

Ain't A Hero – Episode 19

by Bryan Schuder

A few beams of morning light slip in through the blinds and reflect off the hard armor plates upon the desk. The air current from the oscillating fan gently and slightly pushes the soft armor suit upon the free-standing hangar. Dretphi concentrates on her tan tone hands as they braid the last bit of long hair in front of her face. With a few twists, she slips on a stretchy band to secure the end and inspects the braid, running her fingers from the dirty blonde end to the platinum blonde start upon her head. She twirls her hair in her fingers a few moments before dropping the braid upon her chest. She lifts her head up into her bed pillow, searches above her on the shelf behind the bed, and stretches her muscular, grayish striped arms out to grasp an object. She brings the small fluffy toy boar down to the focus of her steely gray eyes. A smile briefly rises upon her face but fades as a frown tugs down the corners. She rests the plush toy boar upon her rising chest, ruffles the wild furry head ridge, and exhales with a long, sad sigh as her blonde brows droop. A knock at the door snaps her attention forward and she sits up quickly. “You may open the door.”

The door opens slowly and Bach leans around into view. He politely waves and glances at Dretphi. “Just wanted to let you know, we’re about ready to head off to the convention. I think Cideeda finally figured out all she’s going to try to pawn off to convention folks.”

Dretphi nods and dons a mild smile to mask her frown. “Good. I am interested in what will happen today.”

Bach returns the nod and smile, but his eyes home in on the small toy boar Dretphi holds against her chest. Dretphi notices where Bach’s eyes affix in brief puzzlement, glances at the toy boar in her hands, and realizes she still holds the toy. While a slight bite of the lip, she attempts to casually put the toy boar back upon the shelf behind her, and tries to obscure some embarrassment. Bach blinks and drifts his gaze elsewhere around the room. “Miss the little pig, don’t you?”

Dretphi pauses mid stretch of her arm, returns her hand in front her with the fluffy toy boar, and noticeably sighs. “Yes.”

A tug at the corner of his mouth prompts Bach nod in a similar sentiment. “Glad we found him and got the help he needed.”

Bach’s eyes glance at Dretphi with a smirk on his mouth. “You really wanted to keep him.”

Dretphi blinks, sways her head slightly shoulder to shoulder in an internal debate, and shrugs. “Feelings conflicting.”

She holds the toy boar in front of her with both hands and thinks out loud. “I would have been happy to raise the boar. Would have been difficult. Albeit rewarding. Ultimately. I am delighted that I was not needed. The best course happened. I am happy to have made it possible.”

She twists around, places the toy boar onto the shelf, and turns herself to place her feet onto the floor. A warm smile returns to her face and she gazes at Bach. "Thank you for your assistance. I do not know how much time we had. You made sure we did not waste that time."

Bach scratches the back of his head and tries to humbly play off the given credit. "Ah, you carried him the rest of the way and were at his side the whole time. I'm glad the mother showed up when we were outside."

Dretphi glances over from tying her boots and takes a long breath in with a serious hint in her tone. "Indeed. Walls may have been missing when she was done."

She stands up, brushes her shirt and shorts in place, and walks towards the door. "I am ready. I am curious as to what I should expect?"

Bach's eyes dart around in thought as he bites his lip trying to condense a proper explanation. "Well... I'll try to best explain some of it on the way there. It's hard to explain. You'll understand once you get there."

Crowds of people flow through the divided paths of registration lines and gaps of space between traverse the snaking runs when people shift forward in line. A floating animated visage drifts above the hordes with extravagant messages heralding the Amaranth Adventure Con in grand spectacle. Intermixed in the masses, people showcase their colorful, themed attire and discuss many topics of fiction and more between themselves. The parallel conversations rise into a low, droning echo in the high ceilings of entryway of the convention center, but small bits of dialog lodge themselves in Cideeda's ears as she navigates her small frame through the gauntlet. A tall emin woman poses seductively in a succubus costume and gives a wink to photographer. A passerby stops, points out the emin woman's tail, and puzzles. "How did you do your tail? That's so life like!"

The emin woman giggles with a beaming smile, strokes her tail up into her hand, and wags it slightly. "Oh, it's no trick! My great grandfather was Fvalian, so it shows up in my family. It really sells the whole outfit!"

