

Ain't A Hero – Episode 2

by Bryan Schuder

Bach lays on the bed in his new bedroom. He stares above at the ceiling fan, as it spins and pushes air down. The bedroom is actually decent. It's the smallest in the house, but there's far better and more furniture than what his old place had. Bach plays with the alarm clock on the nightstand and realizes he can't remember ever having a nightstand at his old place. His attention shifts to points around the room. Despite circumstances leading to this point, he admits it's an improvement. A knock sounds from behind the door. Bach pulls himself to a seat on the bed. "Umm... Come in?"

The doors opens and Dretphi, the tall, strong Grath woman, walks in. She masterfully balances a large stack of clothes that are familiar to Bach in one hand, and holds onto the straps of a backpack in the other. With a quick twist and slide of the hand, she places the clothes stack on top of the wooden dresser. She continues walking forward to Bach, calmly holding out the backpack. "I have made sure to recover most of your belongings. I apologize that we had to go through them, but-

"I did run and try to escape... I honestly can't blame you there."

Bach grasps the backpack with both hands, pulls it into his lap, and unzips the top. He inspects it to find most of the major items. Dretphi drops her head slightly and sighs. "I have not recovered your holoplayer. Cideeda has that and refuses to let it out of her possession. She is difficult when she gets obsessive."

Bach pauses from sorting stuff along bed and gives Dretphi a slight smile. "Hey, I'm glad to get anything back. I mean apart from the holoplayer it looks like everything is here."

Dretphi places her hands on her hips. "Either of us may have better luck retrieving it later, when she finds another toy to obsess over."

Bach shrugs and puts the backpack down on the floor next to the nightstand. "Honestly, I really haven't felt like listening, reading, or watching anything lately. I'm trying to process everything that's happened in the last... two days? Wow..."

Concern hints through Dretphi's face as she breathes purposefully, crossing her arms. "That was not how we wanted our initial meeting to go. We have shown better respect to you..."

A few moments of silence punctuate the air. Bach holds his hands up. "Well, it wasn't my finest moment either. Half hour after I promised my brother in his time of need to help him... The first opportunity to actually get into adventuring... I tear off running like some chicken shit coward."

Bach lowers his head into his hands, shaking his head. Dretphi examines Bach and pulls a minute smile. "You are not a coward."

"How do you figure?"

Dretphi thinks for moment and meets Bach's eyes as his head lifts out of his hands. "After years of little contact, your ghost brother demands you help him destroy the evil that destroyed him. He knows you have never seriously adventured. Your brother's party is at your front door. You have very little time to pick up everything you established to join him. And it seems you have no choice."

Bach's eyes slide side to side in thought, before raising his head to resume looking at Dretphi. "That sounds about right."

Dretphi nods, "Not a desirable situation. You retreated. You hoped to get into a better position. Maybe force a change in the situation that would benefit you."

"Some would still say I ran like a coward."

"Some who have never been in bad situations."

Bach tilts his head to the side and focuses on Dretphi, fighting confusion on face. "I still might run away some more-"

The slight smile morphs seamlessly into a smirk. "You will not."

Bach's confusion taints with an incredulous twist. "I'm perfectly capable of making a good effort to escape."

"You are still here."

"Well, I-"

Dretphi perks a brow and maintains her gaze at Bach. "There have been opportunities for you to escape. You can dismiss your brother. Outrun me. Dodge Cideeda. Resist Aristespha's magic. Hold your own against Sotalia. There's an escape vehicle you are familiar with out in the garage. We are in an area we are not familiar with."

Bach opens his mouth to say something and fades back from saying anything. He crosses his arms and slouches forward, breaking eye contact with Dretphi as he idly scans the floor while his mind thinks.

"You did not attack us. Try to harm us. Attempt to sabotage us. Try to find escape routes last night. You came back from practice with Sotalia today. I stand without armor or weapon in my casual clothes, but there is no desire to attempt escape."

Bach sighs loudly and signals defeat. He shakes his head, shrugs, and places his hands on his knees, before looking up at Dretphi. He confirms that she is indeed wearing a simple dark green tank top, blue gym shorts, and socks. "You got me. I figuratively and literally have nothing left to hide. As awkward as it was yesterday, this is honestly the best opportunity presented to me in years. I get a chance to help my brother out, actually get into adventuring, and maybe keep Dark Lord Noxian from causing another world war in my lifetime."

