

## Ain't A Hero – Episode 27

by Bryan Schuder

Aristespha, Bach, Cideeda, Dretphi, Sebastian, and Sotalia sit around the dining table. Sebastian's ethereal form twists his mouth and crosses his arms. "Okay. Before everyone got started out on all the usual Monday chores, I just wanted to get everyone thinking about how we need to change our tactics with Noxian."

He sighs with a ghostly echo and scratches the back of his neck. "Any suggestions are valid at this point. Anything we've dismissed in the past, we can revisit now."

The group quietens as minds play around with various thoughts. Cideeda pans a glance over to everyone and shrugs. "We need to go to the other places Noxian's has been spotted at."

Sotalia exaggerates a nod on top of her hand to second the idea and turns her approving gaze to Cideeda. "Definitely, girl. Sorry, I doubted you on that one. I just didn't think that much would be there."

Cideeda grits her teeth with a tug at the corner of her mouth and she bites her lip with a humble expression. "Well. Me neither. I was just hoping for maybe a shack, campsite, or old building out in the woods. Or even just a hidden stash of supplies. But a whole town?"

Aristespha grimaces, grumbles to herself, and fidgets her crossed legs more intensely to match the visible unease flowing inside her. "I'm still looking into that. I've sent my official report to the Grand Library and a copy of the information to Nash."

She slowly exhales a small amount of relief through clenched teeth, uncrosses her legs, and attempts to relax when she catches Sebastian's concerned, loving gaze to her. "I apologize. He's taking a lot longer than usual to get back to me. Especially, with something like this."

Sebastian focuses his attention upon Aristespha and directs a calm, soothing tone to her. "Could he be in danger or trouble? Anything we need to do help him, dear?"

Aristespha manages to present a smile and fights the tension in the air. "Oh no, Sebastian. I'm sure he's fine. It's just... If he takes this long, then I think he found something well beyond expectation."

A similar smile appears on Sebastian and he agrees with a nod. "Well, I hope the information he finds will give us some idea of what was going on there. And... What Noxian was doing there."

Bach blinks his eyes and lifts his head back as prominent thought rises to the front of his mind. "Do we know Noxian's end goal?"

A wave of uncertainty sweeps through everyone else and a collective self-doubt stymies the discussion. Sebastian eventually speaks through the embarrassment bubbling onto his translucent face. "That's the one thing we haven't been able to really figure out."

Dretphi gazes over to Bach and expresses some struggle in collecting the right chain of words. “We have been able to... determine what are NOT his goals. That has eliminated the common options.”

Cideeda idly drums a series of claw tip taps upon the dining table, aimlessly directs her eyes up to the ceiling, and gently shakes her head as her tail waves with occasional twitches. “It’s always been like that with him. He’ll go particular route and you think you figure out his plans, then he diverges completely from expectations.”

Sotalia leans upon the table, angles her gaze to Bach, and gestures to him with finger wags in sync to her statements. “This one never hit the news. He just walked in through the front door of a secret Greater Azure Alliance missile silo, went straight to THE ancient second period magic nuke they had...”

A frown of unease forms upon Bach as he watches Sotalia recount the tale. The pause allows the full scope of such a device of mass destruction to materialize in his mind and spring the hairs on the back of his neck up. Sotalia focuses her golden eyes upon Bach and trains a long, black nailed finger point on him. “You know what he did?”

Bach slowly shakes his head and keeps his unnerved stare upon Sotalia. “No...?”

Sotalia slides back into her chair, presses up against the back, puts her hands up in the air with resignation, and groans. “He drained the thing completely of elder energy and disarmed it by ripping the warhead clean from it.”

The tension drops completely out of Bach, and confusion and intrigue flood through his mind. “What?! But? I mean- Taking the energy is one thing, but why go through the danger of disarming it. And how would he know how to do that? And if he knew enough to disarm it, he could have easily ransomed whatever else he wanted.”

Sotalia nods in frustration tinted agreement to Bach points, flips some hair back over a horn, and crosses her arms with a sigh. “I know. Same things I thought, too. That’s what he keeps on doing.”

Aristespha reaches underneath her silvery-blue hair, fans it back over her shoulders, and squirms out some nervous energy. “Overall, it has been very difficult to predict where he’s going and what exactly he’s going to do. It’s proven ineffective to use any historical information about past dark lords and other malcontents.”

