

Ain't A Hero – Episode 23

by Bryan Schuder

The humvee rolls along the roughly paved surface of the four lane highway. Thick forests border the clear shoulders next to the roadway. The suspension of the humvee constantly absorbs the many defects in the road and the vehicle adjusts direction within the extra wide lanes to avoid the obvious minor hazards. With a sudden shift in noise, the humvee rolls from the rough pavement to a gravel. The previous sudden shocks to the suspension system turn into sweeping rocks of the vehicle as tires follow the dips and rises in the gravel. Bach lifts his head up from his seat's headrest, blinks with a yawn, and glances through the window outside at a downwards angle. "Well, I guess we hit the Greater Azure Alliance road maintenance limit?"

Cideeda sits with her eyes continuously scanning the road ahead and gently pulls the steering wheel to follow a calmer path in the road. "Yes. I'm guessing in a few hours, I'll be luck to keep it at sixty kilometers per hour. Don't think this road is high a priority."

A sigh escapes Aristespha's lips and she draws a tight smile. "It's unfortunate, really. These routes used to be maintained so well when Greater Azure Alliance and United Appaland States had a trade treaty."

Dretphi stirs from her back seat, opens her eyes, and looks towards the front of the vehicle. "I thought about a route through Tanoo. It did not save time. This route is the faster option."

A pair of harsh bumps shake the vehicle, swaying everyone around inside with the upwards and downwards shift. Dretphi reflexively grabs onto bottom of the back bench seat to secure herself and groans to herself. "Despite unfortunate travel conditions."

With a snarl to her lip, gritting to the road ahead, and a wince in her eye, an apologetic tone tints Cideeda's brief frustration with the road. "Sorry about that one. Looks like the storms have done a number on this section."

Sotalia glances up from her phone, eyes the road ahead, and then rests her eyes back down on the device in her hands. "Still pretty good shape. I wonder if this is an old Train road."

Cideeda darts her eyes around to examine the various aspects of road design before her. "It definitely is. Extra wide lanes, huge shoulders, and the designation markers. They probably used to run some of their triple length haulers down this route."

Bach rests back into his seat and a thought tugs the side of his mouth. "Don't know if there's any truth to this, but I remember hearing a few rumors that the Train has been working on a new route through the Berland river valley. At least that's what the drunks at the bar kept rambling about."

Aristespha quirks a brow and eyes Bach curiously, focusing her intrigue upon him. "Beckerin mentioned similar. Did these drunks wear Train uniforms?"

A brow lifts upon Bach's face and he tilts his head to face Aristespha with a smirk. "They did actually. As much of a dump as Adison is, it does attract all the Train workers from the Hunt Train depot. Plus, the local bars were about the only attraction to that place."

Sebastian's ethereal voice resonates from the sword secured next to Aristespha's seat. "Noticed a few of those less than a block from where that shack you were in."

Bach shakes his head with an eye roll and sighs. "Yes. I stayed away from those places. Too many brawls on my front lawn at three in the morning to make me ever want to go to any of them."

A small smile finds its way onto his mouth and he relaxes his gaze up to the ceiling of the humvee's cab. "I usually went to an adventuring themed tavern a kilometer down the way. Nice atmosphere. And I traded magical tricks and trinkets for free food and drinks."

The pair of horns poking through dark red hair in the seat in front of Bach stir, rotate around, and lift up to reveal a pair of interested golden eyes. Sotalia grins, spins the rest of her body in the seat, and gazes at Bach. "Really? What kind of magical tricks and... trinkets?"

Flashes of embarrassment trigger a few wincing upon Bach's face and he squirms in his seat. "Oh, just simple little bar games and other... stuff. They weren't anything too great, just what I could scribe on these little novelty scrolls the owner bought in bulk."

Sotalia's eyes narrow with an eager tinge. She wraps her arms around the head rest, places her head back down, and concentrates her stare at Bach. "Give us an example."

Bach lifts his head forward briefly and attempts to nonchalantly avert away from Sotalia to another part of the humvee cab. "Nothing great really. The old owner retired, sold it to his son, and made it into a sports bar. Not really worth talking about."