Cideeda slips in between a few armor suit wearing graths, deftly dodges the swing an oversized plastic sword wielding human, and slides by a group of evuukians comparing older era mage robes. With a final dash through a momentary break in the waves of visitors, she rushes clear to the awaiting group of Aristespha, Bach, Dretphi, Sebastian, and Sotalia. She retrieves a collection of badges and pamphlets from her backpack and distributes them to everyone else. "Whew. It's been awhile since I've had to dodge that many people. But, here's our weekend passes, official literature, and guides to all that's going on."

Aristespha clips her badge onto her belt, next to the sword, and flips through a few pages of the guide. "This is quite the place. It feels weird. Feels like I'm in a-

Cideeda grins slyly and perks an eyebrow. "A shopping mall?"

Aristespha glances over to Cideeda and slowly nods. "Yes!"

With a few claw-tipped page flips in the guide, Cideeda shows Aristespha, Bach, and Sebastian an About page. "It used to be. But, a few decades back some crazed, rich old adventurer sunk his life savings to buy this place after an economic slump and overhauled it into a massive convention center. Offered discounted rates to attract renters. Now, it has some kind of convention every month with this one being THE big one."

Bach opens his guide to the same page, lets his eyes trace down the paragraphs of text, and nods. "Can't go to the adventures, so bring them to you. Not a bad retirement plan."

Sebastian hovers over Aristespha's shoulder as his eyes follow the words on the page. "Wow! He lived to hundred sixty three, not bad at all."

Aristespha thumbs through another set of pages and flits a brow with a smile to Sebastian. "To think Pre-Cataclysm life expectancy was approaching two hundred. I still find it astounding what they did without magic Pre-Cataclysm."

Her attention snaps to a spot on a schedule and her pupils creep wide at the event title. "Interesting. I did not think they'd have something like this here."

Sebastian twists his mouth at the title and grumbles with an ethereal resonance. "Well, I guess I'm going with you to that one."

Aristespha slides her finger over to another part of the schedule and watches with a loving smile as Sebastian's eyes light up figuratively and a tad literally. "Don't worry, Sebastian. I think we'll both like this one afterwards."

Boyish glee swells on Sebastian face as smile firmly plants itself. "Yes, dear. I believe two hours of Sword Style Demonstrations would be great for the both of us to experience together."

A voice from the crowd calls out a comment. "Awesome illusion!"

Sebastian blinks up from the page, turns himself to the source of the voice, assumes a bravado filled pose with a snapping point of the fingers, and smiles heroically at the passersby. "Enjoy the convention!"

The passerby enthusiastically waves back as the surrounding group of friends react in astonishment as the Sebastian "illusion" responds. Sebastian returns his head next to Aristespha and chuckles to himself. "Holy shit, I think this illusion ploy might actually work. This is going to be great!"

Bach stops shuffling pages in the guide and examines the schedule closely. "I think I might join you two for the sword style event. Might be helpful for me to see some other styles..."

Sebastian stares at Bach with a quirk of an eye brow and narrows his ethereal gaze at him. "Let's concentrate on getting you proficient with A style, first. That's next on the list after flight."

A low groan rumbles from Bach as he matches Sebastian's gaze. "I know a style!"

The amusement wanes from Sebastian's expression as he tilts his head back and away with an examining glare. "Does that style involve THROWING the sword? I distinctly remember THAT."

Bach averts his eyes, grits in embarrassment, and attempts to shrug off the unamused gaze of Sebastian. "Dammit! What else was I suppose to do? I could never match you in sword fighting. So, I had to... Improvise."

Sebastian rolls his eyes and sighs with a begrudging smile and laughs. "Well, that instructor learned never to pit us against each other ever fucking again."

Cideeda stifles a snort at the interplay between brothers and wanders her focus to Sotalia and Dretphi. "Hey, you two find anything... yet?"

She watches Sotalia and Dretphi stand, idly grasping onto their badges and guides, and stare off to the convention around them. Dretphi's eyes scan the area, slowly taking in the spectacle before her. A strong smile of delight claims her mouth and she continues to watch people in costumes and listen to passing discussions. Her mind's focus seizes her and directs her gaze upon two grath men hauling a large flat stone grill top. Her jaw drops at the sight of a grath woman carrying a collection of cooking utensils. Sotalia gawks in stunned silence and manages to break away to turn slowly to the group. Her face remains indecisive on an expression. "I've been watching all this for the last twenty minutes."

