

Ain't A Hero – Episode 20

by Bryan Schuder

Rows upon rows of dealer booths sprawl out along the set paths of the dealer hall. People ebb and flow through the aisles between the booths, with individuals stopping to admire merchandise or hear a sales pitch. Magical baubles, reproduction weapons, games, artworks, crafts, and other sundry prominently present themselves upon booth displays and receive praise from their owners in hopes to bolster the desire enough for the elusive purchase. Sotalia excitedly zips through the spaces between people from one booth to the next, often brushing her dark red hair to the side to gaze in wide, golden eye wonder at what awaits her in a particular booth. Bach wanders aimlessly, searching the crowd a few aisles over. He scratches his head of brown hair with strands of gray and can only express honest bewilderment at the moment. “Where the hell did she go?”

Cideeda blinks her emerald green eyes, with the faintest hint of a wince in the very corner of her eye, as the pupils track the other energetic Fvalian in front of her. She calmly guides her short cut, patterned mixture of brown, white, tan, orange, and black hairs back over her long furry ears. Her ear briefly, reflexively flicks when a stray hair tickles the fur inside, but levels back to point out from the side of her head. She maintains a toothy and outwardly cheery smile with the occasional searching dart of her eyes revealing the forced nature behind it. She nods calmly with the conversation washing upon her from a very enthusiastic Deedri. Her light brown skinned hand slides purposefully and slowly into her shorts pocket and retrieves her aetherphone. She aims the screen of the phone to her sight, quickly taps a message with claw tips of her other hand, and flexes her toe claws into the flat hall carpet. With a few flicks of her tufted, medium length tail, she shifts her lithe, fit frame into another variant of her previous stance. With an acknowledging nod from Cideeda, Deedri finally stops her long explanation and sighs. “I’m so sorry... I’ve been talking your head off. I’m not used to meeting other Fvalian’s that aren’t family. Especially other adventurers!”

Cideeda portrays a nonchalant smile and tilt of the head. “It’s okay. I understand, really. It sounds like you’ve been doing some very exciting things with your group.”

Deedri attempts a similar expression but honesty hinders the progress and she settles for a shrug. “Well, you know. They really do try, despite our... interesting... dynamic.”

A crack of a grin forms in the corner of Cideeda’s mouth and she perks a brow. “That I have seen.”

Deedri’s eyes awkwardly avert from the subject in her mind. She drops her focus down and then locks onto Cideeda’s feet. “I HAVE to ask you something... Where DID you get those shoes?”

Blinks of puzzlement flutter on Cideeda’s face and she glances down herself to examine the rubber and fabric, individual toed shoes with holes for her claws. Deedri bites her lip, takes a deep breath, and sighs. “I’ve seen you wear them. And, I’m honestly really jealous. They look so nice and... I bet they are so comfortable.”

Cideeda shifts her gaze up and studies the regular looking canvas top shoes on Deedri's feet. Her attention rises up and she scrutinizes the regular knee socks, tasteful but mundane skirt, and average top that Deedri currently wears. Cideeda settles her eyes upon Deedri's pleading, auburn eyes. With genuine smile and brief relax of her body language, Cideeda taps up an aethernet site on her phone and reveals it to Deedri. "This is the company that makes them. They specialize in custom clothing for Fvalians. I've used them for many years and they work with you to get the sizing just right."

Deedri beams as she shuffles through her pockets, extracts her phone, and quickly makes a note of the site. "Thank you, so much! These last few small jobs we've been on have left my feet aching."

Cideeda guides Deedri through the aethersite on Deedri's phone, points out a few pairs of shoes, gloves, pants, and shorts. Bach rounds corner of a nearby booth back, scans the area with his aetherphone out, and spots Cideeda with a wave. "Hey! Sorry about taking so long. I lost Sotalia somewhere in the mix and tried to find her."

As Bach walks up to Cideeda, Deedri's eyes flit wide and her body language stiffens slightly. Cideeda pivots to Bach and rolls her eyes. "Not surprised. Don't worry. She'll show back up when she's either too loaded or too broke to continue."

Excitement from nervous energy leaps upon Deedri's face and she exaggerates a glance at her aetherphone. "Oh no! I'm so sorry, I need to run and get ready! Thank you so much! It was really nice to talk you!"

