

Ain't A Hero – Episode 25

by Bryan Schuder

Emerald green eyes peer out through the ajar small door within the larger modern doorway, and a furry ear angles out to scan the audio landscape. After a few sweeps of the immediate area, Cideeda's pupils focus on an opaque balcony safety railing panel. She lowers herself to a cautious crawl across the ancient stone flooring and slinks silently up to place her back against the panel. A careful panning gaze of the long overlook walkway satisfies her hunt for possible nearby threats. Edging her head close to the gap between panel and railing post, her eyes flit open in surprise and she returns to look at the doorway. Cideeda holds a finger to her lips, thumbs down behind her, points to either side of herself down the walkway paths, and nods. A heavy boot slowly presses down up the stone floor with care to the angle it contacts and Dretphi cautiously guides herself in a slow ducking crouch to another railing next to Cideeda. She keeps a hand on her sub-machine gun and another hand prevents the large rifle on her back from rattling against the hard armor plates on her suit. She eases herself to a kneel next to her railing panel and maintains a watch over the area. A faint ethereal glow illuminates near the door and Sebastian's transparent face gazes to Cideeda in anticipation. Cideeda nods with a calm, serious expression, points to the open sky, and mouths. "Open air. Bright."

Sebastian reaches his arm out low, watches his visage's glow fade against the ambient sunlight over the area, and then silently floats just over the floor to another railing panel. Aristespha, Bach, and Sotalia creep out in a loose line and fan out to positions in the shadows behind Cideeda, Dretphi, and Sebastian. Pairs of eyes peek around the gaps between panels and railing posts, and dart wide-eyed upon the vast area. Aristespha mumbles mutely to herself. "Gods... What is this place?"

Beams of sunlight drift over the massive circular platform, and the shadows of overhead clouds take long seconds to traverse the diameter. Intricate meshes of ceramic, glass, metal, and advanced polymer form concentric rings around a central disc. Faint flows of white light wave inwards in sync to the low resonating hum. Wavering, snaking shadows develop underneath and contrast the warps of space just above the surface of the platform. White, nearly transparent energy flows through the warps and swim in the air from beyond the outer edges of the platform to the central disc. Upon the central disc, a humanoid figure stands in the middle of a gradual vortex of magical flow, and energy constantly merges into figure's body. Heavy leather boots shift to a wider stance upon the disc, and aging, worn cotton dress pants settle into the new position. Long sleeves cover rising arms and fingers flex within form fitting leather gloves. The hood of the pullover jacket lifts to reveal wisps of white hair fanning in the breeze, a bright blue scarf in a tight wrap obscuring most of the face, and a pair of gray eyes fluctuating white as the waves of energy pulse. Sebastian's jaw hangs agape, eyes open up, and an astonishment floods his face. "Noxian."

All other pairs of eyes immediately lock on to Noxian in shock and awe with certain pairs glowing blue, violet, and flickering gold. A minute later, heads turn back away from the gaps between and exchange glances to each other. Aristespha slowly releases a held breath and blankly stares off in uneasy thought. "I didn't recognize him immediately, but that handle of Elder magic flow is his. With what the sword said... That has to be HIM."

Sotalia narrows her gaze towards the rest of the group and sneers with confusion tainting her doubtful exterior. "How? I've felt his presence before. I would have been able to sense him well before this point if this was him."

Sebastian shakes his head and dons a frown tight upon his face. "It's him. I know those eyes. He may not have that old mask and outfit anymore. But, that is him."

He attempts a reassuring smile to Sotalia but only manages a smirk. "He's changed this tactics from the last time we ran into him. Even the sword didn't pick him up until now. He's been very stealthy and sparing with his magic lately."

A daring grin presses away the sneer and doubt upon Sotalia and her eyes flit brightly. "He might be low on elder magic."

Aristespha quivers a curl of a lip as her violet glowing eyes analyze the gentle, faint vortex flowing around and into Noxian. "May HAVE been. He's drawing in energy from that device. It must be a collector or storage system of sorts. I don't know at the moment."

Sotalia peers through the gap near her briefly and returns with determination bold upon her face and a harsh whisper "Well, we can't just let him charge back up! We HAVE to stop him!"

