

Ain't A Hero – Episode 3

by Bryan Schuder

Aristespha releases a pile of books in front of Bach upon the dining table. He reflexively recoils from the loud slap of book leather onto the wooden tabletop, as the early morning haze breaks free from his mind. He tries to catch a glimpse of Aristespha's face as she properly walks to chair across from Bach. With a constant air of confidence, she slides the chair back, sits down, and locks eyes with Bach. He backs further into his chair from the hard stare of Aristespha. She narrows her glare. "I am a Master Sage of The Grand Library, caretaker and researcher of the Sword of the Spirit Realm, and specialize in magics of the mind, body, and spirit. I serve as the doctor, historian, and the spirit expert for this team. None of which I expect you to learn. It takes a lot of knowledge, experience, and discipline. Any questions?"

Bach searches his mind for a question, but also ponders if that last bit from Aristespha is a well-disguised insult. He eventually settles for pointing at the books on the tabletop. "So, what are these for?"

With a finely gloved hand, Aristespha lifts the front cover of the book resting at the top of the stack. She opens the book fully to reveal the title page. "These are books that will provide basic knowledge of first aid, psionic magics, and spirits. I expect you to read them as soon as possible."

Bach flips through a few pages, glancing at the material, before he returns his eyes to Aristespha. "Is there going to be a test or something?"

Aristespha maintains the stern glare at Bach, that somehow grows a bit colder. Bach gives the stack of books a more concerned inspection. Aristespha groans with a slight shake of her head. "No. There will NOT be a test. But, if you want to be a productive member of this team, I expect you to retain some of this knowledge."

Bach carefully closes the book and neatly rearranges the stack. He warily nods to Aristespha, trying his best to relate honest sincerity. "Okay. I'll get right on it. It sounds important and I'll do what I can. I can start right now if you want me to?"

Bach strangely feels Aristespha's mood lighten, despite her ever so slight shift in expression. The phenomena confuses Bach and also somewhat disturbs him. Aristespha slides over an electronic tablet, nearby on the table, in front of her. She taps on the screen a few times before pressing the side button to release a pen stylus. "Read them and retain the knowledge. That's all I can ask. I want you to be prepared as we have encountered much in our adventures."

Aristespha straightens in her seat and perks a brow at Bach. "So, I've already filled out the information I know, but I will need to ask some questions of a medical nature. We have found that keeping medical histories when we travel is vital, since we never quite know what clinics, hospitals, or temples will be around."

Bach agrees and sits up in his seat, ready to answer questions. "That makes sense. I guess, ask away?"

An ethereal voice beside Bach mockingly questions him. "When was your last sexual encounter?"

If the mental gears inside Bach's head seize any harder, the strain may become audible to others. Bach snaps his head towards the source of the voice, his face flush with shock. Sebastian's ghostly face hovers with a shit-eating grin. "So? When was it?"

Bach immediately realizes who it is and launches from shock into outright irritation. "Goddamn it, you asshole."

Sebastian drifts his ethereal form down into the chair next to Bach. "Morning to you, too! So... when was it?"

Bach grimaces, defensively crosses his arms, and defiantly glares at Sebastian. "I ain't you telling you shit."

Sebastian rolls his eyes as he dramatically throws his head away from Bach. "Oh! So a Not Applicable, still?"

Bach remains silent and stares sternly at his brother. Sebastian just shrugs and shakes his head. "Oh, lighten up! It'll happen for you. Don't have to be so uptight about it. I'll help you out-

Sebastian smiles at his brother and notices the devious smirk forming on Bach's face. Bach slowly pivots his head to Aristespha, the smirk now a full grin. "So one time I was working at the bowling alley when Sebastian walks in with each arm around an Emin woman-

Bach purposely pauses as ethereal hands and arms try in desperate vain to cover his mouth from speaking.

"DUDE. Shut up! Brother to brother confidentiality!"

Bach twists in his chair to see Sebastian glowing light red with fingers curled in frustration. Bach turns up two middle fingers to Sebastian and cackles while wagging the fingers. "Whacha gonna do ghost boy! Haunt me?! Too late!"

A stern and cold voice resonates throughout the room. "AHEM."

Sebastian immediately transforms back into his normal hazy white form and focuses his attention to Aristespha. Bach slowly puts his hands down and settles back into his seat. Aristespha takes in a long, calculated breath. "Sebastian. I am trying to get some work done. You'll have plenty of time to harass your brother after I am done. I'll only have this room to myself and Bach for another hour before everyone is back from chores and practice."