As his eyes drifts to another spot, he catches a glimpse of Aristespha with a wicked smile and momentarily pauses briefly in confusion. Aristespha maintains the smile as she focuses upon Bach. "I'm actually curious myself. What feats of magic keep someone fed and grant them free drinks?"

Bach examines the rest of the cab. Dretphi angles her head slightly from her lounge on the back seat and perks a brow. Cideeda glances up to the rear view mirror and graces the reflection back to Bach with a toothy grin. Sebastian speaks from the sword with a slight reverb and an amused tone. "We got a few more hours of travel today, bro. Plenty of time for you entertain us all about your magical tavern exploits."

The peer pressure compresses Bach into his chair and he awkwardly grits into a reluctant smile. Eventually, as the silence and eyes loom around in the cab, he releases a long sigh and palms his face. "Ah, shit..."

A gust of wind blows bits of debris and dust across an almost empty parking lot surrounding a single large wooden building. The wooden, rustic theme of the structure blends in with the

remote location, despite the more modern underpinnings beneath surface. A fan inside an air conditioner units spins up and rattles the system to life. Next to the road at the edge of the lot, the internal light intermittently blinks inside of an old sign reading "Cooke's Inn and Tavern". The flickering light casts far out upon the area and mixes with the warm evening twilight, eventually fading to the will of the ambient light. Two headlights crest the top of a distant hill and beam down the decline of the road. Within minutes the humvee's left blinker turns off and the tires rotate to guide the vehicle into the parking lot. A slight squeak escapes the wheel brakes as the ancient military machine slows to a stop inside the boundaries of a parking space next to the building. A gradual spindown of a turbine drifts to silence from the powerplant under the hood and the headlights switch off. Doors open up and Cideeda, Sotalia, Aristespha, and Bach disembark. Eventually Dretphi exits via the back of Bach's slid up seat. Bach slides the seat back into place, guides the door close, and scans the huge lot. "Doesn't look too bad. But, it's a bit... Vacant?"

Sotalia places her hand on her hip, sways to a side, and tosses back a few stray hairs over a horn. "That's pretty normal for these places on the outskirts."

Cideeda walks with a long stretch to each step, slowly directs her arms around to the limits of motion, and relaxes her body with an exhale. "Don't let the empty lot fool you. These places make a good bit of money."

Bach nods and squints his gaze out towards a series of long, large parking spaces away in a spacious lot with small utility station rising out of the pavement in the middle and between each. "I guess those spots over there are for the big trucks?"

An outstretched foot taps down next to Bach and Cideeda slides the rest of herself to stand beside him with agreement. "Yes. Usually charging, water, and waste hookups. They probably have a fuel pump somewhere in the back."

Dretphi reaches inside the back of the humvee, pulls out a rolling duffel bag, and carefully lowers it to the ground. Sotalia steps around the side of the vehicle, grabs hold of the top handle, extends it out, and rolls it out of the way. Another gust of wind breezes through the area, blowing ripples through clothing and a chorus of rustling leaves sounds out in the area. Dretphi secures another bit of luggage from the back of the humvee and rests it upon the ground. Aristespha picks up the shoulder strap of the bag, places on top of her shoulder, and awaits with Sotalia. Cideeda approaches the back as Dretphi sorts through the various bits of equipment and reaches a claw tipped hand in to snag her backpack. Bach wanders over, reacts with a brief wide-eyed moment of surprise when his arms instinctively open out, and catch a simple draw-string duffel bag. Dretphi hoists another fancier version of the bag over her shoulder and closes the back hatch. Cideeda reaches into her pocket, draws out the humvee's controller fob, and clicks a series of buttons. After witnessing the few light blinks and a beep, Aristespha sets off towards to the front door of the building and glances back while she leads the way. "I called ahead and reserved one of the large common room suites upstairs."

Sotalia strides along behind Aristespha, rolling her bag with her. She lifts a brow with a sly grin. "Splurging a bit aren't we?"

Aristespha shrugs and returns her head forward. "I figured we might as well enjoy it while we can. It was about the same price as a bunch of smaller rooms. And, we'll have that part of the upstairs to ourselves and not get woken up by any later arrivals."

She wraps her hand around the metal horizontal handle on the ornate wooden door, pulls it open for everyone else. Sebastian's voice echoes from the sword at her side. "Everyone hit up the shower while you can. Including you, bro. It's a lot easier here than in the woods."

