

## Ain't A Hero – Episode 26

by Bryan Schuder

Early morning sun beams through the rows of trees and scatters a warming glow upon the humvee. Aristespha, Cideeda, Dretphi, Sebastian, and Sotalia sit within a small clearing. Dretphi slides a spatula underneath the last few pieces of bacon in the frying pan above a small cooking burner. With care, she balances the last slices away and deposits them on a transparent green plate resting upon a log. The bacon settles in space between scrambled eggs, biscuits, oatmeal, and gravy. Dretphi turns the knob on the burner to an ending click and the blue jets of flame poof out. She glances at the full plate and the humvee, before gazing at the rest of the group. “I know we agreed to let him sleep. I prefer he eat fresh food.”

Aristespha lifts her head up from her tablet towards Dretphi, thinks a moment in her mind, and nods with smile. “Might as well wake him. I doubt he’ll sleep once we get back on the roadways anyway.”

A wicked smile flashes upon Sotalia’s lips and her eyes light with a mischievous gleam. She pinches the last piece of bacon off her plate between two fingers, places the plate to the side, and stands up to a walk towards the humvee. “Don’t worry, I got it!”

As Sotalia moves away from the clearing to the humvee, Dretphi returns her stare behind back to the burner and rolls her eyes long with a grumble. “She enjoys the torment. Possibly too much.”

Cideeda shakes her head with an amused smirk, sips coffee cautiously from a thermos, and sighs with an ending chuckle. “Oh, don’t worry, girl. She’s just having fun with his inhibitions.”

She lifts an eyebrow and eyes Sebastian sitting in thought next to Aristespha. “I’m sure she did worst to you... Sebastian?”

With a few quick blinks and eye darts to find the source of his spoken name, Sebastian meets Cideeda’s gaze, recalls the last few seconds in his mind, and nods with a tight smile and a tugging smirk. “Oh, yah. She’s been pretty mild actually.”

He laughs to himself, shrugs, and looks towards Dretphi with amusement. “Anyway... My bro will be fine. He needs to learn how to stop being so awkward, anyway.”

Dretphi twists her mouth a few times, mulls over the concept in her mind, and sways her head side to side showing an air of uncertainty. “There are lessons to learn. Doubt the effectiveness of the method.”

Cideeda bites her lip as her tail sweeps around behind her, rolls her eyes, and snickers in between sips of coffee from her thermos. “We shall see.”

The smile upon Sebastian face fades as he returns his head to rest upon the fist of his propped arm and his ethereal visage stares distantly in thought. Aristespha diverts her

attention away from the events in front of her and gazes to Sebastian with a quiet, calm voice. "Are you okay, Sebastian?"

Sebastian flits his eyes back to attention and pivots his head upon his fist to smile warmly to Aristespha. "I'm fine, dear. Just thinking about... Things."

A curious quirk of the brow poises itself over her violet eyes and Aristespha maintains a calm, piercing stare to Sebastian. After a few seconds, a long ghostly sigh escapes Sebastian and his smile weakens as the deeper thoughts rise up into his expression. "I'll explain it to you later, in private."

A gentle, gloved hand grasps onto Sebastian's free hand upon his transparent thigh and a pair of glowing violet eyes look into his with a concerned but warm smile. "Okay, Sebastian."

Inside the humvee, intermittent snores sound out from Bach. A blanket covers most his body and a small pillow supports his head that faces away from the morning light radiating through the passenger's side windows. The blanket swells with each long breath, settles with each exhale, and twists when Bach attempts to averts his eyes away from the sunlight. The front passenger's door engages and the sounds of outside leak into the muted interior as the it opens. The front seat rocks slightly as a woman with golden eyes, dark red hair, and swept back horns places her chin down upon the headrest, wraps an arm around the seat, and eyes the sleeping Bach with a corner grin. Two fingers secure a piece of bacon between them and an arm cranes out to slowly waving the slice near Bach's nose. Seconds pass before twitching cheeks contort Bach's nostrils and his face animates with the first stages of consciousness. His head moves subconsciously and briefly follows the trajectory of the bacon when Sotalia draws it away. Bach's eyes flutter open and attempt to work through the haze of sleep to perceive Sotalia. A crispy snap and muffled crunches kick Bach out from his mental haze. Sotalia presents her devilish grin in between bites of the diminishing bacon slice, and focuses her golden eyes on Bach. "Well, good morning!"

