

## Ain't A Hero – Episode 24

by Bryan Schuder

Aristespha, Bach, Cideeda, Dretphi, Sebastian and Sotalia stand just outside the perimeter of fences, alert symbols, and warning signs. Pairs of eyes individually seek out contrasting elements from the landscape of caution and foreboding, but the searches eventually result in nothing. Bach glances to either side of him to gauge the demeanor of everyone, pinches the bridge of his nose with cringing close of the eyes, and draws in breath to sigh. “I get the feeling we are going to completely ignore these warnings. Aren’t we?”

Sebastian turns his self toward Bach, lifts a brow, and shrugs with a nonchalant smile. “Half the places we usually go to on missions have warning signs, bro. And the other half usually SHOULD have them.”

With a hand supporting her chin and an idle finger tapping the side of her cheek, Aristespha ponders about the signage as her eyes focus on areas around the messages. “It’s very strange. There’s no organization listed anywhere, but these signs are extremely well made.”

A quick of flit of an eyebrow and Sotalia’s eyes wander between the different alphabets and languages written upon the signs. “And, there’s just about every major language listed here with a few older minor ones, too. I’ve never actually seen a warning message this thorough in so many languages.”

She leans forward to read the smaller subtext under a large warning paragraph and returns her stance back with astonishment tempering her curiosity. “Wow! That’s a really old dialect of Americ. Still can’t believe the spelling rules back then.”

Cideeda pans her gaze along the perimeter before her head halts at a large gate section of the tall, solid metal fence and focuses upon the thick, long weld running down between the gate and frame. “Interesting. Looks like whoever decided to not even bother with a lock and just welded it shut. I don’t think they planned on coming back to this place.”

Dretphi rotates her head to Cideeda and lowers the aim of her quizzical expression. “Strange. The gate must have been used before. Sealed much later. This fence construction is high quality. Built with the town?”

A nod slowly emerges from Cideeda and she meets Dretphi’s face with a thoughtful gaze. “I think so. You can’t easily put this much high grade steel up this well without some serious planning. This looks like a lot of the old small town perimeter fences my dad would get in the scrap yard when the town upgraded.”

She places her hands on her hips and surveys the work ahead involving the welded gate. “I should be able to cut that gate open in an hour...”

Her weight shifts and she twists her upper body in her body suit to face Bach with a toothy grin. “Or, I’m certain Bach could crack it open in a few minutes...”

Bach blinks to attention and catches Cideeda's widening grin. He notices the encouraging looks upon him, stares briefly at the door, and lowers his forehead onto the palm of his hand. "Of course... Let me go forth, ignore all the warnings, and crack open the gateway to our doom. This makes total sense."

Sebastian rolls his eyes and shakes his head with an ethereal laugh. "Come on, bro. This is nothing on scale of crazy things you've done, even recently."

As Bach removes his head from his hand, he narrows his eyes at his brother and groans when he returns his gaze to the gate. "I know. I know. But, at least those other crazy moments, I didn't have signs, quite literally, everywhere telling me to do the opposite."

Sotalia stretches her arms and interlocked hands out forwards, straightens her back, and flexes her head from shoulder to shoulder with a growing grin. "Well, if you don't feel up to it, I'm still plenty fired up from that bit of deforestation. This gate won't be anything a few plasma flares couldn't fix."

A long sigh escapes Bach and he draws a long breath in afterwards. "No, no. I got it. Despite that little voice in the back of my head telling me not to."

Upon his face a grin cracks across from the corner and widens. "Plus, I'd much rather the gate be functional afterwards, just in case we need it."

A few blinks, Sotalia quickly aims her head at Bach with a quirk of the brow and a neutral expression on her face. She develops a sly smirk, flits her brow, and rests her intertwined hands on the back of her head. "Fair enough."

Sebastian nods and addresses the group. "Okay. Bach will get the gate open. Cideeda and Dretphi. I'm leaning towards camping out in the humvee tonight. Things have been plenty weird, I think we might need to be ready to leave on a moment's notice."

Dretphi eyes processes the situation in her mind and she examines the treeline near the grass roadway with a series of slow nods. "I agree. We should hide the humvee in the forest. Clear a path for escape. Hide obvious traces."