Dretphi unfolds her arms and places her hands back to her hips. She gives a solid smile to Bach. "Good reasons. The ones I hoped to hear."

"But, I'll be honest, I have no real idea what I'm doing. I'm just doing what little I can that makes sense to me at the moment."

Dretphi shrugs. "A sentiment that I share some days."

Bach thinks within the quiet moment and scratches his head to briefly puzzle at Dretphi. "Not that I don't appreciate it, but you've been pretty open and straight forward to me."

"So have you. I hoped I would have caught you in the forest, so I could talk to you. Maybe explain the situation better. I wish Sebastian had gone with my recruitment plan."

"Which was?"

"Lunches and dinners with everyone to acquaint you. A chore quest from the local job board to give you a taste of adventuring. An offer to join us on your terms."

Bach nods with a mixture of mild surprise and amusement. "That probably would have worked pretty easily on me. I didn't have much going on. Why didn't he go with that plan?"

Dretphi rolls her eyes before she returns her attention at Bach. "Sebastian is impatient and Aristespha is encouraging it."

Bach twists his mouth, before gritting his teeth and hissing a breath in. "Yah... Sebastian is easy to convince when routes opposite of his mind are taken."

Genuine amusement warms to Dretphi's face. "I believe that is not a recent behavior."

Bach exaggerates a series of nods. "You are most correct in that belief."

Dretphi briefly glances towards the door and back. "I need to finish armor repair and continue laundry for everyone. I wish to start on good terms. Your training with me tomorrow will demand much from you. I wanted an understanding beforehand."

Upon hearing laundry, Bach leans over to the side to look around Dretphi and examines the stack of clothes more. "Wait. Did you wash my clothes?"

Dretphi pivots to the direction of the clothes on the dresser. "Yes. They had a smell to them."

Bach drops his eyes while rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment. Dretphi smirks slightly. "You need a change of clothes after what Sotalia did to your current ones. I gave your laundry priority."

Bach holds his shirt, checking out the holes and damage from Sotalia. He keeps his magical defenses close to his body, leaving clothes in harms way. He pokes his finger out of a hole in his shirt. "Thank you. Really. I really do mean it."

Dretphi shifts to a light smile and walks towards the door. "We will start early. Rest up. I will fit you for armor afterwards."

Bach watches Dretphi walk through the doorway and close the door. He stands up from the bed and steps over to the clothes stack. He sorts through the pile until he finds a shirt, peels off his old shirt, and works into the clean shirt. Bach resumes a seat on the bed. After a minutes of idle but deep thoughts, he plays around with the settings of the alarm clock, trying to get it set up for tomorrow.

Another early morning rises. Bach drags his feet each step to the next, moving towards the spot in the backyard Dretphi stands. He grumbles about the morning schedule one last time before arriving in front of Dretphi. Bach looks around the area and sees no equipment. "Huh. I thought you'd have some training gear or something..."

Dretphi shakes her head. "Not at this time. In the future. We focus on an exercise routine for you first."

Bach cringes and drops his head. "Okay..."

Dretphi crosses her arms and slowly moves right in front of Bach, her head craning to make direct eye contact. "When is the last time you exercised?"

Bach raises his head back up and averts his eyes from Dretphi's gaze as she tries to lock on. "Ahh- Umm... Well..."

Dretphi takes another step closer and tilts her head slightly down to finally intercept Bach's eyes. She only stares. The truth finally escapes Bach, seeking refuge far from Dretphi. "Dammit- I guess three- four years ago when I got on some self-improvement kick. I went full on for a day, ached for a week, and never did it again."

With a simple nod, Dretphi thinks for a moment. She perks a brow. "Stand up straight."

Bach shrugs. He rises out of the slouch, straightens his legs out, squares his shoulders, and pulls his head back. It takes a minute to settle into a posture he's uncomfortable with and so believes is proper posture. Dretphi circles around reaching out to adjust Bach's posture. She stops in front Bach and with a level head looks right into his eyes. "You might be taller than your brother."

"Really?"

"Your brother can look me in the eye with his boots on. You can with regular shoes. You need to stop slouching."

Bach's head pans down to his now more apparent gut. Dretphi reaches a hand out and firmly pokes a section of Bach's gut. "If this bothers you, do what I say."

Dretphi turns and steps away from Bach. He relaxes his stance and rubs the pain away from the poked section of his belly. Dretphi halts, spins to Bach, and points to the ground. "Set up for sit-ups. Do twenty five of them."