Dretphi shudders as a passing flit of memory on cringes across her face. "That is the truth."

A sneer perches on Cideeda's upper lip as she sighs out past frustrations. "Less leeches, too."

The group files in through the door into a large lobby. Worn but carefully polished wooden floors adorn the area and contrast against the intricate stone tile leading into the spacious dining hall. The tall ceilings provide ample room for local artifacts and other treasures on display. A wiry, muscular older man gazes up with a smile from the handcrafted counter. "Hello! Welcome to Cookes Inn and Tavern. I'm Goff, and I believe one you is Miss Aristespha."

Aristespha spins around from examining all the details of the lobby area and bows slightly to Goff at the counter. "That would be me, Mr. Goff. I called earlier today."

Goff stands up quickly from his seat behind the counter and grins happily as he pulls open a jingling drawer on the side. "Just Goff, ma'am. Mr. Goff is my father. Appreciate the respect, though. Let me get the key and paperwork up on the counter."

He fishes out a few keys and a few page stack of papers and lays them out on the counter's top. "Just got the room ready. Those should be freshest bed sheets and towels for quite a ways. And, I got some good options for dinner, too!"

Aristespha steps up to the counter, briefly studies the paperwork, retrieves a few cards from her pocket, and copies information onto key fields on the forms. "We will definitely be partaking. It was a long, rough trip."

Goff nods with a sigh, checks over the sheets after Aristespha fills them out, and shakes his head while he files them away in another drawer. "Getting rougher by the day. I wish the Greater Azure Alliance and the United Appaland States would get over themselves and strike a new trade deal soon. I've been real tempted to build an add on to this place just to sell tires and shocks."

He stands back up behind the counter, scoops the keys into his hand, energetically walks out from the counter, and excitedly gestures everyone to follow. "Let me show you all to your room. It's got the best view around. After you all are settled, come on down and I'll give you the grand tour."

Windows in the walls surrounding the dining hall shine back the warm lights inside against the darkness outside. Around the largest table in the area, Aristespha, Bach, Cideeda, Dretphi, and Sotalia sit with plates of food encircling center serving trays. Sebastian hovers near Aristespha and enjoys the aroma of the meal. Goff settles back into his chair at the head of the table and laughs. "That's an amazing story. Ones like that keep me believing I made the right decision building this place."

Sebastian shrugs and chuckles with an ethereal echo. "We got plenty of them. I'm still amazed I'm not the strangest thing you've seen."

Goff returns the shrug and directs a wave to the general area. "This far out, I've seen plenty of crazy stuff. Plus, I'm originally from much further north, closer to the Lakes."

While Bach rubs his forehead in remembrance of previous injuries, Aristespha quirks a curious brow at Goff. "I have to admit, you picked a very nice spot for this inn."

Goff chuckles to himself as he collects his silverware upon his plate and slides his chair back. "Oh, I figured it out from experience. Used to go around with my son and crew down this very road doing tree care. Pretty good work, but I had to travel a bunch."

He stands up, lifts his plate off the table, and walks back to a door. "I lost count the number of times we had to camp out around this very place, and I figured... Someone needs to build a nice tavern and inn here."

After depositing his plate and silverware into a cart bin just past the doorway, he steps back out and gets behind an ornate bar with a wide selection of beverages upon the display shelf behind him. "When I finally handed over the tree care business to my son, I figured I'd might as well build such a place. That way, my boy and old crew always have a place to stay after a long trip."

Cideeda examines the craftsmanship of the wood work on the table, squints at a number of chairs, and then carefully scrutinizes the bar. "Is this all your wood working?"

With a proud nod from Goff, he grins and places his hand out upon the top of the bar. "Yes it is, ma'am. I always saved the choice bits of wood I got from the trees I worked on. After I retired, my wife demanded that I do something with it all. So, I built this very building and the furniture in it. She was happy to get the barn back."

Sotalia scoots her plate to the side to inspect the woodwork and lifts her head with a smile to Goff. "So, where is Mrs. Goff?"

Goff shakes his head with a happy eye roll. "Oh, she stays at our nice house down the road. She likes to avoid all the chaos here. She's always been the wiser one. Nice to have someone on the outside to bail you out."