Cideeda directs a thumb behind her and grins to Sebastian. "I saw a spots not too far away that should obscure us enough and the humvee should fit into without too much trouble."

With a gradual pivot in place, Sebastian's ghostly form angles to Aristespha and Sotalia. "While they get camp ready, I'll scout as far out as I can. Could you two check for any possible magical weirdness?"

Aristespha smiles lovingly to Sebastian as her eyes illuminate with violet light. "I will see what I can find, Sebastian."

Sotalia notices the violet glow and squints hard as her eyes flicker a golden light. "Sounds like a plan. Gods, I still don't know how anyone does this for any period of time."

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Faded gray asphalt roadways form a rough mesh around decaying buildings and overflowing vegetation. Years of abandonment eclipse the original craftsmanship of the structures and the long strain against the environment reveals the short lifespans left. With a low whistle, wind blows by a broken hole in a window as the traveling sun reflects off the jagged edges of glass. As a rusted metal post shifts to the will of the breeze, the sign face twists to reveal the stubborn paint outlines of the original message. "Central Administration Office."

Aristespha carefully approaches the sign, grips the edge with a gloved hand, and turns the barely legible lettering to her sight. "This... seems familiar to me. The terminology, the layout, and the building designs."

She releases the sign, straightens her posture, and pivots back to Bach, Cideeda, Dretphi, Sebastian, and Sotalia. Her eyes search low for an explanation while her expression tries to fight the developing logic. "This HAS to be a Grand Library outpost. I've visited many and most were laid out very similar to this."

Sebastian pulls his head back blinking and directs his concern to Aristespha. "But, dear, wouldn't have this shown up in the searches you did on our map locations?"

Comfort fades from Aristespha's body language and she grits her teeth in a battle between bewilderment and nerves. "Yes. Yes, it should have. Something as significant as an outpost SHOULD have a number of entries in the main database... Unless..."

The rest of the group keeps their expectant attention upon Aristespha as she covers her mouth briefly with her hand and slides her hand down to her chin to speak. "This place has been... Decataloged."

When Aristespha returns her focus to the group, she watches expressions of confusion and uncertainty reflect upon their faces between themselves before they seek her. She draws a slow breath and exhales carefully. "It's a core Grand Library law that data within the main database can never be deleted. But, there have been some liberties taken with the catalog that indexes all the data. And, I think this is one of them..."

Aristespha crosses her arms, grips her elbows tightly, and her posture stiffens while she eyes the area with a new aura of caution. "We need to be extremely careful. I can't imagine what is here that has to be hidden so thoroughly, but... I've only ever heard rumors about minor items getting decataloged. Nothing like this."

Sebastian hovers close to Aristespha and gazes into her eyes. "You okay, dear?"

After a long release from Aristespha's lungs, she nods with a slight smile. "Yes. It's just the situation has changed in ways I didn't think it could."

Bach pans his stare out across the streets running between lines of derelict buildings and shrugs nonchalantly with a comforting smile to Aristespha. "I think I know how you feel."

Dretphi steps forward, squints her eyes to a point through the broken front door windows, and glances to Sebastian. “We have four hours left of daylight. Stay together. Clear perimeters of buildings. Search interiors?”

Sebastian nods slowly and rotates his ethereal form to the large, remnants of the Central Administration Office. “Sounds good. It’ll take longer to investigate areas, but I would much rather keep everyone close. So keep within line of sight of someone else, and have anything strange checked for magic before disturbing it.”

Sotalia direct her sight out to the horizons down each major roadway path with a twist to her mouth. “So, they built an outpost here. But, why? I haven’t seen or detected anything strange yet. This is a lot to build in the middle of nowhere.”

Cideeda smirks, unbuttons a pouch on her vest, withdraws a flashlight, and beams a bright spray of light towards the doors of the Central Administration Office. “Depending on how careful they were, we might find something in here.”

Satisfaction wanes from Cideeda’s face as she thinks about the circumstances around her and grumbles to herself. “But, this would be the first place I would clean out if I was getting rid of evidence.”

Sebastian crosses his arm, floats forward, and shrugs with a glance back. “It’s still worth checking out. If nothing else, maybe they were too busy removing all the secret files to get rid of general stuff?”