Bach blinks at Dretphi. She returns a stern glare. Bach warily walks over to the spot Dretphi points to, lays down on the ground with his knees up, and puts his hands behind his head. Bach breathes in and out a few times and attempts to lift his upper body up. He closes his eyes, grits his teeth, grunts and groans. The meager momentum dies short of halfway through the sit-up. He strains in place for a seconds, before the remaining hold-outs of his pride and honor finally abandon him. Bach's upper body drops onto the grass, punctuated with a sad sigh. He keeps his eyes closed, shame plain on his face. "You know you probably have exercise you need to do. I'll work on this. No one needs front row seats to witness this shit show."

Dretphi eases down to a spot beside Bach and prepares for sit-ups, too. Bach hears movement beside him and opens his eyes to her looking right back at him. "You are correct. I need to do twenty five sit-ups."

Without a bit of hesitation, Dretphi cleanly and properly does a sit-up and calmly sets up for the next. "Your turn."

A mix of emotions contend for a place on Bach's face. With an exhale, Bach steels himself for another attempt at a sit-up. "You realize I'm about to embarrass my entire lineage."

Dretphi nods. "Let them be embarrassed now. You will impress them later."

Bach closes his eyes, grits his teeth, and grunts as he tugs his upper body to his knees. Similar to the last attempt, he runs out of strength right before the halfway point. As the strain is about to get the best of him, Bach feels a hand on his back and gradual force pushing him forward. With the extra little bit of force to get over the halfway point, Bach pulls himself the rest of the way up. He lowers himself slowly back down and pauses staring at the passing clouds in the skies above him and Dretphi. "I... I knew this was going to be demanding physically. The psychological... Not something I anticipated."

Dretphi gazes at the clouds above, too. "When we take a break, I will tell you of my first time training with my birth father."

"Does it include embarrassing the family name?"

Dretphi smirks slightly as she executes a sit-up and readies for the next. "Does almost stabbing one of my house fathers with a magic sword count?"

"I'll count it."

"Your turn."

Bach shakes the grimace off to determination and attempts another sit-up.

“Twenty- URK. Five!”

Bach collapses face first into the grass, quickly turning his head to rapidly gasp for breath. Dretphi swiftly switches from a push-up stance to a sitting position next to Bach. “Your other exercises need work. But. Your push-ups are not bad.”

Bach draws the strength to roll up and face the sky, still breathing heavily with his shirt soaked in sweat. “I’m just glad I didn’t have to resort to the cheater push-ups.”

Bach rests his head towards Dretphi. “I’m going to ache so much tomorrow.”

Dretphi calmly breathes deep and wipes a few beads of sweat off her forehead. She leans forward and lifts herself up. She holds down a hand to Bach. “Yes. You will be sore. You should still do the stretches I showed you.”

Bach clumsily lifts a hand to grab onto Dretphi’s. He throws himself up and she pulls him up the rest of the way. “I’ll try. But, I’ll be honest, the pain might be too much right in the morning... I’ll try in the afternoon.”

Dretphi strolls towards the house, stretching her arms and back along the way. She gestures Bach to follow. She reaches into the side pocket of her shorts and pulls out an Aether phone. A few taps and a time appears on the screen. “That’s all for now. Lunch will be ready soon.”

“Really?! Did I really take that long?”

“We did walk the laps in between the exercises.”

Bach hangs his head. “Yah...”

Dretphi slow down and waits for Bach to move next to her. She pats his back. “Hold yourself to high standards. Do not hang yourself with them.”

Bach’s eyes shift along with his head to Dretphi. “Is that another one from your birth father?”

She nods with a smile. “Yes. He has many. Despite all he taught me, I am certain he has more saved for the right moment.”

“Still can’t believe you nearly harpooned your house father.”

Dretphi sighs and shrugs. “My birth father warned him to not sit close when we sparred. It is not the worse that has happened to him. I have heard tales from my mother about how wild of adventurers they were.”

“So, three fathers and one mother in your house?”

“Yes. My mother and birth father were the heads of it.”

“That sounds like an interesting childhood.”

Dretphi tilts her head side to side gauging her thoughts. "I do not know. It seems normal to me. The only excitement ever came from my two younger brothers getting into trouble."

Bach nods and groans. "Know how that can go."

Dretphi grows a subtle, sly smirk. "Any tales to share about your brother?"

