy shit... BACH?!"

Bach's eyes fly wide open and a huge smile explodes on his face. "KALEB?!"

Kaleb throws himself out of his chair and stands straight up with his arms out. "Motherfucking Bach Warwick! Where the fuck have you been, you bastard?! Get over here!"

Bach steps up with a hand out and grabs hold of Kaleb's. Both shake hands before patting the other one back with their free hands. Kaleb moves back and glances over Bach. "I'll be damned. Out of all the places to find you. How the hell have you been?"

Bach shrugs and laughs with a tinge of embarrassment. "Well, that's kind of a crazy story, really. I don't know where to start."

Kaleb holds his hands out to the sides with a grin. "Well, I'm not doing anything right now. Tell me all about it."

Bach takes a deep breath in, scratches the back of his neck, and squints while his brain flips through recent events. "Well, long story short for now... Sebastian got taken down by Noxian, but he didn't die technically, and ended up tracking me down. He and his party practically abducted me and have been getting me into adventuring. And I've been a few crazy missions and..."

Kaleb blinks a few times, lifts his hands up to Bach, and narrows his eyes curiously at Bach. "Whoa! Hold up. Back up to that first point. Shadeesa and I saw the news about Sebastian and his group. He's not dead? Technically?!"

Bach rubs his eyes into a pinch of the bridge of his nose. "Yes. It's a bit weird. I know, how about we go to my group and he'll explain it him... self..."

Kaleb nods quickly and snaps his head out towards the rest of the dining area. "Sounds like a plan. Where are they at?"

Bach's attention locks onto another target out the window behind Kaleb. Bach blinks a number of times slowly as his mind fails to fully process what he sees. Outside in the grass lot a large scaly creature wanders out in view. Walking on four legs with feline grace, the massive creature steps lazily behind a small shrub and sits down to tower above it. Its long tail coils up nearby and folded wings shudder as it yawns open its wide maw. Bright green eyes focus down upon the small shrub and a black tongue licks the creature's lips. The sun shines across blue and black shiny scales, broken up by white bony plates. The creature claws the dirt around the shrub, and digs the top layer with dexterous hand-like paws. It cranes a head down with its long neck and open maw, and fits most of the shrub within its mouth. The maw closes tightly around the shrub. It lifts up its head, pulls the shrub effortlessly out of the ground, and slowly chews upon the plant while bits of dirt shake from the roots with each motion.

Kaleb turns his head back to face Bach and quizzically asks. "Hey? Bach? Where are they at?"

He notices Bach staring past him and follows the path of Bach's eyes to a point behind him. Kaleb tenses as he sees the creature and growls in frustration. "Oh, gods dammit, Lagi!"

He rushes down the dining walkway to an external door to the grass lot. Bach tilts his head to the side and mouths in a state of confusion and shock. "Lagi?"

Kaleb storms out with a stomp to each step and throws his hand down with a snap to point at the ground. "LAGI! SPIT IT OUT! NOW! You're being a bad boy!"

Lagi stops munching upon the shrub with roots dangling and slowly shifts his gaze to Kaleb. Lagi's eyes narrow upon Kaleb. Kaleb stops in front of Lagi and looks at the creature with a stern glare. "You put it down, right now! That's not your shrub, you can't eat it! Put it down now, or no treats after dinner tonight."

Lagi watches Kaleb's glare and grunts with defying frustration and a trailing snort. Kaleb crosses his arms and dramatically taps his foot while maintaining a parental stare at Lagi. "Put. It. Down. Or. No. Treats."

An odd silence falls upon the area. Kaleb and Lagi maintain eye contact throughout the quiet, tense moments. With a quick squint, Lagi opens his mouth, draws the rest of the shrub into his maw, and closes with cheeks bulging slightly. Kaleb pivots around throws his hands up in the air and calls out. "Welp! No treats for you!"

He reaches inside a chest pocket, pulls out an aetherphone, and waves it above his head. "Guess who I am calling? I'm going to tell her what you did and you better hope she just sticks with tonight."