Sebastian accepts his cue, floats out of his seat, and walks towards the sliding glass door. "Okay. Sorry, dear."

Aristespha aims her eyes to face Sebastian as he looks back before exiting. She slyly smiles to him and concentrates her eyes on his. Sebastian pauses to comprehend something in his mind, his face contorting. With a lift of a sculpted eyebrow and a gleam in her violet eyes, Aristespha smirks and Sebastian manages to briefly blush. He then contentedly smiles and walks through the sliding glass door leading outside.

Bach waits patiently for Aristespha to resume her focus on him and enjoys exclusion from immediate events. She taps the pen stylus on the tablet. "So, any known allergies?"

Aristespha finishes writing a few last notes on the tablet. "Thank you for answering my questions."

Bach sits back in his chair with an apprehensive look. "That wasn't too bad. So, what's next?"

Aristespha places down the tablet and slides it away to the other part of the tabletop. She gestures to Bach. "Hold your arm out across the table."

Bach unfurls his arm onto the tabletop with his palm open and up in front of Aristespha. She reaches out with both hands, resting one underneath Bach's hand and the other holding the underside of his forearm. She briefly drops her head and lifts back up with her eyes glowing brightly violet. "I'd like to examine your magical ability closer. So, I'm going to watch you as you cast a few basic spells. Let's start with any basic light spell."

Despite parts of his mind begging him to remove his arm to safety, Bach stretches his fingers and readies himself. "Okay. What are you trying to find out?"

Aristespha briefly lifts up on Bach's arm to punctuate her serious tone. "I am trying to make sure how you are casting spells won't lead to serious injury, eventual permanent damage, or other more immediate side effects."

Bach's morbid curiosity gets the best of him as he grits his teeth and turns his head with his eyes still on Aristespha. "Immediate side effects?"

Aristespha's tone remains the same with her response. "Rupture of organs, self-immolation, and in some cases... Detonation."

Bach slowly blinks, aghast, as his mind's eye puts on a vivid, albeit cartoon, display of those very side effects applied to himself.

Aristespha's gaze shifts up to Bach's face and narrows. "Now. Cast a light spell."

With a brief, reflexive twitch of his fingers, a small hovering blue-white light orb instantaneously appears above Bach's open palm. Aristespha witnesses with a stare, eventually closing her eyes momentarily with distinctly uncertain body language. She shifts her head back and slants it to the side, keeping her eyes trained on the small, golf ball sized

orb of light. Her stern, stoic demeanor crumbling around the edges to show genuine confusion. "Please release that and do it again."

Bach's eyes dart around seeking resolution to a new problem. "Ah... Umm... Okay."

He reaches out with his free hand, pinches the light orb between his fingers, and carries it off to the side. It continues to hover in place when Bach lets it go. Aristespha's violet, glowing eyes follow the chain of events and her face quirks with further confusion. "I said to release it?"

Bach worriedly shrinks back into his seat, arm still held, as Aristespha's face locks onto him. "I-I-I... Umm... I can't. I made that one independent. It'll go out on its own in about 30 minutes or so."

Aristespha hears this and removes her hand from underneath's Bach's forearm. She snatches the glowing orb and brings it closer. She holds the light orb in front of her face, spinning it around with her fingers. The violet glow in her eyes intensifies as she focuses on it. "There's a hover enchantment, surrounded by an energy containment field, wrapped in a light conversion matrix, and all within a... Structure..."

Bach sheepishly interrupts, "It's a stabilized lattice with a static charge so it can stick to things."

Aristespha's attention shifts away from the light orb to Bach, the intense violet glow from her eyes continues. Bach nervously explains to Aristespha, "You can throw it and it'll hover along the release path until it hits something. Then, it'll cling to it until the stored energy is used up."

Aristespha blinks slowly, the glow from her eyes flashing against Bach's face. Bach fights unease and nerves against the visual onslaught. "I-I-I... I created it when I couldn't pay the power bill one month. I got tired of wandering in the dark at night, so I crafted this spell."

Aristespha releases Bach's hand and rests her elbows on the tabletop. Her palms meet and she rests her chin at the peak. Her eyes close in deep thought. A minute passes, before she reopens her eyes to glare at Bach. "We will need to do different testing."

