

Ain't A Hero – Episode 4

by Bryan Schuder

Sebastian floats in the middle aisle of the humvee. “Okay, everyone. Here’s the plan. Aristespha, you got medical supplies, and digging for any kind of info about the ruins in the area.”

Aristespha flips through a menu on her tablet and taps in a few entries. “Any problems with self-adhesive bandages or the quick patch spray I got last time?”

Dretphi shakes her head. Sotalia points to Cideeda across from her the in driver’s seat and Cideeda also shakes her head. Sotalia twists in her seat and leans out to look at Aristespha. “We’re good here.”

Aristespha nods and writes down notes into the tablet with the pen stylus. Sebastian turns to Dretphi sitting in her back seat. “Dretphi, stock up on the food and expendable gear. Since we’ll probably be back to ruin exploration, if you find a good deal on decent spotlights, grab a few please.”

Dretphi confirms silently as her eyes focus on her aetherphone and she enters some words on a list. Cideeda gets Dretphi’s attention through the rearview mirror. “Hey, if you find any more of that jerky in the yellow and green bag, get me a few packs.”

Dretphi gives a thumbs up back to Cideeda. Sebastian shifts his attention to Sotalia. “Sotalia, you know what magical stuff you need to get, but keep an eye out for any more of those disposal magic detector sticks. Also, work with Aristespha with getting any local history, recent and ancient.”

Sotalia leans back into the aisle from the front passenger’s seat and glances at Aristespha. “You hitting the pharmacy first?”

Aristespha shifts her gaze up to meet Sotalia. “Yes. I’ll message you my list of magical supplies I need, real quick. There.”

Sotalia checks her aetherphone. “Got it. Message me when you get done and we’ll figure what places to check out.”

Aristespha confirms with a gloved hand, as she resumes making more notes into tablet. Sebastian cranes his head over towards Cideeda. “Cideeda. Ammo, tech toys, selling of loot, and some updated reading material? Anything I’m missing?”

Cideeda shakes her head, keeping her eyes on the road. “Not that I can think of, I’ll message Aristespha if I think of anything, unless the sword has figured out how to use the AetherNet.”

Sebastian perks a brow and turns his head to glare at the sheathed sword in the aisle next to Aristespha. “No, turns out a thousand year old relic isn’t keen on keeping with the times. Not much of a conversationalist either, since I moved in.”

Sebastian finally turns to Bach. "As for you Bach, I figured you could tag along with Cideeda and-"

He lunges his head forward to stare intensely at the old flip aetherphone Bach holds in his hands. Sebastian reflexively laughs at seeing the old device. "Holy shit! And get you a new phone! Speaking of a fuckin' relic, is that the same one you had in school?!"

Bach defensively darts his head around and quickly realizes the attention towards his old phone. "Y-Yes. What about it?! It still works just fine!"

Sebastian raises his hands up and attempts to calm Bach. "Hey now! No judging here. I'm gonna hook you up, bro. Cideeda, can you get this man a proper phone?"

Cideeda momentarily flicks her eyes into the rear-view mirror, with her signature toothy grin. "Will do! I saw one or two places that should carry decent phones."

Sotalia spins completely around in her seat and peers over the head rest at Bach. Her eyes widen and she smirks. Sotalia's hand whips out and snatches the phone right out of Bach's hand. "Ooo, let me see!"

Bach blinks at the sudden loss of his phone, then tries to reach around the front seat after it. Sotalia slaps a hand underneath her seat and pulls a bar up. She slides her seat forward and mostly out of range of Bach's effective arm range. "I've haven't seen one of these since graduate school! Does it have any of the good games on it?"

Bach settles back down and crosses his arms, accepting defeat and remembering which way Sotalia's horns point. "A few. I'd like my phone back, please."

Sotalia playfully sighs and rolls her eyes. "Okay. Here you go."

Sotalia holds the old phone over and back behind her seat. Bach takes his phone back, flips it open, and checks it. Sotalia pulls the bar underneath her seat again and attempts to slide the seat back, but only manages a few centimeters. She struggles against a force acting upon the seat. Dretphi gives a slight smile at the scene. Sebastian looks down at Bach and Bach's boot pushing against Sotalia's struggling seat and shakes his head. Bach holds a finger up and searches through his phone's menus. "Just making sure she didn't do anything to it."