Lagi's eyes flit wide open and his pupils dilate as a particular thought crosses his mind. Lagi drops his head down above the new hole in ground and deposits the shrub into it with a low, guttural wretch. The coating of mucus and phlegm glistens in the sun as the half-chewed shrub settles crooked. Lagi's front paws quickly sweep up loose dirt around the base of the shrub and pat it down haphazardly. He speeds over behind Kaleb, attempts to nuzzle his head on Kaleb, and pleads with various pitiful whines. Kaleb stands firm, holds the aetherphone in front of him, and hangs his thumb above the call button on the screen. The whines grow more desperate as Lagi begs for forgiveness. Bach carefully opens the external door and steps through the doorway outside. He turns to see Lagi with his jaw almost on the floor. He rubs his eyes and blinks again as the sight of Lagi completely dumbfounds him. "Lagi? That's you?"

Lagi ceases the begging and whining, and lifts his head up to the sound of Bach's voice. His eyes lock onto Bach and his jaw opens. With a happy shriek, Lagi lunges out into a hopping gait right at Bach. Bach's eyes fly out to their widest and he throws out his hand to the over ten meter long creature. "Lagi! Sit! Sit, Lagi! Lagi?!"

Inside a number of people watch the scene unfold outside. Sotalia stands up from the table with Aristespha, Cideeda, and Dretphi, and narrows her eyes at the outside windows. "What is going on over there- What the fuck is Bach doing outsid-?!"

Lagi charges up to Bach, sweeps Bach into tackle with his front legs, and curls up around Bach. Sotalia glances back to everyone else to see the awe-struck, blank stares of everyone else. Aristespha, Cideeda, Dretphi, and Sotalia tear out of their seats and run towards the exterior door.

Outside, Kaleb jogs on over and calls out. "Bach? You okay?"

Bach's arm reaches out and pats the head of the purring beast defensively curled around him. "Yah! He's still pretty gentle despite how big he's gotten."

Lagi whines happily and shudders his wings. Bach works himself out free of Lagi and lightly headbutts the creature and scratches under his chin. "Yes, I missed you, too."

Kaleb walks around Lagi and stands next to Bach. Aristespha, Cideeda, Dretphi, and Sotalia pile out the door and witness Bach petting the large creature. Aristespha examines the situation and her mind trips over some long forgotten bit of information. Cideeda and Dretphi cautiously approach and shift their attentions between Bach and Lagi. Sotalia holds her hands out in front of her and yells out with an incredulous expression on her face. "Okay?! What the fuck is a DRAGON doing out here?!"

Sebastian voice startles and confusion overtakes. "Wait, what?! A dragon?!"

Aristespha blinks and grows a curious grin upon her face as she eyes Kaleb. “Kaleb Hellstrom, I presume?”

Kaleb pivots to Aristespha and nods with a slight bow. “Yes, ma’am. I-”

A spark of recognition erupts on Kaleb’s face and he smiles. “Oh! Your Sebastian’s group! Where is he?”

Sebastian’s ghostly form materializes next to Aristespha. Lagi spots Sebastian, cranes his head over, and pauses with a quizzical tilt. He examines Sebastian and acts out his confusion about Sebastian’s visage with a series of dramatic whines. Sebastian nods to Lagi with a calming smile. “Don’t worry, boy. I’m doing fine all things considered. It’s only temporary.”

An awkward pause in action hangs around. Kaleb takes in a long breath, puts his hands on his hips, and chuckles. “Well! I get the feeling we have A LOT to talk about.”

The group collectively nods, including Lagi. Aristespha briefly eyes the windows leading inside and sighs. “If I may have a suggestion, let’s continue this back at our place?”

Bach traces Aristespha’s glance and tenses upon the sight of a small audience of a dozen people. Sebastian shrugs and waves to people. Many wave back and resume eating their food while continuing to watch. One man gestures for the group to keep on going. “Don’t mind us!”