Deedri briefly awaits Cideeda's glance, happily smiles, bows, and rushes off into the river of people nearby. Cideeda watches Deedri slip away into the masses, rests her hands upon her hips, and puzzles about the sudden departure. "Strange."

Bach alternates his glances between Cideeda and the crowd Deedri disappeared into, before looking to Cideeda with awkward confusion. "Wow. Uh. Sorry, if I scared your friend away. I didn't mean to intrude."

Cideeda lifts an eyebrow at Bach with a twist in her mouth and crosses her arms. "I wouldn't say friend. More of a professional acquaintance at the moment."

Recognition dawns upon Bach and he opens up his eyes with a quick snap of the head to Cideeda. "Wait! That was-"

Cideeda nods simply, narrows her eyes at Bach with a curious grin, and lifts her ears up. "Yes, it was. She was really eager to talk to me. But, she was a bit... nervous about you."

Bach shrugs with his hands out to the sides and grits with a hint of a frown. "Uh, I really don't know. That's the second time I've been close enough to even to talk to her."

Cideeda pivots in place, lifts her arm up to prop her chin up, and stares into the crowd pondering. "I know. Certainly strange to say the least."

Steve rests his elbow upon the booth table, as he leans his large, heavy frame over to hold his tablet out in front of Bach's vision. He grins as he enthusiastically points out parts of the video playing on the tablet screen. "Come on, man! What's your opinion on this? I've been on a dozen forums and no one can agree upon what is going on to make that wand!"

Bach uncomfortably eyes the tablet screen, suppresses a corner twist on his mouth, and expresses a blatant shrug to Steven. He carefully glances over to Steve, averting direct eye contact to focus upon the merchandise in Amaranth's Wrath Game Emporium's booth. "Well, maybe it's just non-standard direct casting?"

Steve sways his head side to side in internal debate before circling a finger over another point in video, his eyes squinting. "I thought about that. But, that doesn't explain all this. This is stabilized magical energy. At least... That's what a few people on a few forums think it is. That usually requires a whole lab or altar or some kind of dedicated setup to do."

A low buzz vibrates the loose change in Bach's pocket and he pulls out his aetherphone enough to catch the brief message notification from Cideeda. He slides the phone back in his pocket, scans around the area quickly, and settles his gaze at Steve. "Well, I'm being summoned, I'll catch you later."

Steve lowers the tablet upon on the table top, sits back down in his chair behind the booth, and smiles with a knowing wink. "Ah, I totally understand, man! Don't need to keep you and get you into trouble with her."

Bach summons up an appreciative nod, pauses a moment as a thought wedges a bit of guilt into his mind, and sighs. "Hey, I just wanted to apologize for not telling you about being part of an adventuring group and everything. Kind of new to it all, so..."

A hearty laugh shakes out of Steve and he shakes his head with wide, happy smile. "It's cool, man! People come to my shop to get away from work. I totally so I understand. But, I figured you guys might be adventurers with the stuff Cideeda sells, or at least have some awesome connections. I'm just totally stoked you guys come to my shop! Those Next Adventurers guys haven't even looked at my place. You all are cool in my book."

Bach extends a hand with chuckling smile to Steve, shakes Steve's strong grip, and nods as he walks off into the flow of people traffic. He searches the vicinity briefly before continuing forward and ponders to himself while scratching his head.

Bach arrives next to Cideeda in a pocket of space between the flows of convention goers. "Thanks for the message."

Cideeda glances up with a sly grin. "I walked near there and saw Steve trying to get your opinion on one of those videos. Figured I'd give you an easy out."

A long sigh of relief escapes from Bach's lungs and he tilts his head back to gaze up. "Yes. I didn't think it'd be THAT popular."

Cideeda places her hands on her hips and perks an eye brow with short smile. “Didn’t think that showcasing an unusual form of magic at a convention dedicated to everything adventuring would be popular?”

Bach levels his head forward, narrows his eyes at Cideeda, and slumps his shoulders down as he stares ahead of himself, examining the obvious error in his mind. “Point taken.”

He thinks for a moment and scratches the beard hairs on his chin. Cideeda focuses her gaze upon Bach as she shifts her weight from one foot to another foot with a wag of the tail. “Plotting your next great reveal?”

After a blink, Bach shakes his head and crosses his arms. “No. But, the thought did cross my mind to maybe make a few more of those focus wands. I know Steve would be interested.”