Sotalia crooks her head around the seat and traces Bach's leg to the back. "I didn't do anything to it! Really! Can I have some knee room now!?"

Bach flips the phone closed and removes his boot from the back of the seat. Sotalia finally slides the seat back away from the dash.

Aristespha points to Bach with her eyes trained on the tablet. Her arm goes through Sebastian, who cringes momentarily at the sudden intrusion. "Sebastian. We need to get Bach officially registered with our group."

Sebastian side steps clear of Aristespha's arm and thinks a moment. "Let's see... Ah! After we are all done, we'll all meet at the local guild office. Sounds good, everyone?"

The gathering agrees in their own ways, as the familiar sign to Amaranth Valley comes into view.

Cideeda pushes open the door of Aether Innovations and Retailers and holds the door for Bach. Bach steps through with a plastic bag around his arm and pokes at a new aetherphone, completely perplexed at the device. "Okay... How do you make call with this thing?!"

Cideeda snorts and points to an icon on the screen. "The phone icon."

Bach grumbles and sighs. "Thank you."

Cideeda quirks a brow and eyes Bach with a grin, while the two walk on the sidewalk of the open-air mall. "A man who can weave together technology and magic in ways that astound me and freak-out our mages, undone by a phone."

Bach continues to navigate through the new menus, icons, and screens. "It's massive increase in complexity to a device that didn't require much from me! But, having the expanded band two-way radio is nice."

Cideeda nods and she pushes her phone into a brand new case. "It costs extra but a good feature for our line of work. We'll have to mod it up with the extended frequency chips I got from... the usual sources."

Bach slips the phone into his side pocket and shrugs. "Sounds good to me. So, where to next?"

Cideeda directs Bach towards a game shop. "There. Need to pick up some reading material, and I might be able to sell one of the early era chests."

Bach changes his route to match Cideeda's as she walks to the doors of the game shop. Bach opens the door for Cideeda and both enter the store floor. The store contains a variety of vices for the Nexus nerd, geek, or dork. Boxes of comic books fill a few aisles of tables. Board games and books sit on shelves along the wall. A display counter displays a variety of cards, miniatures, and dice. A few locals sit in the chairs around open tables, playing games and/or just discussing the latest episodes of shows. Some give a momentary peek at the door, then resume their activities. Bach scans over the place and stops with a confused look to Cideeda. "Why are we in a game shop? Not that I wouldn't mind grabbing out the latest issue of Tales of Orion, but..."

Cideeda smiles and gestures to Bach, as they continue navigating the store. "Well, you have your brother to thank. Sebastian recruited me right out of a comic book shop. I was between groups and decided to catch up on the issues of Tinkering Tina I missed."

Bach thinks a moment and his face grows unamused as memories of his brother's normal tactics come to mind. "He tried to flirt with you didn't he?"

Cideeda rolls her eyes and smirks to Bach. "Pitifully so. But, I humored him, found out he needed a technical expert, and I got with the group. So, I can't complain about that."

Bach lowers his head shaking and sighs. He puzzles at Cideeda. "What about the comic books?"

Cideeda flips through a few wrapped comics in a box, judging her position in the collection. "Turns out two comic book geeks are enough for it to get contagious. And comic books are perfect for down time when you are too far from the Aethernet relays and you have a few hours of night watch to kill."

Bach tilts his head side to side to mull over the idea and eventually agrees on the concept. "Makes enough sense to me. I'm going to look at the miniatures they have."

Cideeda pauses a moment and catches Bach's attention before he wanders off too far. "Wargaming or RPGs?"

Bach holds an indifferent gesture with his hand. "A little bit of both, but really got interested in miniatures when I figured out how to morph the metal and plastic into custom poses for people. People pay a lot for custom figures."

Cideeda ponders the idea in her mind and a devious smirk forms at the opportunities to be had, before resuming her search through the comics. Bach makes his way to the display and kneels down to examine the various miniatures through the glass.

"Dammit... Still doesn't work... Why won't it work?"