Bach scratches his head and puzzles to Aristespha. “Are Central Administration Offices similar to town halls or city capitals?”

After a few hard blinks, Aristespha arrives back to senses and faces Bach with a curious look while her mind compares concepts. “Yes, for most purposes. It’s geared towards outpost management than legislature.”

Pointing at the structure, Bach quirks the corner of his mouth and lifts a brow. “Think they have a map of the place in there?”

Aristespha nods with a growing grin and stares towards the front doors with a violet glow to her eyes. “Yes, they should have at least one.”

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Through weathered glass windows beams of light cast into the empty offices on either side of the main hallway and leftover reflections create ambient glows that spill into the hallway floor from the doorways. A weak breeze from all the fractured panes stirs the floating, illuminated dust in the stagnant air inside the Central Administration building. Steps upon the simple, smooth concrete floor echo distantly down the corridor, with even the softest pats upon the surface still sounding out. Dretphi stands in the middle of the central rotunda, scanning down the hallway leading to the exit, before she pivots in place to guide her sight to one of the many doorways in the large, circular room. A bright spotlight follows along as she directs the handheld lamp with one arm and keeps the other hand on her strap hung sub-machine gun.

Sotalia exits from a doorway with a long sigh. Dretphi lowers the spot light down towards the floor away from Sotalia and shows a quizzical expression. "Anything found?"

Sotalia shakes her head, guides her hair with both hands over her horns, and places a hand on her hip with a mild frown. "No. Nothing. Not a damned thing at all. Whenever everyone left, they must have taken everything that wasn't nailed down."

Aristespha side steps out from behind Sotalia through the doorway with discouragement weighing heavily upon her face. "The times I wish people were not so thorough."

Bach wanders out into the rotunda from another doorway with shrug and a tug to the corner of his mouth. "We found nothing."

Cideeda's toed shoes lightly pat upon the floor and she shakes her head in thought. She idly scratches a furry ear with a claw tip and grumbles. "There's got to be something here. There's always something that gets looked over, especially when people are leaving a place with the intent to never come back."

She lifts her head up and her emerald green eyes hunt around the area with pauses along the way to squint out a theory. Sebastian drifts through a door and releases an ethereal sigh and shrugs with his hands up and out to the sides. "The rest of the rooms look pretty empty. Some rolling chairs, desks with all the drawers open, and a table or two. But overall, it looks like it was cleared out some time ago."

Bach continues a walk out towards reception desk off the center point of room, near the archway leading to the exit hallway. He places his hand on the age touched rolling chair back and gradually leads it away from the desk with the trace of a squeaky wheel. He spins the chair around a few times before settling it towards himself and taking a seat in it. Dretphi glances up to the domed ceiling's windows and eyes the orange light from the dusk sun. "An hour of daylight left. We should return to camp."

Sebastian nods with a frowning curl to his mouth and crosses his arms. "Yep. We'll try again tomorrow and maybe check further out. Don't worry, everyone. It's just the first day. We'll find something soon."

Everyone else shares some form of agreement to the sentiment, but the positive encouragement from Sebastian only briefly subdues the collective mild disappointment. Bach halts the slow spin in the chair, secures his feet on the ground, leans forward to stand. As he pushes the chair back underneath the reception desk, the chair stops short of intent with a soft thud and another lighter, crispier sound. Cideeda's ears immediately perk back towards the reception desk and twitch. Her head spins the rest of her body around and her wide eyes lock on to Bach. "Garbage..."

Bach meets Cideeda's gaze, puzzles a moment at the word, but gradually kneels down to direct his attention underneath the desk. He reaches under the desk and the crinkle of plastic twitches Cideeda's ears as it echoes into the rotunda. A toothy grin flashes across Cideeda's face and she rushes over to the other side of the desk to greet the plastic garbage bag. Bach slides out from underneath the desk. Sebastian flies over ahead with renewed interest. Dretphi steps over and cranes above the reception desk to watch. Aristespha and Sotalia

walk over and around to witness Cideeda gleefully slice open the plastic bag with a claw. Sotalia flits a sneer and rolls her eyes with snort. "This may be another part I'm going to leave out next time I talk to my mother."