Bach chuckles evilly as he flashes a devious smile to Dretphi. "Oh, I got plenty. I'm sure he's told you about his heroic exploits in High Alton?"

Dretphi rolls her eyes and nods begrudgingly. "Yes. Many. Many. Times."

"Ever tell you all the time he called me at three in the morning from the bathroom of another dorm with two Fvalian women getting into a territorial fight in the bedroom?"

Dretphi eyes shoot open wide in honest absolute shock and she faces Bach. She points Bach to a walking path near the house that leads away. "Can we walk more?"

"Yes. Yes we can."

Bach walks out of the shower stall, grabbing a towel to dry off. He wraps the towel around his head to absorb water from his long hair. He puts on underwear, a loose fitting shirt, and a pair of old shorts. His muscles feel mildly annoyed rather than sore, but tomorrow will not be so kind. He opens the bathroom door, carrying dirty clothes and towels, and makes his way down the hall to the large living room. Dretphi looks up from sorting through laundry and points to a basket. Bach tilts the basket up with his foot and sees his name written on it. "Nice. Thanks."

"It makes it easier."

Bach deposits dirty clothes into his basket, and the towels into the community basket. "So, when do you want to fit me for armor?"

Dretphi finishes the last stack of clothes and sweeps it onto the couch. She reaches for a large toolbox nearby and slides it along the floor next to her. "Now. Stand here. Straight posture with your arms out."

Bach side steps to the spot Dretphi indicates. She flips the toolbox open and takes out a tape measure. She leans forward, gets to her feet, and pulls out a length of the measuring tape. She kneels down, tucking an end between Bach's big and second toe, and leading the rest up to near the top his head. "190 to 192 centimeters? Hmm."

Dretphi continues her examination with other measurements along various points on Bach's body. She write a few down on a notepad on the coffee table. The sliding glass door opens. Sotalia casually and happily strides in. "Ahhh... I was dubious about spending the extra coin a month for a hot tub. But, I. Am. Sold, now."

She waits moment to figure out what is exactly going on with Bach as he stands still with his arms out. Sotalia sees Dretphi taking measurements, then the clean laundry in her basket behind Bach. She flings the colorful beach towel draping on her to Bach's outstretched arm. She struts by Bach in her two piece bathing suit with a smirk. Bach blinks in momentary confusion as he twists his head to check the towel now hanging off his arm. He mutters to himself. "Really?! The fuck?!"

Dretphi leans away from Bach to look at Sotalia. "I got most the stains out of your armored cloak."

Sotalia quickly digs through the basket and pulls out the cloak. "Oh, thank you! The enchantments on this thing always interfere with any cleaning spells try. What did you end up using?"

"Denatured alcohol."

Sotalia holds the cloak away from her and examines it thoroughly. "Wow! That was tougher than I thought. Amazing work as usual, Dretphi."

Dretphi resumes her attention to Bach, taking more measurements and writing them down. Bach maintains a lazy gaze forward. He attempts to trance out, but another object falling onto his arm with the towel interrupts. Bach's head slowly rotates and tilts down to see the new article on the draped towel. Parts of Bach's brain puzzle at what exactly is now on his arm, when a streak of insight erupts forth with an answer. The article is the top to Sotalia's bathing suit. Bach eyes widen as the rest of his mind confirms. Mere moments later, another article lands on Bach's arm. It is the bottom of the bathing suit. Bach carefully pivots his head forward with eyes locked center.

"Yes! Nothing like putting on freshly dried clothes!"

Bach feels a force attempt to pivot him around. His head snaps down to glare at Dretphi as she attempts to spin him around by grabbing his waist. She glances up from reading her measures on the notepad. "I need to double-check measurements on your other side."

Bach's eyes look at hers, look the parts of Sotalia's bathing suit, and hint over his shoulder repeatedly in rapid succession. Dretphi returns with indifference, the impedance of her task simmering annoyance. Bach feels her grip tighten and watches her arms ready. He quietly pleads to Dretphi. "No. Don't. She throws fire."

Dretphi torques Bach in place, spinning him around to greet the clothed Sotalia. She finishes slipping on a shirt, pulling it into place. She lifts her head up with a sly grin, steps forward, and reaches for her towel and bathing suite on Bach's arm. "Thank you. I didn't want these to pick up dust and dirt from the floor."

Bach waits to feel his heart resume beating before responding. "Not a problem?"