Bach blinks the remnants of sleep from his eyes and navigates a hand from underneath his blanket to wipe the stubborn holdouts away. "Um... Morning?"

Sotalia rolls her eyes and sighs to a smile. "Yes. Dretphi wanted you to eat breakfast while its fresh and hot."

The blanket slides off to the sides of Bach's seat, and he pulls the side lever to angle the seat back from a recline. "Okay. That sounds good. Right."

The smile drifts closer to concern and Sotalia tilts her head to the side with her attention fully upon Bach. "Hey, are you okay?"

Bach blinks and yawns to awareness. He watches Sotalia vainly fail at suppressing a reactionary yawn and manages to put forth a weak smile. "I guess. I think? I don't feel bad or anything. It's just a lot to process, still?"

Sotalia rocks her head upon the headrest to a mimic a nod and renews her smile to Bach. "Well, that makes sense."

Long brown and gray hairs free themselves from last night's arrangement and eventually rest upon Bach's shoulders. He brushes a few stubborn spots with his fingers and finishes with a long sigh shaking head side to side. "I'm going to be honest... Yesterday really pushed me to the breaking point..."

The smile lowers gradually to frown as Sotalia watches the unease play out on Bach face from the memories of yesterday resurfacing. "I know."

She lifts her other arm from a wrap around the seat, stretches a hand out, places her fingers underneath Bach's chin, and angles his head upwards. She inspects Bach face for moments and gently guides his head to check a few spots. A smile reemerges on her lips and she drops her hand away from Bach's chin. "You are looking A LOT better today. And, since we're being honest, you really spooked me yesterday."

Bach tugs at the corners of his mouth, twists his lips, and briefly grits his teeth averting his eyes. "Ah. Well, sorry about that."

Sotalia slowly blinks her eyes, lightly sways her head, and pulls a grin from a corner of her mouth. "Sorry nothing. Thank you. Really. I needed someone to starkly remind me of the situation before I ran off doing something stupid in the moment."

The dry smirk finds its way upon Bach's mouth and he chuckles. "I'm glad, but I really hope it doesn't require something like that to remind you in the future."

A confident laugh escapes Sotalia breath, she lifts her head off the seat's headrest, and her arms settle to either side of the headrest upon the top of the seat. "I hope so, too."

Seconds of silence pass, a thought works itself across Bach's face and he finally glances back to Sotalia with a wary tone. "So, I guess you and Aristespha are going to question me how I sent that blast back?"

Sotalia narrows her eyes to Bach and slowly nods maintaining her stare. "Yes. Especially since that's the first time we've seen someone pull a return to sender on anything from Noxian."

She cocks her head to the side keeping her gaze upon Bach, places the now short piece of bacon in her mouth, bites sharply, and crunches loudly. "But, that can wait a few days after we get back to the house. I'm all for taking a few days break after all of this."

Her golden eyes focus out the back passenger's window and she twists her mouth in thought. "Anyway, I think Aristespha will be too busy trying to figure out what the hell is wrong with this place and whose head she's going to rip off when she finds out."

Bach exhales relief but quickly draws breath in and glances out through the window to Aristespha meters away in the small clearing. "I can't blame her. I'd like to know what happened here, but..."

He curls a lip into a sneer and groans. "Preferably not while we're here? I can read about this place from the comfort of the living room couch."

Sotalia draws air sharply through her nose and exhales long with a slow, exaggerated nod that trails off to a blinking sway of the head. She notices the small piece of bacon left, pops it into her mouth, and chews it away. Bach squints his eyes at Sotalia and quirks his brow inquisitively at her. "So, I have to ask... Was that one of MY pieces of bacon?"

A wicked grin flares up on Sotalia's face as she nonchalantly slides out of the seat and steps out the front passenger door. "Maybe? You should probably check your plate."

The orange dusk sky glows dimly through the windows of the decorated, wooden dining hall of the inn. Goff adjusts the television from an articulated wall mount out and aims it towards the table with the group. "I think I got the roof antenna right last time I climbed up there. We'll find out, I hardly ever turn this thing on unless its for a special event and the weather."

Sebastian laughs ethereally, grins wide, and crosses his arms smugly. "Well, it should be quite the special event given the week they probably had. I'm just curious how they are going to try to spin it."