Bach nervously crosses his arms and backs further into his chair. "Don't know how to take that."

Bach stands some meters away from Sotalia, Aristespha, and Sebastian in the makeshift backyard training area. Sotalia readjusts her training gear and listens to Aristespha explain a plan. Bach's head bounces between Sotalia and Aristespha, eventually settling to Sebastian between the two. Sebastian catches his brother's sight, and only shrugs as he gestures between Sotalia and Aristespha. After a few minutes, Aristespha calls out to Bach. "For this exercise, I need to you to dispel the magic bolts we cast at you. Sotalia will cast small training bolts. I will cast larger bolts when appropriate. We will start out slow and speed up to your limit."

Bach assumes a defensive stance, slowly holding his hands out at the ready. "Okay. It's been awhile."

Sotalia playfully grins, stretching during her prance into position with her hands giving off a faint yellow glow. "Don't worry, I'll hold your hand like a good little girl."

Bach shakes his head and roll his eyes as Sotalia casts the first barrage of slow moving glowing orbs. The multi-color orbs fly roughly a meter a second with Sotalia casting two at a time, carefully aiming. Bach moves his hands and body to intercept the bolts, pulses of magical energy forming from his palms. As his hand nears a bolt, a pop of energy erupts and contacts the bolt. In a fraction of a second, the bolt breaks down with a faint puff of energy. Sotalia's takes great care to track the rate Bach counters the bolts, adjusting her cast rate and the bolt speed to keep a constant challenge. The whole time Aristespha observes with her violet eyes radiantly glowing.

In a few minutes, the pace between Bach and Sotalia speeds to feverish. Despite the concentration demands, the two exchange banter constantly. Sebastian excitedly watches the two, floating higher in the air to get an ideal view of the exchange. Sotalia trick shots a few bolts and yells to Bach with a smirk, "Where's all this misplaced confidence coming from?!"

Bach dispels the tricky bolts and cracks a smile in return, wiping some of the sweat from his head. "Well if this the best you're throwing, I think it's placed where it should be!"

Aristespha examines the scene and raises her eyes to the nearby, floating Sebastian. "Sebastian. How close is Bach to performing as he did in school?"

Sebastian glances below and behind him to Aristespha. "I've seen him do faster. But, not by that much more."

Aristespha quickly swirls her arms and hands in regimented, purposeful motions and flicks out a large potent bolt towards Bach. "Good."

The large bolt blazes by and twists between the other bolts, homing exactly in on Bach's midsection. Sotalia startles as the bolt suddenly weaves into her stream of small bolts. Bach's face flashes to surprise as he whips his hand out towards the path of the large bolt streaking to his chest. The bolt crashes into the pulse of energy from Bach's palm, and only breaks down with the quick emission of another larger pulse. Bach takes advantage of the gap in small bolts from a recovering Sotalia to adjust his stance for Aristespha. "Okay! I think I still got it here!"

Bach interleaves his focus between the intermittent large bolts and the small bolt barrage. The burgeoning confidence fades as the larger bolts fly more often. With a stern and calculating stare, Aristespha launches two large bolts. Bach's eyes widen and he grits his teeth. He flings his arms to intercept the two bolts. The counter blasts of energy from each palm erupt more violently than before, immediately disrupting the large bolts. "OKAY! I think I'm at my limit! I don't got this! We can stop now!"

Sotalia halts her casting and turns her head to Aristespha. "I think that should be good. I'm getting a little tired, honestly."

Aristespha narrows her brilliant violet eyes at Bach and seeks something. "One more test."

She rapidly gestures, chants a few incantations, and heaves both hands towards Bach. Three large bolts simultaneously rocket out. Happening too quick for the shock to register on his face, Bach's hands dart out for two of the bolts, and catch them. The bolts struggle against some kind force, then disappear with faint essence misting away into Bach's body. Both of Bach's hands then arrive together in front of him to contain the third bolt. It almost immediately disappears similar to the other two. Bach shakes his hands out and breathes heavily, watching for anything else from Aristespha and Sotalia. "Wow... Could you warn me next time... I'm bit tired... I haven't dispelled that much in a while... Not ready for that much..."

Sebastian flies right in front of Bach. "Holy shit, dude! That was awesome! Took me back to training back at school. We'll have you in shape in no time with shit like that!"