Bach glances over to the bar and Goff, and scratches the beard underneath his chin. "Do you get a lot of people going down this road?"

Fingers drum on the counter top of the bar while Goff searches his mind with a few tugs upon the corners of his mouth. "Well. It's been a little slow leading up to yesterday. I got a few regulars that travel through this area a lot. A few couples that want a taste of the rustic life. One guy stayed a few days a couple weeks ago. Really nice guy, had a lot of amazing stories and we talked for hours every night. Then, yesterday..."

Quick snort escapes Goff and he grins slyly with a shrug. "I got my fill of chaos and fun for the month!"

A curiosity seizes Bach's expression and he pauses his spoon midway through transit to look towards Goff at the bar. "What happened yesterday?"

Goff whistles in thought as he collects the timeline of events in his head and a spark of excitement energizes his voice. "Sunday, I get the this call out from this lady. She says her group and another smaller group are heading out this way and they will need accommodations. First time in a long while, I'm going to have a full house!"

He gestures and pantomimes with his hands and grins as he continues the depiction of the events. "I get all the rooms ready, I even call up my old friend Oyn to come over and start cooking up a storm. I even convince my wife to come down and tend the front desk for me. The time comes when they said they're going to arrive... and nothing..."

With arms in the air, he shakes his head and pulls his hands down along this sides of his head. "I was starting to think I had made a huge mistake, but this one lady with a clipboard and a guy with camera, like one of those television cameras, comes in."

A slight crook warps the side of Bach's mouth. Goff continues with an idle roll of the hand to punctuate the situation. "She gives me this paperwork to sign to allow them to run cameras in here. I'm thinking its strange, but I don't mind showing the place and I'm not going to let my preparations go to waste."

He points to large main doors and rotates his gaze across the big dinner table to everyone. "The second I signed the paper, she radios to someone, the camera guy starts recording, and then this group pushes the doors wide open!"

Goff flicks his index finger up on a hand. "There was this heroic looking guy with a big bright smile..."

Sebastian halts mid drift and a barely containable cringe flashes upon his ethereal face, while Bach squirms a bit in his chair. Another finger rises on Goff hand. "An emin woman with black hair, blue eyes, and way less clothes than my wife approves of..."

A piece of meat flops back into the soup bowl when Sotalia's shudders shake the spoon in her hand. Goff counts off another description as he thinks more into that moment. "A nicely dressed fvalian with this bell around her neck."

Briefly a twitch squints Cideeda's eye and a low groan sounds out from Aristespha. Four fingers flex in Goff's hand and he looks up into his mind. "And, there was this evuukian guy that seemed nice enough but was scarce most the time..."

Aristespha rolls her eyes while Sebastian echoes a low groan very similar to hers. Goff closes his fist and holds a thumb up with a final shake for emphasis. “Finally, this BIG grath nearly clips the door frame coming in.”

The grip tightens upon the fork in Dretphi’s hand and muscles flex in her forearm. With an astounded sway of the head side to side, Goff laughs loudly. “The second they cleared the door and went up the counter, this flood of camera crews just filled in around them. Oh, the drama between them. They argued back and forth about who would get which bed in the other big common room suite. After dinner, they fought about who should do what and that on this mission. They were a mess!”

A heavy silence settles over the group at the dining table while Goff remembers other details of the events from yesterday. After a few minutes, Dretphi raises a hand with an index finger up and captures the attention of Goff. “Excuse me. Question. Did they state when they would return by this route?”

Goff scratches his chin while his eyes seek out a single bit of knowledge in his head. “I think they mentioned possibly in a few days. The woman with the clipboard said she’d give me a call if they were coming this way again. And, from where I guess they were going, it’ll take a few more days to get there.”

A collective release of tension fans away the heavy silence and relief finds the group at the dining table. Goff surveys the change in mood and quirks a brow with curiosity driving a smile. “They wouldn’t happen to be friends of yours?”

Snickers, snorts, and laughs escape the group with shakes of the head. Goff grins, simultaneously places both hands upon the top of the bar, and nods. “Well, that sounds like at least a story or two to be had over a few drinks. Consider the bar open! I still got a run a business, but I’ll let the first round go at cost.”