She dons a tight frown, breathes in quickly, and exhales hints of irritation. “What troubles me the most is the knowledge he has and what he does with that knowledge. I’ve poured over so many resources trying to find out what the common thread is to all his activities.”

Her hands interlock fingers, her arms stretch down under the table between her knees, and she leans back into her chair. “There’s something I’m missing. Despite how scattered his activities may be, there’s a purpose behind it.”

Sebastian looks at Bach with some residual embarrassment and shrugs with a hard tug on the corner of his mouth. “Unfortunately, bro, we were really focused on catching up to Noxian to stop him rather than figuring out what his end goals were.”

Dretphi maintains a neutral expression upon her face, and ponders past events as she glances over to Bach. “Halting his progress was priority. His activities were dangerous. Implications seemed dire.”

Cideeda continues to tap her claws upon the table top and smirks wryly. “Well, you go into restricted zones, steal artifacts from both public and protected places, sabotage attempts to track you down, fend off the police, military, and other adventuring groups, and then start messing with strange magical elements... It usually doesn’t mean anything good.”

Bach weighs the information, thinks to himself, hums a few times, and nods slowly. Sebastian ponders a few moments himself. “But... We may need focus on that now. Because, I think we threatened him achieving that goal, whatever it is.”

Each member of the group individually agrees. Dretphi straightens up her posture and addresses everyone. “We need to train intensely.”

Sebastian nods to Dretphi and focuses upon Bach. “Yes. I think we all need to step up our training. Sorry, bro. But you might be getting the worst of it.”

A nervous smile creeps up on Bach’s face and he chuckles half-heartedly. “What do you mean, brother?”

An amused grin pulls across Sebastian’s mouth and he perks an eye brow at Bach. “Well, I think Dretphi needs to mix in some close quarters combat soon. Aristespha and I will start training you in sword fighting. And...”

He darts his eyes between Aristespha and Sotalia, and returns them to Bach. “Whatever you are doing with magic gave you the ability to fend off Noxian’s use of magic. So, Aristespha, Sotalia, and you will all probably need to amp up the magic training.”

An eager, sharp smile cracks across Sotalia lips and she narrows her eyes with a sly tone to Bach. “We are going to have to do some real combat training. I hope your mage armor barrier is in better shape now.”

She flits an eye brow with a grin pushing apart the smile. “Hate to burn a few more holes in your clothes.”

Sebastian notices his brother’s discomfort as Sotalia focuses her confident gaze upon Bach. He trades glances between the others and directs his voice to Sotalia. “Hey, Sotalia. Thinking about it, when’s the last time you ever did any close combat training?”

Sotalia’s eyes open wide, her mouth contorts awkwardly, and her expression blanks to a dumbfounded stun. “Uh, um, ah. Why would I need to know anything like... that?”

She keeps her head facing towards Bach, and ignores the other pairs of eyes upon her with different degrees of foreboding smiles.

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Bach stands out in the field behind the ranch style house and curiously eyes the area in a mix of anticipation and wariness. He briefly adjusts the magical sparring gear upon him, pulls the protective vest taut, checks the straps on the leg covers over his pants, and tugs at the gloves on his hands. Sotalia taps her foot impatiently as she watches Aristespha stroll up. She slowly swings her head over towards Bach and flashes a confident, playful grin. Aristespha secures her artisan sparring gloves, flexes around in the matching gear, and examines Bach and Sotalia. "I think we need to change up the magical training to take advantage of recent discoveries. We will keep the basics the same, but there's some advanced training I would like to explore."

A wicked tint colors Sotalia's grin. Her eyes light up and focus upon Aristespha. "I think I like the sound of that. Maybe, I can finally get taught THOSE spells..."

She straightens her posture, returns her gaze to Bach, and applies her full attention upon him with a barely audible dark chuckle to herself. Bach smiles halfway at Sotalia, blinks, and puzzles a glance to Aristespha. "So, we're just training today?"

Aristespha shifts her foot inside her boot, nonchalantly looks to Bach, and nods succinctly. "Yes. What else did you expect?"

Bach brushes his fingers through his long brown hair to end in a scratch of the back of his head with a quirk of a lip. "Uh. I figured you two would be questioning me about the whole sending Noxian's elder energy right back at him?"

