

Ain't A Hero – Episode 22

by Bryan Schuder

Bach lifts his upper body off the bed and sheets roll off as he rises up to sleepily crack his eyes open. With a quick pan of the head about the room, he throws the bed covers off and pivots the rest of himself to place his feet upon the floor. A yawn pauses him briefly before he leans forward and stands up with the back of his hand driving the last remnants of sleep out of his eyes. His hands work out the tangles from his long brown, graying hair and guide the white streak to one the side over an ear. Blue eyes search around the room and Bach surrenders to another yawn with stretch of his back. He briefly stands tall with proper posture, sucks in his gut, and puffs out his chest in front of the mirror. For a few moments, he enjoys the heroic ideal in the tall, simple wall mirror. Then, he releases his breath, slouches, and slumps his shoulders. Bach examines the farmers tan on his forearms in stark contrast to the rest of his fair skin and scratches the forming beard under his jaw. With a general sigh of disappointment, he places his hand upon his stomach and stops in surprise thought. He glance down and notices the difference of where his hand rests in comparison to what he normally expects. “Huh...”

He searches the room in thought and eyes the door with a lift of an eyebrow. “... there is a bathroom scale...”

Bach opens the nearby dresser drawer, puts on a new shirt and pair of shorts over his underwear, and opens the door to his bedroom.

The bathroom door opens to a content Bach with a satisfied smirk upon his face. He steps out into the hallway, turns, and walks back toward his room. The mumbling voice of Sotalia emanates from her room and catches Bach’s attention before he makes too much progress. He halts mindfully, slowly spins around, and cautiously approaches her room’s open door. Bach carefully cranes himself around the door frame to peer through the doorway into the room. Sotalia sits, legs crossed, upon her bed in the middle of a collection of trinkets, folded space frames, shopping bags, and labeled boxes surrounding the area. Her attention focuses upon a single red crystal in her hand and the semi-circle of labeled boxes around her. She bites her lip in deliberation, gestures the red crystal towards one box before her head sways it back over to another box. As the debate in her mind continues, she idly grabs hold of her foot with a free hand while her other foot unconsciously fidgets. She blinks hard, straightens up her back, and opens her eyes to notice Bach in the doorway. Bach weakly waves awkwardly. “Oh, sorry. I didn’t want to interrupt anything.”

Sotalia lifts a brow with a smile and points the crystal at Bach to punctuate her thoughts. “Actually, perfect timing. You might be able to answer this one.”

She rolls the red crystal in her hands until she secures it between a finger and thumb and shows it to Bach. “If you were a seven year old boy, would you be interested in a magical artifact that charges by sunlight and produces an illusion of a flame with light and warmth when tapped?”

Bach slides fully into the doorway with a hand on the frame, looks into his mind along with the proposed question, and quizzes back. "Can it light stuff on fire?"

Sotalia shakes her head slightly and maintains her curious gaze upon Bach. "No. Just light and safe to touch warmth."

With a shrug, Bach lifts his hands up around his sides, pulling a twist in his mouth. "Sounds neat, but I remember being a bit more into the more dangerous sounding things when I was that age."

Sotalia nods, directs her hand over a box, and carefully deposits the crystal into it. "That's I what I was thinking. Well, to Dellena that one goes. I think I got something for Kalant... But, I need to make sure Sontaila has enough small things to keep her distracted from anything I give Kalant."

As Sotalia wanders off in a dialog of thought to herself, Bach studies the area and walks into Sotalia's room closer to her bed. "Just curious, but what are you doing, exactly?"

It takes a few moments before Sotalia registers Bach's question and interrupts herself from the task before her to explain. "Oh, yes! I'm figuring what to gift my nieces and nephews from out of everything I've found and bought."

Bach glances down with a questioning quirk to his brow and allows his eyes to search inside the boxes with names written upon them. "So, you are gifting your nieces and nephews possibly potent magical artifacts?"

A sly grin grows upon Sotalia's expression as she narrows her eyes with a distinctive flit of the eyebrows in return to Bach. "Oh, yes. I believe I'm not unique in the practice, as demonstrated recently."