Sebastian gazes to Sotalia, lifts a calming hand, and ethereally sighs. "I know. But, we are facing a HUGE unknown here. We have no idea what's he's like after he tried his power against that rift."

His mind races through options while his expression idles between determination and caution. The humming peaks and suddenly dies off to silence. The group returns attention towards the circular platform and Noxian. Moments of silence later, Noxian's head lowers down to level from his previous bask and he darts glances around in brief bewilderment. His shoulders droop, head lowers, and he pinches the bridge of nose with a grumbling groan. His low growls of frustration echo out against the surrounding, encircling tall walls of the region and funnel into Cideeda's perking ears. She concentrates upon the series of complains and draws a toothy smile. "I think the machine down there is a bit cranky from age."

The magic flows fade to slight warps of light and loosely follow Noxian as he steps off the center disc. He walks across the circular platform to a lone control station just outside the perimeter. After moving to stand in front of the ancient control station, he stares with a huff and contemplates the new state of circumstances. Seconds after playing out thoughts upon his face underneath the blue scarf, he presses series of icons upon a changing surface, adjusts knobs, and slides levers. He checks read outs, lights, meters, and other measurement equipment. He waits, shakes his head, and attempts another series of tweaks. Sebastian flashes a grin, turns his head away from watching Noxian, and quietly addresses the group. "Okay. This might be our chance. Cideeda and Dretphi, I need you two to sneak into some opposing cover with good vantage points."

Dretphi lifts her helmeted head just above the top of the safety railing and pans a stare across, stopping to scrutinize large evenly spaced support pillars for the balcony and small awning roof overhead. "The pillars present the better option available."

She lowers her head down, eyes the area below, and surveys around the circular platform. "Other options below. None grant an ideal firing position. Protective cover. Hiding spots."

Sebastian searches along the outer rim, and spots containers, relics, abandoned machinery, debris, and piles of undeployed safety platform equipment. "Okay. Aristespha, Bach, and Sotalia. We need to figure out how to shut that machine down enough to keep it useless for Noxian. Preferably as safe as possible. Of course, given current circumstances, we might need to push it a bit."

He meets Aristespha's and Sotalia's faces, and cranes his head over towards Bach. "Hey, bro? Did you hear what I said?"

Bach stares silently at Noxian, a neutral expression masking most the emotion. Slow shuddering breaths escape his lungs and a constant slight tremor shakes his hand idly resting on his leg. Dretphi follows Sebastian's worry to Bach, along with everyone else. She calmly reaches her hand out, gently rests it upon Bach's shoulder, and firmly squeezes. "Bach?"

Her hand buffers a tense flex of Bach's back as he startles, squelches an involuntary gasp, and blinks back to awareness. Bach turns towards Dretphi's warm, but worried smile, then to Cideeda, Sebastian, Sotalia, and Sebastain. "Oh gods. Sorry. Just spaced out there..."

Sebastian presents a comforting smile and nods. "Don't worry, bro. None of us really expected to find him here. Maybe the signs he was here at some point, but... This is a bit more than what I expected, to be honest."

After grimacing the emotionally concealing blank expression off his face, Bach manages to slight smile and sighs. "Seems to be the running theme of this place."

The group shares a series of nods, head shaking sighs, and other expressions that play off the stresses. Noxian stands up straight, draws a long breath, and crosses his arms. As he exhales, he studies another series of readings upon a magical screen streaming ancient text. He squints his gray eyes, reads the output, and flits his eyes open while his body tenses. He straightens his posture momentarily and bounds his eyes around the boundaries of his vision. But he then relaxes and resumes a cool exterior. He calmly pivots and meticulously hunts around the complex, paying careful attention to the shadowy areas and the balcony.

Sebastian dons a confident grin and resumes addressing the group. "Okay, one last time. Cideeda and Dretphi, take hidden firing positions and be ready for the signal over the radio or by me. Aristespha, Bach, and Sotalia, try to get close to the control part of that machine and figure out how to shut it down... Or what will shut it down. There's some stairs over there, otherwise maybe one of the ladders down will work. We'll see. I'll try to keep watch over and be ready to be a-

A cool, collected voice projects itself out into the area. "Excuse me. Who. Is. Here?"