Sotalia sips up the last bit of soup in her spoon, places it down, plucks a roll from a basket on the table, and waves it around in sync to her thoughts. “Speaking of discounts, Bach over here actually used to create this wonderful line of mini magical scrolls, perfect for a place like this.”

Abrupt gurgling sounds out immediately after an ill timed gasp of food sends Bach into a coughing fit. The grin upon Sotalia’s face adopts a sinister undertone. Goff blinks and then focuses his attention on the proposed concept. “Well, I’m always looking for things to sell or show. What do they do?”

Sotalia bites a piece off the roll off and continues to direct it around in her fingers to punctuate. “There’s the random fortune teller, drink tracker, drunk detector, and...”

Cideeda dons a toothy grin with a mischievous gaze towards Bach. “Don’t forget all the games. Bomb defuser, balance the card, and that mini role playing game. I still think that collectible card game would have done well if you had a marketing department.”

A brief, sudden snort from manages to escape Dretphi and she averts her eyes away while she contains a small smile from progressing further. "Love tester."

Sebastian's ethereal forms fails to hold back the cackle that triggers almost the rest of the table to laugh. Bach sighs with twitches of a lip curl and rolls his eyes. A few moments a facetious shrug and shake of the head accompanies a thinly veiled crack of a smile upon his mouth. "Well, all that sounds great, but I don't have anything to write on that would fit the bill."

Goff tilts his head down and examines the area behind the bar with a finger hovering with the focal point of his attention. He kneels down behind the bar, stops, and returns with a roll of receipt printer paper in hand. He puzzles over the item as he draws out a long sheet from the roll. "Will this work?"

Aristespha, Bach, and Sotalia spot and scrutinize the receipt printer paper roll. Aristespha and Sotalia nod in unison with evil tinges coloring their smiles. Bach only blinks with an awkward cringe, but his demeanor stumbles to a recovery and tries to adopt the previous facetious shrug. "That could work, but I would need special pens and inks to-"

Sotalia pops the remainder of the roll into her mouth, stands up from the table while chewing, flashes a lift of a brow to Aristespha, and holds her hand open as she walks from the table towards the main hall. Aristespha reaches into her pants pocket, settles the room key into her hand, and tosses it with flick to Sotalia's awaiting hand. "Third zipper pocket from the right. It's the small roll out kit."

A long exhale of defeat slowly vents from Bach and he pivots his head to the side and tilts up to Sebastian as he hovers nearby. "I guess I'm doing this, huh?"

Sebastian nods with his hands behind his back and glances down to his brother. "Yes, bro. You must placate them."

Bach drops his head low for a moment before inhaling a breath and lifting it back up with an accepting semblance of a smile. "Okay... Which one first?"

The sun floods the large, long common room with morning light. Six beds line up perpendicular to the outer wall, with each bed's position just under a wide window on the wooden floor. On the other side of the room two tables rest flush against the wall with a number of chairs each, and lockers line the remanding bit of wall after the dividing doorway. At the far end, another door opens to a flow of steam and bright light reflecting off bathroom tile. Sotalia steps out in bare feet onto the wooden floor and walks with relaxed smile. She balances the towel wrap on her head between her horns and keeps a hand on the towel tuck over her chest. She glances over at the other roughly remade beds and the layout of personal items each. She passes over the unused bed and pauses to stare at the furthest bed where Bach stirs, still sleeping. With an eye roll and an amused shake of her head, she continues to her bed with a quiet chorus of hardwood floor joining the pat of each foot. She kneels down over her luggage to pick out clothing for day and notices the hum of her vibrating aetherphone on the bed. A snatch later, she reads the message on the phone. She glances to Bach and watches. A long intermittent snore from Bach barely graces just above the

background noise. Sotalia snorts to herself, shakes her head side to side while her thumb taps out a reply. A few seconds later, the phone vibrates with another message. Sotalia quirks an eyebrow and gazes at Bach. Slyness curls the corner of her mouth while evil widens the expression.