A long sigh precedes Bach burying his face in his hand and he groans in a mix of acceptance of fact and defeat from counterpoint. Sotalia chuckles to herself and she reaches an arm down deep into a thin rectangular frame next to her. "Not to worry. Anything I gift to my little ones I screen personally. I keep a whole stock of detection strips, meter vials, and the usual kits for figuring out what magic might be bound to these things."

Bach recovers his face from his hand, surveys Sotalia's room with interest, and stops his gaze upon a few square and rectangular containers in the corner. "I see. How many of those isolation containers do you have?"

Sotalia draws a small scroll out from the frame, shifts her glance to the containers, and taps a free finger upon her lip while she sorts out the accounting. "Aristespha and I originally got a dozen of a few different sizes. Two of them have worn out and their isolation enchantments barely work anymore. One was rendered useless when a dangerous artifact we found in a ruin exploded and sprung every safety on it. So, we have nine working ones."

She squints her eyes, leans forward across her bed, and cocks her head to the side. "Is that indicator strip blue?"

Bach steps close to the container in question and kneels down to scrutinize the bluish strip inside with a small metal cylinder and bright orange cap upon its end. "Pretty much. Huh. What type of indicator strip is this?"

Sotalia lifts herself back and plays with the small scroll in her hands while she ponders the development inside the container. "It's a standard two alpha magical type indicator strip. I'm not surprised it changed, since I remember feeling something strong in it when I picked it up at the dealer room."

Bach stands back up, scratches the back of his head, shrugs while shaking his head in confusion, and glances back. "What magic would be on a paint pen?"

A nonchalant smile crosses Sotalia face and she draws a breath in while she twirls the scroll over each finger on a hand. "Well, that's what I hope to find out. People have put far more powerful magics on stranger things..."

Bach keeps his face forward away from Sotalia as his eyelids lower half mast with an unamused tug on upon the corner of his mouth. Sotalia rolls her eyes with a smile and bites her lip. "Speaking of which... I bought some decorative wooden wands that would be perfect for enchantment into practice focuses."

Bach continues to face away from Sotalia, slowly breathes in, and slowly exhales. Sotalia grins with an evil tinge. "Such application of magic would certainly be a great exercise that would most assuredly count for today's magical training."

A few quick twists of the mouth and Bach pivots around with an accepting smirk. "Okay. You got a deal. How many?"

Sotalia angles her head away, brushes some of her dark red hair over a horn, and casually tries to play off her request. "Nine."

With a few hard blinks, Bach shudders his head side to side and squints at Sotalia. "Nine?! How many nieces and nephews do you have?"

Still avoiding direct eye contact, Sotalia counts out to Bach. "Three nieces, two nephews, and one nephew on the way."

Bach turns his hands up towards him, counts down from nine on his fingers, and flexes three remaining fingers on a hand to exaggerate his stare to Sotalia. "And?"

Sotalia sighs and sways her head around. "Well, my two sisters, too."

Two fingers curl down to the palm and leave one remaining index finger that Bach prominently holds up. He alternates his gaze between the finger and Sotalia. Eventually, Sotalia crosses her arms and perks a brow with a twist to her pout. "Well, one for me. I'm not missing out."

Aristespha presses down on the screen of her tablet over the play icon and watches another video of the creation of Mylo's wand. She smiles gently as she watches the reaction of Mylo and his mother Lalyanpha, and tilts the tablet up from the coating of papers, notes, and research materials upon the tabletop. Sotalia moves out from the hallway archway with the small scroll in hand. Bach follows shortly behind. She steps next to Aristespha and peeks over her shoulder to see the video on the tablet. "Aww. He is such a sweet little boy."

Bach cranes his head around, spots a glimpse of the video, and nearly immediately changes course for the couch. "Great... another video has surfaced."

Cideeda snorts as she adjusts a few pillows underneath her on her claim of the couch. Following a flick of her tail, she lifts her arm lazily up from the side and aims the television's remote at the screen. "Oh, that's nothing. You should SEE the comments on a video posted of you two and Tassilda. I've seen some aethernet forum fights, but these are amazing."

Cideeda's foot stretches out from her half of the couch and a cautious clawed toe gently pokes the side of Dretphi's leg. "And, there's rumors someone might make it into the next episode of you-know-what..."