He quirks an eyebrow and smiles at Cideeda. “I know you don’t usually mess with magic, but would you be interested in one? There’s a few simple but really useful effects I may be able to get working.”

Cideeda slowly drifts her eyes away from Bach and lets them wander around the area. She bites her lip to keep her frown from pulling down too hard and hints of sadness leak into her exhale. “No thank you. It’d be useless with me.”

Bach’s expression lightens, a positive tone reinforces his voice, and he gestures confidently. “Hey! Don’t say that. It’s frustrating initially, but once you get the basics of magical flow, it starts to make sense.”

He notices Cideeda’s stare into his eyes, sees the sadness tinge her smile, and halts speech with a mix of concern and confusion. Cideeda takes in a deep breath and sighs. “I really wish I could do magic. But... You’re not the only one with a magical disability.”

A flush of embarrassment floods up Bach’s apologetic face and he struggles with a few words in his mouth. Cideeda breaks the gloom with a strong smile and shakes her head. “Don’t feel that way. No one told you.”

She averts her gaze briefly to release the last few clinging bits of melancholy. With a squirming shudder of her posture, she straightens herself back her usual confidence and looks to Bach. “Long story short. Had a run in with a Nightmare Geist, too. I was really young and it attacked my town. I guess, it grazed me? Didn’t remember all that much from the attack. Just knew some adventurers fended it off and sealed it before I got killed.”

She crosses her arms takes in a deep breath, glances forward, and continues. “Unfortunately, I was somehow left unable to flow magic. Something always disrupts the flow no matter how hard I try. No medical mage has an exact clue why.”

With an accepting shrug and shake of her head, Cideeda rolls her eyes to Bach with a rumbling sarcastic tone. “Which is a real dampener on a young girl’s dreams of being a mage, let me tell you.”

Bach blinks in silence and deflates slowly as he keeps on failing to find something to say. He eventually, hides the embarrassment upon his face in the palm of his hand. "Wow... I'm sorry. I really didn't mean to bring stuff like that up."

A sharp poke in the side grabs Bach's attention and he removes his hand from his face to meet Cideeda's eyes. Cideeda dons her trademark toothy grin and snorts. "Don't worry. I'm okay with it. And, it was over two decades ago. Mostly over it by now. I got to go to nice local college for technology and spend a lot of time with both my parents. It honestly worked out."

Bach rubs the back of his neck and sheepishly averts his eyes with an awkward grit of his teeth. "I still feel a little like an asshole..."

Cideeda pivots forward, lifts her hand up to a claw tipped point, and pulls Bach's shoulder down with her free hand to guide his eyes to a spot in the distance. "Well, you can still make something for me. Look over there and tell me what you see."

After a lot of squinting and following the path Cideeda's finger directs, Bach's eyes open wide as his jaw loosens downwards. He lifts his head back up, straightens his stance, and laughs. "I wondered if that old hag of a landlord had sold my junk yet."

In the distance, through the gatherings of dealer hall customers, upon a prominent decorative pedestal, in a booth filled with an assortment of proposed antiquities, resides a single translucent gold cup that faintly sparkles of stabilized magical energy. The man in the booth calls out to passersby and showcases his wares with professional salesman's flair. In between the pitches, his demeanor resumes that back alley vendor air as he examines his merchandise and seeks out another target from the crowd. Upon the display cases and platforms rest cards with extravagant claims in front of most items. The biggest sits underneath the golden magical energy cup. Bach squints and shakes his head after a few attempts. "I can't make it out. I wonder what the sales pitch for that is."

Cideeda snidely pulls the corner of mouth to a partial grin and narrows her eyes at Bach with an upwards flit of the eyebrow. "Behold the ancient magical artifact from the First Period. A mysterious item said to empower the liquids poured within it. Or, something like that. I stopped listening after the first few loads of bullshit."

Bach crosses his arm, leans his posture back, and inquisitively rests his stare at the booth. "I wonder how much he's trying to pawn the thing off for."

An evil grin creeps upon Cideeda's mouth. She draws a long, slow breath, places her hands on her swaying hips, and directs a fast whisper to Bach. A number flies into the air, into Bach's ear, and stuns his mind. He bluntly stifles an impulsive snort into a series of coughs as his sheer bewilderment interrupts whatever thoughts he had. "Really?! What a con artist!"