She drifts her gaze across the group and tries on another look of confusion. "I still have no idea what is exactly going on here."

Cideeda toothily grins, exchanges humored looks with Aristespha, Bach, and Sebastian, and returns to Sotalia. "Don't worry. Just pick something from the guide. You'll figure it out."

Sotalia nods in a daze, lowers her eyes uncertain to the guide in her hands, and wanders aimlessly through the pages. "Right. Okay. Sure."

Through the wide halls of mall turned convention center, people flow from place to place. Individuals dart through with purpose in mind, while loose groups wander from one location to another as they experience what Amaranth Adventure Con offers. Bach manages to locate a sparse spot out of the main river of traffic. With a few well-timed side steps, he shifts out the masses into the clearing and slows his pace to appreciate the void. A number of benches and chairs offer their surfaces, which Bach gladly utilizes. He unfolds his guide and searches his pants pocket. After seconds of curious confusion, a pen finds its way into Bach's hand as he withdraws it. The pen strikes a few spots on the guide's schedule and circles a number of others. Minutes go by with Bach idly tapping the pen upon the page between a number of options. He lifts his head up, places his back firmly against the wall behind the bench, and closes his eyes while his ears filter through the chorus of sounds in the area. Conversations drift on by, distant echoes of loud voices escape from large rooms with celebrity panels, and

various other noises peppers the soundscape. But, a nearby sighing whine from a small child catches Bach's attention. He opens his eyes, scans the traffic free area, and locates the source across from him in another collection of benches. A sitting evuukian woman gently rubs the shoulders of a small child standing in front of her in a comforting attempt. The little boy holds a wand in both hands with a sad stare of disappointment. He waves it around with a vigorous effort, but the wand remains inert and nothing happens in the space before him. A long, sadder sigh escapes from his breath and he resumes the longing stare at the wand. The evukkian woman leans forward, wraps her arms around the child, and rests her head on top of his, letting her long golden brown hair flow around, obscuring his long but rounded tip ears. "I know my son. We'll try tomorrow to see if we can find that dealer again. Maybe he can get it working for you."

The boy idly, and as carefully as his young motor skills can manage, guides the wand through various motions. "It was working. It lighted up and everything. Am I doing something wrong, momma?"

The boy's mother cracks a reserved smile, leans back, and ruffles her son's dirty blonde hair. "No, my dear Mylo. I think it's equipment failure. You had it working just fine. I saw you. It was very good."

Mylo looks at the wand and concentrates on it intensely. A strong tug pulls the corner of Bach's mouth. He lowers his head back to his schedule and taps the pen idly upon the page. In his mind, a long ignored motivation stomps around. The same drive behind the recent split-second shields saves, heroic plasma barrages, energy draining D-ball, and bold thudkicker challenge... Now loudly, annoyingly taps its foot behind the other machinations of Bach's mind with a demanding glare. A long wince overtakes Bach's face with a twist of head over the span of a minute, before he exhales to resignation. He places the pen back in his pants pocket, folds the guide back up, and stands up with a hint of heroic determination seeping into his expression. With purposeful, calm steps, Bach walks over in front of woman and child. "Excuse me. I couldn't help but overhear that you have a problem with a wand?"

The evuukian woman blinks her focus away from Mylo, gazes up, and nods with a smile at Bach. "Why yes. I purchased a toy wand for him, since he was enamored by it. Too many stories about his grandfather, I guess. Unfortunately, I think this one is broken... But, I couldn't find the person I bought it from."

Bach returns a smile on the edge of grin and understandingly nods. "He may have left for the day. If it's not a problem, I could take a look at it and see if there's anything I can do about it. I have some skill fixing electronics."

The smile on the woman's face grows brighter and she lowers her head next her son's. She directs his attention to Bach and in a motherly tone asks. "Mylo, do you want the man to look at the wand and see if he can fix it for you?"

Mylo glances up at Bach, back at the wand, and then back up, extending the wand in his hands toward Bach. With a slow descent, Bach kneels down, settles on the floor, and takes the wand from Mylo's hands. Mylo's mother softly pats her son on the shoulder and watches. "I greatly appreciate you taking the time to help. If you can get working even for an hour, I'll be in your debt."