Aristespha smiles slyly at Sotalia and lifts a brow at her. Sotalia crosses her arms, angles her posture back, and exhales dismissively. "If you can somehow spin taking a two day trip to a forgotten, forsaken town..."

She slips a finger out from her crossed arms, points to Aristespha, and then pans a wave out to the area. "Where something terrible may very well still exist, to dig through a bag of garbage, and NOT have it sound like a good reason for my mother to suggest a career change..."

Slowly Sotalia leans close to Aristespha with a smirking grin and quirk in the brow. "I'd love to hear it."

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Aristespha eyes focus upon a series of number and letters on a tattered information pamphlet and she angles the document to discern the faded lettering along a number of crumple lines. "This document is in the database. It has to be. This looks like a valid database address."

She flips the paper around to stare at the "Orth Ridge Archaeological Site Welcome Guide" briefly, carefully folds it up, places it in a hard, thin case next to her seat, and releases a long sigh while staring at the ceiling of the humvee cab. "I wish we weren't so far out, so I could access the database right now. And get some answers to this mess."

The seat back across the aisle reclines and Bach settles in down into the new position with a few comforting hunting squirms. "That's still weird you can lose track of such information with just having the catalog entry removed."

A long boot thuds upon the cab floor in front of Aristespha and she flexes her sock covered toes. The other boot of the pair lands similarly. She drapes and wraps a blanket over herself and glances to Bach with a frown. "It's not usually a problem. But, the infrastructure the Grand Library's main database uses to allow it's flexibility, robustness, and capacity can theoretically have such... issues."

Bach searches his mind and pieces together a question with his eyes. "What type of infrastructure is it... Well, roughly?"

Aristespha fidgets in her seat to find a sweet spot and rests her head against a small pillow. Her silvery blue hair flows over the pillow and she gazes at Bach with hints of internal unease leaking through her smile. "Well, it really used to one big massive, singular database a very long time ago. Unfortunately, a near crash occurred and they nearly lost a huge chunk of the records. So, a new design was requested and the chosen design happened to mirror a small version of the Aethernet system."

Bach's eyes open wide as the concept expands in his mind and he turns his head forward to process the idea with a number of blinks. "Wow. I've heard it was big and complicated, but a mini-Aethernet?"

A large figure stirs underneath a blanket in the back seat. Dretphi slowly rolls her head to face away from the seat back with a faint snore and a number of her blonde braids unfurl upon her pillow and face. The driver's door opens and Cideeda quietly steps up to slide into her seat. Sotalia pulls the front passenger's side door open and gently maneuvers herself inside the vehicle. Both softly guide their doors closed and tug upon them until each door latch engages with a click. Sotalia opens a dash compartment and stows a roll of toilet paper inside before closing it back up. "We checked the perimeter one last time. All the magical wards were undisturbed and active."

Cideeda cranes her head around her seat to glance to Bach and Aristespha. "Anyone else before I arm the exterior alarm?"

Both Aristespha and Bach shake their head and Dretphi sounds slow slumbering exhale. Cideeda smiles, returns fully into her seat, and presses buttons on the dash console. After a few final presses of the buttons on the side of the center in-dash display, status messages gradually and continuously scroll on the screen as it dims down. Sotalia looks around her seat as she reclines it down, stops above Bach's legs, pauses with the crack of evil on her face, but then raises the seat back amply above. She flashes a sly smile to Bach's watchful stare before flopping a pillow down and pulling a blanket snugly over herself. Cideeda raises her hand up from the center display and adjusts a few setting knobs on another vehicle system. A few moments later, a barely audible stream of air flows from the front air conditioning vents into the cab. Cideeda coils up in the front seat under blanket with the tip of her tail poking out and covering her neck.

The humvee cab grows quiet with the collective slumber of the group. While most the forest surrounds the vehicle tightly, a section of forest front of the vehicle maintains an ambiguous haze with details lacking focus upon inspection and surfaces transparent to the faint moonlight above. Further out, a number of small metal posts with antennas masquerading as twigs hide from outside view behind trees. Near each post, thick sticks with magically symbolic writing barely reveal themselves out of the ground and faintly illuminate in a split second pulse with each other. As the distance increases, the location of the humvee obscures quickly into the background of the forest, lining the grass way.