The inquisitive gaze from Sotalia intensifies upon Bach. Sotalia briefly seeks hints for proceeding from Aristespha, which grants Bach a reprieve from the stare. Aristespha smiles kindly and shakes her head. "Oh, that can wait for later."

Sotalia's expression pops, making way for bewilderment to overtake her. She squints at Aristespha. "Um. What?"

Aristespha crosses her arms, maintains a calm smile, and shrugs her shoulders. "I do have questions, but those need to be answered in a different environment."

She lifts an eyebrow at Bach with a quizzical tint to her face. "I will say... While I am surprised by what you did, after some thought, it makes sense you were able to."

Sotalia's head tilts and she cocks it back while keeping a confused stare upon Aristespha. She crosses her arms and waits expectantly as she searches for the explanation. Aristespha meets Sotalia's gaze and ponders a moment in her thoughts. "With the way elder energy disrupts most spells derived from Foundation Constructs, someone who creates advanced spells without their assistance might be able to counter that disruption."

Moments later, the revelation dawns upon Sotalia as her eyes flit open and she glances back to Bach before returning. “That does make a lot of sense. And, Noxian did NOT expect that barrier to stop the blast.”

She walks forward with an exaggerated sway to each step and her eyes formulate a theory while she holds her chin. “Now, I’m actually really curious as to how good Noxian’s control of that elder energy is.”

Aristespha nods in confirmation to Sotalia. “That’s another theory I’ve been reviewing. But, to focus on the training at hand, I think one way we can prepare ourselves against Noxian is to... Harden our spells.”

Bach strokes his beard and turn towards Aristespha. Sotalia spins quickly in place with an eager smile and a golden glint in her eyes. “Okay! Now that sounds interesting! How do we do that?”

Aristespha grins with a glow in her violet eyes and rolls her hand out at Bach. “Very simple. We craft our spells, and then let Bach attempt to disrupt them.”

Bach’s eyes open wide in a fit of shock and he slowly rotates his head to stare at Aristespha with a sporadic twitch of the upper cheek. “Uh, excuse me?”

With calming, waving gestures of the hand, Aristespha attempts to dismiss Bach’s fears and perks her brow at him. “Defensive spells only. I figured our main focus should be strengthening our barriers right now.”

A long exhale of relief escapes Bach and he nods with renewed willingness. “Okay. That I can do.”

Disappointment tugs down upon the corners of Sotalia’s mouth. Aristespha notices the change in mood and rolls her eyes with a laugh. “Now, now. I actually want to do some offensive spell training today.”

Sotalia lifts an eyebrow, places her hands on her hips, and eyes Aristespha with a playful curiosity behind a smirk. “Really?”

Aristespha briefly averts her eyes, sighs, and places her hands on her hips, too. “Well, watching you and Tassilda face off, I realized I haven’t thrown a good fireball in a while. So, I figured it might be good exercise to do some target practice later.”

A competitive air emanates around Sotalia as the smirk shifts to a proud grin and she postures confidently. “I see. It has been a while. Well, let’s get this spell hardening training going then.”

With a single nod and waving gesture to Sotalia, Aristespha signals her to prepare. Sotalia stretches out her body, flexes her joints, and steps off to nice flat section of the field. “Give me a minute, need to warm up and check my spot.”

Bach bites his lip as he draws a long breath of air and watches Sotalia prepare. Aristesha moves next to him, leans close to his ear, and carefully directs a whisper. "I think she'll probably need the target practice after you dismantle her spells a few times."

With a gradual nod, Bach sighs long and quietly with a grimace. "I'm going to have to agree with you on that one."

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A half-fvalian girl holds her tan, brown striped arms out in front, and exhales her sigh to blow long, bright pink hair out of her face. Her eyes wander around the backyard behind the two story house. She hunts for anything that could possibly be more entertaining than the constant lecturing drone of Tassilda. She shifts her weight around and squirms within her boldly colored, tight fitting shirt and shorts. A sharp snap guides her fuzzy, upright ears and her short-haired tail flicks up. Tassilda steps forward with a strong sneer and aims her frustration at the half-fvalian girl. "Veevi! Are you even paying attention?!"

Veevi rolls her pink pupil eyes dramatically as the motions of her head relay annoyance. "Yes."

Tassilda places her long-nailed hands on her hips, leans her upper body forward, and sternly stares at Veevi with her light blue on black eyes. "Then... What did I say?"