The evil grin pushes Cideeda's lips apart and she lifts an eyebrow to don a plotting expression to Bach. "I know... If he's charging that much to sell it... I wonder how much he'd pay for another "artifact"."

Bach's blue eyes meet Cideeda's emerald green eyes. Gradually, he almost mirrors a copy of her scheming grin. Cideeda holds a finger up, steps back, lowers her head, takes a breath in, and exhales. She lifts her head up to show a bubbly smile. Her body language lightens as she cutely sways and bounces with each word from her mouth. "Oh. My. Gods! You actually have one! I've been looking SOooo long for somebody to tell what this is!"

Cideeda pantomimes hoisting a cup object up into view, perking her ears up and waving her tail for effect. She puts forth a very exited tone to her voice. "Can you please tell me what it is? You seem like an expert in this stuff and I have no idea what it is... I really don't need it. So, maybe you'd interested in buying it?"

Bach fights to keep his hand covering his mouth as he processes the dramatic act before him and laughs escape through his fingers. With a final pose, Cideeda relaxes back to her normal posture and demeanor, and presents a confident smile to Bach. "I think that will get his greed's full, undivided attention. Hopefully, just enough to be a bit too eager."

Bach scans around the area and searches for quiet, secluded areas. "I'll agree. If we can find somewhere out of the way, I'll form something up real quick. I'm thinking a wine glass. Nothing too complicated."

He glances down at Cideeda with a grin. "If this works, it might pay for some nice meals for all of us for the rest of the convention."

Cideeda cackles as her eyes bring down the full focus of her plotting on the con man behind the distant booth. "Ha! Once I'm done, he'll be paying for our weekend passes and meals."

A chorusing drone of idle conversations flood the long, open auditorium. Convention assistants adjust and secure advertising banners for "The Next Adventurers of Nexus", before scurrying off to sides of the large stage. One assistant positions microphones on the long table in front of seats, and another assistant follows behind placing name tags inside holders at the base of each microphone stand. People file in through the entry doors and take up seats towards the front. But, a few break from the pattern and divert towards the very back rows. Aristespha, Sebastian, Bach, Cideeda, Dretphi, and Sotalia move down the side aisle towards the very back row of seats and settle into the chairs. After a minute, Aristespha glances around with a guilty squirm and holds a mischievous smirk firm. "This feels strange. I so rarely sit on the back row of anything on purpose. I really feel like I'm completely up to nothing good."

Sotalia leans forward and directs her voice down to Aristespha with an evil grin. "Welcome to the back row delinquents club, where I spent most my school years. It's fun back here."

Sebastian chuckles and eyes Bach. "Bringing back any memories, bro?"

Bach rolls his eyes and groans. "Hey! I tried that whole studious, front row kid thing all through grade school and even high school. Back row for me after that for the most part."

An ethereal snort sounds out from Sebastian and he quirks a brow at Bach. "Hey, I remember you joined me up on the front row for a few classes."

With a shrug, Bach relaxes his shoulders and settles into his seat. "Those instructors were cool and pretty fun to be around. They were nothing like that one bitch I had for basic spellcasting form that HUNTED for reasons to fail me."

Sebastian shakes his head with a long, hard blink and exhales in agreement. "No shit, bro. She HATED you."

Cideeda laughs and stretches her legs out. "That's why you stick to the middle of the room. Teachers always check the front and back when they are looking for students to single out."

Drephi squints her eyes and puts all her focus ahead towards the stage. "It is starting."

An announcer sounds out from the public address system. "Ladies and gentlemen, if I could have your attention. Please give our guests of honor, The Next Adventurers of Nexus, The Flames of Phoenix, a proper Amaranth Adventure Con welcome!"

The gathered crowd cheers loud and applauds. Just as noise reaches an apex, the announcer yells out. "Welcome to the stage, the leader of the Flames of the Phoenix, Chad Bosch!"

Chad confidently struts out onto the stage in clean, new armor with the Flames of the Phoenix logo prominently on the breastplate. He waves out to the crowd with a gleaming white smile, nods to a few select areas, and stops center stage to give a dramatic bow. He stands back up from his bow, quickly shakes his head to settle his hair perfectly back in place, winks to an attractive lady in the front row, and finishes his walk around the stage to behind his center spot at the table.

"The alluring, mystical enchantress, Tassilda Evernia!"