Sotalia strides to the hallway and exchanges a glance with Dretphi out of eye sight of Bach. Dretphi perks a brow at Sotalia, who only responds by holding her hands up in the air in a

grand dramatic shrug flavored with a playful sarcasm. Dretphi rolls her eyes before resuming business. "Sotalia. Could you bring out the backup equipment chest?"

Sotalia stops in thought. "Is it the one in the store room or the office?"

"Store room."

"Be right back."

Dretphi taps Bach's arms. "You can rest your arms now."

Bach drops his arms to the sides, taking a few moments to roll the aches out of his shoulders. Sotalia drags in a large metal, machined chest that serves as a frame to a series of thin drawers. "So what are you going to put him in?"

Dretphi kneels down and slides out one of the drawers. Bach moves closer to the chest, just as Dretphi reaches her whole arm into the few centimeter thick drawer. "Wow! A chest of linked pocket dimensions?!"

Sotalia quickly shakes her head. "Nah. Folded space frames."

Bach leans in closer to the chest to examine it. "Ah! I heard these are becoming popular."

Sotalia gets on her knees next to the chest and opens the top lid. It opens to reveal a volume slightly larger than the chest itself with the frame acting as doorway. This space is filled with bits and pieces of armor, weapons, and tools. Sotalia digs around and holds a wearable, adjustable flashlight to Bach. "Oh, yes. We had a few bags of holding and a chest of storage. But, after one bag lost connection to its pocket, we all decided to switch over to the folded space chests."

Bach takes the flashlight in hand. "Better to have your stuff launch out onto this plane of existence than the pocket drift in another."

Sotalia groans and shudders. "I know. It took Aristespha a month of her communing with spirits every night and astral projecting before we tracked that pocket down and relinked it. Almost lost my arcane book collection."

Dretphi lifts herself and her arms out of the drawer with her hands holding something. "Nearly lost a rare rifle in the same pocket."

Sotalia and Bach both train their eyes on the object Dretphi holds. Sotalia quirks with surprise when she recognizes it. "That's Sebastian's OLD helmet. The first one I ever saw him in."

Bach reaches his hand out to it with a smile on his face. Dretphi passes it to Bach. "Wow. He kept it."

Both Dretphi and Sotalia exchange interested looks and look to Bach. Bach rolls the high tech helmet in his hands, pausing to inspect signs of battle damage. "Yah. Sebastian spent his all his summer job money getting his first full suit of armor. He didn't have enough money

for a good helmet. So, I did some research and got him this one. Titanium mesh construction, ceramic plating armor, a kevlar outer coat, ballistic visor, and attachable respirator mask. Did some basic magic deflection enchantments, too.”

He holds the helmet down in one hand and clicks on the flashlight to shine into it. “Even personalized it a bit for Sebastian.”

Sotalia grasps the helmet and adjusts it to her view. Her eyes widen then squint as she reads the text. “With a skull as thick as yours, you probably won’t need this. But every warrior needs a helmet to hold in photographs. Love ya, you shithead. Bach.”

Dretphi leans herself up with head next to Sotalia’s to read the writing, too. “I never knew this was written here.”

Sotalia leans back on her hands laughing. “Well, that explains why he never let anyone else hold the helmet for very long.”

“Yah. Don’t know how much he used it-”

Dretphi continues searching in the chest. “All the time.”

Sotalia grins at Bach. “Oh yah. First sign of trouble, that helmet went right on his head. It out lasted a few suits of armor. I think he was looking for suit to go with it for a long time.”

Bach smiles hearing that.

Dretphi stirs around the next drawer, but takes moment to glance at Bach. “There is armor that can go with that. I think you should try it.”

Bach works the adjustment mechanisms in the helmet and fits it onto his head. “Let’s see what we got.”

The alarm clock beeps constantly. From under the bed covers, a hand emerges to seek out the source of the jarring noise. With a collapsing strike, the hand drops on top of the alarm clock’s snooze button and remains motionless. Moments later, the body attached to the hand stirs under the sheets. The bed linens pull away from the head board and reveal the awkwardly morning adverse face of Bach. One eye opens and aims at the alarm clock, slowly drifting in a scan of the room. Stopping at the coat rack, now an impromptu armor stand, Bach admires the eclectic assembly of armor: His brothers helmet, a synthetic fiber duster, composite shoulder pads, a segmented kevlar breastplate, a pair of plain plate bracers, leather gloves, combination shin and knee guards, and a pair of old mithril/adamantite alloy plated boots from Dretphi. The boots also have gel insoles from Dretphi’s supply, as per her personal recommendation.