Tension flares up in everyone as Sebastian's jaw hangs open and his pupils shift to the corner over his shoulder. Noxian steps away from the control panel and walks upon the dusty floor surrounding the perimeter of the platform. "I KNOW you are here. Something has changed in this area. Please show yourself. I do not mean you immediate harm."

Noxian's angles his head to suspicious points around the vicinity, and pauses to seek out signs of activity. "To be honest, I'm actually quite curious as to how..."

He lifts a graying eyebrow, cocks his head slightly to the side, and gradually squints his searching stare. "And WHY are you here?"

Worry weighs down upon Sebastian and he see the looming tension hover over the rest of the group. As they remain silent, he searches his mind for possibilities and alternatives. He lowers his head while his ethereal eyes mentally flip through his thoughts. Each second his mind rejects another possible idea. He halts, lifts his head up with a reassuring smile, and nods. "Okay. Keeping almost the same plan, while he's distracted try to do your parts."

Aristespha narrows her focus to Sebastian and reads the details of his face. "Sebastian, how are we going to distract him?"

A sly smirk plasters itself upon Sebastian face and he quirks his brow. "Well. With the one thing he doesn't expect to see."

Silence hovers in the air of the arena around the platform and Noxian narrows his eyes as he continues to hunt for any disturbance or movement in the suspicious areas surrounding him. He pivots a step over towards the control panel and leans forward to squint at the status messages flowing on the magical surface. He holds the position, stares at the screen in contemplation, and rereads the same numbers with the contrasting color to the rest upon the display.

"So, Noxian. How's it been?"

Noxian eyes flit wide open and he swings his upper body to the source of the ethereal voice. He glares at the source, rears his head back in shock, and shakes himself to his senses with renewed focus on the visage in front of him. "S-Sebastian?!"

Transparent arms shrug nonchalantly and a smug grin presents itself upon Sebastian's ghostly form with a lift of the brow. "In the... spirit, I guess?"

He steps forward towards Noxian and crosses his arms. "Didn't expect to see me again, didn't you?"

Gray eyes sort through the flush of confusion and Noxian's face twists out bewilderment underneath a blue scarf. "Not exactly... Especially, considering our last encounter was less than... amicable?"

Sebastian's grin deflates to a mere smile and he locks his stare at Noxian. "You can fucking say that for certain."

Noxian straightens his thinner frame tense and lifts his head up to return the stare back to Sebastian. "Speaking of our last encounter, I saw the news report. I need to ask... Do you know if there were any other casualties besides yourself?"

Sebastian lifts a curious brow and tugs at the corner of his mouth. "Not really. I caught most of that blast of yours and the rift kicked up a serious concussion wave when it slammed shut. Maybe some broken bones and I think one guy got knocked out by some debris caught up in the wave."

Tension eases from Noxian's stance and he allows himself to relax to a guarded posture. "That is a great relief to hear. I'm certainly glad no one else suffered. I had difficulty garnering much information after that incident."

Sebastian drifts gradually closer to Noxian, maintaining a cautious watch on him. "Most the aether network towers in region overloaded and I think the network news crew's feed got cut. Nothing using the aether system worked for days around there and radio barely functioned."

He sneers and with a groaning grumble. "I'm guessing the producers decided to take some artistic liberties with the presentation to punch the drama up."

Noxian rolls his eyes long and sways his head side to with a curl of the lip showing under the scarf. "Tell me about it. Depraved and morbid as the usual."

He eyes the control console display momentarily and darts his eyes around the area with a long sigh. "Sebastian. I do not know what has happened to you, but I would be remiss if I didn't take the opportunity to say this."

Noxian's expression through gray eyes and blue scarf softens and the outline of a frown reveals itself. "I am sorry for the results of my actions towards you. I had to stop you, but I truly wanted something far less than your demise."

Sebastian lifts his head and examines the covered face of Noxian with an itching glare and an eyebrow lift. "I guess that's the best apology I'm going to get, so... Thank you? Haven't quite made it to forgiveness yet. I'm sure you understand."

With a slow nod, Noxian releases a singular laugh and glances back to the control system status display with a subtle seek of his field of view to the area. "Yes. I do understand. I very well can't blame you either."

Sebastian straightens up and eyes Noxian with a growing sneer. "Okay. Noxian. What ARE you doing HERE?"