Bach slumbers on his side, facing the end wall, and subconsciously shifts his face away from line of sunlight creeping up the sheets. As the his current snore fades, a faint rush of air echoes into the room with a muffled sound of flapping fabric trailing. A damp towel impacts the back of Bach's head and part of it flops over onto his face from the momentum. Bach startles and stirs groggily from sleep and grumbles incoherently. His hand aimlessly paws at the towel on his face until enough of his motor coordination and consciousness reassembles itself. Bach lifts himself up to sit up in the bed, the towel still covering most of this head. Someone else in the room squelches a snicker. Bach manages to finally remove the damp fabric from his head to reveal a chaotic mop of hair and opens his eyes halfway in a morning daze. He spends most of a minute to examine the towel in between blinking and clearing the sleep from his eyes. Idle mumbles of deliberation seize Bach's focus and his head sways towards the source. His vision watches someone with an hour glass figure finish pulling up a pair of pants to the small of her back. Puzzlement and confusion mix harshly with the morning fog in Bach's mind, while familiarity tries to cut through the haze as Bach's eyes move up two color pattern on the skin of the woman's back. The woman's black nailed hands reach up to the towel on her head and unfurl the fabric to reveal dark red hair and black swept back horns. Familiarity manages to finally shriek out and clear the lethargy in Bach's mind. As embarrassment flushes Bach's face and tightens his throat, shock drains the color and forces a gasp. A short lived, inhaled squeak results from the conflict and Bach nearly sprains his neck from the reflexive twist of his head the opposite direction.

Sotalia voice calls out after the sounds of clothes rummaging, luggage zippers, and button snaps. "You awake, Bach?"

Bach blinks in silence for a few moments in an effort to stall long enough for the speech centers of his brain to wake. "Uh... Y-yes?"

A few more similar noises emanate from Sotalia's direction. Then, a series of softer footsteps grow in volume from that direction. A curious tone colors Sotalia's voice as she snaps her fingers a few times to get Bach's attention. "Hey... Over here. Wake up!"

Hesitation impedes the pan of Bach's face and, with a deep draw of breath, he forces himself to turn the rest of the way. Sotalia lifts an inquisitive brow at Bach and stands at the side of Bach's bed with pants, shirt, and socks on. Bach relaxes and releases breath. Sotalia works a questioning twist to her mouth. "I guess I'll count this as awake. We'll be leaving in an hour or so. Shower and come down for breakfast. Your brother's orders, via Aristespha."

Bach nods in confirmation fighting a yawn. "Okay. I'll be down in half an hour."

Sotalia returns the nod, spins around with smile, and walks to the exit door. "Sounds good to me. I'll let them know."

As she opens the door and goes through the doorway to the hallway, the smile cracks with a guilty smirk. Bach watches the door close behind her and he stares forward in contemplation.

A minute passes by before he tilts over onto his side upon the bed and groans to greet the new day.

In the middle of a wide, overgrown gravel road, the humvee slows to a stop just before the end of the road that fades to a thick tree line. Cideeda peers out through the windshield and scans the area around the vehicle. Sotalia squints her eyes to seek anything of interest in the forest bordering the road. Sebastian's ethereal form floats out forward from the aisle between Cideeda and Sotalia, and stares with uncertainty ahead. "Something is not right about this."

Cideeda taps her finger on the steering wheel in thought and turns her head to the side to check out the driver's side window. "We're near the area people reported seeing someone matching Noxian's description. And, this is really close to the coordinates from the research base data. This is also a road not on any map I have."

Sebastian hovers while his eyes slowly pan the horizon, and hems to himself. He crosses his arms and drifts through the windshield out to the front of vehicle. "Okay. Let's get out and check around. If there's nothing here, we'll drive around a bit more."

Reaching under her seat, Dretphi rummages around for a few moments before pulling out a hard shelled case by the handle. "We should verify our position."

Doors open and the team exits out to wander and wonder at terminal point of the gravel roadway. Cideeda opens the back hatch and Dretphi reaches in to pull out three telescopic poles and a tripod. Aristespha, Bach, Sebastian and Sotalia spread out from the humvee. Both Aristespha's and Bach's eyes glow brightly as they carefully survey sections of the road and overgrowth surrounding. Sotalia eyes flicker to a constant dim illumination and she strains in concentration to maintain the effect. Sebastian rises high up into the air, rotating around to stare at parts of the horizon as he gains altitude. Dretphi opens up the tripod, rests its feet securely upon the ground, adjusts it to a level point, and then opens the hard case up. She carefully lifts a complicated piece of machinery, with elements of a sextant and other measurement devices, and attaches it to the top of the tripod. While Dretphi retrieves a book from the hard case, flips to a worn section, and reads intermittently between tweaks of setting knobs on the device, Cideeda climbs up to the top of the humvee and locks the telescopic poles into welded on mounts. After she extends the last pole, she screws in signal cables from a small, rugged electronic device into each pole's base underneath a covered flap. With a flip of a switch and a few button presses through the thick rubber weatherproofing, the screen on the electronic device springs to life with a series of numbers and gauges. Cideeda leans her head back briefly toward Dretphi. "It'll be a minute or two. Nav beacons are a bit old out here and using the old spec."