A snarl forms upon Veevi's lips. She grits her teeth, reveals prominent canines, and groans in defiant irritation. "Blah, blah, blah, boring magic theory, you like hearing your own voice-"

She slaps down her arms to her sides and glares in outrage at Tassilda. "And I've been **STANDING** around for **HOURS** and done **NOTHING MAGICAL AT ALL!**"

Tassilda rears back her head, puffs up her chest, snorts out indignation at Veevi, and eyes her with bubbling disgust. "WELL! Whose **FAULT** is that? Maybe **YOU** just have **NO MAGICAL ABILITY.**"

Veevi crosses her arms tightly, postures boldly, and smirks meanly back at Tassilda. "Maybe **YOU** don't **UNDERSTAND** it well enough to teach!"

The two maintain their stances, bounce prickly commentary off each other, and deny the other the last word. Camera crew exchange glances as the verbal battle escalates. Samantha blinks and writes down notes on her clipboard with a darkly, content smile. Gerald wanders into the area from the neighboring house and steps next to Samantha. "What the hell is going on here?"

Samantha flashes an evil grin to Gerald as she hugs her clipboard close to her chest. "Prime material for this week's episode."

Gerald gazes at deadlock of sneering, anger backed glares between Veevi and Tassilda, "Gods... I heard it over in the kitchen at the crew house."

He lifts a sandwich up to his mouth, bites off a portion of it, chews, and clears his mouth with a swallow. "Skipped the mustard because I thought I needed to get out here."

Samantha eyes the sandwich, sniffs the air, and bites her lip with a pleading gaze to Gerald. "Is there enough left to make another?"

Gerald twists his mouth side to side, catches the endearing expression from Samantha, and grumbles. "Yes. No mayo, spicy brown mustard?"

When Samantha nods contentedly, a series of distant booms and blasts echo up from the background of the neighborhood. Everyone halts to seek the source. Veevi's ears quirk and guide her steps. Her anger blinks from existence and excitement driven curiosity immediately replaces it. "What was that?!"

A far off cacophony of magical energies resonate distantly into the soundscape. Veevi's ears lock onto the origin and she speeds off with childish glee. "I've got to see this!"

Tassilda widens her eyes in shock, frowns sharply, and chases after Veevi with a hand out to grasp her. "GET. BACK. HERE!"

Veevi leads Tassilda with camera crew rushing to catch up as Samantha and Gerald quickly organize the mass of equipment and people. She crests over a small hill at the corner of the property and peers out into a field behind a ranch style house. Her eyes spot the flashes of magical energies forming and watches a half-emin woman with dark red hair and swept back horns release a potent fireball at a boulder in the middle of the field. The fireball impacts with a brilliant explosive burst. Veevi's pupils enlarge as fascination overflows and she squeals gleefully at the powerful display. The half-emin woman follows up with speedy gestures and expedient chants. A bolt of lightning arc from her hand to the large rock. The other hand swings forward to jet a misty beam at the stone mass. A frosty spot on the boulder pours a light fog. Veevi hears a low growl next to her from Tassilda. She darts her eyes over, carefully watches Tassilda, and notices the obvious target of her ire. A sly grin forms upon Veevi and she draws in a long breath, adjusting her pose. She hems dramatically with a long pause, and puzzles over a thought out loud. "Well, if you aren't willing or CAPABLE of teaching me magic... I wonder if SHE could teach me."

With no wind and still air, a wave of invisible force flares out the loose and draping features of Tassilda's wardrobe as her posture stiffens. She slowly pivots in place to face Veevi, lowers her glare down, and suppresses a dark glower down to a stern stare. "Come. I have magic to teach you."

Tassilda spins rigidly back to the two-story house and marches firmly down the hill. As Veevi follows her, she focuses one last glance towards distance group of three and mouths upon a wry smile. "We shall see."

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Aristespha places her aetherphone upon the dining table top in the middle of the gathering, leans over, and projects her voice. "I switched the speakerphone, Nash. Are you still there?"

Through the phone speaker a squeak of an office chair echoes in the remote background as a long sigh escapes the man at the other end. "Yes. I am. Wow... What a day it has been."

A brow lifts up on Aristespha and she curls her lip warily. "Okay. Well, did you find anything with the information I sent you, Nash?"