Bach peers over the counter and sees the shopkeeper attempt to stare a hole through a paperback book on the counter. The large, round man keeps his fists on his sides and frowns, quietly muttering to himself. Bach stands up and sneaks a peak at a page of the book, while casually drifting towards the register. Various magical symbols adorn the page with some brief instructions. Bach recognizes the book as one of the many from the "Teach yourself magic" genre of books. He grits his teeth and curls his lip in disgust. Most of the books in that genre typically have errors, mistakes, and just failures in quality. The shopkeeper puts his hands on either side of the page and concentrates. Bach actually senses a slight stir of energy, but something on that page hinders it. Bach stands next to the register across from the shopkeeper. A few moments later, the shopkeeper notices Bach, double-takes, and startles slightly. "Oh! Hello, welcome to Amaranth's Wrath Game Emporium! The name is Steve. Umm... Can I help you?"

Bach makes eye contact with Steve and twirls his finger at the book. "You have the ink bottle that came with this?"

Steve looks to either side of him and then spots a bottle sitting on the shelf underneath the counter. He fetches the bottle and curiously eyes Bach. "Here it is. Um... Are you magically inclined?"

Bach holds his hands up and shrugs. "Somewhat. I'm kinda getting back into it."

Steve happily grins at Bach and respectfully pleads, "Man, I don't want to bother you, but if you can share any tips, I'd really appreciate it. I've been trying every book around nothing seems to work. I feel it, but nothing seems to happen."

Bach holds his hand out for the bottle. Steve passes it over and Bach twists the cap off. He wafts the bottle underneath his nose, then seals the top with a finger and briefly turns the bottle upside down. He lifts the finger and licks it. Steve blinks stunned and confused. Bach quirks his face and groans. "Yep. This mix is pretty watered down. And if its the same stuff they use to print that page, unless you got a lot of magical energy to brute force the thing... It's not going to work. You got any salt and... A lime, maybe?"

Steve returns to his senses and pivots around searching. He finds a salt packet in a fast food bag. He then leans over to a small mini-fridge behind the counter and opens the door to show a bunch of canned drinks and a lone lime-shaped plastic bottle of juice. "Will lime juice work?"

Bach nods, cracks open the paper salt packet, and dumps it all into the ink bottle. Steve holds out the plastic lime juice bottle. Bach picks it up, flips the cap, and squirts a healthy amount into the ink bottle. "Okay. Cap that bottle with your finger, shake it a few times, and hold you finger out. We'll test to see if the rest of the mix is still good."

Steve follows Bach instructions and looks at him quizzically. "So, what's this suppose to do?"

Bach points at the bottle. "Recharge the mix. The watering down messes with the electrolyte mix and pH often gets screwed up during bottling."

Steve stops shaking the bottle, places it down, and then holds out his ink spotted finger. Bach stares at Steve. "Okay. Now I want you to concentrate and direct your flow to that point on your finger. If the mix is good, it'll glow."

Steve nods, closes his eyes, and tries his best to focus. Bach faintly feels a stir in magical energy and watches as the spot on Steve's finger dimly glows orange. "Steve... You're forcing it too much. Don't listen to what those guides on the Aethernet said. Calmly guide it."

The glow now shines bright enough to be seen from a distance and catches the attention of others in the store. Bach smiles confidently. "Steve, open your eyes."

Steve cautiously opens his eyes and lowers the gaze to his finger. His eyes widen as he processes what the glow on his finger means. The awe overtakes him and an ear to ear smile grows. Bach snaps his fingers and points at glow. "Now that's a good sign. So you want fix this page right with your recharged ink?"

Steve slowly raises his head to Bach with sheer determination in his eyes. "Fuck. Yes. I do."

A small gathering of store regulars surround the counter and watch as Bach continues an impromptu lesson on arcane dynamics to Steve. “Now... Trace those last outlines and put some curve on those sharp angle corners. They do that to save on ink, but with the poor print quality it really does a number to the energy flow.”

Steve hovers his head over the page with an attentive eye and carefully applies new ink to the page, applying many Bach suggested corrections. He stands back up and looks to Bach expectantly. Bach examines the page one last time and crosses his arms with smirk. “Alright. Give it a shot.”