Noxian tilts his head and flits his brow at Sebastian, a smirk barely perceptible through the scarf. "Well, if you have been here a while, the blatantly obvious. Finding a path towards completing my goals."

His demeanor mixes with reluctance and wonder as he gazes out over the platform and surrounding arena. "Turns out this ancient place could be of service to me... still."

Head looking away from Sebastian, a thought winces on his face and long mournful sigh escapes with an equally long, hard closure of his eyes. He reopens his eyes, forces the traces of sadness from his expression, and returns to Sebastian's stare. He focuses his attention upon Sebastian, cocks his head to the side, and puzzles with a quirking eyebrow. "So in fair play, what are YOU doing HERE?"

As Noxian's gray gaze pierces right through him, both figuratively and literally, Sebastian works his lips to a grin and postures darkly. "Haunting you, of course! Why else would my ghostly form present itself to you? Stranger things happen."

A deep smile forms underneath the blue scarf wrapping Noxian's face as he closes his eyes hard and laughs genuinely. His eyes open and emit a bright glowing white light. Sebastian widens his stare and leans his posture back. Noxian casually points a gesturing hand to Sebastian and releases a long breath. "That is a curious form of existence you presently find yourself in. Hmm. Interesting. That damned sword of the? Of the?"

He continues with a rolling hand gesture to Sebastian as he searches the top of his mind for the phrase. With hints of annoyance directed towards the sword more so than Noxian, Sebastian voices out a bit of sarcasm. "Legendary Sword of the Spirit Realm."

A faint sneer interrupts Noxian's smile under the scarf. "That has to be a translation error. I do not remember anything from that period having that fanciful of a title. But... That unique energy signature is quite unmistakable."

He levels his head to stare eye level to Sebastian, fills his lungs slowly, and speaks calmly with a tinge warmth in his expression and pleading tone hinting. "Before anything else happens... Your group has shown themselves to be the heroes that Nexus should have. And, the heroes that will still be needed, even moreso, when I set things right again. So... I will make this offer again to you and your group. Stop hunting me. Let me do what needs to be done. And, I will do what I can to undo the harm I've caused."

An eerie silence hangs over the two as they keep their eyes locked upon each other. A minute later a defiant grin cracks wide on Sebastian as he chuckles to himself. "Sorry. But I'm going to have to go with a solid No."

Noxian laughs as he rolls his shoulders to stretch and nods in grim acceptance. "To be honest, I would question my judgment of character if you had said Yes."

He calmly walks towards the control machinery and maintains a watchful pan of the area, alternating between high balcony spots and low areas around the scattered debris and abandoned equipment. Sebastian's stare follows Noxian. He hovers closer to him and flares up his ethereal form brighter. "Stop right there, Noxian! Keep away from those controls. You can stop all this right now. Leave it alone. Now."

Noxian halts, glances over his shoulder at Sebastian, lifts a brow, returns his head forward toward the control system, and reaches out with a pointing finger to press a button. "I wonder who will-

Two blue beams of light flash out from a dark area near a balcony support pillar, impact a warping coat of space around Noxian's center mass, and refract into chaotic scatters of illumination off to his sides. Noxian focuses an amused, smirking glare to the vicinity of the lasers' origin. "Cideeda! I see you brought your laser pistols today."

He eyes the support pillar, lifts an open palm up to aim, and narrows his eyes. "I'm certain you've slunk off to another position. But I can't very well leave that convenient hiding spot standing."

A small marble of white energy condenses in front of Noxian's palm, and with a sudden flex of his fingers, ray momentarily floods the area with blinding light and digs into the support pillar. A spread of brilliant cracks overtake the structure of the pillar completely and it crumbles into a pile of large, loose gravel. The newly formed chunks of rock rain down through the railing gaps onto the floor below the balcony and each impacts cracks out loudly. Three pairs of eyes glowing violet, blue, and wavering gold briefly watch the spectacle and return their peering stares out from behind the cover of a heavy cargo container to the control station. Aristespha, Bach, and Sotalia exchange glances before they collectively nod in agreement. Aristespha ducks back down behind and out of view along with Bach and Sotalia. She lifts up her aetherphone close to her mouth and keys the radio function. "Dretphi. Shoot the control console. It drives the logic behind the system to move energy around, but does not seem to be active in any other function."