Bach hangs his head down with a smile as his brother hovers around him. Sebastian tries to pat him on the back. Bach lifts his head up and chuckles at some of his brother's oddball methods praise and encouragement. Sotalia and Aristespha gawk, stunned in shock with jaws agape. The glowing stops in Aristespha's eyes as she forgets to maintain her ability. Sotalia blinks a few times and slowly resumes conscious thought processes again. "Was that... A complete spell decompilation?"

A rare, genuine bewilderment overtakes Aristespha. She attempts to put together a cohesive thought and voice it. "Yes. Three of them. In under two seconds."

Sotalia slides over and pivots in front of Aristespha and looks quizzically at her. "What... What were you trying to test? This?!"

Aristespha arrives back to her senses and shakes her head, puzzling at Sotalia. "N-no! I was trying to flush something out to the surface."

Sotalia steps close and leans in, lowering her voice to whisper. "Like what?"

Aristespha draws a thoughtful breath in and her eyes search her mind for a proper explanation. "There's a strange feel to his energy flow. I don't know much more. I was hoping putting a little stress on him would reveal more. Well, more about that. This was unexpected."

Sotalia crosses her arms and glances back to Bach and Sebastian talking. She taps her fingers on her arm and returns to Aristespha with intrigue and curiosity showing. "I wonder what spells he's developed. He has to have a few that use his abilities. That might reveal more than testing for things we don't know to... or even how to test for?"

The proper and dignified facade reforms on Aristespha. She smiles slyly and turns her focus to Sebastian. "Sebastian? You once told me about a particular spell of Bach's you liked?"

Aristespha, with the regained air of dignity, strides over next to Sebastian and flashes a loving smile to him. Sebastian catches her smile and pauses from the playful hassle of his brother. He thinks for a moment and turns to Bach. “Dude! Can you do the D-Ball right now?”

Bach drops his head and scratches the back of it. He lifts his head back up shaking. “Nah. I’m not used to casting anything that powerful yet. That’s going to take me awhile to figure out.”

He halts and his eyes light up. Bach smiles with hope and holds his hands out. “Wait. I got enough left in me for a Plasma Bolt.”

Sebastian settles next to Aristespha as Sotalia joins them, and gestures towards Bach. “This one is pretty cool. We used this one to get through a whole section of the fourth year team assessment tests.”

Bach scans the vicinity and finds one of the thick steel plates Cideeda uses for target practice. He plants his feet and extends his hand out and up. He remains still and concentrates in silence. Air swirls towards a point above his palm, condensing to a mist and a faint glow forms around the mist. The air charges and Bach’s hair rises up. With a loud, low thump, his hair drops back down, the air grows cold around him, and the mist ignites. A low hum rises in pitch and the contained mist glows red. The mist glows brighter, the color shifts from red to white, and the hum pitch rises. In a matter of seconds, the orb glows a bright, brilliant blue, in silence. Bach orbits his hand behind the orb and takes slow, careful aim at the metal plate. He braces his hand with his other, as the bolt spins fast in place. With a loud crack-boom, the newly formed plasma bolt streaks in the air and bores into the steel plate. A mix of vaporized steel and plasma explodes from the front and erupts out the back. The remaining mass of the bolt bounces off the ground. It finally dissipates in an expulsion of left over plasma after a few more bounces.

Bach stumbles back a few steps and tilts himself forward. He regains balance and rests his hands on his knees. He straightens back up and shakes his hand. “OW! Damn thing launched it too fast and broke the sound barrier next to my hand. Dammit that stings!”

Sebastian glides out to cheer and talk to Bach. Aristespha and Sotalia survey in astonishment. Sotalia holds her jaw and eyes Aristespha. “I think he can do a simple mission with us.”

Aristespha nods slowly. “I’ll start checking the forums, boards, and guilds. There should be a few things in the area. We’ll also need to stock up on some supplies.”

Sotalia puts her hands on her hips. “Cideeda mentioned seeing a few good places we could check out when she was driving through town. I think a group trip into town this weekend would be perfect.”

Bach finishes eating the last bit of the leftover bacon from breakfast. Resting on the top of his bed, he flips a page in the First Aid handbook. Bach reads the new page, mentally churning the concepts. Fragments of biology and other past courses float up to the surface of his

mind. Sebastian passes his ghostly upper body through the window above Bach. “Man, it’s a nice day outside and you are bookworming it up in this bitch.”