Nash laughs singularly and pauses to draw an audible hissing breath. "Yes and... Well, no."

Sotalia crosses her arms and tugs at the corner of her mouth, briefly eyeing Aristespha before settling back on the phone. Sebastian glances over to Aristespha to gauge her reaction and resumes watching the phone. Cideeda's ears aim forward and she awaits further explanation. Dretphi cocks her head to the side quizzically. Bach leans back in his chair examining the group overall during the silence and freezes stiffly when the wood creaks loudly. Nash lightly whistles and explains. "Okay. Good news, I checked all the database addresses you gave me. And, they all resolved to the documents you described."

He groans as his hand scratching his head sounds out from the other side. "But, I can't find anything else. You're right. Dammit, Aristespha, the things you have to be right about. You found a decatalogging."

A tight frown pulls down Aristespha's lips and a mix of emotions play out the confirmation of her suspicions. "I know... And I usually like being right."

She chuckles lightly and fights to don a loving smile upon noticing Sebastian's concern. Nash snorts and laughs. "I tried my best to find anything, especially after reading the copy of the report you sent up to higher ups."

His tone shifts and he works his voice to a comical aside. "And just between you all, as much as I like to consider myself a brave and bold man... I'm not going to lie. From what you described of the place, it would have not only been understandable for me to shit my pants in terror, but probably expected of me."

The group reacts with scattered snorts, chuckles, and amused smirks. Nash continues his statement after another squeak of the office chair joins the faint sounds of movement at the other end. "That's why they pay you all the big paychecks. Anyway, let me get to the strange news."

The gathering around the table concentrates their full attention upon the aetherphone on the tabletop. Nash draws a long breath of air and exhales slowly as he struggles to start his next statement and his tone develops tinges of embarrassment. "Uh, while I can access the database node logically through various systems... I don't know where it is."

Aristespha pulls back her head blinking and darts her eyes within her mind in vain attempts to process the meaning of that sentence. Sotalia scoffs, standing next to the table, and drops her hands to the sides upon her hips. "Pfft- Um. What?!"

Cideeda's emerald green eyes flit wide and she immediately narrows them to focus with a new twist to the lips from the sudden confusion. "I'm pretty certain those database nodes are

NOT small things. I'm assuming, but... Fairly large. Power hungry. Need ample cooling. Require a physical connection to a network system. Not something that's easily moved?!"

Nash grumbles with a humble cadence. "Yep. Correct on all those things. You sound exactly how I how felt when I discovered the empty spot down that node bank where it should have been."

Dretphi leans forward and calmly directs her intrigue towards the phone. "Could the node have been moved? The location information not updated?"

Another sigh precedes a punctuating, implosive click of the mouth from Nash. "I hoped for that, too. But, no move requests, no hardware change orders, and... the network pings show it is still within that particular building. I got the network folks to check it from other locations."

He pauses and a dull thud of a hand landing upon a desk resonates from the audible background. "It's in that building. Somewhere. Damned if I know."

Aristespha rests her elbows upon the table, props her head up between her hands, and slowly shakes her head side to side. "What is going on here?"

Bach strokes his beard thoughtfully and blinks hard, forming a theory in his mind. "There's A LOT of intent behind all of this. This is just a ridiculous amount of effort."

Nash groans in annoyed disgust at the situation. "Tell me about it. The one time I was hoping for sheer incompetence to be the reason behind it all... Nope. So, that will unfortunately make the next steps more difficult. I'm going to do a proper trace of where this thing is early tomorrow. But, I don't know long it'll take since any maintenance information needs to be treated as possibly wrong or lying."

A weak smile finds its way upon Aristespha's face and her voice presents an appreciative tone. "Thank you, Nash. Really. As concerning as the information is, it is good to know it."

Nash snorts with a chuckle. "Be careful with that mentality. Well, I'll call you again if I find anything else out. You all take care. And, if you all could keep away from any more abandoned towns with questionable histories, that would really help keep me from revisiting my alcoholism research."

A laugh escapes from Aristespha and pushes her smile wider as she exchanges amused glances with the rest of the group. "We'll try. Good night, Nash."

With quick hum and playful grumble Nash finishes the conversation. "Okay, I'll believe you. Talk to you all later."