A long, flowing, form revealing robe trails behind Tassilda as she steps with a suggestive sway in each motion. She stops center stage, bows down, and reaches her arms inside the opposing sleeves of the robe. Just as the room lights dim, she springs up, flings her arms out triumphantly, and releases a hundred small blue orbs of light out over the crowd and up to the lofty heights of the ceiling. She waves out to the astonishment of the crowd and blows a kiss to random person in the masses. Then, she follows a similar path to Chad and takes a seat left of him. The lights brighten back to normal as the glowing orbs feather fall very slowly down.

"The strong, tall, indomitable Trakenthin Brecomin!"

Solid impacts of heavy boots resonate out from the stage floor. Trakenthin puffs out his chest and continues to stomp across the stage. Near center stage, he pans a mean glare out to the crowd and shakes his head with a boisterous, dismissive grunt. He flexes his muscles underneath the armor plates strapped to him and snorts. He turns away from the crowd and walks around the table to take the seat right of Chad.

“The cheery medical mage herself, Deedri Preetta!”

The rhythmic ring of a small collar bell follows Deedri as she happily rushes out on stage. Her long braided-back hair bouncing on her ornate blouse and tail flowing along underneath her dress. She smiles brightly and waves out with both hands to the crowd. She stops center stage, straightens her posture, bows properly with both hands on her apron, and bounces along her way to the seat next to Tassilda.

“And finally, the dark, mysterious, Modoran Lotherin!”

The stage remains empty upon initial inspection. Members of the crowd search the area with a few camera operators panning around to various points upon the stage. A faint dark shadow on the stage floor shifts along at a steady pace and slows to halt at center stage. Flowing leaks of dark miasma erupt out from above the spot and spill forth out onto the floor. After a few moments of awe-struck gasps, the dark cloud disperses to reveal the nonchalant stance and casual smile of Modoran. As the last few bits of darkness disappear, Modoran looks around the vicinity, shrugs his jacket up with his hands in the pockets of his black pants, and ambles off to his seat next to Trakenthin.

A convention appointed host steps up to the stage and he goes into a speech summarizing the current season of The Next Adventurers of Nexus. In the back row, Bach aims his head high and studies the glowing orbs. “Why do these things look familiar to me?”

Sotalia quietly and sneakily performs an incantation with motions and directs a finger point toward an orb overhead. With careful concentration from Sotalia, the orb’s feather fall changes to a guided flight path. The glowing orb eventually lands in her hand and she scrutinizes it carefully with her golden eyes widening with each passing moment. She stops studying it and passes it to Dretphi with a gesture towards Bach. Dretphi reaches her long arms over Cideeda to hold the glowing orb next to Bach’s face. When his head turns to examine the glowing orb, Bach’s eyes flit open and he pinches the orb out from Dretphi’s hand. He places the glowing orb in between his hands, his eyes glow a faint blue, and sparks of irritation bubble into his expression. Aristespha, Sebastian, Dretphi, Cideeda, and Sotalia watch expectantly as the orb shudders and pops into a mist in Bach’s hands. A strong twitch squints Bach’s eye, while a mean draw pulls the corner of his mouth back to a grin. “Oh... So, you’re going to crudely copy my spell... And use it for your own gain? Okay.”

The grin expands to a dark smile upon Bach’s face. “So, you like the glowing orb...”

The host flips through to the last card and speaks loudly into his microphone. “Well, that’s the last of the question I have. Members of the Flames of the Phoenix, The Next Adventurers of Nexus, are there any announcements you’d like to make to our wonderful audience?”

Chad straightens his posture in his chair and beams with a heroic smile. “Why yes, there is! I would like to let everyone know that the fine folks at Stalwart Sword have chosen this convention to unveil their latest model, the Storm Striker. And to celebrate, they are putting forth their classic Still Sword challenge. Five swords lay still in stone, only to be moved by

their true owner. Please visit, try to pull a sword out, and find out if one is going home with you.”

As Chad clears his throat, a lone glowing orb with a tint slightly off from the rest descends from directly overhead and lands gently on Tassilda’s head without any reaction from her. Chad grins big and gazes out into the crowd. “And after this very convention, we are going on a mission of great importance. One that is going to take us through dangerous territory as we guard an extremely important cargo. Unfortunately, none of us can divulge much more, but you’ll see it all on next’s week episode!”