Bach rests the book open on his chest. “After all the crash course training this week, I’m really enjoying not doing anything right now.”

Sebastian pulls the rest of his ethereal body through the window and coasts to rest down next to Bach on the bed. “So, what are you reading anyway?”

Bach flips the book up and turns it to the cover in view of Sebastian. “Not a bad read so far.”

Sebastian recognizes the book and settles back to looking up at the ceiling. “It’s not bad. One of the few books Aristespha made me read I actually liked and found pretty useful.”

Bach quirks a brow in thought and aims his eyes to Sebastian. “So, you and Aristespha are pretty serious?”

Sebastian searches his thoughts and contorts his face. “It’s complicated.”

Bach rolls his eyes and flops the book back down. “Really? That line?”

Sebastian throws his arms up in the air and gestures. “Yes! Here’s the break down for you. Aristespha is the fifth child in a moderately powerful Evuukian ruling family.”

Bach interjects and posits, “So powerful enough to control a bunch of decent land, but not that many votes on the Evuukian Ruling Council?”

Sebastian nods in agreement. “Pretty much. I think her family gets five votes instead of the default one all the minor ones get. So anyway... She’s the fifth child, her older brothers and sisters have already taken all the cushy positions in the household and drained coffers of any easy money for upper tier school tuition or even investment capital. So no ruling prospects and no easy money, she goes to discount adventuring school.”

Bach reacts to a thought jumping across his mind. “Did she go to our-”

Sebastian motions with both hands. “Nah! She DID go to the sister school in Evuukian lands. She completely aced everything as medical mage, and got a fellowship to The Grand Library. Enjoying it all. A little sad that the family doesn’t give shit about her accomplishments, but no political bullshit.”

Bach nods and sighs. “Yah, that’s true. That’s crazy about her family. The medical mage program is brutal. And The Grand Library doesn’t hand out fellowships! Usually people have to donate more than what the fellowship pays to get those.”

Sebastian angles his head toward Bach. “Fuck, I know! Mom and dad would be thrilled to death if we were janitors at The Grand Library. So, yah... She gets in. She’s studying ancient history for old medical spells with the TV in the background and one of those ghost hunting shows has a marathon running. She notices that some of the ghosts weren’t trying to

scare people off by yelling gibberish, but begging them to stay in their ancient, forgotten languages.”

The significance hits Bach and he sits up. His face blanks as his brain processes and puzzles over the concept. Bach’s amazement rushes out as he looks back to his brother. “Holy shit! That was her?! I remember reading up about that new line of research over at the The Grand Library.”

Sebastian throws himself up and excitedly continues talking to Bach. “She wrote the grant proposals, dove head first into spirit studies, hit a few ruins, and came back with more history in a year than half the Elders ever did in ten years! They made her a Master Sage on the spot. The youngest one EVER.”

Bach exclaims with a righteous tone in his voice, “Well, fuck yeah! You make a discovery like that you get some well deserved recognition.”

Sebastian darkly sighs and frowns as his eyes drift down. “Yah... Recognition she got.”

Bach feels the drastic change in tone and focuses on his brother. He realizes the problem. “Aww, fuck no...”

Sebastian nods grimly. “Yep. The whole family recognized that achievement. Everyone now paying all kinds of attention to her... And her achievements to tout to the other families. What’s worse the first major research assignment entrusted to her was the Sword of the Spirit Realm. It awoke and said it was instrumental to destroying Lord Noxian... the world’s latest pain in the ass.”

Bach holds his mouth briefly and slides his hand down to his chin. “Wow... That’s some crazy Murphy’s Law bullshit.”

Sebastian shakes his head frowning. “I know! I was really hoping we’d defeat Noxian. Then the Sword’s quest is done, return the damn thing back to The Grand Ol’ Library, and go adventuring far from the fanfare. And...”

Bach cranes his head down to see his brother’s somber face hung low. “And?”

Sebastian sits up with a faint hope in him. “See if she would be willing go official and public about our relationship. It’s already hard given how the most Evuukians are staunchly against any kind of intermarriage. Disowning family members is pretty common. But. Despite all the bullshit, she does still care for her family.”

Bach straightens back up and calculates the drama in his mind. “Yah. Maybe the man who killed Noxian would have gotten a free pass? But... Damn. Just, damn. But, man, that’s her call on that front.”