Steve places his hands down on the sides of the page and takes a deep breath. His eyes narrow and he focuses intensely. In mere seconds, a flow of orange glow travels along the traces and paths on the page. Upon reaching the center, the energy materializes and forms a simple rotating cube that floats up from the page to a fixed point. Steve slowly removes his hands from the page and the cube remains for a number of seconds before dissipating away. The awe-struck crowd remains in silence for a moment before cheering Steve.

“I got it on video, Steve! Fucking awesome, dude!”

“Holy shit, you finally did it!”

“It looked better than how-to videos on the Aethernet!”

Steve reaches back and slides a stool behind him. He drops himself on it and thinks with disbelief and wonder fighting for position on his face. He places his hands to the sides of his head. “Wow. I... I... I don’t know what to say. I’ve been trying all these months and all these guides and... I did it.”

Steve’s drifting attention locks onto Bach. “You... Man. Thank you. I don’t know how to pay you back.”

Bach puts his hands in his pockets and acts nonchalant. “Don’t worry about it. I’ve kinda been there before. Know how it feels.”

Steve pats his legs and stands up in triumph. “I got it! Your next few visits, including this one... Twenty-five percent discount on purchases.”

The rest of the gathered crowd astound at the announcement and discuss between themselves at the sheer rarity of a discount, much less such a significant one. Over in comic book aisles, a particular pair of furry ears flick to attention and home in. Bach bashfully chuckles and scratches his head. “That’s quite the honor. I’ll have to find something to-”

“Sweetie, there were a lot of issues we didn’t have. Would it be okay if we got them all?”

Bach’s expression remains unchanged, but elements of his psyche spit-take and scramble to understand the situation. The voice is familiar. The tone is strange. Claw tipped hands place a stack of comic books, graphical novels, and other media onto the counter. Someone wraps arms around Bach’s arm and playfully leans on him. Bach calmly and purposefully aims his head down the length of his arm to see Cideeda acting affectionate. Bach’s expression

quirks, twists, and twitches as confusion, frustration, embarrassment, and indignation argue too much for any to take control. Cideeda reveals the screen of her aetherphone discreetly and winks cutely to Bach. Bach silently reads the note on the screen. "25% discount!!! Play along! PLEASE!!!"

A part of Bach's mind awakes from a long slumber and strides confidently into the mental control room. It throws its hat perfectly onto the hat rack, adjusts its proper attire, and grins with sly determination. It amusingly perks at seeing a new mission target, but considers someone other than Sebastian a fresh new challenge. The other elements of the psyche await in wary anticipation as it takes control.

Bach assumes a suave but humble demeanor and calmly addresses Cideeda. "Well, I don't know, dear. I wouldn't want to impose too much upon Steve's generosity."

Steve bounces his head between Bach and Cideeda, and finally arrives at a conclusion. "Oh! No, man! It's completely cool! It's no problem at all! I thought I wasted my money on those magic workbooks. But with what you taught me, it's going to be an absolute trip going back over those and practice inking all those tweaks in."

Bach slyly shrugs and glances at Cideeda. "Well, if he has no objections, I have none for you, dear."

Cideeda smiles softly, reaches into a pouch on her side, and turns her attentions to Steve. "Steve, question. You know anyone who would be interested in one of these?"

Cideeda pulls out Bach's holoplayer, presses an option on the holographic menu, and projects the hologram of an early era chest. Steve and other store regulars affix their gazes upon it. Eventually, Steve strokes his chin with great interest. "That looks genuine early era. Does it have a working lock and key?"

Cideeda tugs on Bach's arm to get his attention and grins slyly. "A working lock and maybe a key, if keys aren't that much different than miniatures. Are they, sweetie?"

Bach forces a smile to Cideeda with a brief twitch in the eye, as she skips off to get the chest from the humvee. "We'll find out, won't we?"

Cideeda pats Bach hard on the back, as the two walk through the large automated doors of the large book store. "Come on! That was pretty good on the spot acting you did back there."