Bach examines the plastic wood-texture, toy wand and rests the it in the palm of his hand. A grin widens on his face, blue flickers into his eyes, and he hovers his other hand over the wand. With a slow twisting, pull to the sides, the wand hovers midair and disassembles methodically in all its pieces. The parts hang in the air between Bach's hands and his glowing blue eyes scan the components. Eventually, a stray wire away from a solder joint bends around from the influence of some force. Bach briefly glances over to the awestruck mother and son, who witness with jaws agape. "There's the problem. This one was probably the last one made for the shift and they skimped on that wire. Give me a moment."

The stray wire end frays out the individual strands of copper before they intertwine into a properly braided wire. The blob of solder morphs from a solid cloudy gray to a liquid silver that reaches out and seeps into the wire as it closes in. The wire settles onto the solder joint with a cooling coat of silver securing it to the spot. With a waggle of a sensor part, the light from the tip illuminates and a small speaker chirps out. As the floating parts snap and merge together into the complete toy wand, Bach stares at the toy and thinks. A bold grin dawns on his face. "It should work just fine now... But..."

He glances at the mother and gazes at the son, as that drive finishes the grin on his face. "I don't think you came out just to settle on a simple toy wand..."

A bright flash of blue shines from Bach's eyes and he concentrates upon the wand. Thin shimmering fibers of magical flow waver out from his hands, contact the wand drifting in between, and sink in. Pathways of multi-color energy etch onto the surface of the wand in systematic, geometric designs that encase the entirety of the wand. In between the larger paths, patterns of magical mesh grow into the outer surface and partially sink into the plastic. The process shines brilliant lights upon the area and the faces of the mother in astonishment and son in sheer wonderment. The magical flow wanes, the glows fade, and the wand feathers down upon Bach's open palm. He lowers his hand to Mylo and gestures with a gradual lift. "Take it. It is yours."

Mylo blinks as his young mind recovers from the spectacle, reaches out with his hand, and grabs onto the toy wand as his mother watches, her face attempting comprehension but failing halfway through. He lifts his hand up, his finger on the other hand approaches the power button, and Bach shakes his head. "Not yet. It does work as a regular toy wand. But, try it right now without turning it on."

Mylo stops, angles his head to stare with a youthful attempt to raise a brow, and squints back at the wand. "How?"

Bach chuckles to himself, clasps his hands together, and mimics straining in concentration. "You know how you tried to think really hard to get it to work before? Try that again, just imagine all the magic going right to it."

A long gaze of uncertainly tinged childish suspicion before Mylo takes the wand in both hands and stares at it. Moments pass before the expression on the child flickers from a faux concentration grimace to proper focus. With a flash of determination beyond his age, the pathways of the wand illuminate and the tip sputters to a shining haze of green magical energy. Mylo's eyes flit wide open as the green glow and joy lights his face up. He waves the

wand around, notices the trail of misty energy lingering, and launches out his mother's arms to twirl the wand in rough shapes around in an empty area nearby. Mylo's mother reacts with a hand covering a gasp, gazes in disbelief, and rushes over to hug Mylo and lead him back. Bach slowly nods in a content satisfaction at the scene. His mind wanders and notices something very strange of the acoustics in the area. The normal drone of the convention center seems quieter. Something muffles the audio from the background activities behind him. Bach begins to pivot his knee upon the floor and catches a glimpse of a someone holding a phone recording the scene. Then another... And another... A whole crowd of people watch on as Mylo playfully draws shapes in the air, many with phones recording. Bach returns his head forward wide-eyed and darts his eyes around hunting for an exit route. "Shit..."

As the thoughts of the cameras weight in Bach's mind, he shrinks his posture and scoots carefully away to an opening around the gathering. With each kneeling shuffle, he carefully glances to the camera holding crowd, waits for a response, and then continues on. Mylo's mother finally convinces Mylo to go where she keeps pointing him. He walks with wand distraction securing his attention and she looks up to the crowd. With a defensive, but respectful motherly glare, most in the crowd stop recording. A few politely ask questions with many breaking off into their own debates about the events. Mylo's mother senses something missing and glances to the spot Bach was. She snaps her head around to points around area and stares at the crowd. "Where did he go?"