From behind a support pillar on the opposing side of the balcony walkway from Cideeda, Dretphi peeks cautiously out and scans the situation below through her helmet visor with her massive rifle in hand. "Time required to ready the shot. I will be dangerously visible. Arrange a distraction?"

An eager, confident grin explodes on Sotalia's face and an orb of fire materializes from swirls of magical flow above the palm of her hand. "One distraction coming up."

With a fanciful flurry, Sotalia launches series of fireballs from alternating hands while she traverses the spaces between cover. Noxian cracks a brief smile, pivots towards the incoming projectiles, and extends his arms out. "There you are, Sotalia! I was curious how long you could actually wait before taking a shot at me."

His eyes brighten briefly as eruptions of magical energy burst out from his hands when the fireballs arrive a meter shy of himself. The projected waves of energy pop the fireballs effortlessly into fizzles of adrift magical mist. Noxian hems with tints of intrigue upon his face. "These feel a little different than before."

Aristespha glances around the container and pulls back to secure a firm grip around handle of the sword at her side. The sword rattles intensely inside its scabbard and Aristespha's annoyance plays out on her face while she closes her eyes in concentration. Sebastian halts, diverts his attention inwards, and smirks mischievously at Noxian. He zips in front of Noxian and keeps his ghostly visage occupying the hooded, blue scarf covered man's field of view. "So, about haunting you."

The humor quickly drains from Noxian's expression and he glares in sheer frustration at and through Sebastian. "By the gods, even in quasi-death you have figured out ways to be a nuisance."

Aristespha's voice calls out a fast series of incantations and she gestures rapidly to a final stance, releasing a powerful wave of energy across the distance between her and Noxian. The narrow wall of magical power glides quickly over the floor and splashes around Noxian, struggling to engulf him. The restrictive field strains against a protective barrier around Noxian. Noxian forces his movements through the barrier, fending off magical orbs, bolts, and rays from Sotalia. "Ah, yes! Your favorite trick, Aristespha!"

Another volley of twin lasers beam down from the balcony, before Cideeda darts back into the shadowy areas off to another spot along the balcony. With a bright flash of white from Noxian's eyes, the wave squeezing over him rips apart to misty sections against the swell of his protective barrier. He snaps an open palm at Cideeda's previous hiding spot. Another ray floods the area with light, energy fractures another support pillar, and the sounds of rolling rocks echoes out. Noxian aims his focus at Sotalia with slight curl to his upper lip, but suddenly releases his concentration to search the area. "Wait..."

Arcing out from behind cover, a large orb jets out in a winding, spiraling path and weaves chaotically through the air roughly towards Noxian. As the heavy magical bolt grows close, Noxian narrows his eyes and puzzles at the spell before him. "Is that an over sized magic missile?"

He maintains a hand out to deflect and disperse Sotalia's attacks, and squints to the lone flying ball of energy before eyeing Sebastian. "Gods. I sincerely hope you didn't drag some mage school dropout into this mess."

A bold grin pulls itself across Sebastian's face. "Well, about that..."

Noxian holds his free hand out, angles it up high to meet the incoming vector of the missile, and readies a field of energy in his hand. He maintains an unamused glare at his target until he flits his glowing white eyes wide in absolute bewilderment. "What was THAT?!"

The singular, large orb explodes into a swirling, interweaving flurry of slightly smaller, significantly faster bolts. They stream outwards and navigate to approach all sides of Noxian. Fascination fills Noxian's face and he watches the orb swarm close in with an expression of genuine wonder. He pulls his arms close to his body and the warping void of his magical barrier expands out in anticipation of the missile pack. "Who IS this? That initial bolt didn't have the power to do this. But somehow, there was an energy surge that allowed it to spawn this many more bolts. I'm curious as to how much power is behind these."

Sotalia halts her attacks, drops back down to cover, and watches, eager to see the impacts. The swarm of magical bolts fly into close range of their target. But simultaneously, they halt just short of the barrier projecting from Noxian and idly hover in place. Each projectile adjusts its position clear of the magical shell when it fluxes around. Noxian blinks in sheer surprise and gazes quizzical to Sebastian hovering in front of him. "Who did you find?!"