Bach rolls his eyes and grumbles, with his hands in his pockets. "I've had plenty of practice getting out of awkward situations thanks to Sebastian. Didn't think I'd need to use that to con someone to give you a discount."

Cideeda twists her mouth and raises a brow at Bach. "Con, nothing. You just used your given discount to buy everyone their reading material."

Bach remains silent and grumbles to himself. Cideeda speaks in a contrasting genuine tone, "Bach, you shouldn't feel bad. You helped Steve significantly with his magic. He got to repay you with a decent discount for you and assumed lady friend. He also got a good deal on a genuine early era chest with working lock and a key custom formed on the spot with magic before everyone's eyes."

Bach stops walking and shifts full focus on Cideeda. She continues. "As someone who was a game shop regular and worked a lot behind the counter a decade ago... That would have been a hard day to top for many, many years."

Cideeda crosses her arms and resumes her normal tone of voice. "Now, if you are a little angry at me putting you on the spot... I'll accept that and apologize."

Bach eventually accepts and dismisses the charges. "It's okay. Really. It just brought back memories of some crazy moments with my brother that I'd conveniently forgotten."

Cideeda nods and checks her aetherphone. "I understand. Do you see Sotalia anywhere? She messaged me that she was in here."

Bach looks above the tops of the display shelves and scans around for her red hair and swept back horns. Near the history section, Bach spots Sotalia and points her out to Cideeda. "There. Way down this next aisle."

Cideeda peers down the aisle and catches sight of Sotalia. "I see her."

Bach blinks as his vision notices something else and he snaps his focus to a new target. His eyes widen and he bites his lip in punctuation. "FUCK."

Cideeda freezes and glances back at Bach. "What?!"

Bach watches as a familiar Emin woman struts confidently toward the area near Sotalia and a small camera crew closely follows behind. "We need to get over there and warn Sotalia quick!"

Sotalia lifts a book up from the shelf and flips it over to read the summary. Her eyes trace the lines of text, but abruptly halt. She rotates her head to follow her eyes and sees both Bach and Cideeda frantically signaling her over from around the shelf end. She squints and tilts her head. "What?"

Bach quickly points to something behind Sotalia. She checks over her shoulder and immediately tenses. "Oh shit."

Sotalia spins her head back forward, replaces the book in her hand on the shelf, and power walks over around the shelf to the aisle behind it with Bach and Cideeda. "Thanks. Did not want to get caught up in that bitch's path."

Bach raises his head just above the top of the shelf and surveys the events. He ducks back down when the cameras shift and the Emin woman sets up to pose in front of the shelf. A human woman in the mix of the camera crew reads notes from a tablet and prompts the Emin woman. "Okay, Tassilda, talk about what books you'd recommend for people wanting to learn more about magic."

Tassilda strikes a pose in front of the shelf next to the "Magical History" section. She seductively draws a book from the shelf and holds it suggestively close to her chest. "I will always recommend a favorite of mine, the Collected History of Nexus Magic series. It always captivates my attention and the details are all so enthralling."

Bach cringes at the suggestion. Sotalia contorts her mouth in disgust and seeks a spot in the books to spy through the shelf. "Really, woman? Out of all the books on this shelf, you pick the one that's a proven insomnia cure."

Tassilda gradually places the book back into the shelf, adding a purposeful bounce in the process to highlight personal assets. Sotalia eyes Tassilda and grumbles to herself, annoyed. "Oh, and I bet you are the first to take offense at about people comparing you to a succubus."

Tassilda plucks another book from the shelf and advertises her prominent aspects during the task. "Another one I'd only suggest to the most dedicated is The Great Magical Handbook of Nexus."

Bach slides his head right next to Sotalia's and he peeks through the opening to see the back of the infamous volume. "She's got to be getting kickbacks from a publisher. I remember spending way too much money on that damn thing in school. It was pretty shitty doorstop, too."

Cideeda quizzes Bach and Sotalia smugly. "Well, if you two are such experts, what book would you recommend?"

Sotalia holds her face and thinks to herself about the subject. Bach steps back and examines the books on the shelf. He walks down the aisle and searches the shelves, following the order. He stops walking and puts a finger on the books, reading titles. He tilts a paperback out from the shelf and hands it to Cideeda. "The Illustrated Guide to Magical History. Pretty much first semester magic history in illustrated novel style."