Kaleb slowly nods and points to the harness and saddle upon Lagi’s shoulders. “If can give me the address, I’ve got a holographic HUD with a navigation system.”

Gerald stands up from his chair and walks out a doorway onto a small balcony that overlooks the large backyard of the property and provides a useful vantage point of the neighboring houses. He lifts a condensation covered bottle of beer up and pours a swig into his mouth. With a distant gaze, he surveys scenery from his top floor view and slowly breathes. Creaks and cracks sound out from the stairs near the entry to the bedroom and Samantha steps onto the landing. She scans around the room and pauses to note major caches of equipment with a short grin. “Well, I see you’ve settled in quickly.”

Gerald glances back and casually shrugs. “Pretty easy when you have plenty of space to scatter stuff around. I’ll sort it out later. Just happy enough to get it up here.”

Samantha steps carefully across the room, avoids large blockades of travel containers, and slides next to Gerald on the balcony. “This IS a nice view. I can see why you claimed it.”

Gerald nods and waves a point across the view. “Pretty enough. But, I especially like the clear shot I’ve got of our adventurers’ yard and...”

He circles his finger over a spot containing a large open field, diagonal from the adventurers' yard, and directs Samantha's attention after taking another swig from his beer. "The nice shot of our OTHER adventurers."

Samantha leans over with a squint to trace the path from Gerald's arm and grows a mischievous grin. "Oh! That IS nice. I'm sure you got some plans for that."

Gerald chuckles and flits his eyebrows with a smug smirk. "Oh, yes. I'm thinking of using the outdoor case with a telephoto lens with the motion trigger. Fix it on the railing. Still haven't decided on the high resolution camera or that one with the good night-vision mode."

Samantha stands back, crosses her arms, and rests her chin on her fist with a sigh. "I'd go with the high resolution one for now. I'll talk to Howie and see if he can send us another outdoor case, because I would love to have both at the ready. You never know what's going to happen-

A loud shriek echoes out from above and low, repetitious thumps vibrate the air. Samantha blinks and searches to the left and right of herself. Gerald eyes spring wide open and he tilts his head up. The balcony briefly darkens as a huge shadow passes over it. Samantha continues her hunt in vain. "What WAS THAT?! It sounded like a hawk, but huge!"

Gerald's eyes affix themselves to a single target. He slams back his beer til empty and tosses it aside as he reaches through the balcony doorway. Samantha briefly puzzles at Gerald when her eyes find the source of the strange noises and she snaps her head to it in wide-eyed shock. Her jaw drops and her mind struggles to find anything coherent for her mouth to say. Lagi stretches his four legs out for a landing as a pair of massive front wings and a pair of smaller back wings blast air across the grass of the distant field. He touches down with a smooth routine and Kaleb pats him on the head as he looks back to check on his rider. Kaleb leans over, says a few words to Lagi, and waves his hand towards the wooden plank picnic table. Samantha slowly pivots towards where she remembers Gerald being. "By the gods, I hope-

She smiles wide and watches Gerald adjust his large shoulder camera rig. Gerald feels a pat and squeeze on the shoulder from Samantha and he laughs. "You know better than to ask that."

Aristespha, Bach, Cideeda, Dretphi, Sotalia, and Sebastian gather near the picnic table with Kaleb and Lagi. Bach walks up to Lagi with arms outstretched. Lagi quickly nuzzles his head close to Bach and purrs with a low rumble as Bach scratches under his chin. Bach smiles and hugs Lagi. "I missed you, Lagi."

Kaleb shakes his head with a grin as he watches the two. Dretphi approaches Kaleb and calmly asks with a tinge of eagerness. "Would it be acceptable for me to pet Lagi?"

Kaleb looks up to Dretphi, chuckles, gestures with an outstretched hand in front of him. "Oh, go right ahead. He LOVES attention. I won't be able to convince him to go back home until he shows off for a bit."