Smells of delicious food from all around the world mix into an alluring aroma that wafts above in the high windowed ceilings of the food court. Sounds of heat sizzling intertwine with cookware rattling and conversation enriching the area's canvas of sound. Bach navigates through the walkways, changes impromptu lanes a number of times, and finally finds refuge in an unused alcove. He pulls out his aetherphone, glances down, reads a message, and searches the area for anyone familiar. Moments pass and he feels a strange set of pressure points press into arm with a slight tug. Cideeda's voice directs Bach's attention down to his side. "So... What's this I hear about some mystery mage fixing up toy wands into artifacts of power?"

Bach eyes widen and he tries to casually avert his gaze away from Cideeda's piercing emerald pupil stare and toothy grin. "Ah... Um... What are you talking about?"

Cideeda narrows her eyes, maintaining the grin, raises her aetherphone up from her side, holds the screen out, and adjusts it to align with Bach's face. "Oh, don't play that game with me. I don't know anyone else that can pull this trick off. And, neither does the rest of the aethernet from the looks of it."

The video replays on Cideeda's phone, showcasing previous events from a perspective behind Bach and over to the side of his shoulder. A strong twitch yanks at the cheek beneath Bach's eye and a wary, unnerved grimace forms. Cideeda lowers the phone down, pats Bach on the shoulder, and laughs. "Don't worry. Everyone was too focused on the magic to get a good shot of your face. And most the aethernet armchair mages are too busy in arcane knowledge pissing contests to bother figuring out who you are."

A long sigh escapes Bach's lungs and he stares at the ground with a hand on his chest and relief solidly upon his face. "Oh good. I really didn't want to have dodge attention and questions for the rest of the convention."

Cideeda glances up from her phone at Bach and shakes her head with a smirking smile. "Still questioning the logic behind arming a small child with potent magic."

Bach lifts head up toward the ceiling with a long eye roll and groans. "It's not anything powerful. It's just a simple magical focus. A training tool. Simple energy collector piping to a simple vapor light trail effect. My dad had a bunch of different ones to help refine his magical flow control."

A poke into his side prompts Bach to lower his head back down to Cideeda. She gives a wink, smiles, and points to a table near several large stone grill tops. "I know. Anyway, Aristespha, Dretphi, and Sebastian are over there. Let's eat, first, then worry about how much you are trending on social media."

Cideeda steps forward with a sly grin and Bach follows immediately behind with a worried look on his face. "I'm WHAT?!"

Dretphi sits patiently at the table as her gaze wanders between the stone grill tops and grath cooking. Aristespha taps through menus on her tablet upon the table with Sebastian hovering nearby watching over her shoulder. Bach settles in a seat next to Dretphi, rests his elbows upon the table top, and props his head up. Dretphi leans over and speaks without taking her eyes of the culinary progress in front of her. "Excellent timing. They are close to completion."

Cideeda slides into the seat between Bach and Aristespha, carefully slides her phone over towards Aristespha, and nudges an elbow to her. "I see you found the app they posted for the convention."

Aristespha turns her head with a hint of curiosity to Cideeda, scrutinizes her expression, and aims her eyes down at the phone with a quirk to the corner of her mouth. Cideeda discreetly tilts her head to Bach, glances to the phone, and holds a finger to her lips. Aristespha nods back, slides the phone over next to her tablet, and taps a prominent play button on the phone's screen. "Yes. It's really helped with planning everything out and posts all the updated information."

Cideeda sways her head to face Bach pokes him in the shoulder. "You have the app, yet? Get your phone out. It allows you to show your schedule to other people and plan with others."

Bach grumbles a moment before reaching into his pocket, retrieving his phone, and holds it out as Cideeda directs, nearly commanding, Bach on the setup process. Aristespha focuses upon the video and watches it silently play. Her expression softens over time, a warm smile grow on her face. Sebastian smiles proudly, glances over to Bach in mid-distraction with Cideeda, and unconsciously tries to rest his hand upon Aristespha's. As Sebastian's ethereal visage starts to pass through, he sighs but halts as Aristespha's hand rotates and grabs hold. Sebastian turns his gaze towards the faint violet glow of her eyes. The video ends with both watching happily. Aristespha discreetly slides Cideeda's phone back, pressing it carefully

against her elbow. Cideeda without changing her focus from Bach, deftly grasps the phone up, taps a few spots on the screen to exit out of the video player, and hoists it up next to Bach's phone. "Here, let me add you to group and we can see our schedules and choices."