Sotalia stands up straight and stares at Bach incredulously. "Really?"

Cideeda opens the book to the table of contents. Bach carefully points out the subjects in the listing. "It covers the Three Cataclysms, the Three Periods, the Abstract Prism, Foundation Constructs, and even Magical Flow Dynamics."

Sotalia perches over Cideeda's shoulder and seems honestly surprised. "Huh. It goes into how ridiculously dangerous Elder Energy is and even how it caused the Third Cataclysm and prompted the creation of the Abstract Prism."

Bach hears no activity on the other side of the shelf and checks over the shelf. "See. It's not bad at all. It has textbook parts after the story section, but it does a good job explaining it all."

Even has a decent high-school romance subplot. I think we're in the clear, they've moved on to coffee shop."

Sotalia searches around the area and takes out her aetherphone. "Good. I messaged Aristespha to see how far along she was and- Oh. Oh my."

Cideeda and Bach shift their attentions to Sotalia. Cideeda scoots next to Sotalia, reads the screen, and covers her mouth in astonishment. "She's just MAD right now."

Bach worriedly moves in view of of Sotalia's screen. "What's going on?!"

Sotalia extends her phone away to give the other two a better view and emphasize the situation. "Wow. She's gone full Low Evuukian in her rants back to me. I can only make out half of this, but I think we're not the only ones who ran into one of the show stars."

Cideeda groans and hovers her claw tip over a few characters. "It's the Fvalian. I recognize that term. Looks like she's stuck behind her in line."

Bach squints and focuses on a new line of characters in a language he doesn't full comprehend. "Uhh, that's something not good. I've never seen half of these before."

Sotalia draws her phone up close and carefully rereads the line a few times. She grits her teeth and then snorts. "She's furious. She's dropping out parts of proper sentence structure. What do you all think this direct translation means? Brain devoid furred abomination destroy time. Yank bell broomhandle feed, necklace reach rip start bell expedient ass exit."

Bach stares nonplussed and scratches his head. "Umm... We should check to see how Dretphi is doing?"

Sotalia nods in agreement and cringes as another line pops on her screen. Cideeda stows away her phone and points towards a general store through the store's glass front. "Dretphi says she is still waiting for the staff to get her order together over there."

The three sneak out from the aisles to the front door. Bach shakes his head as they pass through the front doors. "Poor Sebastian. Hiding in the sword strapped to Aristespha's back right now."

Sotalia draws breath through her teeth. "Yes. But, he's the only one keeping her calm right now."

Bach grimaces at the thought of Sebastian having no escape and defusing the rage of his significant other. "I hope he's gotten better at that."

Dretphi stands at the Amaranth Valley General Store counter and sighs with annoyance. The general store stocks a variety of goods for locals and adventuring parties. Amaranth Valley advertises itself as the last big spec of civilization before the borderlands and other wild places. So, the general store takes up the slack. Given the range of goods and services, the

store front is modest. But, this is possible thanks to the massive warehouse attached. Unfortunately, this delays larger orders and forces customers to wait. A fact that Dretphi finds exceptionally bothersome given the large muscular Grath man that's been trying non-stop to flaunt himself and acquire her attention. He remains a few registers away, waiting for his order to be fulfilled. Dretphi avoids all contact with him. She also cares not for the bored cameraman nearby, watching.

The cameraman retrieves his aetherphone from his belt holster and talks into it. "Yah, Samantha? ... The Unit C is still here with Trakenthin. He's failing to flirt with some Grath woman. ... Hmm? Sure, I guess."

The cameraman takes the phone off his ear, aims the camera on the device, and taps the screen with his thumb. A few more taps and he places it back on his ear. "Sent you a picture. ... You know, now that you mention it, she does look familiar. ... Unit A saw an Evuukian woman with a sword strapped to her back? ... Yah, I'll definitely let you know if anything changes."