Cideeda steps up to the side of Dretphi and pets Lagi along his head and neck. Sotalia crosses her arms, takes a breath in, and alternates a demanding stare between Sebastian and Bach. "Okay! I'm going to ask the question. Dragon? Why? How? When?"

Bach and Sebastian exchange looks and sort through a number of expressions. Sebastian shrugs and tilts his head to the side. "Well, I did mention a few times my roommate had a pet dragon."

Sotalia glares at Sebastian, throws her arms to the side, and directs them towards Lagi. "A little dragon. I honestly didn't think it was a legitimate dragon."

Bach steps back from Lagi, allows Aristespha to take his place as she caresses Lagi, and scratches his head. "Well, back then, Lagi could fit in the bathtub."

He pivots to face Kaleb and points a thumb over to Lagi. "How big has he gotten?! I'm already amazed he grew in the back wings, but he's HUGE."

Kaleb takes a deep breath in, exhales, and blinks as he strokes his chin in thought. "Umm... Last time Shadeesa and I managed to get a tape measure on him, he's easily pushing a fifteen meter front wingspan and maybe eleven meters long head to tail."

Sebastian eyes Kaleb with a sly grin. "Aha! So you and Shadeesa are still keeping in touch?"

Kaleb works a smile on his face and laughs. "You could say that. In fact, I wanted to thank you, Sebastian."

Sebastian perks an eyebrow and places his hands on his hips, the sly grin morphing closer to smug. "Really? And, why is that?"

Kaleb stands up straight and proud. "Well, I finally took your advice and asked Shadeesa out. I'm a biologist. She's an exotic veterinarian. And well, I got a job traveling to strange and weird places, which worked perfect for her research of creatures that live in those same places. We've been together since a few months after you graduated."

Bach and Sebastian look at each other and then focus upon Kaleb with smiles. Sebastian rubs the back of his neck and with an ethereal chuckle. "Damn, Kal. That's really awesome. I figured you two would do well."

Kaleb holds a finger up and takes a slow dramatic breath. "I'm not done. But, you're right. We've actually settled down a few hours away and well... We're expecting our first in six months."

Sebastian's mouth opens silently in dumbstruck awe. Bach walks and shakes Kaleb's hand. "That's great news!"

Everyone speaks congratulations and Kaleb humbly accepts them. "Everything is good. Shadeesa makes sure of that. She can give more details, herself. When we get inside, I'll

get a video call going to her on my aetherphone. Hopefully next doctor visit, we'll find out the sex of the baby and figure out if the baby will have her mother's horns."

Sotalia pauses from petting Lagi and glances back at Kaleb with interest and a hopeful smile. "So, Shadeesa is a full emin?"

Kaleb turns his attention to Sotalia with a nod. "Yes."

Sotalia bites her lip and shifts to confident grin. "Well, if she needs a half-emin to talk to, I'll answer any questions she's got."

Kaleb exhales in relief. "Thank you! Any bits of knowledge will help us so much."

Lagi lifts his head up, cranes it over to Kaleb, and mutters a little grumble. Kaleb rolls his eyes and pats Lagi's head. "Okay! I was wondering when you'd want to show off for everyone."

Kaleb sweeps a gaze over everyone else and gestures out into the field. "Would it be okay if Lagi does one of his spells? It's something he likes to show new people."

Bach looks around for any objections and points off to the lone boulder in the field. "I don't have any problems. It's the field we train in anyway. That boulder is usually the target."

Kaleb nods, steps next to his saddle on Lagi, and pulls out a large high-tech pistol from a holster. Cideeda squints her eyes at the pistol and quirks a brow. "That's a Particle Power Blaster isn't it?"

Kaleb lifts the pistol up and aims it into the air with a sly grin. "Yes it is! It's pretty vanilla, but it has a multi-spectrum laser target painter module. I use it point out things to Lagi."

He whistles, snaps his fingers, and levels the pistol at the boulder. "Lagi! Get ready!"