He squints at the floating bolt with glowing eyes and mumbles to himself. "There isn't anything standard about this... even to the actual construction. How is it reacting to my movement? There's a control mechanism, but there would be too much interference right now with all the..."

A brief pause, a lift of the brow, and Noxian launches his hand out to snatch an orb. His hand grasps it tightly, a flash of white energy fills the bolt, and a streak of white flow zips through a barely visible, fine magical thread. The overpowering energy from Noxian burns through the ethereal filament, traces a path right back to the split point, and lights back to the origin. Bach crashes out from cover onto the floor, waves his hand frantically free of the magical thread right before the white energy graces the end, and curses as he flips the visor up on his helmet in a panic. "Oh, shit! What the fuck?!"

Noxian cocks his head to the side, scrutinizes Bach, glances over to Sebastian, returns a gaze to Bach, resumes a longer stare to Sebastian, and then opens his eyes wide in astonishment as he rotates his head slowly back to Bach. "The BROTHER."

Bach spins his head toward Noxian and blinks in shock at his statement. "Uh?! The what?!"

With a settling of his boots upon the floor, Noxian straightens his stance in contemplative thought and crosses his arms while he puzzles the situation. "Of all the things. I, truly, did not expect this as a practical possibility."

His eyes shift to pour his full attention to Sebastian's ethereal visage and balances confusion with genuine intrigue upon his expression, partially hidden by the scarf. "Why would you bring your adventuring school drop out brother into this? And, how is HE casting these strange spells?"

Noxian's gaze catches a glint of the shiny metal pommel of the sword at Aristespha's side through Sebastian's transparency and his ears decipher it as the source to an intermittent background vibrating rattle. A twitch itches the top of the cheek near the corner of one his eyes and his expression stiffens to an enthusiastic glare upon the sword with a snarling grin revealing his teeth. "Well. That would certainly explain some of this. But, certainly not all of this..."

He takes a step forward, his stare alternating between Bach and the sword. The moment he shifts his stance along with his motion, a beaming streak of light tears into the space behind him and an explosive, thunderous report aggressively echoes immediately afterwards. A thick, foggy barrier flashes up and protectively envelops Noxian. When the last traces of the cacophony dissipates out to the open air above and into the ancient stone around, Noxian slowly pivots in place and concentrates his wide, glowing eyes to witness a spinning rifle round hover a mere centimeter away from the center of the control panel. A warping field constricts and slows the round's rifling rotation to halt. Noxian traces the tunnel of disturbed magical energy, angles his head to follow the path cut nearly across his back, and directs a hardening glare to a space next to a balcony roof support. "As patient, calculated, and dangerous as always Dretphi."

He returns to analyze the rifle round and the system controls. After a struggling, thoughtful stare, he draws a long breath and enthusiasm fades from his face. A stoic expression

overtakes him but barely contains the remorseful reluctance leaking around the edges. His eyes flit bright white and the control station stirs. Buttons press, levers move, and knob spins by themselves, and the status screen screams to alert streaming life as graphs slam out to their upper limits.

“BEWARE. ENERGIES. SURGING... TO. HIM.”

A constant resounding vibration rattles the platform and surrounding structures. Torrents of streaming magical flows funnel into Noxian, the sheer volume flexing the fabric of space during transit from the platform. The cloth of Noxian’s clothing ripples to the swirling energies, lifting the tail end of the blue scarf and feathering stray white hairs from underneath the hood of his pullover. He flings out both his arms to side, flexes his fingers, and feverishly utters incantations. Two massive roaring, flaming orbs expand into existence from his palms, rocket out to opposing sides of the chamber, and impact the balcony walls. Both explode simultaneously and releases pairs of snaking jets of flame. They billow out into all engulfing blazes and guide their expansion along elevated walkway. Cideeda snaps her head in shock to witness the fiery bright orange red wall ignite debris leading to her hiding spot. She reflexively bounds out over the balcony railing just as the flame flash fries her hiding spot. Panicked gymnastics and haphazard tumbling provides her with a passable landing upon the lower floor and she scampers into cover next to Aristespha. Solid boot steps stomp out upon the balcony walkway while armor plates rattle against each other. Dretphi throws herself over the balcony railing, crashes upon the top of wooden storage container, and spills out towards Bach when the crate structure shatters to a collapse. Sebastian flies back away from Noxian, pans a glance to Aristespha, Bach, Cideeda, Dretphi, and Sotalia, and commands loudly. “Change of plans! Form up! We’re getting out of here!”