Aristespha's eyes eventually dim down to normal and she gazes at Sebastian lovingly with a happy sigh. Sebastian chuckles quietly and shrugs. Sotalia drops into the seat across and blinks wide-eyed to the group at large. "Okay. I think I'm figuring this all out. I'm going to things, I'm doing things, and I'm seeing things."

She shakes the rest of the daze out of head, and takes a deep breath in with a sniff of the air. "Now it is time to eat, so I can go, do, and see more things."

The alluring odor seizes her attention and pulls Sotalia around in her seat. "Wow! That smells amazing! Is that what we're getting to eat, because I'm all for it."

Dretphi nods quickly with a wide smile and keeps her eyes on the grills. "Yes. All cooked properly."

Sotalia leans her head back at Dretphi quizzically. "How so?"

Dretphi lifts her hand to point out and explains energetically. "Stone grills. Dense stone has very small holes. The stone is oiled. Takes time to heat up. It stays hot no matter what food you put on it. When you are done cooking it will warm the house at night."

She shifts her point, directs everyone's attention to collections of ingredients nearby on tables, in buckets, and some in water, and continues with excitement welling. "Main ingredients. Very few other small ingredients. Plenty of spices. Those that you need very little to flavor. Those that are trivial to have great amounts of."

Dretphi sits up in her seat and thinks a few seconds, twisting for mouth to test out words in her mind. She looks at the group with a renewed calmer smile and carefully speaks with her hand gesturing to the grath cooks. "There have been many times in Grath history when we could not anticipate what food would be available. Grath developed streamline, simple recipes. Focus on the preparation to compensate for lack of abundance."

Bach pays attention to the careful movements of the cooks as they shuffle food around on the grill, moving much from the center region to outer areas. Cideeda flips through the screen on her phone and notices a new update from the Amaranth Adventure Con news feed. She taps the notification and the article expands out on her phone.

"Mystery Guests of Honor revealed to be The Next Adventurers of Nexus's own Flames of the Phoenix..."

A strong cringe distorts Cideeda's face and she snarls her lip with a stare at her phone as a painfully familiar promo group picture fills the screen. She manages to fight back a grit and draw a calming breath through her sharp teeth. "Well, that's... interesting... news."

Bach tilts his head back and aims his glance at Cideeda's phone, prompting a lift of an eyebrow. "Oh. Well... There goes the neighborhood."

Aristespha cranes her head over, catches a glimpse of the source and headline, and returns to a series of taps on her tablet. "I'm not exactly surprised. But, it looks like they are pretty booked for the rest of the convention."

She hovers a finger over a spot in the convention schedule app and waits. Sebastian angles his view to read what lies underneath and curiously turns his head to face Aristespha with an evil grin forming. "Really?"

Aristespha bites her lip, let's a playfully sinister drive contain her fleeting embarrassment, presses down on the schedule spot. An alert pops up on Bach's and Cideeda's phones. Both slowly rotate their stares from the alert and concentrate their collective, awkward confusion at Aristespha. Cideeda glances back down at her phone and returns to face Aristespha with her head turning away but her eyes maintaining lock. "Whatever are you thinking, woman?"

Aristespha shrugs with feigned coyness and averts her eyes up and away. "Oh, I don't know. All of them... In one place... In front of a few hundred people... On a question and answer forum, for two hours?"

Cideeda blinks, lowers her head, widens her grin, and taps a spot on her phone. Bach twists his mouth a few moments before firmly placing his finger tip on his phone screen, right on the same schedule spot. Dretphi quirks a brow, retrieves her phone from her shorts pocket, and quickly reads through the screens to find the current topic at hand. A crack of grin forms as she taps her phone screen, and casually places it back in her pocket. Sotalia darts her face between the others in confusion. "Um? I'm missing something. What is it?"

Aristespha spins and eases her tablet to Sotalia. Eyes traces through the literature on the screen, and Sotalia laughs to herself with a dark undertone. "Oh. Well, I know where I'll be tomorrow."

A directed voice calls out from the grath grills. Dretphi snaps her head towards the origin to see an older grath woman gesturing everyone at the table to come over. "The food is ready!"

She stands up, halts herself abruptly, and turns to the group. "Please enjoy what you want. I will pay. It is rare to enjoy this away from home. I want to honor all of you with this meal."