The host nods out to the suspenseful crowd and directs a number of awaiting convention workers. “Exciting news! Okay, everyone, we are opening it up for audience questions! Please line up behind one of our wonderful assistants near you and we’ll try our best to get to your question.”

The host turns around to glance back at the panel and immediately spots the glowing orb sitting on top of Tassilda’s head. His eyes dart around before he shadows his movement from the crowd, points to Tassilda with hands close to his chest, and gestures her attention to her head. Tassilda snaps out of her idle stare to the crowd, blinks at the host, and then plays off brushing through her hair. She feels the glowing orb, grabs hold of it, and with a faux laugh flicks the orb off towards the crowd. It drifts off but gradually reverses direction and aligns a return path to Tassilda. Her focus returns to gaze at the crowd with a sultry, seductive posture, that proves extremely difficult to maintain when the glowing orb bumps right into her forehead. “What the hell?!”

She swats at the orb and it zips just clear of her hands each time. Once clear of obstacles, it drifts closer and closer to Tassilda, only adjusting course to avoid obstacles and to keep track of her. A low rumble of laughter sounds out from the crowd as more and more eyes watch the scene unfold. Tassilda swings her hands out with a confident smile and releases a focused burst of wind, which the orb side hovers out of the way. She blinks her blue on black eyes in confusion, snaps a glare at Deedri next to her, and harshly whispers. “What’s wrong with this thing?! What did you do to it?!”

Deedri shakes her head between Tassilda’s stare and the orb, and nervously shrugs. “I-I-I don’t know.”

Chad narrows his eyes at Tassilda with a quirk to his brow and leans close to his microphone with a grin. “Having magical malfunctions again, Tassilda?”

A growing chorus of laughter wells up from the crowd. Tassilda grins nearing a grit at Chad, flutters her eyes, and fans an arm out at the approaching orb. “Nothing I can’t handle. Just need to make a few adjustments on this one.”

Chad laughs, eases back into his seat, and smugly smiles. “Heard that a few times.”

Trakenthin snorts and resumes watching his aetherphone screen in one hand and idly toying around with a bottle in his other. Tassilda’s composure cracks as the one light orb assault continues despite her best efforts with the crowd cheering on. The orb receives as much encouragement as Tassilda does at the moment. Modoran calmly watches the orb for a few

seconds, ponders, and tilts his head as an idea manifests. He slides his chair back quietly, leans around the back of the chair, and directs a whisper out to Deedri behind everyone else. "Deedri! Deedri!"

Deedri's left ear perks to Modoran's voice and guides the rest of her head to meet his gaze. "Yes?"

Modoran eyes to the orb and Tassilda. "I think it only dodges fast movement towards it."

Deedri searches her mind, nods in thought, and blinks as a plan arrive to the front of her mind. She gives Modoran an appreciative smile and directs her attention to Tassilda. "Tassilda!"

A growl of frustration precedes Tassilda's response. "What?!"

Deedri glares sternly at Tassilda and calmly commands. "Sit. Down. Stay. Still."

Tassilda draws in a breath, begins to open her mouth, and the words retreat from her mouth as Deedri continues her glare. She lowers herself back into her seat, quickly brushes her hair roughly back in place, and adjusts her wardrobe before ceasing all movement. The light orb gently floats down and rests right on the very tip of Tassilda's gray skinned nose. Deedri carefully lifts her hands up, keeps both hands open and palms facing the other, and positions them to either side of the light orb. Slowly and meticulously, the gap between Deedri's hand shrinks. With a fast vocal incantation and subtle movement of her hands, a magical field appears between Deedri's hands and she pulls field and orb away in one swift movement. Cheers roar from the crowd, Chad claps with a smile, Trakenthin pays no attention, and Modoran sneaks a thumbs up and wink to Deedri. After a small bow, Deedri sits back down and the host takes control of the situation. "Thank you, Deedri! Always there to help the group!"

The host starts summoning questions from the audience and directing them to different members of the Flames of the Phoenix. In between questions, Tassilda and Deedri focus upon the captured light orb. Tassilda finishes a question with a nod, pushes her microphone away, and whispers to Deedri. "So, what's going on with that one."

Deedri bites her lip and anxiously glances back at Tassilda. "It's not one of ours. It... It's like one of the original ones..."