Bach remembers Dretphi’s mild expression of curious approval at the configuration. He grumbles as he distinctly remembers Sotalia’s failure to contain her laughter as she asked how he was suppose to cast spells in that. A thought echoes in his mind, “Note to self...

Casting the Hover Disc spell with a dramatic flip of the middle finger is to be avoided in the future. Also, expect more cheap shots when sparring with Sotalia.”

Bach gazes back up at the ceiling fan and grins. At least his brother thinks his armor looks fucking awesome. Bach finally concedes to start his day. He moves and sits up with great enthusiasm... and immediately freezes. His eyes widen, face contorts, and mouth emits a faint strangled yelp of pain. His seized body falls to the side on the bed. Bach moans and hopes the post-work out muscle pain will subside in time.

Bach runs the water from the kitchen sink faucet in his bowl, swirling it around before dumping it into the sink. With a quick rinse, he cleans the spoon and places both the bowl and spoon in the dish washer. He slowly walks over to the dining room table where Cideeda is already laying out weapons, boxes, tools, and parts out on the surface. With a wince and strain from muscle, Bach settles into a chair across from Cideeda. “So, what’s your training going to be about?”

Cideeda blinks blankly at Bach. She searches her mind as the large furry ears on the sides of her head twitch in sync to the passing thoughts. With perk of the ears and sharp smile, she leans to the side to reach down on the floor. One at a time, she places three small stylish wooden lockboxes on the table and slides them to Bach. She then leans the other way reaching down the tabletop, grasps hold of something in a satchel, and with a flip unrolls a very worn and old set of lockpicks. “You can help me unlock these things!”

Bach examines the tools before him. He rolls a pick between his fingers, inspecting ever bit of it. “You want me to open these... with these lockpicks?”

Cideeda tilts her head to one side, lowers her ears, and narrows her eyes at Bach. “What’s wrong with that?”

He holds the pick closer and closer to Cideeda. “This pick is almost worn to nothing! I mean, I’ll try! But don’t expect any results any time soon.”

A sly smirk, a quirk of a brow, and lift of the ears, Cideeda reaches and presses Bach’s hand back to him with a finger. “Good, you do have some knowledge. I want you to try. And no cheating!”

Bach growls as he pulls his hand back the rest of way and grabs a torque wrench from the set. “Fine. What are these anyway?”

Cideeda scoots a metal chest along the tabletop to her and sets it up for her operation. “Those? Some old personal chests we found in an old ruin. Probably don’t have much in them, since Sotalia and Aristespha didn’t detect anything. But, the chests are in good shape and early era is really popular right now.”

“Really?”

She lifts her head up from attention to something below the tabletop and nods excitedly at Bach. "Oh, yah! I've got buyers willing to give me a couple hundred for each one even before I do any clean-up on them. Kids these days and anything retro."

Bach rotates one of the small chests around on the tabletop, his examining in disbelief. "A few hundred for this?"

Cideeda shrugs and rolls her eyes, shaking her head. "I don't make the fads. I just sell to them."

Bach nods in agreement and drops his focus upon the small box in front of him. He inserts the torque wrench loosely in his the old lock and feels around the inside of the lock with the pick in hand. He concentrates to dredge up old lessons from adventuring school and all the times he had to spring Sebastian out of awkward situations. Sifting for relevant knowledge, he breaks from the trance as the unmistakable sound of a high speed, geared motor spins up. Bach snaps his head up from the task to see Cideeda wrapping a bandanna on top of her head, pulling her multi-colored hair out of her face. She snaps up and flips out some safety glasses from the table. Finally, she hoists up a cordless power drill with one hand and a loads a drill bit into the chuck. Indignation manifests as a sneer upon Bach's face, with his hands turning upwards. Cideeda grasps hold of the drill's chuck, then feels something. Her ear closest to Bach twitches and she pivots her head toward him. She meets his sneering face with awkward confusion. "What?! These metal chests aren't worth THAT much and I can recore the lock once I drill the old one out."

Disbelief squeezes next to indignation as the sneer on Bach's face breaks down to puzzlement. "NO. CHEATING?"

Cideeda quirks momentarily before drawing a smug smirk with a strange seductive highlight in the eyes to Bach. "Oh. That. You see, you are a beginner and need to learn. I am expert."