Cideeda snickers with a dark, mischievous tone, glances to Dretphi, and pokes a claw tip gradually into her side. "I'm curious how they're going to frame that ass beating you gave your... professional peer?"

A low grumble resounds from Dretphi, and she averts an unamused, distant stare from Cideeda's toothy grin while pouring a ladle full of stew into her bowl. "That term is incorrect."

Anticipation squirms through Sotalia as she grasps hold of a bread roll and fidgets in the finely crafted wooden chair. "Oooo! I hope they do a nice segment between me and that Tassilda bitch! I wonder how much the camera caught afterwards."

Bach fends of his apprehension towards the television and the commercials running in the space before the next show. He focuses on enjoying the food in front of him and occasionally eyes the screen to figure out what the commercial advertises. Goff shrugs, walks back to his chair at the table, and slides himself and chair back in. "Well, I think that's the right channel. Anyway, I hope they show this place in a good light, if anything."

Aristespha directs a smile to Goff and covers brief giggle. "Oh, Goff. I wouldn't worry too much. Given how they usually act, this lovely inn will seem wonderful."

She tilts her head to the side and lifts a curious eye brow at Goff. "Again, I want to thank you for having room for us on such a short notice. But, I remember you said you usually had a few regulars frequent this inn."

Goff scratches the graying beard stubble underneath his chin and shakes his head with a long breath into his lungs. "Hey, I'm glad you all needed a place to sleep. For one reason or another, all my regulars either canceled or postponed."

Sebastian drifts over near and angles himself to look at Goff. "What were the reasons? If it's not too much to ask?"

The old man, Goff, gazes up into his head, mentally flips through a list, and maintains a count upon the fingers of his hand. "Let's see... A trade group from the Appaland area postponed a few days due to bandits deciding to camp out their main route down. But, last I heard they got some big mercenary group clearing the route ahead of them. Their sister group is on standby until that clears up."

He hems to himself as he sorts through a checklist in his mind and counts a few other points on his fingers. "Then, these reagent hunters canceled because a Terra Priest group was spotted recently in the place they wanted to explore. But, they mentioned there was another spot and would get back to me to make arrangements."

The chair creaks slightly as he shifts his weight upon the back and sighs. "I'm really sad the old guy from a few weeks ago had to cancel. I really enjoyed him being around. I was hoping to hear a few more of his stories. But, he had some really unexpected things come up and had to change up all his immediate plans. Even offered him a discount, but it sounded like he needed to take care of business first."

Bach glances over to Goff and tugs the corner of his mouth with a bit of interest tinged with concern. "Wow. That has to be rough on business."

Goff shrugs and holds his hands out to his sides with a nonchalant smile. "That's the nature of the business. But, it works out. You all needed a place to stay from what sounds like a rough few days, and I'm happy to be able provide a place. Anyway, usually for every thing that stops people from getting here, there's something that brings them here."

He rests an elbow on the table, waves a hand, spoons some stew with his free hand, and cracks a sly grin. "I don't aim to profit from disaster, but that last maelstrom sent a lot of people my way. And a lot of tree clearing work to my son."

The television blares out familiar fanfare and a series of graphics flash up on the display showcasing the title "The Next Adventurers of Nexus".

"Ladies and gentleman! We have quite the week to recap! Our adventurers have been quite busy! Tempers flared from confrontation..."

A brief clip of showcases the banter between Sotalia and Tassilda. The screen swipe cuts to a split screen graphic of Sotalia grinning menacingly with fireball in hand upon a golden yellow background. Tassilda's closeup smug, sly grin occupies the other side with her green fireball and a contrasting blue backdrop clashing with animated sparks to Sotalia's side.

Sotalia pulls a wide teeth baring smile across her face and points the partially eaten beard roll towards the screen. "Backgrounds that match our eye colors, not too bad. Almost looks like something from a fighting arcade game."

"Emotions exploded from unexpected defeats..."

On the display, the camera frames Trakenthin sitting unamused in the interview room as his body language borders on irritable. He crosses his arms, glares harshly into the camera, and growls lowly. A woman off screen questions him. "Trakenthin, what are your feelings towards Dretphi? Given your last match with her... And the question at the panel?"