Tassilda blinks, rears her head back, and, in unison with Deedri, gazes out into the crowd. In the back row, a very amused bunch barely contain their mischief derived smiles and watch the realization upon the faces of Deedri and Tassilda. Bach chuckles darkly to himself. "Oh yes. We are here."

The questions come forth from the crowd and many members of the Flames of the Phoenix answer them, with a notable exception being Trakenthin who either grunts, rolls his eyes, or completely ignores them entirely. Bach stands next in line to speak into a convention worker's microphone and glances to his aetherphone as he waits. A large figure moves right

behind him, which prompts him to look over his shoulder. He blinks in puzzlement as he recognizes Dretphi. “Oh. You have a question?”

Dretphi averts her eyes briefly and with a firm smirk on her face. “Yes.”

The host catches a signal from an assistant up in the sound booth, turns to the crowd, and projects his voice into the microphone. “Ladies and gentlemen, looks like we are just about out of time, but I think we can handle a few more questions. So, let’s give the people in the way back a chance!”

The worker holds the microphone up to Bach and gives Bach a nod for a cue. Bach checks his aetherphone one last time and stares out front to the stage. “Well, this one is from a friend of mine stuck watching the hotel TV feed, and it’s for Chad.”

Chad’s smile sours briefly with the sound of Bach’s voice and he squints with a new interest towards the back area. Bach continues with a smug grin. “How’s your car doing?”

Snickers and laughs echo into the open air. Each second of the din attempts to drag Chad’s trademark smile down into an unamused frown, but he perseveres despite his ire. “Just. Fine. It took some effort... From all of us... But, the Phoenix will rise again.”

A chime from Bach’s aetherphone prompts him to nod and speak, before quickly moving back to his seat. “Thank you.”

Bach sits back down in his next to Sebastian, who quickly peers over at the message from Kaleb on Bach’s phone. Sebastian snorts with an ethereal echo. “Kaleb’s right, bro. He is touchy about that SUV. He almost dropped that smile of his.”

Aristespha curiously eyes Dretphi, ponders, and aims her question to the rest of the group. “Did Dretphi say anything about what she was going to ask?”

Bach, Sebastain, Cideeda, and Sotalia only provide shrugs of shoulders and shakes of heads to Aristespha. Dretphi steps up and the convention worker holds the microphone a bit higher for her. She draws in a breath, pauses, and speaks. For a number of seconds, a flowing, fluent stream of the Grath language leaves her lips with an eloquent pace and impeccable pronunciation. At the end, Dretphi pivots and walks away from the microphone, leaving a bewildered convention worker. Grath throughout the audience react with laughter, gasps, and snorts. A few non-Grath present similar responses, including Sotalia as she covers her mouth to muffle a snort into chuckle. A plastic cap flies off towards the heights of the ceiling with a jet of water not far behind it, as Trakenthin instinctively crushes the water bottle in his hand with a sudden clench. He snaps his head away from his phone and actively scans through the audience with angry sneer on his face. He bellows out a number of Grath phrases in a furious tone. Dretphi takes her seat next Cideeda and Sotalia. She eventually allows her eyes to meet the quizzical gazes of the group and sighs. “Pity. He can speak.”

Other members of the Flames of the Phoenix give Trakenthin space while they get up from their seats to leave the stage and the host quickly calls out with a nervous smile. “That’s all for now folks! Please enjoy the rest of the convention and be sure to visit out Next Adventurers of Nexus in Personality Alley for photo opportunities and signatures.”

The large, long mall walkway skylights reveal the night sky overhead. A low, distant thumping radiates through to the airspace of the hall. A number of people move between demo and game booths trying their luck and skill. Aristespha casually strolls down the path between the gatherings of people and flips through various messages on her phone. The voice of Sebastain sounds out from the sword on her hip. "So, where are the others at, dear?"

Aristespha's eyes trace through a few more messages and she quirks a brow. "Seems like they ditched the concert now. Opening act was amazing. But, the main act is some pop star from another TV show and they left after the first few songs."

Sebastian hums in thought. "I think I remember, she's that crazy half-fvalian girl. Likes to stir up all the shock and drama."

A few more swipes of a finger sends more messages away on Aristespha's aetherphone and she puts the device away into her pants pocket. "They are going to the humvee to clear a path through Sotalia's purchases so Dretphi can get in the back. They'll be around the main entrance in a few minutes."