He returns his tense stare to Noxian and witnesses the slow side to side sway of Noxian as he closes his eyes. Noxian reopens his eyes, dons a sad frown, and remorsefully watches the group form up. Sotalia expediently gestures and pronounces incantations with an arm throw to project a protective barrier. Aristespha concentrates with a brilliant violet glow from her eyes and sends out another barrier layer. Noxian lifts his arm from his side and directs a single pointed finger at the dual barriers and a beam of white energy flashes out. The energy arcs, sparks, and crackles into the barriers, both violently warp before they dissipate into shreds of fizzling magical energy. Noxian draws in a painful breath, shifts his arm’s aim, and opens his hand, palm out. “I am truly sorry. This world needs heroes like all of you. But... I need to do what I need to do. Things HAVE to be set right. Unfortunately, you were able to find me. You are trying to regain your ability to stop me. And, you’ve come too close to halting my progress.”

Magic flow erupts out from him and concentrates to a bright white ball in front of his palm. “When I am done, I will make sure that people know you all died heroes in their defense... despite how misled you all were.”

He guides his sad gaze to Sebastian and sighs. “And if that damned sword survives this, I promise to find way to free you, so you may at least join them beyond in peace.”

Horror chokes Sebastian and his eyes widen fully to the sight of the forming, lethally familiar energy gathering into the orb. Bach glances to his brother, studies with glowing blue eyes the condensing magic in front of Noxian’s palm, and rushes out in front of the group. He slides to

stop, extends his arms forward, and stares at Noxian. Magical flow gushes forward through and around Bach. Energy flows spin off his body and fly out to a developing hexagonal lattice in front of him. The lattice fills in with golden, translucent hexagon panels from Bach's hands and many other magical flow connection points. In mere moments a golden structured energy barrier melds into the floor and rises up tall to intersect the path between Noxian, and Aristespha, Bach, Cideeda, Dretphi, Sebastian and Sotalia. Before a brilliant flash bathes the room, Noxian mutters. "A noble effort."

The pure energy beam slams into the golden barrier and splashes explosively out over the surface. The individual hexes of the barrier shudder violently, arcs of power crackle between, and the structure flexes chaotically. The magic from the beam infiltrates between the structural divisions and flushes out the golden color. Jets of the beam's energy flow out and reach towards Bach. A rush of white traces back through the tubes of flow from the shield and into Bach's body. Sparks blast from the clashes between energies within the flow outside of and inside Bach. Tension rips through and twists Bach's form, agonizing strain radiating throughout his being. His blue eyes flash out attempts to push back against the powers overwhelming him. Noxian blinks with bewilderment and squints his eyes to the struggle before him. "What the-"

Edges of white press against the glowing blue of Bach's eyes. Cracks fracture into the blue and spider closer and closer to the center. As the threads of white work near the center, a pinpoint of white flickers open well within the center of blue of both eyes. Abject utter terror ruptures and destroys any previous expression upon Bach's face. He grits his teeth, slams his eyes shut in a grimacing wince, and roars out in a bellowing howl of absolute defiance. "NOOOOOOOOO!"

Bach's eyes open to a solid, clear blue and vent out mists of magical energy. Streams of gold, blue, red, green, and other colors intertwine out from Bach within the magical flows and press back the white energies to the barrier. With a gigantic fluctuating surge through all the magical flow channels spiraling from Bach to the barrier, the hexagonal field expels a massive wave of the intrusive energy at Noxian. The wall of magic contacts Noxian, lifts him into the air, and drops him unceremoniously into a slide upon the circular platform, stopping at the center disc. Noxian blinks, quickly lifts his upper body off the platform floor, and manages to stand in the middle of the maelstrom of white energy that continues to seep into him. He stares toward Bach and the barrier. In addition to the golden hexagonal tiles, blue energies seal the divisions between, red threads intermesh inside the tiles, and a green coating rests upon the front of the constantly developing shield. As Noxian continues to gawk and process the events of the previous minute, the ambient vibration eases to silence. The remaining bits of white energy, including the expulsion wave from Bach's barrier, drift and funnel into Noxian. He pauses in thought for a moment, squints to the control station, stares at the shielded group, and glances up into the blue sky above. A swirling vortex of air spins up around him and he rests a gaze at the group through the barrier. "I think I'll take my leave now. There's nothing more for me here."