Dretphi nods in confirmation and returns her attention to the machinery on the tripod. "Similar delay. I want long measurements to reduce inaccuracy."

Bach scratches the back of his head, shakes it side to side, and alternates a glance between Sotalia and Aristespha. "Well, I'm not sensing anything magical around here."

Aristespha blinks her eyes back to normal, pivots towards Bach, and walks with a sigh. “Nothing, either. I really was hoping for at least an illusion spell. That actually would have made some sense.”

With a hard close, Sotalia rubs both her eyes and shakes her head while she steps back to the group. “I don’t see or feel anything over here. Feels normal to me.”

Sebastian flies back down from a lofty height and lands his ghostly self to stand on the ground in front of the humvee. “Anything to report, everyone?”

Aristespha shakes her head and crosses her arms as her mind continues to process possible next steps. “No magical influence at the moment, Sebastian. If there is anything, it’s no stronger than the typical background magic.”

Cideeda lifts the radio navigation console and shows the screen towards Sebastian, Aristespha, Bach, and Sotalia. “Land navigation beacons put us roughly where we think we are. I’m waiting for the computer to refine the area down.”

Dretphi’s voice calls out behind the humvee, squat down and carefully writing measurements and calculation in a notebook. “Need time difference in measurements to reduce error. We are in the vicinity of where we should be regardless.”

After a few nods, Sebastian points out towards the dead end of the road and moves slowly in that direction. “I think I saw an odd clearing a few kilometers away. I couldn’t make out much more than that, but the clearing has a really weird shape to it.”

The group roughly assembles behind Sebastian and ready themselves. Sebastian turns to face behind and smiles as he watches everyone else greet him eagerly. “Well. I guess no one is against a bit of a nature hike?”

Grins, shrugs, and smirk appears on all faces and Sebastian leads out the group into the dead end woods.

A chorus of leaves cracking and the occasional stick snap accompanies the group as they navigate through the thick forest. After a few minutes, Dretphi stops, reaches up to a tree branch, and lowers it down to her eye level. She studies it with full focus and her face reveals a mind churning through information. Sebastian glances back and calls out with hopeful curiosity. “Did you find something, Dretphi?”

The rest of the group halts their progress, face Dretphi, and wait expectantly. Dretphi looks around briefly, reaches out with her free hand to another branch from a shorter tree, and brings it down next to the previous. “Forest... Is not... Natural.”

Bach blinks a few times and puzzles at Dretphi’s statement. “How so? There’s no magic that we’ve found.”

Dretphi twists her mouth, lifts her head back, and her eyes search upwards in her head for the right phrase. “Not naturally occurred.”

As her words enter the thoughts of the others, their attentions quickly involve the forest surroundings with a greater interest. Dretphi continues and pulls down the branches to showcase her findings. “The tall trees here are not native to this area. The short trees are. Both similar in appearance. From the same family. Different species.”

She guides the branches back up to their respective trees and squints to glance into the forest ahead, behind, and to either sides of the group. “It is strange that the non-native tree is found only in a narrow band here. That species grows fast. Does not live long.”

Sotalia twists her boot on the ground and pats in it a few times on the forest floor. She quirks a brow as she feels out the ground. “Has this been a really easy hike for anyone else? I just think this terrain should be a lot rougher? It’s an incline, but really consistent?”

A series of long, slow nods punctuate Dretphi’s silence. She kneels down, digs at the forest floor with her hand, and ponders implications between sifts through the dirt. Sebastian holds his chin, thinks, and gradually spins back forward to the direction of the clearing. “Let’s see what this clearing is. It should be up ahead. But, let’s approach it carefully. Everyone, stay in the forest when we get to the edge. I’ll go scout ahead.”