Sebastian dropping his head in his hands. “I know! So, I haven’t really brought it further up to her, since I’m not going to put that kind of pressure on her. But, holy shit, I will be her best backup the day she decides to tell them to deal with it!”

Bach draws a smirk and looks at his brother. "You know. I'd never would have thought you'd go for someone so serious... So seriously."

Sebastian chuckles and shakes his head, leaning towards Bach. "Don't let that proper and uptight appearance fool you! She's just as crazy as I am, and it's amazing."

Bach holds his hands up and twists his head away slightly. "Alright. I don't see it, but I'll believe you."

Sebastian simply shrugs with an uncomfortable demeanor. "But, well, so much for those plans. I got to get myself back together again, before I worry about all that."

Bach pivots on the bed top to face the edge of the bed, and places his feet on the floor. He laughs to himself once. "Yah, you're not the only one with plans that got wrecked."

Sebastian floats around in front of Bach with concern. "Hey. I've been a real dick in pulling you into all this mess as hastily as I did. I promise to work with you and make things right and all-

Bach waves his hands to signal a halt in front of Sebastian. "Whoa! Hold up. Let me finish."

Sebastian hovers in anticipation. Bach takes deep breath and concentrates on his words. "I hoped that you would have defeated Lord Noxian. Because after all the fanfare was over and your group resumed normal, simple adventuring... I was going to ask if you'd let me join up."

Sebastian yanks his head back in sheer surprise and shudders at the full realization. "R-r-really?! I thought you didn't want to do the whole adventuring thing, risking your life, and all that."

Bach dramatically shakes his head side to side and groans. "No. No. No. That was some bullshit I spun to hide the real problem. That encounter with the Nightmare Geist... It left me a lame mage... I couldn't tell people that, especially not mom and dad."

A distant glare at some point beyond this room masks Bach's face. Tears run down when he closes his eyes. Sebastian tries to hold onto Bach's shoulder, to only pass through, and settles to a voice of encouragement. "Well... That's obviously changed for the fucking awesome."

Bach looks up to his brother, with a rebellious grin. "Yah. It has. Took me over five fuckin' years to figure it out. But, I've got a way, again. I just wanted to join you when I at least had it working decently enough first."

Sebastian shines brightly with an ear to ear smile. "I think you're decent enough right now. Hopefully, Aristespha finds a good local job soon and we'll get you on your first real quest."

Bach rubs the back of his neck, unsure. "You think I'm ready? It's only be a week of training and-

Sebastian lays back and drifts in the air. “Ah. Don’t worry. Simple task. Nothing too fancy. I looked over Aristespha’s shoulder when she was browsing the job listings. There’s a bunch of ruins in the area the county needs adventurers to check up on to make sure nothing moved in or awoke in the last few years.”

Bach tilts forward off the bed, swings an arm out to snag his shoes, and stands up. “Sounds good. You know, you’re right. It’s nice day, I should at least take a walk outside, see what everyone is up to.”

Sebastian floats off towards the door. “Speaking of which, I’m going to go see what Aristespha and Sotalia are up to. They’ve been studying magic texts all morning, and talking about a light orb spell or something...”

Dretphi kneels next to the steel plate target. Cideeda reaches into her tool bag’s front zipper pocket and retrieves a micrometer caliper. She examines the hole straight through the plate and ponders to how it got there. She takes a few measurements with the caliper and plops to a seat on the ground with legs stretched out. “What put a twenty five millimeter wide hole through thirty millimeters of steel armor plate?!”

Dretphi investigates the outer rim of the hole and focuses on a detail. “This was not a kinetic projectile. This was melted.”

Cideeda groans and lays back in the grass. “It couldn’t have been magic. Aristespha don’t care much for those type of spells. And Sotalia wouldn’t be able to put that clean and round of a hole into the thing.”

She throws out her arms to the air and lowers them at the target. “This looks like the work of an anti-tank plasma cannon.”

“Well, I kind of modeled the spell after one.”

Cideeda’s tail twitches and she rolls her head back to see Bach standing behind her. She agilely twists and twirls herself up to hop up and stand in front of Bach. She crosses arms and gives an inquisitive gaze up to Bach. “Really? Now. I’m not mad. I’m just disappointed I wasn’t here to see it happen.”

Dretphi taps the steel plate and it rings with a muffled tone. “One of your spells did this?”

Bach slouches forward and hangs his head. “Yah. Sorry about the plate. I got a little carried away yesterday showing off, with Sebastian cheering me on.”