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Dretphi sits on her bed just clear of the beams of morning light projecting through the windows. She keeps her arm out and aims the screen of her aetherphone at her face. She maintains a stoic expression while she focuses upon the display. She briefly sighs and speaks long, intricate sentences in a dialect of grath. She waits with a stare despite the

attempts of her eyes to shamefully avert. An older grath man on the phone's video feed meets Dretphi with a calm, cool demeanor. His steely gray eyes, that nearly match Dretphi's, search his thoughts purposefully. He tugs at the corners of the mouth upon tan skin similar in tone to Dretphi. After a few tense, quiet moments, he breaks the silence between the two and speaks in a firm but strangely soothing voice. The accent he uses to navigate the language shares many elements to Dretphi's.

With each of his sentences, Dretphi gradually lowers her head more and aims her eyes lower with a frown hinting. The man on the screen pauses when he notices the mood shift. He glances over to the corner of mind, lifts an eyebrow, cracks an amused smile, and speaks endearingly with a far warmer tone. Dretphi lifts her head back up with a full smile, gazes with pride at the older grath man, and softly says a few phrases. A chuckle from the man sounds out through the speaker with a few more words. Dretphi's smile grows more, until she rigidly freezes her expression. A woman's voice rises from the background speaking loudly in grath, and Dretphi's eyes widen. The man nonchalantly turns his head, calls back, listens to a response, and returns to face Dretphi through the phone. He speaks a few sentences and Dretphi nods vigorously and stiffly. The older man laughs, sighs with a playful shake of his head, and smiles warmly with final few words. Dretphi loosens her expression, smiles warmly back, and returns a similar few words.

The phone call ends and Dretphi closes her eyes a few seconds with the happy smile before placing her phone on top of the bed near the pillows. She leans herself forward to stand up, walks out through the doorway into the hallway, and moves into the living room. She spots Bach upon the couch, steps next to the couch, and aims her gaze down. "I am ready for our training. I apologize for the delay."

Bach blinks his attention away from the television and turns his head towards Dretphi. "Oh! Hey. No problem. Let me turn this thing off."

He stretches his arm forward with remote in hand, presses the power button, and rests the remote upon the coffee table. He lifts himself off the couch, stands straight, and navigates his way out from behind the coffee table towards the sliding glass door. "So, what was the delay. Anything wrong?"

Dretphi smiles at Bach and shakes her head as she follows Bach through the sliding door. "No. My birth father contacted me. He wanted to talk to me about my recent publicized confrontation."

Bach awkwardly contorts of the corner of his lips, quirks a brow at Dretphi with a tinge of concern, and uncertainly questions. "So, uh, how did he feel about that situation?"

Dretphi conceals a bite of her lip, and sways her head gradually, slowly side to side. "He reminded me of his wisdom to chose the confrontations I engage with care."

The warm smile returns to her face and she gazes at Bach. "He shared his opinion that he saw no fault in my actions. He relayed that my two house fathers are proud of me. My opponent had it coming in their perspectives."

Bach nods with satisfaction as the two travel to their usual work out areas in the short grass plots near the house. “Well, I still don’t know what he said, but I’ll trust your decision was the right the one.”

A looming awareness picks at Dretphi’s demeanor and attempts to neutralize her amusement. Bach squints briefly, lifts an eyebrow, and addresses Dretphi. “Was there something else?”

Dretphi blinks off guard, catches Bach’s examination, and sighs with a wary air. “My birth father warned me my mother will call me tonight.”

Bach visibly puzzles at the statement and tilts his head to the side. “Warned?”

While her eyes hunt her mind for the correct terminology, Dretphi describes the linguistic error out loud. “Warned is not accurate. The original term does not have an exact translation. It is the act of informing someone with contextual foreboding not probable enough to classify as a warning.”

Bach stops walking, blinks hard, and ponders this new information. “There’s a word a for that?”

Dretphi succinctly nods to Bach and adopts a plain tone of voice. “Yes. There are variations.”

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Deedri stands with her back up leaned against the brick wall of the two story house next to the sliding glass door. She stares out into the backyard and watches Veevi wildly swing at the towering Trakenthin with a padded training sword. Each crude swipe meets the thick, straight branch within Trakenthin’s single handed grasp. Veevi clumsily hops away, readies herself in a manner she believes fitting of the situation, and charges with a sloppy flurry of overly animated blows. As the unamused Trakenthin fights boredom, he intercepts each strike from Veevi effortlessly and deflects them away with the large stick. The sliding glass door opens and Modoran leans his head cautiously out. He notices Deedri as she brushes the apron of her usual medical mage attire and he smiles with a tinge of ill humor. “I see that Trakenthin hasn’t killed her yet.”