Sebastian glides out in front of the group. Aristespha, Bach, Cideeda, Dretphi, and Sotalia spread out and cautiously hike on, keeping loosely behind tree cover as they venture forward. A quarter hour later, the group reaches the edge of the forest and finally take time to survey the clearing. Bach mumbles to himself in astonishment. “What the hell?”

Before the group an overgrown, wide strip of land cuts out into the hilly distance, devoid of trees. The grass growing on the strip maintains a strangely even height that matches the oddly flat topology of the land. Almost hidden, worn ruts indicate the only semblance of path through the grass. Off to the sides of the strip lay piles of different types of rubble that scatter out into the surrounding trees and provide a place for undergrowth to root. Sebastian jets back to the group and signals them out with a waving arm gesture. “Nothing dangerous I could find. But... What do you all make of this?”

Cideeda flits her eyes wide and points a claw tip to one of the rubble piles. “That’s broken up asphalt! Gods! There was a road here!”

Dretphi nods with surprise infiltrating her expression. “Land has been altered to suit that purpose. Felt unnatural. Tilled. Packed tightly.”

Sotalia puts her hands on her hips and idly gazes out ahead with a dumbfound expression. “So, someone removed this road and planted trees to hide it? Why didn’t they just take it all the way to the highway?”

Aristespha draws a breath in and slowly exhales nervous energy out through her reserved stare to the situation before her. “It’s less suspicious to keep that much of the road there than obviously removing it.”

Sebastian shakes his head and sighs with an ethereal echo. "Something has been covered up. This is A LOT of effort to hide anything. There definitely IS something here we need to investigate."

Cideeda glances back and growls in frustration. "I hate to leave the humvee back there, but I didn't see an easy path through."

A sinister grin creeps up on Sotalia's mouth and she stretches out her arms over her head. "Oh, I'm very certain that can be arranged. I mean, the trees aren't native here anyway."

Sebastian laughs, stands proud to the group. "Sounds like a good enough plan to me. Aristespha, Bach, and Sotalia get ready to move some lumber. Cideeda and Dretphi, navigate the best you can and see if we can keep the clear cutting down to minimum."

A large furry ear twitches to a repetitive tapping noise on the roof of the humvee. Cideeda press down on a control button and her window rolls down. She reaches out through the open driver's side window and plucks out a small branch stuck in a gap between roof and roof rack. She brings the branch inside, directs it near Sotalia, and gives her a brief glare. Sotalia meets the glare and attempts to innocently play off the accusation with a shrug. "What? That wasn't on my side."

Cideeda's eyes roll and she chucks the branch out the window, resuming her focus on driving through the grassy roadway. Humvee rolls smoothly over the grass, only the constant patter of large grass blades add to the background rustle of road noise. As the vehicle crest over a hill, Aristespha rubs her temples as she concentrates down upon a tablet showing map data. "We were already kilometers off the main highway, now we've gone almost five more. Why is this not on any map? This isn't some kind of forgotten logging trail."

Bach cranes his head over from his seat to peek at the map on the tablet screen. "I keep on seeing more piles of road they ripped off, dumped in the forest."

Dretphi gazes out a side window and concern tugs at the corner of her mouth. "Without the road surface the forest will reclaim the area naturally. This was purposeful."

Cideeda squints out down the hill decline and opens her eyes wide. Sotalia tilts her head to the side in confusion. "Is that a town up ahead?"

Dretphi works her way up from her seat into the aisle to stare forward in bewilderment. Aristespha rolls her window down and leans out to get a clear look. Bach and Sebastian find a viewing path around the headrests of Cideeda's and Sotalia's seats. Cideeda focuses her gaze harder and puzzles at what she sees. "I guess it used to be. It looks abandoned for sometime."

The humvee drives onwards to the collection of rundown, derelict buildings. A faint squeal of brakes trails off when the vehicle stops short of a perimeter of barricades and huge warning signs encircling the main entry point. In many languages and dialects, the same phrase repeats upon each surface.

“WARNING! DEADLY DISASTER ZONE! NOTHING WORTH YOUR LIFE EXISTS HERE ANYMORE! GO BACK! THE DANGER STILL EXISTS HERE! NO HELP WILL COME!”