Trakenthin remains quiet, but the glare intensifies upon the camera focal point and a persistent twitch forms in his eye. The woman continues her queries and shuffles some paper off scene near a microphone. "We have the original audio, but we actually have a translation of the exchanges that I'll read off. First, let's play the question at the panel."

An audio clip of Dretphi's voice plays out into the airspace of the room. Sotalia snickers covering her mouth and winks to Dretphi as a wicked smile escapes the concealment of her hands. The satisfaction filling Dretphi's grin deflates to a neutral stoic expression the moment she notices the attention of Sotalia and the rest of the group. Bach carefully leans close to Sotalia and whispers to her. "What did she say anyway?"

Sotalia bites her lip with mischief under the watchful eyes of Dretphi, rolls her eyes, and softly answers back. "Oh, it doesn't have the same punch translated. The cultural contexts makes it really cutting."

As the woman off scene draws breath for her next statement, loud cracks of clenching knuckles echo in the room and Trakenthin pulls his fist back. The camera view shatters as his fist impacts the protective glass and it abruptly falls backwards to hazily focus on the lighting rigs above and spooked camera crew. Heavy foot steps stomp away from the microphone and a door slams powerfully with a trace crackle of splintering wood.

Cideeda pokes Dretphi playfully again with a claw tip and barely contains her laughter. "I can't believe how far under his skin you got! He can't even stand to hear your voice."

A content smirk sneaks out from the corner of Dretphi's mouth and challenges the firm neutral expression upon her face. The television cuts to another segment and the announcer's voice reads out.

"Curious covert conversations were had..."

From a distant shot, Cideeda stands along with Deedri in the dealer room at the convention, talking to each other. Cideeda's humor halts, her jaw drops, and her eyes widen with sheer bewilderment. "How the fuck?!"

She studies the screen, blinks, and turns her head to the side as her stare studies the dynamics of the shot. Her clawed hands gesture out the physics behind the shot in between alternating glances. One hand serves as the target and the other as the camera location. Cideeda squints at the screen, curiosity tempering frustration. "Wait! That's a downwards overhead shot. Someone actually climbed up into the maintenance walkways up in the rafters, found us, and recorded us?! That's it! I see support beams around the edges of shot. Who the hell?"

The imagery on screen cuts to another theme and the music mixes in with a pop rhythm. The camera moves forward down a dark walkway towards a figure on the center stage.

“But, first, the announcement you’ve all been waiting for!”

A video clip opens up upon the screen and overlays on top the stage scene. The video shows Chad standing up from a large, very familiar looking table in Goff’s dining hall. He coughs loudly to capture the rest of the group’s attention and addresses them. “I know you all have been curious as the exact details of the assignment and who exactly we are escorting back to Amaranth Valley. I believe it is safe to reveal the details. After the last show of her tour, we are going to escort back the pop star Veevi Valiant.”

A mild mixture of reactions stir in between Deedri, Trakenthin, Tassilda, and Modoran, with no strong acceptance or rejection and a generally bland reception overall. Chad grins brightly and draws a deep breath. “After which, she will join our group as short term intern to experience the adventuring life herself, first hand.”

Modoran’s eyes flit open, he barely halts the inhale of water from his glass. He drops his head forward to empty the contents of his mouth into the glass before drawing a gasp. A wave of unease passes through Deedri and causes an involuntary cringe upon her face. Trakenthin slowly lifts his head back away from his meal, gradually pivots it to Chad, and concentrates a glare of brewing rage upon him. Tassilda crosses her arms with a hoist of her cleavage, flips her head up defiantly at Chad, and curls her lip into a disgusted snarl. A tense moment of silence looms over the Flames of the Phoenix and shatters to the tumultuous objections of Trakenthin and Tassilda. The window shrinks away to the background and the focus shifts to the stage lighting up. A half-fvalian girl struts across the stage to the walkway in front. She tosses her vibrant pink, long hair around and sways her long, short-haired tail in sync with each step. Her short, upright fuzzy ears perk as she lifts a microphone to her mouth and sings to the music playing. Clips of her career flip up onto the screen showcasing a variety of pop phases and themes, along with segments of her scandals and drama. Cutting through the din, the yells of Chad to the team rise out from the background. “It’s ONLY for ONE mission! Just ONE!”