A furry ear perks over to Modoran’s voice and Deedri glances over. She tighten her lips, sighs, and fails at holding back a roll of her eyes. “No. She’s lucky he hasn’t put any effort into it.”

Modoran gazes out to watch another ineffective barrage from Veevi impacts deflection after deflection and shakes his head with a frown curling the corner of his mouth. “Hope she gets tired enough to quit or angry enough to storm off soon. At least before Trakenthin decides to finish it.”

Deedri nods uneasily at that thought and cringes briefly. She thinks for a moment and puzzles at Modoran. “By the way, where were you yesterday? Veevi was looking everywhere for you.”

A snort escapes through the sly grin upon Modoran's dusky bluish gray face and he flits a smug eye brow. "Oh, that. Well, after seeing how things between her and Tassilda went Monday, I thought I'd figure out a way to keep my distance. Convinced her that playing a game of hide and seek she couldn't win was part of her stealth training."

Deedri crosses her arms, tries to muster a glare at Modoran, but settles for expressing mild, general annoyance. She idly gazes out to the backyard. "That must have been nice. Where did you end up hiding?"

Modoran steps out the rest of the way through the doorway, closes the sliding glass door behind him, and rests his back up against the brickwork near Deedri. "Over into the forest. I decided to spy on our neighbors for a while."

With a quick pivot of her head, Deedri focuses her wide eyed curiosity on Modoran and lowers her voice. "Did you see anything going on?"

Modoran shrugs nonchalantly and presents an unimpressed smirk to Deedri. "Not really. The grath woman, Dretphi I think, was running laps around the house with the human... Um... Bach? It was a pretty intense workout. He could barely keep up."

He blinks as his memory kicks in and smiles happily. "Oh! I did find some more of those protellow seeds in the forest."

Deedri's eyes brighten as she dons excited grin and clasps her hands together. "Wow! There must be a patch deeper in the forest. Even as far as they can launch their seeds, that still means they're pretty close by."

A shrill voice flowing with irritation bellows out from Veevi as she steadies her training sword. "Some swordsman you are! Always blocking and defensive."

Veevi curls a wry smile and she narrows her eyes at Trakenthin. "Are you adopting the same tactics SHE DEFEATED you with?"

The distractions within Trakenthin's mind leap away out of fear from the burst of indignation and ire jetting to the forefront of his conscious thoughts. His posture shifts drastically, his stance changes, and his grip alters on the wooden branch. He awaits Veevi's attack and focuses his glare upon her. With bravado, Veevi lunges forth to assault Trakenthin and confusion erupts on her face as her training blade halts early against an unmovable object. The large stick moves with a brief blur away from Veevi's sword, letting her stumble forward. Trakenthin strikes Veevi's training weapon with an incredibly hard, overpowering back swing that spins Veevi around with her sword. She struggles to find her footing and awkwardly dances upon the grass of the lawn in an uncoordinated mess. She sinks her foot into a section of loose sod and tumbles over herself. Moments after impact, she curls up grasping both hands around her ankle and wails in pain.

Deedri grimaces, sighs with her eyes looking up in defeat, and pushes forward from the wall to a jog over. She lowers to her knees next to Veevi, cautiously reaches through the motions of Veevi's panic, and secures a safe grasp of the leg. Deedri's eyes glow light auburn as she focuses her gaze upon Veevi's ankle. Seconds later, Deedri presents a comforting smile to

the worried Veevi and to the ever present camera crew. "You'll be fine, you only just twisted it a little. Let me fix it with a quick spell."

Veevi seats herself upon the grass, props herself up with arms behind her, and allows Deedri to guide her foot onto a lap. With a series of gestures and incantations, Deedri flows waves of blue and green energies into her hands and carefully places her hands upon Veevi's ankle. The energies leave Deedri and sink into Veevi's ankle, each pulse illuminating less of the foot over time. A few minutes later, the magic flow wanes and Deedri withdraws her hands. "That should soothe the pain, combat the swelling, and speed up the healing. But, we'll need to provide it some support for now. I should have some compression wraps..."