He focuses his attention fully upon Bach and pulls a genuine smile underneath his blue scarf as the end flutters around behind him in the air currents. "I do hope we meet again. Preferably, under less confrontational circumstances. Your name is Bach, if I am correct?"

Bach through pants and the haze of fatigue manages to grant Noxian a slow nod. Noxian lifts his head upward, bends his knees low, and lunges up into the air as a gust of air rockets him up into the sky. Sotalia shakes her head, regains her senses, notices Noxian gaining altitude, and runs forward. "What the-?! Gods dammit! He's getting away! NOT AGAIN!"

She straightens her posture, moves her hands in place to begin her gestures, and draws a long breath in. Sebastian snaps a point to Sotalia and yells out. "SOTALIA! STAND DOWN! DO NOT CHASE HIM!"

Sotalia growls defiantly with a sneering glance back to Sebastian and begins to cast her spell. "I'm just going to SEE which way he GOES! I'm not THAT crazy!"

The moment tries to move her arm, she feels a strong grip of hand clamp around her forearm. She flashes an irritated, teeth bearing grimace towards the owner of the hand and finds the outstretched arm of Bach. Her anger pops away and she blinks to a confused glare. Bach lifts his face to gaze at Sotalia and shakes his head, the physical, mental, and magical drain more apparent by the second through shuddering pants and drifting wobbles of his balance. "No. No. More. Risks. Today."

Concern flushes upon Sotalia's expression and she nods carefully, placing her free hand upon Bach's gripping hand. "Okay."

She feels the trembles from Bach through his shaking hand and gazes back to him. "You need to sit down. You can probably take the shield down."

Bach slowly nods and closes his eyes. The barrier fades back component by component through the channels of magical flow to Bach. The pants of exhaustion slow and Bach's stance stabilizes as the tremors subside along with the recovery of barrier energies. He gradually releases hold of Sotalia's forearm, slides his hand out from underneath hers, and lowers his head into the hand to cover eyes and forehead. Sotalia slides a hand underneath Bach's shoulder when his next step sways his upper body off balance. Heavy footsteps sound out behind Bach, and Dretphi secures a firm, gentle grip underneath his other shoulder and rests another hand at the ready on his back. "Slowly. No need to rush."

Dretphi and Sotalia support and guide Bach to cleared spot on the floor to an awaiting Aristespha with medical kits rolled out. Cideeda glances up towards the balcony and the lingering clouds of smoke underneath the roof awnings. "Good, it looks like that flame wall didn't catch anything too big on fire. We should be able to get back out the way we came in."

Sebastian releases a long sigh, vents out his tension, and nods as he pans his sight around the area. "Okay. After Bach gets checked out, we'll get out of here-"

Bach attempts to roll to his side, lifts his upper body off the floor, and stress shaken groans. "Oh, fuck that! Let's just get out of here right now. I'm okay enough to get the fuck out of here-"

A gloved hand grasps onto Bach's shirt collar, and guides his view to the narrowing eyes of Aristespha. She stares silently at Bach and he resigns himself back onto the floor. After removing Bach's helmet, she lightly pats him on top of his head with a slight smile. Bach tugs

a wary smirk out from the corner his mouth and closes his eyes. After a few minutes resting upon the stone floor, he tilts his head toward Sebastian. "So, brother?"

Sebastian hovers over and kneels down next to Bach with a comforting smile. "Yah, bro?"

Bach sighs, closes his eyes, and opens to gaze up into the blue sky above. "How much longer are we going to be at this place?"

A twist fights to reveal itself on Sebastian's lips, but he quells it to keep a smile going. "Honestly, bro. I think we got more than what we needed. I don't think there's anything more we need to experience first hand with this place."

Sebastian slowly looks to rest of the group, and gauges their demeanor. "I think we should leave tomorrow. Head back to base. Objections?"

Between silent head shakes and post-adrenaline exhausted grumbles, no objections voice themselves from anyone.