Aristespha widens her eyes in disbelief, hangs her jaw agape, and covers mouth and nose with both hands. Sebastian snorts and fails to stifle his ghostly reverberating cackles. Sotalia draws an ear to ear grin, props her arm upon the table, and rests her head upon her hand as she continues to watch the chaos upon the television. Cideeda blinks hard a few times and slowly shakes her head. “I have to admit, that’s a little cruel and unusual.”

Drephi quirks a brow and glances to Cideeda quizzically. “She is the same one from the concert. I believe?”

Cideeda nods slow, draws a long breath, and exhales with a slight whistle. “Yes. Yes, it is. I think she’s on a show called The Next Star of Nexus... Oh, I bet this is some kind of cross promotional ploy.”

Bach grits his teeth and squeezes a sigh through, eyeing the progression of the drama on the television. “Well, I guess the good news is that they’ll be a little preoccupied for a while and hopefully leave us alone.”

An awkward tension wafts across the table as each member of the group individually realizes the proximity that such a personality will be to their current home. Goff shrugs nonchalantly and smiles humored. "Well, looks like tomorrow night is going to be really exciting again!"

Aristespha, Bach, Cideeda, Dretphi, Sebastian and Sotalia focus their collective attention upon Goff, a mix of curiosity and dread playing out upon each individual's expression. Goff works his mouth side to side and hems with an ending chuckle. "As much as I'd love more of your business this weekend... It might serve you all better to head straight home tomorrow morning."

A late afternoon light illuminates the familiar and comforting living room from the sliding glass door. Dretphi sits upon the floor and sorts through the first load of dry laundry, placing folded clothes in the appropriately named basket. Cideeda's claws pick through the exposed components of her laser pistol, scraping bits of soot off and prying a small chunk of rock out from the focusing barrel. Sotalia sits on the couch, counting vials of potions and inspecting the parts and pieces of unrolled equipment kits upon the coffee table. Bach lifts a large metal case onto the kitchen floor from the garage and hauls it next to another similar container by the dining table. Moments later, Aristespha walks in through the hallway archway and stands straight with a neutral but serious expression. Sebastian hovers through immediately afterwards, stands next to Aristespha, and pans a gaze across Bach, Cideeda, Dretphi, and Sotalia. He puts forth an admirable effort to maintain a confident smile that roughens around the edges as his mind concentrates on the prominent thought in his head. With an ethereal cough, he address the group in tone missing the usual bravado. "Everyone, if I could have your attention... I need to say something pretty serious."

The strange tone from Sebastian carries across the room, yanks everyone's focus away from their respective chores, and fills the room with uneasy tension. Eyes fall upon Sebastian and he continues his efforts to maintain a smile that fades quickly to wary smirk. He gazes out at the group and sighs. "I've been thinking the last two days, reviewing the situation... And how things are looking."

He lowers his head momentarily, ethereally sighs, and lifts his face up to meet everyone's eyes. "We got ridiculously lucky Thursday. There was a damn good chance that we could have all met our ends."

Sebastian face contorts as a flood of emotions fight to express themselves. "I know our profession is risky in general, but... I feel that some misjudgment of mine put us in that situation... That was completely avoidable."

He stiffen his lips, blinks hard, and gazes out to the group. "I know situations can change anytime, anyway on a mission and all of you have been extremely supportive. But, this last encounter with Noxian was too close... And, way too familiar to THE previous time we encountered him."

A shaky undertone fills his voice as he concentrates his attention and visits a glance to Bach, Cideeda, Dretphi, and Sotalia. "I... I... I'm glad no one paid a price this time... Like I had to last time."

A slight wince washes over Aristespha's face. Various degrees of frowns push faces down and gloom looms into the room. Sebastian straightens his posture again and continues his address. "I can accept my fate... Eventually. But, I do not want anyone to suffer a worse fate because my failure of judgment."

He briefly grits his teeth, grimaces, and sighs in remorsefully. "We had NO BUSINESS confronting Noxian this time and especially THE last time down in Anta. As much shit as we give those guys in Flames of the Phoenix and previous groups on Next Adventurers of Nexus... I can't rightfully say my judgment was any better than theirs. I've been pushing the group too hard, too fast, and without being careful enough. I thought we might be able to catch Noxian when he was weak and just solve everything quickly. But... Noxian has changed his tactics and I don't know what he's up to anymore."