Sebastian chuckles ethereally from the sword. "Figures. Oh well. Hope she didn't go too broke-

"Lady Aristespha?"

Aristespha slows her steps to a halt and gradually pivots herself towards the source of the voice. She lifts an eyebrow, shakes her silvery blue hair back, and directs her violet eyes upon Modoran. With a simply casual wave, Modoran smiles in return. "Hello. I am Modoran Lotherin, pleased to meet you. I guess officially now."

Curiosity pulls an amused grin on Aristespha's mouth and she confidently walks up to Modoran. With a shift of her posture, she eyes Modoran. "Official enough. Any camera crews I need to be made aware of?"

Modoran laughs and shakes his head with an eye roll. "Not right now. They have a hard time finding me when I feel like it. I've got about a few more minutes before I need to make a presence to keep them happy."

A barely audible ethereal grumble resonates from the sword. Aristespha nonchalantly taps the sword a few times with her hand. Modoran quirks a brow with a sly smile and crosses his arms. "I have to hand it to your group. They certainly know how to rile up the more... prideful of my group."

An equally sly smile arrives upon Aristespha's face and she sighs with subtle shakes of her head and switch of her posture. "I have no idea about what you are talking about, sir. I believe you may have the wrong group in mind."

Aristespha and Modoran maintain stares as each analyzes the others' expression. Eventually, Modoran laughs into a sigh and lowers his head to a sway. "Oh my. Despite the group I'm with, let me show there's no hard feelings from me to you. How about I treat you to a few games at the archery booth here."

The young evuukian woman running a nearby archery booths perks up in her seat by the register and expectantly awaits attention from either Aristespha or Modoran. A momentary twitch in Aristespha's eye prompts her to gradually guide her view and finally analyze the booth near her. As she examines the layout and contents of the booth, she eventually rest her attention upon the bows. Her chilly, contemptuous glare condenses her harsh disdain upon the stylish wooden bows. With an audible pull of breath through her nose, she resumes her previously sly smile and politely shakes her head. "Unfortunately, I'm not much into archery these days. But, I do greatly appreciate the offer. It's charming, really."

Modoran blinks in confusion and perks an eyebrow up in genuine puzzlement. "Really? That's interesting. I distinctly remember hearing stories of a very accomplished, young evuukian woman performing great feats of archery for the Tarikira family."

Aristespha maintains her smile and shakes her head with sigh. "I'm afraid you must have mistaken me for someone else. I have personally have moved on from the bow."

An eager grin cracks upon Modoran's mouth and flits an eyebrow at Aristespha. "Oh, you just can't say something like that without a demonstration."

With a slow shift of her stance, Aristespha examines the booth table top. As her eyes faintly glow violet, she briefly holds her hand on the sword before grasping an arrow on the table. She twirls it in her fingers, until she grips near the fletching. Her arm extends behind her and her legs shifts with her balance. With a fluid whip motion across her upper body, she flings the arrow whizzing through air and solidly in near the center of target roughly a dozen meters away. She straightens up, brushes her hair back, and studies the dumbfounded expressions of the booth attendant and, especially, Modoran. Aristespha pivots and strides away with a wave behind her. "Have a good night."

Once out of ear shot, Aristespha's eyes dim back to normal and she dons an evil grin. "I hope you got to see what I saw."

A ghostly cackle emanates from the sword and Sebastian's voice finally breaks from the laughter. "I fully approve, dear. The look on his face was priceless."

Aristespha bites her lip and sneers as she rubs her shoulder and arm. "Need to get back into practice, I can feel that's going to be sore in the morning. But, I still got it."

Sebastian sounds out lovingly from the sword. "As if you could ever lose it, dear."

Modoran lowers his hand down from a weak, perplexed wave in response to Aristespha's departure. He gawks at the arrow firmly planted in the target and watches as the young evuukian woman pronounces some incantations and gestures to the arrow. With a few exaggerated motions, the arrow frees itself from the target, floats over at the direction of the

woman, and hovers down upon the table. The evuukian woman gazes up a Modoran with an amused smile. “Wow, that was in there good.”

The woman awaits Modoran and glances at Aristespha in the distance. “I’m about to close up for the night. Would you like a few free pity rounds before I shut down?”

Modoran blinks back to awareness, meets the gaze of the woman, sighs with a smile, and shrugs casually. “That actually sounds pretty nice right now.”