She waits patiently for the rest of the group to move before her, but her eyes betray her immediate desires as they sneak moments at the food. Sebastian smiles proudly at Dretphi and shakes his head. "Thank you for the honor, but there's no need to wait for us. Get over there."

Dretphi bows slightly to the group and happily rushes to be the first customer in the serving line.

A chorus of laughter echoes above the crowd around the simple wooden riser, cobbled stage in a large mall hallway intersection. Kaleb secures his pants with a pull, readjusts his helm back upon his head, and twists his fake breast plate back straight on his body. He stomps up

to a large stone prominently in the front center of the stage, rubs his gauntleted hands together, and firmly grips the sword stuck in the middle of the stone. He briefly lifts his head over his shoulder to a Shadeesa with a heroic grin and nod. "Don't worry my fair princess! I will have this sword out in no time and use it slay the dragon!"

Shadeesa rests her elbow on a handrail in front of her, props her head with an unamused expression on her face, and watches Kaleb with narrowing eyes from a platform decorated as a tower balcony. She sighs with a dramatic eye roll that flows her fanciful green princess dress and shakes her head to the crowd. "Heard that a few times before."

Kaleb's grin to the audience drops as he snaps his head back again. "Uh... A few times? How many times?"

With a dismissive wave, Shadeesa stands up, taps a finger to her chin, and glances around the stage. "Oh, I don't know anymore, I've lost count. How many charred suits of armor do you see around here?"

The eyes of the audience along with Kaleb trace the many piles of decorative armor pieces littering the stage, and all finally settle on the sword in the stone. Kaleb looks uncertain towards the crowd, returns his gaze to sword, and then frantically pulls at the sword. He tugs, yanks, and theatrically strains with each motion, all the while the sword remains solidly in place. "Come on! Don't be shy, sword! There's dragon to slay! FULFILL. YOUR. PURPOSE."

Shadeesa blinks dumbfounded and firmly facepalms as the struggle continues to greater and more ridiculous lengths. "Really? This is what it has come to?"

She darts her eyes over the side of the stage and gasps with both hands covering her mouth. Lagi casually and confidently strides on the stage, examines the crowd, and acknowledges their cheers and cries out. While Lagi works the crowd, Shadeesa directs a harshly loud whisper toward Kaleb. "HEY! HEY! HERO! BEHIND YOU!"

Kaleb continues to struggle at a feverish pace trying to work the sword loose from the stone, while the children in the audience chatter about the looming Lagi behind him. They point, wave, and scream. Lagi steps closer and closer, his opening mouth leading the rest of his body. Kaleb's loud grumbling and constant loud pleads to the sword seem to overtake his perception of the world around him. Lagi hovers his wide open mouth just behind and over Kaleb, who thematically powers all his remaining strength into one final yank of the sword. Kaleb plants his feet, grasps the sword with both hands, and whips his body up with a scream. "AHHHHHHh- Oooooohh GODS!"

The sword launches out of the stone, frees itself from Kaleb's grip as he fall backwards, and flies right into the awaiting mouth of Lagi. A long dramatic moment hangs in the air as Lagi's mouth slams shut around the sword, engulfing it. Kaleb scurries up off the floor to the side of the stage and watches Lagi the dragon warily. Lagi blinks, exaggerates staggers along the stage, gurgles out dramatic choking noises, and stiffly pauses in the middle of a spotlight upon him. With slow, careful grace, he places one fore paw on his chest, reaches up towards the light with another, and gazes into the heavens. The moment draws out to seconds before

the spotlight cuts out and Lagi unceremoniously flops onto the stage floor, releasing a final thematically contrary death cry. “Bleah.”

Kaleb slides step by step up to Lagi, checks with the crowd, shrugs, and pokes Lagi with a boot. He waits. He pokes again and waits again. Doubt no longer plaguing him, he assumes a bravado filled stance and gives a bright grin and wink to princess Shadeesa. “So? This counts, right?”

Shadeesa sternly crosses her arms with a huge twitch in her cheek, turns away with a flowing flare of her green dress, and walks out of view with her hands thrown to the sides. “I can’t believe THIS! Years of waiting and THIS is the...”

With a shrug and pivot to the crowd, Kaleb gazes out with a sly smile. “Well, I’m counting it.”