With distant stare forward, a head held up high, and stiff upper lip, Sebastian carefully speaks in a calm but wavering voice. "That's why in good faith, I can't ask any of you to continue on this path against Noxian. If anyone wants to stay away from him, I'll understand and we'll continue on as a group for as long as we can. We'll enjoy the time we have before circumstances catch up to Aristespha and by proxy of the sword... Me. And... If you want to leave the group... I can't blame you."

His stoic demeanor cracks and his words shudder with his trembling frown. "Truth be told... There's part of me that would be happy to know you wouldn't be steered Noxian's direction anymore."

Wide eyes gaze around the room as the heavy atmosphere weighs down and compresses the mood well into the floor. Traces of tears form in Aristespha's eyes as the silent collective contemplation lingers in the room. Eventually, Sotalia mutters swears silently to herself, lifts herself off the couch to stand quickly upright, and marches around the coffee table to stare Sebastian up in his face. She glares with a fury welling behind her eyes. "Fuck. You. Sebastian."

Sebastian's dour expression falls unceremoniously off his face onto the ground and his eyes widen with shock towards Sotalia. She focuses her stare upon Sebastian and pierces through his very being. "Fuck. You. Don't you DARE kick your own ass in front us and act like we didn't have a part in the whole thing!"

Sotalia firmly places her hands on her hips, perks a brow, and maintains a hard gaze upon Sebastian. "You've always involved us in every big important decision. You always considered our safety above anything else. And you have ALWAYS reviewed any plan with us and asked for our input. So, fuck you for dumping this bullshit all on yourself like some kind of martyr."

Her expression softens quickly while she looks into Sebastian's ethereal eyes and she blinks hard, wetting her eyes. "And, fuck you... For not being solid enough for me to slap some sense into you."

A small smile graces Sotalia's lips and she winks to Sebastian as she pivots to face Aristespha. "So, I'll do the next best thing for you."

Aristespha blinks with glistening tears hanging in her eyes and puzzles as Sotalia shifts her attention. Sotalia smiles, opens her arms up, steps forward, and hugs Aristespha with a soothing pat on the back. "There, there, girl. I am going to help you kick Noxian's ass and get Sebastian back whole again."

Tears finally escape Aristespha's eyes as the initial stun wears off and she wraps her arms around Sotalia with meek whisper. "Thank you."

A warm smile grows on Dretphi's face and she gazes to Sebastian with a calm, bright tone. "Important decisions rarely have best options. I believe we have taken the right options of the decisions presented. We will continue to make those decisions in the future."

She exhales slowly with a tension in her voice. "Noxian's actions concern me. I do not want to experience what they will become if unhindered."

Cideeda flicks an ear, stares at Sebastian with an amused, toothy smile, and slowly shakes her head with a long, exaggerated eye roll. "You can't get rid of me that easily."

She gestures with her hands to emphasize and punctuate her points to Sebastian with toothy grin. "Don't beat yourself up on my account. I'm smart enough to know well enough what I'm getting into. Anyway, I really doubt that letting Noxian mess with a magical rift or continue to charge up with some ancient artifact was going to lead to anything good for anyone. Don't work yourself up with the thought I'm going to leave now."

A strong smile forms on Sebastian mouth and relief loosens his stiff posture. He blinks as some semblance of tears reflect on his ghostly visage. A few seconds later, he gazes to Bach in silent contemplation and humbles his demeanor. "Bro, you put yourself in the line fire, yet again, and saved everyone. I... I've already put you into harms way enough as it is-

Bach lifts his hand up, halts his brother's speech, and snorts as he contorts his mouth into a reserved smile. "Brother, I promised to help you and I am going to whether you fucking like it or not at this point. And, it's not like the broke quasi-mage life is calling me back."

He perks his eye brow up, strains his marginal smile, and exhales with a slight hiss as his eyes wander analyzing the situation. "I'm still pretty clueless to all this adventuring stuff. I'm still scared by some of the stuff we do. And, I'm just now feeling useful overall."

A solid grin pushes through the waves of doubt in Bach's expression and a moment confidence washes away the uncertainty in Bach's body language. "But gods dammit, you all are going to need my help to stop that crazy bastard from doing whatever he's got planned."