A low grumble rolls out from Dretphi as she squirms for comfort on her half of the couch with hints of embarrassment sneaking into her expression. She attempts to maintain her stare forward towards the television while other eyes focus upon her. Eventually, she sighs with a curl to her lip. "I apologize. I did not think about the recording equipment at that time."

Sotalia snickers with a grin and glances at Dretphi. "What's there to apologize for? He asked for everything he got saying THAT to you. I just hope they got a good shot of you throwing him onto the mat, so I can see it."

Dretphi briefly meets Sotalia's gaze and gradually cracks a smile as her head returns to watch the television. "The recording equipment functioned properly at his defeat."

Aristespha rests the tablet down upon the table and rotates her chair with a slide out towards the rest of the group. She draws in a long breath and sighs with a serious expression to the group. "As the one that files the paperwork for the group, I'd like to remind everyone that such activities can alter perceptions of the group and could affect how mission bids are or are not accepted."

A sly grin grows on Aristespha's mouth and she perks an eyebrow while she tosses back her silvery blue hair. "But... Certain sacrifices need to be made from time to time for all the right unofficial reasons."

Smug satisfaction wafts into the air of the living room from multiple sources. Aristespha's eyes home in on the small scroll in Sotalia's hand. "What is that? The script on the outside seems to be... an old high Evuukian dialect?"

Sotalia lifts the small scroll up in her hand and positions it in front of Aristespha's view. "It's that decorative star chart I found a few months back. My little sister, Talelia, mentioned that Kalant is getting interested in astronomy, so I thought he might like this."

She places the small scroll into Aristespha's awaiting hands, crosses her arms, and grumbles. "But, I can't remember what calendar it uses for when you write in the date. Thought you might be able to figure it out quicker."

Aristespha nods, carefully unrolls the scroll, and examines the changing chart and scripts on the material. After a minute of reading, she reflexively groans in disgust, momentarily sticks her tongue out, and rolls her eyes at sudden realization. "Bleah. I remember. I am NOT going to honor that man by saying his name. It's practically the ancient Gregorian calendar, but just with a year and day offset based on that bastard's birth date."

With care, Aristespha rolls the scroll back up and places it on the table. "Before you gift it, let us see if we can adjust it to the proper Nexus calendar."

Sotalia snorts with a humored curl to her mouth's corner. "I still can't believe how many Evuukian high nobles tried to push their own calendars after the monarchy was dissolved."

Rubbing the temple of her head, Aristespha groans dismissively to the thought. "None of them were above a vanity project, especially... THAT one."

Bach quirks a brow and gazes over to Aristespha with heavy sarcasm in his voice. "Sounds like a revered historical figure you got there."

A series of small shakes of the head precede Aristespha taking a long breath to exhale out tinges of irritation. "Unfortunately, revered by too many evuukians in positions of power, even today. That man is responsible for popularizing so many terrible aspects of Evuukian culture..."

She tilts her head over to look sadly at the paused video of Mylo and Lalyanpha. "And making life hard for those that don't follow those aspects."

Bach nods and gazes towards Aristespha with a cautious curiosity. "I've always heard intermarriage with other races is really taboo with most Evuukians."

Aristespha nods slow and tugs at the corner of her mouth with distant dissatisfaction. "Taboo is a nice way of putting it. Most are disowned by their own families and many are forced to change their names legally to strip both house and family names from them."

She crosses her arms, leans back in her chair, and chuckles dryly with a dismissive crack of a grin. "And, it's just considered the proper procedure in proper Evuukian society. Gods, to think I was that deluded when I was young."

Sotalia pulls a tight smile and momentarily averts her eyes off from anyone with a hint of past youth reflection. "Well, you know better now. That's all that matters."

Following a scratch of the chin, Bach sits down in his chair next to the couch, eyes Aristespha inquisitively, and thinks a few moments. "If I'm not digging too much... Umm... What changed your mind?"

Aristespha smiles with a snort and gazes at Bach. "College, of course!"

She places her hand on the side of her face and her violet eyes search up in her mind for a particular memory. “Actually, one project, I will never forget, comes to mind. It was the start of my second year and it was a selected topics course in humanoid genetics and history. Oh, that first major project that sneaky professor gave.”