Trakenthin struts confidently over towards Dretphi, his hand gliding over the counter rail. Dretphi reads a new message on her aetherphone and searches with her head up. She seeks past Trakenthin and waves past him. He smiles smugly and picks up the pace. Sotalia, Cideeda, and Bach hurry by Trakenthin right to Dretphi. Trakenthin smoothly changes direction and leads himself back to his original spot. The cameraman chuckles and mutters to himself. "Denied."

Dretphi breathes a much needed sigh of relief and quietly addresses everyone. "I am glad you arrived. I believe IT was going to talk to me."

Sotalia crosses her arms and tips her head back towards Trakenthin. "You mean the two meter and then some tall ego back there?"

Dretphi groans and draws back an upper lip. "Yes. Unfortunately."

Sotalia grins with a tinge of evil and her voice radiates with sarcasm. "Come on Dretphi, I'm sure he's quite the accomplished man. Probably has plenty of trophies he wants to show you in the bedroom."

Bach looks at Dretphi with a bit of worry. "Do you want us to do anything? Is there something about him we should know? Sorry to pry, but you seem pretty upset."

Dretphi glances at Bach and smiles warmly. "It is okay. I thank you for your concern. He is an unfortunate nuisance of the Grath culture. One day he may achieve great things."

She narrows eyes and views Trakenthin without moving her head in his direction. "For his caliber, his deeds will receive a paragraph in the history of the Grath. Men of the level of my fathers write the history that paragraph will go in."

Sotalia laughs and puts her hands on Dretphi's shoulder. "You keep that bar high for the rest of us."

Dretphi straightens up and crosses her arms, grumbling. “It is my bar to set.”

Cideeda snickers and checks a new message on her phone. “Well, Aristespha is going to meet us at the guild office. I don’t think she’s in the mood to do any researching today.”

Dretphi perks a brow. Bach leans in. “She got held up by one of the Next Adventurers of Nexus.”

Dretphi shakes her head, notices a clerk coming to the register, and turns around in anticipation. “A sentiment I appreciate.”

The young clerk stands behind the register and he promptly types a few keys on the system. “Sorry about the wait, but your order is ready! We’ve processed payment to your company card and here is your claim ticket. One of our warehouse assistants will cart it out to your vehicle.”

Dretphi takes hold of the claim ticket and her company credit card with a nod. The clerk directs the group to a side door, and they move out. The cameraman finishes taking one last photo and presses the send icon on the screen. A few moments later, a message window pops up on the screen. “This is getting WEIRD now. Unit B is wrapping up with Tassilda. Meet me in the parking lot when you get done.”

Aristespha marches with her fists clenched and back straight, maintaining a severe glower. She stops in front of Bach, Sotalia, Cideeda, and Dretphi. Aristespha opens her mouth and a resonating voice from behind her interrupts. “Dear, take a deep, long breath first.”

Aristespha grimaces and winces, but closes her eyes and slowly draws in air to fill her lungs. She exhales with a long growl hidden in the mix. The same voice from before continues. “You might need another breath.”

Aristespha grits her teeth and adjusts her attire to a more orderly fashion. “I’ll be fine, Sebastian.”

She finally calms herself down to a demeanor close to her normal and sighs. “Well, it seems that some children’s cereal is giving away medical mage licenses as the prize in the box. Despite the excessive delay, I was able to get the medical supplies we need.”

Sebastian’s voice echoes from the sword on Aristespha’s back. “So, medical supplies, check. Sotalia?”

Sotalia stops biting her tongue from Aristespha’s display and reports, “Magical supplies are good. Nothing of value at the big book store. No Local Lore section I found.”

Sebastian resumes his run down. “Okay. We’ll try the local library and see if the college has some adventurer access service. Dretphi?”

Dretphi clears her smirk. “Food and gear acquired. I did find the jerky requested.”

Cideeda happily grins and reflexively licks her lips. “Thank you! Oh! Bach has a new phone. And we got the reading material at a really good price. Also, got a good source to sell any ancient trinkets in the future. Didn’t get to the ammo, today.”

Sebastian sighs but his tone sounds understanding and appreciative. “We’ll see about tomorrow. Right now, I think we should get Bach registered and get out of here before we run into anymore celebrities. While Aristespha, Bach, and I handle the registration, rest of you check to see if there’s any missions, quests, and jobs you like out there.”