A spark of excitement courses through Lagi's bright green eyes. He slowly unfurls his massive wings into the air as the blue and black scales shimmer between shades. His claws on all feet dig into the dirt and anchor in the soil. Lagi's mouth opens wide as glowing trails of magical flow funnel towards a central point in front of his mouth. Sotalia slides next to Aristespha as they both carefully watch. Sotalia eagerly waits and speaks to Aristespha. "This is so cool! I remember the last time I saw a dragon breathe fire, it jetted almost a hundred meters across the sky!"

Kaleb taps a second set of triggers on the pistol and a bright blue beam flashes on the boulder. Lagi's eyes focus and the magical energy warps. The energy erupts into a flaming orb of orange fire as more magical energy flows into it from roots across Lagi's body. Aristespha slowly closes her eyes, reopens them with a violet glow, and concentrates her attentions with wonderment. Sotalia pauses her excitement as the orb triggers flashes of familiarity that border on recognition. The energy orb near Lagi's mouth condenses to a slightly smaller form as the colors shift from orange to yellow to blue to blue-white. The rolling flame exterior gives way to a powerful jet torch that roars out loud. Sotalia tilts her head to the side as recognition floods her mind and her jaw hangs open. Aristespha dons an amused

grin while she enjoys a glance at Sotalia's face. Kaleb pulls and holds the second trigger. The blue-white orb of magical fire streaks across the field and crashes into the boulder with an explosion of flame. The shock wave ripples across the grass with a loud thunderous boom. Lagi quickly turns his head, witnesses everyone's reactions with a toothy smile, and happily hops in place. Sotalia blinks out her astonishment, gradually pivots around, raises a hand to a point at Bach, and narrows her eyes to query. "You have something to do with this. That's not normal for any dragon I know of."

Bach awkwardly shrugs with his hands out to his sides. "Uh, yes. Turns out dragons learn the fire blast spells from their parents. Neither of Lagi's were alive, so I... Improvised?"

Kaleb laughs and places his blaster pistol back into the holster on Lagi. "It's strange, but Lagi only ever paid attention to Bach when it came to spell casting. So we figured, he might learn from him. Lagi knows a lot of different spells from Bach."

Sotalia's eyes open wide and she grins ear to ear as she flutters her eyes at Kaleb. "Well, I would LOVE to see them. Would it be too much to ask for Lagi and you to showcase a few of the more spectacular ones?"

Cideeda calls out with a toothy grin. "I'd like to see a few more! That was pretty amazing."

Dretphi excitedly nods with a large smile. Aristespha takes seat on the picnic table bench and amuses at Bach's uncomfortable expression to Sotalia's gaze. Kaleb nonchalantly turns to Lagi. "You up for a few more?"

Lagi nods his head with a wag of his long fanning tail. Kaleb walks away from Lagi, points to the boulder, and takes deep breath. "Okay, well, I'll do some of the routine. This next one is called Homing Laser. Available in single shot or flurry attack."

Peering above a small shrub, Deedri and Tassilda stare eyes wide open at the large, blue-black dragon sunning himself in the field. Tassilda leans her head next to Deedri and speaks out the side of her mouth. "What is a dragon doing here?!"

Deedri rises above the top of the shrub with her hands covering her mouth and shakes from her excitement. "I-I-I-i... I can't believe it! It's a really dragon!"

Tassilda warily eyes over to Deedri and returns her attentions forward to Lagi, the dragon. "How about we sneak back and call it day?"

Deedri bites her lip and grins. "I'm going to call it over here."

Tassilda snaps her head at Deedri and blinks a number of times. "You're what?"

Two hands reach out over the bush and gesture Lagi over. Deedri clicks with her mouth and directs her voice. "Hey! Over here!"

Another set of arms snatch the first set away. Tassilda puts her face in front of Deedri's. "WHAT. ARE. YOU. DOING?"

Deedri pulls her arms back and perks a brow at Tassilda. "Calling him over. I want to see him up close."