He pans a gaze to everyone else in the room, draws a deep breath, and sighs with chuckle. "And I'm sure we've all seen, heard, or read enough stories to know that anyone messing with power like that shouldn't be left alone with it."

Sebastian closes his eyes for a few moments, sniffs a couple times, and ethereally exhales his remaining tension away. "Thanks, bro. It's good hearing it from you."

Donning a renewed aura of bravado, Sebastian smiles confidently to everyone and nods. "Well, I'll do my best to lead us right in the future towards our goal of stopping Noxian. But, for now... let's take the rest of today and tomorrow to relax. We'll sit down Monday and rethink our plan of attack. The situation has changed again and I want to make damn sure we change accordingly."

Sebastian bites his lip with an eye roll and shrugs. "Sorry for any unnecessary drama, but I had to say something and make sure for everyone's sake. I do consider you all family and I want to do what's best for everyone... Well... The best possible given the likely world ending dark lord we have to somehow triumph against. Thank you, everyone."

Sotalia releases Aristespha, eyes Sebastian with a lift to her brow, and shakes her head with a smile as she walks back to the couch. Dretphi resumes digging through the dry clothes in the laundry basket and examining who they belong to. Cideeda turns herself back forward in her chair at the table and picks up a cleaning cloth with her focus upon her partially disassembled laser pistol. Bach gives a quick thumbs up to his brother, pivots, and then steps back towards the kitchen door to the garage. Aristespha gazes up to Sebastian's ghostly form and waits for Sebastian to meet her eyes. He smiles warmly back to her and she nods happily.

Bright white light shines from the headlamps on black sports utility vehicle and down the narrow residential road. Chad gradually adjusts the steering wheel to follow the contours of the dark road through the night. "Almost there."

Tassilda drops her head back into the rear driver's side seat headrest and groans as she rubs the bridge of her nose. "I can't believe we're going to try to teach that girl ANYTHING about adventuring. I sincerely hope whatever mission we have to bring her on is easy."

Squirms of nervous energy work their way through Deedri's body and she grits her teeth briefly as she stares out the rear passenger's window. "I just hope she doesn't get hurt."

Tassilda rolls her head on the headrest to face Deedri across from her with an amused perk to her lip. "Well, I do, too. As if we need anything more for her to complain about. I'm just glad she's staying at that hotel for the night, at least."

Deedri bites her lip and eyes Tassilda warily with a nervous air. "That, too. But, if she gets hurt, I'll have to treat her. And... She gives me strange looks that really make me think she's more than I want to deal with. Especially, alone."

Modoran's dark blue eyes dart between Deedri and Tassilda's conversation as it lowers to whispers. He eases himself forward from resting upon the third row seat and trains his full attention upon the discussion between Tassilda and Deedri, curiosity tainting his expression. Trakenthin tends a near sneering glare out the front windshield from the front passenger's seat with his arms crossed. He squints abruptly and focuses to a section of road in the closing distance. "Something ahead."

The vehicle slows to a stop and the lights project forward onto two blockages on the road. On one side of the road, a gigantic plant stalk arches from the nearby forest and a large circular seed pod flower lays crashed on the pavement. Huge leaves springing from the stalk shake as an animal pushes against it. A large boar with patterns on its back fur sniffs and snorts the pavement. He opens his mouth, bites down on a large seed, and munches contentedly. Chad tilts his head to the side and mutters to himself. "What the fuck?"

Deedri, Tassilda, and Modoran work their ways forward in the car and stare out to examine what lies ahead. Deedri points a claw tip towards the gigantic plant and her eyes widen in astonishment. "That's a protellow plant. And a huge one! I didn't know there any around here."

Trakenthin grunts and eyes the creature before him through the windshield. "Resembles a boar."

Chad lifts a brow and watches the boar continue to eat seed after seed happily ignoring the headlights illuminating the area. He presses a thumb on a steering wheel button and the car's horn blares out in the surrounding dark roadway. The boar stops, briefly glances to the source of the sound, and then promptly resumes eating another seed. Chad blasts the horn out a few more times and the boar still pays no mind. He thinks a few moments to a growing smirk, then eyes Trakenthin as he shifts the vehicle's gearshift to park. "Well, if you know what it is, then you can deal with it. Get it out of the road."