Her hands reach out to gesture and demonstrate vague columns and rows of information. “He gave us a sample set of summarized genomes. We had information about the gender and race of each genome in the set. He wanted us to write up a simple ruleset to help categorize another set of genomes by race, that would be at least better than random chance.”

Aristespha sighs, shakes her head, and rolls her eyes while she props her head up with her hand. “I was SO certain I had it figured out. Even tried to optimize it to use fewer rules for identification. I turned it in.”

Cideeda, Dretphi, and Sotalia crack amused grins as Aristespha dramatically drops her head forward and covers her face with her hands. Bach grits with an awkward smirk. “Not good, I guess?”

Aristespha lifts her head up to gaze up at the ceiling with her hands up and deflates. “Significantly worst than RANDOM chance. I was SO furious. I wrote the nastiest aethermail I have ever to any person. And, I used my entire spring break to research and show him wrong.”

She sits in silence remembrance for a number of seconds before drawing the breath to speak again. “Sunday before the break, I started my research. Wednesday night, I couldn’t process any more information. Thursday, I laid in my bed all day and comprehended how much an arrogant bitch I had been. Then, I spent the rest of the break trying to figure out how to make up for the worst aethermail I have ever written to any person.”

Aristespha chuckles and smiles to Bach. “Monday after the break, I tried my best to apologize to him and he just laughed wanting to know what changed my mind. We had an amazing time discussing all the details of what I found.”

Bach nods and shrugs nonchalantly returning the smile. “I didn’t take that many biology courses, personally. But between talking to Kaleb and Shadeesa, it never seemed like there was that much difference between the races.”

Aristespha slyly grins and sits up in her chair. “Oh! There is NONE. Biologically, we are all just post-cataclysm humans. No other species have formed.”

She guides out a bundle of her silvery blue hair over her long pointed ears with one hand and gestures towards her eyes and facial coloration with the other. “The common characteristics that most attribute to defining a race are just a collection of Pre-Cataclysm genetic modifications that have been passed on in physically, socially, or politically isolated groups for hundreds of years. And, the most fascinating part is that the modifications aren’t unique to ANY race.”

She eyes Bach, focuses upon the white streak in his hair, and points it out. “For example, that white streak. You have it. Sebastian has it. And from the pictures Sebastian has shown us, your mother has it, too.”

A realization lands solidly in Bach’s mind and he blinks a few times as he cocks his head to a side. “Come to think of it, my grandfather has it and my great grandmother had it. And, there’s a few cousins on my mom’s side that have it. All in the... same... spot.”

He crosses his arms in thought and lets his eyes search around his mind, before pulling down the white streak in question into his sight. Sotalia grins with a chuckle to herself as she walks towards the kitchen. “Oh, that’s nothing. You should have been here the first time she ranted about all of this to us.”

Aristespha twists her mouth with a bit of embarrassment and stiffens her posture. “Well, I was a drink too far that night and made the mistake of watching political news. I’ve learned to never let the two mix again.”

Cideeda flexes out her hand in front of her and examines the claw tips on each finger with a content expression. “Still pretty amazing how it’s the same modification that gives Fvalians claws and Emin their nails.”

Dretphi raises her arm up and rotates her forearm to show Bach the gray stripes on her skin. “Never thought my skin would be similar to both Emin, Evuukian.”

Sotalia withdraws her head from inside the refrigerator, takes a moment pose her head to showcase the side, and traces the edge of her pointed ears with a finger. “Same old modification on both Emin and Evuukian.”

Bach shifts his attention between the different examples everyone presents with interest, but eventually settles down in his chair and shakes his head. “Huh. All the same mechanisms with just different settings?”

Aristespha slowly nods to confirm Bach’s suspicion. “Exactly. And often, modifications are present but have very mundane parameters. So, you will never know normally. And, there’s so much to be researched when it comes to how iterative generations, mutations, and magical influences have affected the modifications.”

She idly pushes some papers on the table near her clear to the other of the table side and positions the small scroll in the middle of the bare tabletop. “I was VERY interested in that field, but standard and magical medicine captured my heart more. But, I still read up on the latest developments.”