Tassilda shudders her head and narrows her eyes. "Are you insane?! That's a dragon!"

Deedri slowly nods her head and takes a deep breath with a determined expression. "Tassilda. I know. My undergraduate thesis was titled The Engineered Genetics and Magical Alterations of the Modern Day Dragon. So, when presented with an extremely rare octopod, tame, and unusually large dragon... I'm going to get a good look at him."

Deedri's assertion surprises Tassilda and she leans away dismissively. "Okay. Go ahead. Go pet the dragon."

Deedri smiles, stands up, and walks out to Lagi. "Hey, big guy! What's your name?"

Tassilda pivots her head and watches with a wince that fades. She squints her eyes. Events astonish her, and she mumbles to herself. "She's... actually petting it. It's purring?"

She watches dumbstruck for a minute. Eventually, she stands up, brushes the dirt and leaves off her form fitting outfit, regains her air of confidence, and struts out. "Well, hello. What big tough dragon do we have here?"

Deedri holds a tight smile and eyes Tassilda. Tassilda catches the look and sighs as she scratches underneath Lagi's chin. "Well, I couldn't very well let you have all the fun."

Inside the living room, everyone gathers around the dining room table. On the table, an aetherphone screen shows an emin woman smiling warmly. She exhales in joyous relief as she wipes a tear off her white freckled cheek underneath her green on black eyes. "It's just so good to see you again, Bach. And to know you're not dead, Sesbastian. Kaleb and I were so worried, but didn't know how to contact you."

Sebastian grits to a smile. "Well, we haven't been very reachable, to be honest. My fault there."

Bach shrugs with a sigh. "And, I kind of dropped off the radar for bit. So, my fault there, too, Shadeesa."

Shadeesa guides her dark green hair over her light gray pointed ears and shakes her horned head. "Oh, it doesn't matter. We got each others contact information. I'll hopefully be there in person in the near future. Or you all are more than welcome to come visit our home. Whatever works."

Kaleb focuses on the phone and pulls his mouth to a corner. “Hmm. Hate to break up the party, but the day light hours are running thin. Hey, could you check the radar real quick for me, please?”

Shadeesa spins to a side with a small squeak of a rolling chair and leans out of view. “Yes, I will. And... Oh my. Good gods, really?! Again?!”

Kaleb leans in closer to the aetherphone with concern. “Did that damn weird zone kick something else out?!”

On the screen, a hand grabs around the lens, carries the other end, and clears out of the way to show a weather radar image with large, dangerous looking storm cells. Kaleb hems and rubs his chin in contemplation. “Well, damn, going right in my flight path back the house. That is pretty big. It looks slow moving, too. Okay, I need to lea-”

Shadeesa’s voice sternly calls out through the speaker. “Stay for the night.”

Kaleb lifts an eyebrow, stares at his phone, and begins to open his mouth. The image on the screen flips back to Shadeesa’s face. Her stoic, stern, unamused glare slices through the screen at Kaleb’s very being. Bach and Sebastian instinctively take a step away from Kaleb and wait. Cideeda, Dretphi, and Sotalia exchange bemused glances off to the side. Aristespha curls a hidden smirk. Kaleb nods his head and smiles with a resigned breath. “You are right.”

Sebastian takes a step back to Kaleb’s side. “We won’t put you out into the storm. You are welcome to our most comfortable couch.”

Bach taps a fist into Kaleb’s shoulder. “Plus, Lagi can curl up comfortably in the garage. I’ll just need to move my bike.”

Cideeda drops into a seat on the couch. “Hey, you can help us suffer through watching the tonight’s episode of the Next Adventurers of Nexus.”

Kaleb crosses his arms. “That works. We haven’t caught the latest season yet. Is it interesting?”

Silence looms in the air before a consensus of nods follow. Kaleb warily picks up his phone from the dining table and walks over to the couch. “I think we might want to get caught up.”

Shadeesa nods on the phone’s screen. “Yes. I think we should.”