While Deedri digs through the pockets of her outfit for the right bandage, Veevi tilts her upper body gradually forward and examines her foot. She carefully flexes the joint around and eventually manages a series of small circular movements. The previous fright and nerves fade to a happy smile. Her eyes glance up to Deedri and Veevi watches Deedri inspect pocket after pocket. The happy smile morphs to a seductive grin when Veevi eyes down near her foot. Deedri finally locates a roll of flexible compression bandage, removes it from the pocket, and pauses. She perplexes at an odd pressure moving on top her apron along her inner thigh. Veevi continues gently brushing her big toe upon Deedri's apron. A wave of uncomfortable, nervous energy flows down Deedri's tail and bristles the hairs down to the very tip as it passes. Deedri slowly returns to face Veevi and presents the roll in hand, and awkwardly forces a smile. "I... found the... compression wrap."

Veevi relaxes her posture, maintains the flirtatious air with a dramatic bite of the lip, and hovers her foot up with a flex of the toes. She gazes at Deedri, waits until Deedri's eyes meet hers, and winks with a quick lick of the lips. Deedri barely contains the scream resonating in her mind behind her professionally courteous demeanor.

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Cideeda engages the last lock on the upper outer casing her laser pistol, angles the side of the pistol in hand to showcase the device to Bach, and circles a claw tip over the mechanism. "And that's how you field strip the Arc and Spark Light Lance four fifty."

Bach nods in the seat next to Cideeda and strokes his chin in thought. "So, how many times have you done a field stripping in the field?"

Few wags of tail and darts of the eye through her memory, Cideeda pantomimes the math. "Maybe twenty... five times? With this pistol at least. So long as the laser core is in good shape and you don't break the case seal, it should work long enough to get you home."

Bach glances around the dining table at the containers surrounding both Cideeda and him with curiosity. "So, why laser pistols? From personal experience, you're pretty good with a shotgun."

Cideeda flashes a toothy grin and rests the laser pistol back into its custom protective case. "Well, as much as I love my shotgun, the recoil doesn't help when I need to be moving around and keeping a good aim."

She shrugs as she closes the top of the custom case. “The laser pistols have no recoil, burn lines at targets, and the energy cells weigh A LOT less.”

When the laser pistol case rests upon the ground, she shifts her focus to a large rectangular container and securely grasps it with both hands. “Also, I usually use the shotgun for the specialty ammunition most of the time.”

She hoists the padded fabric box upon the table top, hooks a claw into the zipper handle loop, and pulls a sly grin at Bach. “Now, with your training today, I have a special task that’s perfect for your skill set.”

Bach cocks his head to the side, gradually raises a brow, tugs a corner smirk on his mouth, and examines the container. Cideeda undoes the zipper around the perimeter of the top flap’s edges and deftly slips a hand inside, seeking something within. After her forearm muscles flex briefly, she withdraws her fist out of the fabric covered case and gently rests a cupped hand upon the table between her and Bach. With some flare, she removes her grip to reveal a small plastic figurine upon a twenty five millimeter diameter base. The shiny details of the miniature glint from the natural and artificial light sources in the room. The figure stands upon the base in a dramatic action pose. It wields a large revolver pointing forward, wears dark emerald green plate armor, and holds a translucent energy shield in the other hand. Bach studies the intricate paint job of the plastic model and glances up to puzzle at Cideeda. “Um... Do you want me to paint them?”

Cideeda shakes her head with a hard blink and a laugh. “OH! No. Never. Only I get to paint them. Which I’m going to touch up but...”

Her expression softens and she dons a sweet, endearing smile. She flutters her eyes, gazes at Bach, and coyly fidgets in her seat. “Could you change their poses for me? I’d really like them to look nice for Legends of Nexus tournament this Saturday at the game shop.”

Bach aims his scrutiny at the figurine, returns his eyes to Cideeda, and squirms in his seat as she concentrates her pleading, hopeful expression. Eventually, He cracks a smile, sighs with amusement, and turn his head away. “Okay, I’ll help. Just stop using that look on me. No wonder you get all those discounts.”

Cideeda drops the cute act in flash and a prominent toothy grin slyly widens. She flips over the top flap, proudly displays her rows of miniatures, and removes tray after tray. She plucks a few out, places them in front of Bach, and instructs him about every single aspect of real world and in-game details. Bach listens with interest and watches Cideeda act out her desired new poses.