Sebastian drifts through the sliding glass door and adjusts his altitude to coast out of the viewing path of the television screen. “Well, nothing to report on the neighbors. Looks like they either busy or not currently trying to spy on us.”

He lands standing next to the dining table and glances around to everyone else. “Did I miss something?”

Bach directs Sebastian's attention to his white streak and with an amused expression. "Talking about ancient genetic modifications we inherited."

Sebastian eyes light up with interest and he grins as the thought wells up in his mind. "Oh yah, bro. It's actually pretty neat stuff they're figuring out. What was the name of that paper you got a while back, dear?"

Aristespha carefully unrolls the small scroll out on the table top, pauses a moment, and glances towards Sebastain briefly. "I think it was called New Methods in Detecting the Propagation of Pre-Cataclysm Genetic Modifications, Sebastian."

Sebastian's ghostly form floats up, leans over the table to survey the small scroll, and looks toward Bach. "They talked about how most people have at least one modification somewhere in their DNA and it reminded me of that lab partner I had for that forensics elective I took."

After a few moments, Bach's eyes stop sifting through memories and he returns his gaze to Sebastian, quirking a brow. "The one with green hair?"

A few nods and Sebastian flashes a grit with an ethereal sigh of defeat. "We had a lab using microscopes to analyze hair. I joking suggested making bet on what her natural hair was... She warned me that it was green. But, I decided to call her bluff with dinner at a nice restaurant as the wager..."

Sebastian contorts his mouth a few different ways as his pride shrinks a bit, but eventually shrugs with his arms in the air. "Well, after paying for a very expensive dinner-

Bach grumbles to himself in the gap of Sebastian's sentence. "And eating all your brother's frozen dinners for a month..."

With a flit of the brow Sebastian ignores his brother's addition. "I learned there are just some things you take someone's word for. Proved to be a lot cheaper for me."

Aristespha, Bach, and Sotalia sit around the end of the dining room table watching the pictures and text upon the small scroll shift and change erratically. Aristespha's glowing violet eyes dim down to normal and she removes her hands away from scroll. In moments, the scroll settles down to stable and consistent imagery and script. Sotalia smiles as she checks her aetherphone and compares a picture of the night sky to the image upon the scroll. "Looks like a match to me."

Bach blinks his blue glowing eyes to a regular blue and rests back down in his chair at the table. "I would not be surprised if they had a huge stock of these and just hacked in that date adjustment."

Aristespha closes her eyes briefly while she shakes her head. "I am certain someone tried to make a quick profit by selling them as promotional materials. But, thankfully, it was simple enough to undo."

Sotalia rolls the scroll's woven material back up and grips the roll in her hand. "Thank you, so much. I hope Kalant likes it."

Aristespha opens her mouth to speak, halts, and peers down at her side towards a chime emanating from her pants pocket. She reaches into her pocket, retrieves her aetherphone, and surprises herself upon reading the screen. "It's Nash! And, he's making the call?"

She quickly taps a few command buttons on her phone, rests it down upon the tabletop, and directs her voice. "Hello, Nash. I have you on speakerphone."

The phone sounds out Nash's voice along with a repetitious subtle background squeak of a rolling chair, a wariness hints color Nash's tone. "Good. I'd like to make sure everyone can hear this. I've got... News.

Sebastian hovers close to the phone. Cideeda's ears perk up and she sits up on her part of the couch. Dretphi reaches over to the coffee table, presses the mute button on the television remote, and twists her upper body towards the dining table. A long exhale echoes into the distant room through the phone's speaker and Nash resumes. "We've started to figure out the system based on the data you gave us. We haven't figured out what the extra data is all about, but I've been able to map the coordinates to locations using today's standard coordinate system. But..."

The idle chair squeaks stop and light taps come through as shoes plant themselves upon a tile floor. Nash sighs and groans. "Fuck it, I'll drop it now. I asked myself one of those questions. I asked myself, how the hell does anyone know a login to a system this old. Answer? They don't. They crack it."

Aristespha leans closer to the phone with growing concern on her face. "Nash? Are you okay?"

Nash coughs, recollects himself, and brightens up the tone in his voice. "Me, personally? I'm fine. Really. It's just I'm about to tell you all some details that just make room for harder questions. But... Long story short, someone cracked this system with Grand Library software... Five years ago."