The lights cut out, the suspended stage curtain closes, and the audience cheers and applauds. Noises of movement sound out from behind the stage and stop as the curtains open back up. Kaleb holds Shadeesa’s hand up high. Lagi quickly spits out a wooden sword onto the stage floor, sways himself over to join in the bows Kaleb and Shadeesa perform. The curtain close a final time and a convention staffer flips the show sign over to reveal no further show times for the rest of the late evening.

The crowd disperses over a few minutes, leaving only a group of people standing nearby. Bach fumbles with his phone, but eventually gets it to play back a recording. He chuckles with an evil undertone and holds up the phone so Sebastian can get a clear view. “I’m so saving this.”

Sebastian grins and nods darkly. “Yes. If we could get in touch with that drama professor he took classes from.”

Bach snorts and shakes his head as the video continues. “Oh, yes. I’m sure that whole department would be laughing their asses off at Mister I’m-Just-Taking-These-To-Kill-Electives.”

Aristespha waves her hand at Bach and Sebastian, acquires their attentions, and directs them to follow around to the side of the stage. Aristespha, Bach, Cideeda, Dretphi, Sebastain, and Sotalia congregate near Kaleb, Shadeesa, and Lagi. Shadeesa quickly seizes another chair nearby, slides it over, and carefully hoists her legs, with dress in tow, upon the seat. “I’m so glad that’s the last show until late tomorrow. This princess needs to start wearing more comfortable shoes.”

Kaleb slips off the costume slippers from Shadeesa’s feet, tosses them into an open suitcase, and turns to the group. “Next script revision, I’ll work in the princess having gel insole work boots.”

Sebastian floats over to Kaleb and laughs with a smile. “That actually wasn’t too bad. Good to know all those theater classes came in handy.”

A sighing groan escapes Kaleb mouth and he rolls his eyes with a finishing shake of the head. "Well, I'm glad you enjoyed the show and didn't add too much commentary of your own. By the way, how's your hologram, illusion act been going?"

Sebastian shrugs with his hands out to the side. "Pretty good, I guess. Mostly compliments at how lifelike I am. No one seemed to recognize me or if they did they just thought I was joke done in poor taste. Everyone just thinks I'm some really amazing magical illusion."

Aristespha briefly looks away from admiring Shadeesa's elegant dress with Dretphi and Cideeda, and scoffs with a heavy dose of sarcasm. "Well, except for that one poor girl."

Kaleb narrows his stare quizzically at Sebastian. With an ethereal grumble and a palm firmly on the forehead, Sebastian sighs. "You know the sad part is, I really don't think that exorcism she tried was an act to her. She was so into it, I kind of felt bad when I was still standing there afterwards."

Bach glances between Shadeesa and Kaleb with a curious quirk of the brow. "So what are you two doing tomorrow?"

Shadeesa eyes Lagi with a playful roll of the eyes and smile. "Well, you know, pimping our dragon out to pay the bills."

Lagi gnaws on the wooden sword from the show, pauses when he notices the attention, shuffles the sword from his mouth underneath him, and attempts a disguise of innocence. Shadeesa shakes her head and returns to face the group. "Any particular plans yourselves?"

Bach digs out his battered guide from his pants pocket, unfolds it out, and flips through a number of pages. "Well, apart from one big event, I think I'm going to wander around the dealer room for awhile and-"

Sotalia blinks, scoots over to Bach's side, and squints at the page with her phone out. "Dealer room? What's that exactly?"

Bach opens the guide to a particular page with a map showing a section of the mall and circles out a large area with his finger. "Well, it's a huge area dedicated to shops and vendors of all varieties. They mostly just sell supposedly magical trinkets and-"

He winces when he realizes what he just said out loud. Sotalia's eye flit wide as she moves through menus on her phone to a picture gallery of the location, and grow even wider as she studies the pictures of the location. "Oh. We are definitely coming here tomorrow."

A distance away, Samantha and Gerald walk down a hallway of the mall towards the intersection. Samantha taps on her clipboard and nods to Gerald. "That should all work. They arrive tomorrow, do the first panel and-"

Samantha halts mid sentence to Gerald's pokes into her shoulder. She looks up from the clipboard, hoists her phone up, taps the screen a few times, and smiles sharply. "Oh. Howie is going to be so happy..."