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Bach's eyes shock wide open and he freezes rigid mid breath. A distance stare silently echoes onto his face. Eventually, his eyes break free and systematically inspect his surroundings. Aristespha sleeps peacefully with the slight rise and fall of her chest under the cover and a hand resting securely upon the Sword of the Spirit Realm. With a gradual tilt of his head, Bach watches Dretphi sound out the traces of a snore. He turns his head to glance forward at a few locks of dark red hair peeking over the head rest and carefully lifts himself up to gaze upon Sotalia less than glamorous, sleep contorted face. Mumbles from Cideeda capture Bach's attention and he watches her grimace and cringe. She mouths out unintelligible phrases, clenches her fists around the blanket as tension travels through her

body. Bach frowns as he witnesses another wave of discomfort affect Cideeda and cautiously leans forward with a soft voice. "Cideeda... Cideeda?"

A furry ear flicks and Bach pauses in uncertain thought and searches his mind with his eyes. He returns his gaze to Cideeda. "Cideeda?"

The same furry ear on Cideeda's head flicks again and perks towards Bach, shifting some of her short multi-color hair. Bach speaks calmly and gently. "It's just a dream."

Cideeda's face twitches and her lips move with faint vocals. Bach continues with the best assuring tone he can relay. "It's just a dream. A dream. It's not real. You can change it."

A clearer vocalization sounds out barely from Cideeda and Bach nods with his response. "Yes. A dream. Change it to what you want. You are okay."

A trailing confirmation drifts from Cideeda and, moments later, her expression calms and her body relaxes to a peaceful slumber. Bach dons a brief smile that wavers as he stares out into darkness contrasting the moonlit forest. His eyes hunt through the voids between the trees around the vehicle for minutes before resting his gaze upon the constant stream of nominal status text upon the dimmed center dash display. As he aims his head up from the display, he halts and closes his eyes hard. He draws in a shuddering breath and lowers himself back upon his reclined seat. He pulls the blanket back over his body, and directs a section to hood his head as he warily sighs with his eyes still firmly closed. Sleep eventually finds Bach, but at its own reluctant pace.

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The rusting door handle gradually turns, the bolt grinds against the door jam, and specs of dust unsettle off the aging door surface. As the door gradually swings in, a claw-tipped hand follows behind the path to sweep the aim of a laser pistol across growing span. When the door bumps into the decaying rubber of the doorstop on the wall, another hand trains another laser pistol at the area of the room. Cideeda glances behind her to the glowing blue eyes of Bach. After a few sweeps of his vision into the space of the room, Bach shakes his head. Cideeda engages the safeties, holsters both her laser pistols, and lightly steps with a watchful eye hunting. Bach walks into the room and stands just behind Cideeda with a dimming gaze panning along the features of the room. "I don't think anyone has been in here in a while."

Cideeda moves next to a desk with an arrangement of items upon desktop underneath a faint gray haze. She rests a finger tip upon the surface and clears a speckled path with a drag across the surface. "Dust and some mold. It's been undisturbed and closed off for years."

Bach pivots slowly in place as he assesses the major contents of the room. Old books rest on the shelves with manila folders occasionally dividing sections and nearly bursting out with written notes. A drafters table sits at the ready near drawers of supplies and rolls of decaying paper. The desk prominently bridges the two sides of the room with a number of large ring binders stacked one corner with a variety of measurement hand tools arranged neatly. Finally, Bach settles his stare to a child's toy box upon a play rug. His expression unsettles at the sight and he directs his gaze back towards the desk Cideeda cautiously inspects. "This seems so strange... Especially, this room."

Cideeda nods her head and sighs as she surveys the area again. "I know. Most of the other houses were mostly cleared out or just abandoned hastily. This place feels like it..."

Bach turns to Cideeda with a frown. "Was left like this purposefully."

After a long breath, Cideeda agrees with a twist of her mouth. "Yes. Not just left behind, but left like this."

Silence looms above while Bach and Cideeda exchange glances between investigating parts of the room and finding possible items of interest. Eventually, the desk becomes the single focal point of both their searches. Cideeda kneels down, concentrates her stare along the gaps and joints, and shrugs. "There's no obvious traps. And, I haven't seen anything resembling one the whole time I've been here."