Surprise and confusion spreads through the group, and everyone exchanges reactions before pouring full focus upon Nash's voice from the phone. "Judging the from the Oh Shit gasps and silence I heard, you are just surprised as I was. But wait, it gets weirder. The software used was ten years old. And, it's not the stolen hacking edition that most your black market tomb raiders often use. This was the official, tagged, archaeological edition."

Bach squints and twists his mouth while resting his chin down upon the palm of his hand. "What's the difference between the two editions?"

A rolling tap of fingers upon a desk resonates through the speaker of the phone and Nash thoughtfully breaths in. "Well, the hacking edition is designed to get the job done no matter what. While, the archaeological edition is designed to carefully open systems up, preserve the integrity of the target, and leave notes about anything changed for other researchers. It's

the difference between drunkenly chainsawing a door open while raging about your ex, versus using precision tools to calculate and create a proper key to unlock the door.”

With an understanding nod, Bach acknowledges as his expression perplexes about the analogy. “That is strange. Why would someone use that software to perform that task? And, huh...”

Nash’s voice mirrors the confusion rising in Bach’s tone. “Exactly! The only thing I can think of is that it was the only thing whoever had at the time. Which makes this next detail, a bit frightening to think about. That recent login you all suspect that Noxian used to acquire that data set... Was the same login created by that software five years ago.”

Aristespha’s light skin somehow pales more as shock widens her eyes and she covers the mouth of her dropping jaw. Sebastian blinks in sheer bewilderment before he changes his focus to Aristespha and attempts to get her attention to check on her. An awkward, tense silence looms above the room as minds process out new possibilities. Nash’s voice rushes up from the background noise on the other side of the call. “Now! I don’t know any more than that! Please don’t make any assumptions yet! I want to make sure I get ALL the information first. Especially, before I have to report this to Grand Library’s Powers-That-Be.”

After a few waves of Sebastian’s ethereal hand, Aristespha shudders back to awareness of the situation and draws a careful breath with nod to Sebastian. “I’ll send you anything you need. This is certainly a twist.”

Nash chuckles to himself and humors out some stress. “Oh, yes. This is WAY too much serious business for me. I’m just suppose to babysit graduate students and play tablet games during budget meetings. But, I’ll do my best. Well, I really got back to this, but I wanted to pass this info along to you all. I’ll send you the mapped out coordinates we’ve gotten so far.”

Aristespha smiles and speaks in soft, comforting tone to her phone. “Are you going to be okay, Nash?”

A laugh sounds out from the phone and Nash snorts. “Don’t worry. It’s nothing a refresher course in all the ways I misspent my youth won’t fix. You all take care. Really.”

Before pressing the hang up button on the screen, Aristespha calmly speaks with warmth in her expression. “We will. You do so, too.”

The previous awkward silence continues to hang above until a message notification rings out from the aetherphone with a tablet on the table buzzing moments later. Aristespha checks her phone, reaches out to the tablet, and taps through a few screens to get an aethermail open on the screen. “Well, here’s the coordinate list. Looks like he’s figured out what time stamp they were using and sorted it by the most recent. A few he’s put notes about anything located near the point.”

Aristespha reads out coordinate numbers from the list along with Nash’s notes. After a dozen readings, her voice drifts as the monotony of the task distracts her focus. Upon mentioning a series a numbers, Cideeda’s ears perk up and her eyes flash open wide with her posture shocking rigid. “What was that one?!”

A curious glance snaps to Cideeda from Aristespha, and she Aristespha carefully announces the coordinates in question again. Cideeda throws herself up from the couch and searches the area in an energetic hunt. "Where's THE map?! That sounds familiar for some reason!"

Dretphi thinks to herself momentarily, before pulling herself to her feet and holding a finger up with a bite of a lip. She rushes through the hallway archway to the office. The audible sounds of rummaging and moving items echo into the living room, before Dretphi steps back into the room with a large folded map in her hands. As Dretphi spreads the map out onto the tabletop with Aristespha, Bach, and Sotalia securing it down upon the surface, Cideeda slides into a space between chairs and leans over with her eyes scanning the entire map. A claw-tipped finger hovers above the longitude axis at the top of the map before carefully moving down square divisions of latitude. Her claw point glides along until it finds a familiar, previously made indentation on the material that fits her claw tip perfectly. Cideeda gazes to everyone with a toothy grin as she taps the spot with an air of victory. Sotalia blinks with her jaw slightly agape and places her hands on her hips with a conceding nod. "I'll be damned. You were right, girl."