A low growling grumble sounds out from Trakenthin as he releases his seat belt buckle and pulls the handle to his door. He places his heavy boots firmly upon the pavement, stands up behind the open car door, and glares at the boar. He thinks a moment, loudly claps his hands together, and bellows out aggressive phrases in Grath to the boar. The boar pauses from eating, glances at Trakenthin for a few moments, and then consumes another seed from the huge, round flower. Trakenthin blinks, shakes his head incredulously, and steps cautiously towards the boar. Standing right beside the boar, he studies the creature and scratches his head giving a shrug to Chad in the sport utility vehicle. He lifts up his large boot, lowers it firmly onto the backside of the boar, and gradually applies pressure to push the boar forward onto the other side of the road. The boar shifts that direction initially, but soon tenses his body and applies his mass and muscle against the force from Trakenthin's foot, in measured defiance. Trakenthin stops pushing, places his boot back down, and watches the boar settle his footing to continue eating. He dons a greatly amused grin upon his face, chuckles to himself with a quip in grath, kneels down, and strokes the back ridge of hair on the boar's back. Chad's jaw drops, and he throws his hands to the sides. "What the fuck, Trakenthin?"

Deedri sees Trakenthin pet the boar and smiles excitedly with a bright glint in her eyes. "Aww, he's friendly. I want to pet him!"

Chad undoes his seatbelt, yanks his door open, and hops out of the car, narrowing his eyes at Trakenthin. "Get it out of the road already!"

Trakenthin glares back at Chad and growls at him as he calmly strokes the back of the boar. "I am trying."

Frustration overtakes Chad's tone and he shakes his head angrily. He walks up to the boar and glowers at him, pouring the full ire of his scowl upon the critter. "What's wrong with this thing? Shouldn't this pig be scared of us or something?"

After a few pulls to the corner his mouth, Trakenthin shrugs and continues to pet the creature. "Maybe. I am not familiar with this fur pattern on a boar. A piglet. Yes. Strange."

Chad buries his face in his hand and grumbles loudly. "Well, just pick him up and drop him off the side of the road, or something! Tomorrow is Monday, and I want to be able to rest sometime this weekend. I just want to get back before anything else happens!"

A loud series of snaps and cracks chain together to form a cacophony that echoes out in the area. Another gigantic plant stalk slips between the gaps of nearby trees and free falls down with a resounding metallic, dull thud upon the roof of the black car. A shriek and squeak intertwine in the background under the cascading rainfall of large seeds upon the metal body of the vehicle and pavement of the road. In the moments of silence afterwards, Chad slowly pivots to gawk in astonishment at huge circular, flowery seed pod resting within the fresh dent into the roof. He tries to form words but manages to only move his mouth to start of phrases. Trakenthin blinks in amazement, surveys the scene carefully, but glances to the boar who happily grunts and wags his tail. As Trakenthin feels the boar shuffle in place to excitedly squeal, he lifts his head and freezes in place as his eyes widen. In mere moments, Trakenthin scrambles from the boar, plants himself in his car seat, slams the door shut, and points out something to the rest of the group inside the car. Chad regains awareness to witness Deedri, Modoran, Tassilda, and Trakenthin staring in unison to the forest bordering the road. He pivots slowly, opens his eyes fully, and races to his front driver's seat. "Shit!"

As the car door closes, snapping and crackling noises erupt into the soundscape. A large two meter tall boar creature presses effortlessly through the underbrush. The dire boar's eyes follow the stalk to the vehicle and she steps proudly up on the road. An accompaniment of five other dire boar piglets spread out from the influence of a flowing magical miasma that radiates from the dire boar. Her maw clamps down the stalk. She shifts the stalk and slides the seed pod off the roof of the vehicle with a weak metallic scrape. The flowery seed pod crashes down on the pavement and a swarm of piglets descend over the seeds scattered around the now scratched and dented, black sports utility vehicle.

Minutes after the initial shock fades, the occupants of the vehicle deal with the situation in their own ways. Trakenthin smiles as he watches the piglets challenge each other for choice seeds. Tassilda stares in sheer fascination of the power and aura of the mighty dire boar. Modoran deftly picks off seeds from the roof through the open sunroof and gives handfuls to Deedri, which she feeds to piglets through her window. Chad lifts his head briefly from the steering wheel, weakly glares at the lone piglet in front of the car, and drops his head back down to a frustrated grumble.