Bach reaches out a hand underneath the wide middle drawer handle. "Open it?"

Cideeda cranes her head under the desk, scrutinizes the underside of the drawer, and returns herself to stand. "If you don't feel or see anything magically dangerous, go right ahead."

With a secure grip on the handle, the drawer slides out with a little hesitation. The inside compartment reveals a single book with a necklace and ribbon wrap binding it shut. Bach and Cideeda tilt their heads in confusion, look to each other, and then refocus upon the book.

Aristespha leans herself into the room through the doorway and enters as the contents of the room capture her interest. "This is very different."

Bach places both hands on either side of the book and carefully raises it out of the inside of the drawer. He turns to Aristespha and angles the front of the book to her. "Very different."

A pair of violet eyes flit wide and Aristespha carefully extends her arms out with open hands to the sealed volume. "Oh. We are going search this place from top to bottom now. Let's get back to everyone else. They were about to check the bedrooms down the hall."

Sebastian flies into the room and halts in between Aristespha, Bach, and Cideeda and gestures a finger to the lips. He signals them through the door and jets out. Sebastian leads Aristespha, Bach, and Cideeda to Dretphi against a corner waving a point to a faint trail of traffic upon the hallway carpet leading from the kitchen. Cideeda blinks in surprise and quizzically perks a brow at Dretphi in whisper. "I thought we checked the perimeter."

Dretphi nods in thought and sneers to twist of the lips as something comes to mind. "Back door leads to a brick patio. Connects to the driveway from the street. Surfaces that do not allow traces to last."

Sebastian floats over and quietly address the group. "Get ready. I'll go through the bedroom door and see what's there. Be ready for my command."

The rest of the group moves into positions lining magic and firepower down the hallway at the door. Sebastian nods and phases his ethereal form through the door. A tense silence looms

over the group for a minute before Sebastian's ghostly visage pops through the door. "No one is in here. Don't see anything rigged to the door, but double check me on this side."

Cideeda creeps up to the door and her eyes guide her head in moving stare around the frame. She glances to Sebastian with a nod, reaches out to the door knob, and turns the knob with a push to swing the door open into the room. A fine layer of dust lightly shades the two dressers, a pair of nightstands, and the large wooden bed frame in the room. The group fans in and heads scan the area with Dretphi squatting down and squinting at the area rug on the carpet. "I am not able to determine how recent this activity was. Material is old. Dusty room. Closed environment. Strangely preserving. Not within a week?"

A low grumble sneaks out through Dretphi's voice as she frowns with frustration. "Could be more? Less? Difficult."

Cideeda grumbles and drags a finger tip along the top surface of a dresser to reveal similar results as before. Sebastian hovers into the room more with a hem and puzzles at the situation. "This house has been an odd one, figures it would be one of the last we checked for the day."

He pivots mid air and pans his curious concern along the area. As the rest of the group expands out into the space to investigate parts, Sotalia places her hands on her hips, lifts an eyebrow, and examines the space with an unamused expression. When she rests her glare to the shadowy corner behind the open door, her head halts abruptly and her eyes widen slightly. She casually steps over and pulls the door back to remove the shade from a simple wire waste basket. With an almost reflexive eye roll, she attempts to dismiss the object, but a reflective glint catches her attention. Sotalia kneels down, looks into the waste basket, and plucks out one of a number of plastic wrappers. She brings it close to her vision. Cideeda sniffs the air, pauses perplexed, and her nose leads her to see Sotalia holding up a breakfast snack bar wrapper. The odd silence attracts the attentions of everyone else, as they all collectively stare at the discovery. A few leftover crumbs of breakfast snack bar fall out onto the carpeted floor, each relatively fresh and mold free. Upon the wrapper's edge a future expiration date's ink contrasts the shiny coating of the wrapper. Finally, an extravagant promotional image overtakes most the wrapper's label space and features a recent group shot of the familiar Next Adventurers of Nexus.

Sebastian narrows his eyes, drifts near a large window, and gazes out through the clean spots of the dirty glass pane. Through the frame of the window, a long well engineered road leads out to a distant set of structures near the base of the nearby mountain. Sebastian turns to address the group with an air of determination. "I think we need to take a tour of this Orth Ridge Archaeological Site ourselves as soon as possible."