Aristespha compares the location and the notes on her tablet screen. "That is a match, but that location's timestamp is ten years old."

While Aristespha head tilts to the side to entertain a spark of thought in her eyes, Sebastian nods with determination and a growing grin as he stands up confidently. "I think we found our next place to visit! It might be an old time stamp, but Nox has been reported to have been there in the past and the place he visited recently points it out, too."

Sebastian assumes a more heroic posture and smiles to the group. "That's enough to be worth the trip to me. Any objections?"

No objections present themselves over the idle pondering and figuring of the group over the new information present. Dretphi enters data into her phone, squints at a map with a highlighted route, and turns the screen towards the group. "Travel will be two days. The location is remote. Need to prepare to establish a camp. I recommend two weeks of supplies."

Cideeda nods in agreement while she studies the map. "That sounds good. If we're there for a week, we'll need to probably come back anyway."

Aristespha sits back in her chair, stretches her back out, and focuses upon her tablet. "I'll get to informing all the usual people. I'll let the guild and Grand Library watchdogs know."

Bach quirks his expression at the mention of the word watchdogs. "Sorry, but guild and Grand Library watchdogs?"

Sebastian rotates his gaze to Bach with a gesture of his hand. "Oh, they're groups you let know when you are going on risky trips and quests. That way if you don't check in or respond to calls, they know to send people after you."

Bach aims a quizzical glance to Sebastian. "Have you ever needed them?"

A collective energy of annoyance floats up to the surface from the rest of the group and Sebastian sighs with a noticeable dip in pride. "Yes. Once."

Cideeda narrows and shakes her head with a growl. "Let's put it this way, there's a REALLY good reason there's a lock on the humvee's fuel door and mesh screen collar inserts in the fueling tubes."

Sotalia crosses her arms tightly and sneers. "Fuck that hick town of thieving shits. I still think most courts would have seen fireballing that place as justified."

A video game displays upon a television screen in a modestly decorated living room. Various toys sparsely litter the area with a few partially wedged between couch cushions and on top of other items on a nearby bookshelf. Mylo sits with a game controller in hand next to Mason. He frantically presses buttons on the controller and vents his frustrations in grumbles and growls. He flops back into couch as the television plays a loud jingle for the character's demise. "Not fair!"

Mylo sits back up, snaps at his gaze to Mason, and pushes the game controller into his hands. "Can you get past this part, daddy?"

Mason takes hold of the controller, smiles, and shakes his head with a laugh. "Okay. But, you really need to do these parts yourself. I can't do just do all the hard ones for you."

With a quick nod, Mylo returns to his attention to the television screen. "I know. I'll do the next hard one. I promise."

Mason continues to smile, chuckles, and narrows his eyes in full focus to the screen. "Sure. Okay, now watch carefully, I'll show you the boss's pattern."

Lalyanpha dons a warm expression as she watches Mylo and Mason on couch before turning back from the archway into the small, simple kitchen. She adjusts a few dials on the oven, lifts a lid on a pot to inspect the progress of the contents, and opens a cabinet to reveal a number of ceramic dishes inside. She retrieves three plates from the stack inside the cabinet, opens a drawer below the counter top, and hovers a hand over the utensils. She freezes rigidly as a unique ring tone sounds out from her apron pocket. Carefully, she slowly retrieves her aetherphone, raises it up to her eye level, and stares at the caller's label in Evuukian. Lalyanpha closes her eyes, gradually draws a breath in, releases it slowly, and opens her eyes to stoic an expression upon her face. She taps the answer button on the screen, places the phone to her long pointed ear, and responds in a monotone proper high evuukian greeting.