Cideeda glances over at the plate and snorts. “Ha! The plate was doomed the day I bought it from the scrapyard. Dretphi and I are going to sight her anti-armor rifle with a new scope we picked up some time ago today.”

Dretphi drags a heavy frame over next to the metal plate. “We use paper targets. We hang the plate at an angle behind to bounce the rounds into the dirt.”

Bach looks embarrassed and walks over to the metal plate. “Ah, shit. Let fix that then. Don’t want to be the cause of any bad ricochets off that hole.”

Dretphi calmly attempts to ease Bach’s concerns. “It is okay. That hole should not cau-”

Cideeda holds a finger in front of Dretphi’s face and flashes a sly, toothy smirk to her. “Let him fix it. I’d like to see this.”

Bach eases to his knees in front of the steel plate. He scans the area and picks up one of the larger chunks of steel slag. A blue glow flows into his eyes. With a flick of the wrist, the large chunk floats out from Bach’s hand and maintains a set distance. He guides the chunk near the ground and sweeps around the vicinity of the steel plate. Small specks and chunks of steel hop out of the grass and off the dirt to join the chunk. The collection of metal grows larger as more bits attract each other. Eventually, the sounds of metal bits impacting the metal collection stop. Bach opens his free hand near the hole in the plate and closes his eyes to focus. The metal around the hole morphs gradually. The entry and exit point edges warp flush with the surfaces of the plate and the interior of the hole smooths out. Bach opens his eyes to concentrate on the collected steel mass. The mass glows orange-red as it melts into a molten mass. Bach directs the molten mass into the steel plate hole. The mass oozes into and onto the rest of the plate, forming a smooth plug, flush to the edges. The heated glow shifts from the middle of the plug to the outer edges, briefly glowing brighter before fading completely.

Bach waits a few moments to collect himself and wipes the sweat off his forehead. He stretches his legs out from underneath and sits his butt down on the grass. “That should do it. Unfortunately, I couldn’t find every little bit I blasted out, so there’s an indentation on the back of the plate. Got most of it though-”

At this point Bach realizes that Dretphi and Cideeda are to either side of him. The two stare at the plate in awe. Bach pivots his head to both sides, and settles to face forward. A large hand rests on Bach’s shoulder and Dretphi leans in. “Your training now includes armor and other repair work.”

Another smaller, clawed hand lightly grips Bach’s other shoulder. Cideeda’s sly, toothy grin widens. “You are going to save this team so much money on repairs and replacement parts. And also, make a lot of money by fixing up and modding all the extra gear we pick up for sale.”

Bach closes his eyes and growls with begrudging acceptance. Dretphi pats his shoulder. “Do not feel bad. You grow more valuable to the team by the day.”

Bach grumbles and lowers his head. “As a magical multi-tool.”

Cideeda playfully squeezes Bach’s shoulder. “That’s not a bad thing to be. You don’t see those other two mages pulling shit like this off. Anyway, we’ll make it worth your while. You want to shoot guns with us?”

Bach rocks his head side to side in deliberation and quickly nods. "Yes. Yes, I want to shoot guns."

All three stand up and set off to ready the range.

Sotalia leaps over the couch arm and flings herself onto the nearest cushion. She searches the coffee table for the remote, grabs it, and flips through channels on the TV. "Damn it! What station is it around here?!"

Cideeda leans on the dinner table scrolling through a holographic schedule listing from the holoplayer. "Channel three dash ten!"

Sotalia peeks down at the remote and presses a few buttons. Dretphi scoots between the couch and coffee table and settles on the middle cushion. She places a large bowl of popcorn on the coffee table and scoops of handful for herself. Aristespha, in more casual clothes, glides into the nearby reclining chair and pulls it back and releases the footrest. Cideeda launches into the remaining spot on the couch. Bach wanders into the area and looks at everyone. "What's going on?"

Cideeda reaches for a handful of popcorn and talks to Bach in between bites. "The two hour premiere for the new season of Next Adventurers of Nexus is on tonight!"

Bach pulls a chair over from the dining table next the couch. "I've heard of this. I'm surprised you all watch it."

Sotalia throws out her feet onto the coffee table and sinks into the couch. "Oh, it's a total shitshow, but we can't help but to watch the trainwreck each season. One of those guilty pleasures and all."