The drill briefly spins up and jerks to stop as the held chunk spins down to a halt on a the drill bit inside.

"Experts get to cheat."

Bach holds the small, stamped gold token in his hand. "Are you sure?"

Cideeda nods. "Yes! You unlocked all the chests and kept the locks working! That's at least fifty a piece I can charge more for them being historically intact."

Bach ponders a few moments and pockets the token. "No objections here."

Cideeda digs around the area below and near her chair, tail occasionally flicking up into view. "And I saw how little you had in your wallet."

Silence punctuates Bach's unamused expression. Cideeda's hand places tools and other items from the floor onto the table. Most notable is Bach's holoplayer. Bach watches Cideeda carefully as she arranges rifles, pistols, blades, and tools on the table and drops down below the tabletop to sort through containers on the floor. When Cideeda dips down, Bach makes his move. He slowly reaches his arm over the table, glancing between his hand and Cideeda's bent over back. As his open hand hovers over the holoplayer, Bach feels five sharp pin pricks around the base of his forearm. He halts his arm and realizes Cideeda's hand grasping his forearm, each claw point on each finger in position. His stare shifts along her arm to see a pair of focused eyes greeting his. Bach attempts to close his hand around the holoplayer and retreats as five claw points dig in sync into his arm. He makes other motions to acquire his holoplayer and each is met with an equal amount of clawed deterrent. After a few minutes, Bach moves his arm away. The grip around his arm loosens until a complete release. Bach rubs his arm, the five pressure marks from Cideeda's claw still visible.

Cideeda grows an evil, toothy grin. "Not today?"

Bach shaking his head in defeat. "Not today."

She sits back up in the chair, the grin fading to a happy smile. "Good! Because today I want to give you a gun!"

Bach put off-guard by the quick change of attitude. "Really? Okay. That sounds good. I wouldn't mind having one."

Cideeda happily slides pistol to Bach. "That's what I like to hear. Here's one I picked out for you."

Bach continues sliding it closer to himself to inspect. "It... It's an Arc and Spark Plasma-Um. Damn, what model is it- Ah... Shit. It's been awhile. Plasma Power Pulse Six?"

Cideeda fidgets in her seat with giddiness. "Correct! And it's yours to use if..."

Bach picks up the pistol and does some routine checks. "If?"

A sly air hangs around Cideeda. "If, you can get it to work."

Bach sighs, but continues to examine the pistol. "So what's wrong with it."

Cideeda rolls her eyes and grumbles. "Well. Sotalia says she doesn't know. But, I think she tried experimenting on it and fucked it up."

Bach looks up from the pistol to Cideeda. "What exactly did she fuck up?"

She coyly rests her chin on her hand and winks. "That's for you to find out."

Bach pinches the bridge of nose and groans. "Fine. Give me some decent tools and I'll get it fixed."

Cideeda slides a flat rectangular box to Bach apologetically biting her lower lip. “Well, good luck on that. Here’s the service kit I got back from her.”

He flips the lid of the kit and his expression deflates to incredulous disappointment. “What the-?! I guess these will work, but damn. I don’t know how you expect me to do this-”

Cideeda leans in towards Bach and asks him directly, “By the way. How did you do the mods to the holoplayer?”

Bach puzzles a second and shifts his attentions to Cideeda. “What do you mean? I just installed the mod chips and did the tweaks.”

Cideeda’s tone reveals genuine curiosity and honest inquiry. “How did you DO it? The method. The warranty seals are intact. The mods are done, but there is no sign of the disassembly needed to install them. The work from what I can tell is ridiculously clean. You know tech, you may have done this. But, I can’t figure out how.”

Bach presents a smug smirk and confidently sits back in the chair, placing his hands together by the finger points. “I’ll show you. But I want my holoplayer back-”

Cideeda narrows her gaze and curls a lip up around a canine.

Bach continues, “In a few months after you have enjoyed borrowing it.”

Cideeda scratches her chin and soon begrudgingly nods. “I can work with that.”

Bach holds his hand out flat, places the plasma pistol on top with the other hand, then hovers the free hand over. A blue glow flickers in his eyes. For nearly a minute Bach is motionless save a few facial twitches. Cideeda leans forward watching for any signs of activity. She just shifts back in her seat when both her ears find a target. With a twist and turn, Bach moves his hands perpendicular to the table and slowly draws them apart. The pistol erupts in activity as it floats in the middle of Bach’s hands. Both sequentially and simultaneously, screws spin out, latches depress and release, components unlock, and pieces drift methodically away along paths. When Bach’s hands stop, the pistol hovers, exploded into its assembly pieces. Cideeda’s jaw drops, her pupils wide open, and bright wonderment adorns her face.