Dretphi checks her sub-machine gun and adjusts the strap to the large rifle on her back. Cideeda nods and subconsciously rests her hands near her holsters. An eager grin emerges upon Sotalia's face. Aristespha nod calmly and straightens her posture with hand on the sword at her side. Bach gives a simple thumbs up gesture with a smile.

Sebastian smiles proudly and gazes out through the window. "I'll scout ahead. Move fast there, but keep watch for anything off."

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Gigantic, ancient structures stand solemnly in spite of the hundreds of years of exposure to the world. Stone, metal, and traces of arcane intertwine to form massive buildings of purpose that remain silent. Modern constructions add a minuscule to the overall via stairs, doors, walkways, lifts, and lighting. Massive areas with magical ruins and industrial equipment show themselves to the skies above whether by original intent or the eventual decay of time. Sebastian darts around to scan the path ahead, waiting for the rest to catch up to report. Dretphi and Cideeda lead the group with sub-machine gun and laser pistol at the ready. Aristespha and Sotalia follow close behind pondering the purpose behind this place. Bach tails in the rear and keeps a watchful eye behind the group and joins in on the debate about observations. "I have no idea what was suppose to happen here. But, it had to be big and significant."

Aristepsha's eyes wander between one significant structure to one of the many more littering the area and she pauses to rub her eyes away from the afternoon sun. "I know. And, so much effort and time was taken to set up here. But, why leave so fast? I would be disingenuous to say I'm not worried."

Sotalia rests her stare forward to massive, five meter tall modern doors enclosing the area the next archway leads to and notices the smaller sub-doors open to the dark area within. "I've seen a few places with that big and open style, but... I don't think this was a style choice."

Cideeda shakes her head slowly as her eyes peer through the contrasting darkness through the small embedded doorway. "The construction of this place isn't for looks. Despite how old this main roadway is, they only needed to install some safety rails. This was made to handle heavy, heavy traffic."

Dretphi and Cideeda pan their views and weapons through the open small doorway and into the next area. A cavernous echo faintly bounces around the massive space when Dretphi steps her large armored boot onto the roadway inside. A spotlight, flashlight, three different lights spells, and an illuminating ghostly figure shine out starkly and push out the shadows. Through small cracks and worn seals in the ceiling, natural daylight creeps in to provide a dim ambient light to the region. The bridging roadway from the doorway arches over the floor meters below and meters under the ceiling to lead to another archway with a similar set of modern doors. The group swells out on the heavy walkway in cautious attempts to perceive the distant and assumed walls in the inky black shadows. Cideeda steps quietly next to Bach and points her flashlight down over the guard rail to guide a spot of light through chaotic but undisturbed debris below. She winces briefly, uncomfortably squirms all over, and aims her flashlight ahead.

The pupils of Cideeda's emerald eyes narrow to pinpoints and a ghostly pale tone overtakes her face's light brown skin. With frantic, split-second flurry, another laser pistol leaves its holster, both aim rigidly ahead simultaneously, shriek to full power charging, and the flashlight bounces from free fall onto the floor. In moments, Bach snaps his head to witness Cideeda's terror driven determination, follows the trajectory of her laser pistols, and flits a blue glow in his eyes as he looks towards the distance. Horror floods his face and stun him, but a force from within powers through with gritting teeth and a snarling lip. His eye explode with brilliant blue light and swarms of magical flow channels swirl within and around him to condense

between the palms his outstretched arms. Layer by layer tightly packed, hair thin rings of magical energy build upon each other. Each layer of rings rotate, spin, and turn to form a growing chaotic maelstrom of visual white noise in an orb form. The ball of destructive energy shrills in chorus with the powerful energy whine of the laser pistols.

Sotalia and Aristespha pivot simultaneously towards Bach and Cideeda when both shiver from some nearby source. Sebastian and Dretphi halt when familiar sounds reach both and rotate immediately to find the source. Dretphi quickly hunts through the void, raises her spotlight in the direction of focus, and instinctively raises her sub-machine gun as her body tenses. The spotlight shines against the far wall against industrial machinery and arcane components, except for one mass in the middle. Encapsulated in the border of illumination, a billowing cloud of black miasma lingers and remains in place. Ignoring all light with an aura of spite, the fluctuating entity idly looms around with the edges of its being flowing a black ethereal fire. Weapons and magics ready, the group engages an eerie stand off as the whine of a laser pistols and the chaotic shrill of a disintegration ball fill the background as frantic pants from Cideeda punctuate fear.