An older male voice replies back in an almost equally stoic, monotone manner. The both sides of the conversation continue dryly and stilted. The strain reveals itself upon Lalyanpha's face but she continues to steel herself, until the older male voice wavers and pauses. Lalyanpha puzzles a moment and she clicks the volume up on the phone to concentrate fully on the other voice. Stammers briefly hinder the other voice but eventually the tone of a

question arrives to Lalyanpha's ear. Her stance drifts looser, her eyes search for the reason, and she answers back in confusion. "Mylokia."

The silence lingers for seconds before snuffles precede sobs and almost audible tears echo from the phone's speaker. Lalyanpha eyes spring wide open as absolute shock and concern flood her face. She covers her mouth and she desperately attempts to determine how to react. She speaks with a shaky, worried tone to the other voice with series of similar sentences. Eventually, the older male voice collect himself with a series of sniffs, and voices out a long careful sentence. He pauses. And he prominently says a few key words. Lalyanpha gasps quietly and firmly clasps her mouth with her hand. She firmly closes her eyes and tears gush out down her cheeks. The other voice wanders a bit in audible, unsure thought. Lalyanpha removes her hand from her face to reveal a tear covered smile of absolute elation and her voice fights through snuffles and stammers to a warm, cheerful statement back. The conversation continues with moments of emotion that keep a smile on Lalyanpha and a happy tone in the other voice.

With a final power shot and trick slide from the player character, the boss drops down in defeat and the level completion screen flies up and a blitz of numbers count out with colorful animations. Milo cheers out and rocks happily on the couch. "That was amazing!"

Mason chuckles and ruffles the dirty blonde hair on Mylo's head. "Many years of practice."

As the sounds and music quiet down for the level transition, Mason directs his head towards the archway leading to the kitchen and concern tints his expression as he hears a series of familiar sniffs and sighs. He returns the controller to Mylo, pats him on the head, and smiles as he gets up off the couch. "Give the next level a shot. I'll go check to see how far along mom is with dinner, okay?"

Mylo nods quickly, faces he television screen, and begins pressing buttons on the controller. Mason carefully walks at a normal pace across the living room and passes through archway with an immediate pivot towards Lalyanpha. He quickly but carefully approaches as she stands holding her phone to her chest and staring idly with her head slightly down. As she sighs out, he gently wraps his arms around her and guides her close. "Is everything okay, Laly?"

Lalyanpha breathes out and rests her head against Mason's shoulder. "My father called."

Mason grimaces and frowns as he tries to comfort Lalyanpha. "I'm sorry-"

A renewed smile appears on her face and Lalyanpha reaches a hand onto Mason's face. "He- Someone sent him one of the videos of Mylo and me at the convention. He asked to know his name. He heard the name... He cried... I've never heard him cry."

She gazes up lovingly to Mason with new tears waiting in her eyes. "He said... He wants to come meet his grandson. He wants to meet... His daughter's-"

Lalyanpha pauses, closes her eyes to squeeze out new lines tears, and concludes the sentence with delight hidden beneath old pain. "...son."

Mason gazes into Lalyanpha's eyes, manages to fold up a clean section of his shirt off his chest, and dries off the tears from Lalyanpha's face. The two enjoy quiet moments in each other arms before they share a quick kiss. Mason gently sways Lalyanpha around in his arms with her shifting her weight in sync. Eventually, the two let each other go with Lalyanpha moving to inspect diner and Mason examining the area. Mason scratches his head with a tinge of nervous energy. "Well, any time frame for when he's going to visit? We don't exactly have the biggest place. But, we can manage something, I'm sure."

Lalyanpha shakes her head with smirk and opens the oven door. "Nothing yet. We both agreed to talk about it later after we've both emotionally rested. He also has to talk to mother, but she'll be easy to convince."

Mason exhales in relief and examines the area. "Good. I just want to make sure the place is presentable-"

Lalyanpha stands with her oven mitt wearing hands gripping a covered pan and lifts her eye brow to Mason. "We live in a house with a four year old. This is as presentable as this place is going to get for them."

The groan of an annoyed child radiates into the kitchen and Mason pivots to point towards the archway. "Speaking of which, I better go help him out, again."

A warm smile with wink meets Mason's glance back as Lalyanpha rests the pan down upon the counter. "Keep him occupied for ten more minutes and we should be good for dinner."

Mason nods, gives a thumbs up, and steps through the archway into the living room. "What's wrong Mylo? Another hard part?"