Bach smirks and rolls his eyes. “You know this is technically cheating.”

Cideeda holds a finger up. “You under the supervisor of an expert. After this one... Can we do a few more?”

Bach sighs and shakes his head. “I don’t know. I have to check out all these parts on this pistol you gave me-”

Without taking her eyes off the scene, Cideeda holds up a part. “She fried the main power coupling. Here’s a spare.”

The power coupling hovers out of Cideeda’s fingers. The bad power coupling drops onto the table top as the new part moves into place. Bach slides his hands underneath the scene. In

almost perfect reverse, the pistol reassembles itself. A flurry of activity as components lock in place, pieces snap together, and screws tighten. The plasma pistol feather falls down to Bach's awaiting hand. He presses the self-test button, and the pistol status lights blink different colors. They all turn on and stay green, with a happy digital chirp signaling the end of the self-test.

The kitchen back door opens with Sotalia backing into the room with a wrapped pack of sports drinks. She hoists up the pack on the counter and opens the fridge. She pokes a hole into the plastic wrap and rips open pack, then loads them into the fridge.

"Hmm. Doesn't feel right..."

"You have to release the clip first."

"Ah, there we go."

"Shit. The sear spring bent again! I'm going to have a word with Ralado next time I see him. That's the second spring I got from him that's done that. Well, here's a replacement."

"And back together we go."

Sotalia breaks loading the fridge. She takes a bottle from the pack and moves over to the bar window into the kitchen, shifting attention to Bach and Cideeda at the dining table. Cideeda lifts up a rifle and places it in Bach's open hands. Sotalia twists opens the bottle and tilts it to drink, pondering why Cideeda is expectantly waiting her seat. Sotalia catches the blue flicker in Bach's eyes, then her mind attempts to understand the rifle rapidly self-disassembling midair. She attempts to gasp in shock, drawing the sport drink into her airway. Her lungs realize the error and forcefully send the fluid back up. A portion of the sport drink returns to the bottle, most of it expels out the mouth and nasal passages. Sotalia slams the bottle on the counter, and launches her self to the kitchen sink. She hacks, gags, and wretches as her body sorts out which way fluids and gases should go. Bach and Cideeda search in the direction of the kitchen. Bach's eyes still glow as the rifle disassembly floats. "Are you going to make it?"

Sotalia rips off some paper towels from the nearby roll and quickly wipes the combination of orange sport drink and spittle off her face, with some attempt to clean her splattered shirt. She darts from the kitchen into the dining area, pointing at the hovering rifle in pieces. "WHAT IS THIS?!"

Bach shrugs in confusion at Sotalia's outburst, "Just something I've been working on since adventuring school. It was originally going to be my master's thesis."

Sotalia calms herself down, pulls a chair out next to Bach, and sits. Before speaking, she halts herself, holds up a finger, and turns her head to the hallway entry. "Aristespha! Could you come in here! Like, right now!"

Aristespha's voice disapprovingly echoes down the hallway. "I am in the middle of important-"

Sotalia interrupts. "Just get in here! You need to see this!"

A series of faint footsteps hit the hardwood floors, eventually the proper and dignified figure of Aristespha trots out into the room. "What is this all about?"

Aristespha processes the scene and the words stop in her mouth. Sotalia gestures at her and to the floating disassembled rifle. Sebastian's ethereal form passes through the wall. He looks at everyone, then Bach, and finally notices what everyone is looking at. "Holy shit, bro! You've gotten really good at that! Much better than you were back in school!"

Sotalia and Aristespha lock onto each others faces, then cooperatively turn their gazes to Sebastian. Sebastian feels a strange sensation that pulls him from his wonderment at Bach's recent spectacle. He bounces his head between the condemning expressions of Sotalia and Aristespha, settling on Aristespha. "Don't look at me like that! I told you about his research! Even what it was-"

"You said he was looking into ways to take apart things."

Sebastian pointing. "Was I wrong?!"

Aristespha darkly narrowing her eyes at Sebastian. "No. You were correct."

Sebastian cringes. "How do you make that sound like bad a thing?!"