A minute passes, Bach squints, gradually tilts his head in thought, and breaks the silence. "That's not one of them."

With a sudden cringe Cideeda growls back with fully tensed, rattling grip on her pistols. "The FUCK do you mean?! I KNOW what it looks like! It's right there waiting for us!"

Bach releases a long, shuddering sigh, and draws a long breath in. "It's not a whole... Working one... It's not all there... It's like the components to make one..."

Cideeda defiantly maintains a panicked glare at the black mass encompassing a cylindrical tank. The mass oozes out through a rupture on the side of the container, while bits of arcane material, runes, and equipment lay in scattered fractures upon the floor and even into other pieces of nearby equipment. Bach gazes over to Cideeda and waits while struggling to keep the orb maelstrom. Cideeda's eyes dart over briefly and she blinks through to analytical thought. As her focus shifts to the scene rather than the dark miasma, a long painful sigh escapes and tension releases hold of her body. "It... It... would have come after us by now."

The laser pistols lower slowly, the charging whine disappearing as the safeties reengage. The disintegration ball shrinks with reverse flows of magic entering back into Bach's body until the last points fades. Bach relaxes his arms limply to his sides and pants with his head hanging. A grimace flashes upon his face and he growls loudly. "THE FUCK IS WITH THIS PLACE!? What THE HELL did they DO HERE?!"

Cideeda's gaze drifts around in her thoughts and glances over when she feels a Sotalia's hand on her shoulder. Cideeda looks to the concern on Sotalia's face and manages to return a smile with a nod. Bach closes his eyes hard and pinches the bridge of his nose with an idle shake of his head. Sebastian slides on over next to his brother craning his head to see Bach's face. "Hey, bro. You okay?"

Bach draws in a deep breath and eventually manages to nod. "Yes. But, holy shit. This is a bit much."

Sebastian stares out solemnly to the black mass leaking tank and eyes his brother. “Is that what they look like?”

Bach sways his head from one shoulder to another with a grim smirk. “Generally. Well, usually about four meters tall with all the fucking anger, spite, and hate you can ever imagine one damned thing ever having. But, mostly that.”

Sotalia steps next to Bach, bumps her shoulder into his, and gazes at him with a masking grin over her concern. “Hey.”

She winks with a sly tint. “You still have to teach me that spell.”

An honest smile surfaces on Bach face and he playfully rolls his eyes at Sotalia. He feels a series of light but firm pats on his back, and glances over his shoulder to meet the warm smile of Drepthi underneath her helmet’s visor. Sebastian looks towards the light coming in through the small door within the larger archway door. “Well, I’m going to check ahead. See if we can avoid any new surprises like that.”

Sebastian pauses his flight next to Aristespha and hovers in front of her to parse her expression. “Dear?”

Aristespha turns to Sebastian, eventually relinquishing the tremors of anger, twitches of irritation, and strain of gripping frustration to her typical calm, neutral demeanor. “I’m fine. I’m going to get answers to this madness once we get within aetherphone reception. Someone WILL tell me what happened here.”

Sebastian waits until she finally shows a loving smile and gestures him off. As the group reforms to previous marching order, Bach feels a set of light pressing claw points on his arm and gazes down to see Cideeda smiling back. She sighs and gazes at him for a moment. “Thanks for the backup.”

Bach shrugs modestly with a smile and rubs the back of his neck with hints of embarrassment. “Well, I don’t know how much it would have helped. I was just mostly scared there.”

Cideeda tightens her wrap around Bach’s arm and releases it to move back up to the front. “You still stood your ground.”

Bach walks back to the reforming group. As the team approaches the door a powerful low hum resonates throughout the area. In between the group’s startles and worry a voice echoes from the sword.

“ENERGIES. FLOW. STRANGELY... NOT. NATURAL... HE. RECEIVES. THEM.”