Sebastian pops in through the wall above the couch. "Did I miss anything?!"

Aristespha shakes her head and spreads a blanket over her. "No. Just the introduction. They haven't gotten to announcing the new party."

Bach sits in the chair expectantly as the announcer goes into his routine.

"Welcome ladies and gentlemen to the new season of the Next Adventurers of Nexus! We have an amazingly diverse party to follow this season! Without further ado, let's get to know our Adventurers! Hailing fresh out of school from High Alton, Chad Bosch!"

The show cuts to prerecorded segments of all this season's cast with extensive editing and special effects.

"Hello, people. I'm the heroic, all mighty leader of the Flames of the Phoenix adventuring group. Let us fight your fires with our fire!"

Sotalia breaks out in a cackle. Aristespha cringes with an eye roll. Cideeda snorts and shakes her head. Dretphi groans. Sebastian looks at Bach and points at the TV. "See. This is why we don't have a team name. Period. Used to want one, saw one episode of this, now I'm just happy to have the registration number only."

"Excellent slogan there! Next on the roster is Tassilda Evernia, the Emin enchantress!"

The show cuts to a voluptuous, sultry woman with long raven hair, swirling horns, piercing blue on black eyes, and showing more gray, patterned skin than clothing by an order of magnitude. "No one can escape my charms... and my spells."

Aristespha quirk a brow. Sotalia disapprovingly twists her head side to side at the sight. "Damn. There's a whore somewhere pissed at her makeup being stolen."

"But, what's a party without some muscle!? Here to lead the charge into battle is Trakenthin Stakken Olig Brecomin the giant Grath warrior!"

The camera starts at the midsection of a very large Grath man and rises up to his face. He wears a stoic expression, deadpan all the way. The camera pauses for dialog, only to pick up a solitary, loud grunt on the microphone.

Dretphi pinches the bridge of nose in aggravation. She glares daggers at the screen. "Our native language contains more words than the other languages. A palette of diction at your disposal. You... Grunt."

Sotalia and Cideeda pat Dretphi on the arms, playfully soothing her frustrations. The announcer continues. "A stunning statement none the less! Next on the list is the infiltration specialist a mysterious Evuukian, Mordoran Lotherin!"

A very well dressed Evuukian man steals the scene. He stands prominently, his dusky skin contrasting his white hair. He brushes back the hair from his face following his long pointy ears back. "I've put my abilities towards the greater good in spite of my Dark Evuukian heritage."

"Bullshit!"

Aristespha throws her arms to the side and leans forwards in the chair to the TV. "Bullshit! There hasn't been a Dark Evuukian in Nexus since the last cataclysm! Damn children these days! Just because you have a darker skin color, does NOT mean you have ANY ancestry to those raving, back-stabbing, psychopathic head cases!"

Sotalia snickers at Aristespha's outburst. "Well, tell us how you really feel, why don't you."

Aristespha crosses her arms and drops back into the couch chair and shakes her head in disgust.

"An enthralling back story I'm certain! Finally, last in the pack but the one who you want to watch your back, the Fvalian healer, Deedri Preetta!"

Cideeda's jaw hits the floor and she stares wide-eyed at the screen. "Is... Is... Is bitch wearing bell around her neck?!"

The TV shows a very excited and young Fvalian woman hopping around energetically, waving to the camera. She wears an extravagant top matching her long skirt. Medic magical script decorates the attire. A necklace with a large bell adorns her neck. She shows the peace sign, before holding her hands up in cat-like gestures. "Meow! I hope they never need me, but I'll always be here to patch everyone up in no time!"

Bach watches Cideeda fling herself back into the couch and growl in anguish. "So, how many years did that set the Fvalian race back?"

Cideeda rolls her eyes, sighs, and speaks through gritted teeth. "About fifty, if she doesn't keep the cat routine up."

"This season, we've decided to set our adventurers out in new territory! Let's see how their first day went..."

The show fade cuts to dialog between party members as they drive on the highway. The camera focuses on a grand roadside sign. Bach feels an odd silence strike the room as the words "Amaranth Valley" come into clear focus. He sees everyone stunned and thinks back in his mind to recent events. He glances at Sebastian. "I'm guessing this is the sign I missed because I was asleep when we all drove through?"

Sebastian simply nods. "Yep. That's the big town nearby."

Bach returns to watching the TV, not quite sure whether to feel excitement or dread at this development.