The group enters the guild offices. Off in the distance a cameraman and woman casually hang out by a van with the Next Adventurers of Nexus show logo plastered on the side. Despite the idle conversation, the two keep a very attentive eye on the guild office.

The doors of the guild office open. The team walks out with Bach trailing behind, examining his registration card. Sebastian floats in his ethereal form behind Bach and peeks over his shoulder with a proud smile. “It’s pretty thing, bro.”

Bach feels the card’s facets, takes his wallet out, and carefully settles the card into the most prominent spot. “Well, I’m only technically an intern.”

Sotalia glances over at the card in Bach’s wallet. “Still pretty cool that they can work it as an internship and have it count for college credit.”

Aristespha takes a peek at the card, too. “The paperwork is significantly easier now. Now the paperwork for denoting an authoritative proxy due to your team’s leader being a soul stuck in a sword on the otherhand...”

Sebastian catches Aristespha glare and shrugs. “Hey, if I could actually sign stuff, you know I would!”

Aristespha winks playfully, reaches behind her, and taps the handle of the sword. “Before you scare the locals, Sebastian.”

Sebastian’s visage swirls into the sword. His voice echoes a few moments later. “I know. Just wanted to see Bach’s registration card in the light. Vision is so weird in the sword. Anyone find anything good on the boards?”

The rest scroll through their aetherphones and take turns reading job descriptions. Debates follow after each reading and the team discusses jobs on their way to the humvee. Nearby a particular van, a cameraman tracks the group and a woman stares with her jaw nearly on the floor. She checks the cameraman. “By the gods, I hope you recorded all that.”

The cameraman grins widely. “Oh, yes. There’s a reason I get to be on my own unit.”

The woman flips open the cover on her tablet and tap-types furiously into it. “I can’t believe it. It’s them and they are here.”

Evening falls at the house. Most retire to recreational activities after the unexpected stresses of today. Aristespha closes the door to her room, removes the sheathed sword from her back, and places it on the bed. She slides the sword to a corner and sits down on top. She removes her boots and other attire until she achieves comfort. She lays down the rest of the way on the bed and exhales. Sebastian's visage reforms and floats above her. "You okay, dear?"

Aristespha rubs her eyes and keeps them closed as she stretches out on the bed. "Yes. Just the state of things bothers me. I was accepting certain elements, now new ones got thrown in."

Sebastian hovers down next to Aristespha on the bed. "I know. But, we are making good progress. Bach is going on his first quest soon!"

Aristespha twists her mouth and thinks. "Sebastian, your brother is still an unknown factor. Not a bad one. But, still unknown."

Sebastian frowns lightly and turns his head to Aristespha. "I know. I wish I knew more to tell you. He did mention the Nightmare Geist incident to me. And... how it left him a lame mage."

Aristespha eyes snap open and she twists her head to lock a glare on Sebastian. "Anything else?!"

Sebastian blinks blankly from her sudden change of expression. "No. I didn't want to push the issue. I was amazed he mentioned it without me pestering him. I'm hoping he'll open up more once he gets some confidence back."

Aristespha closes her eyes and rubs her forehead in thought. Sebastian quickly lifts up and looks over and down at Aristespha. "What's wrong? Is there something wrong with Bach?!"

Aristespha opens her eyes with a faint glow, reaches her hands up, and places them around Sebastian's face gently. "Your brother is just fine. It's just... He has his abilities, but I don't know how or even why he arrived at them."

Sebastian places a hand on one of Aristespha's hands and smiles. "I'm sure you'll figure it out soon enough or he'll eventually tell us. I'm just happy to have him along, just like we promised each other when we were kids."

Aristespha lovingly returns the smile as she feels Sebastian's face. "We shall see. But, I want some answers eventually."

Bach examines his new aetherphone while he lays on his bed. He flips through menus, settings pages, and lists of icons and eventually settles back on the home screen. He mumbles to himself, "Well... It's about time..."

Bach presses the phone icon and taps a series of numbers on the shown numeric pad. He holds the phone next to ear and waits. After a few moments, Bach hears a familiar voice. "Hey, mom. It's me. Got a new phone and everything. Thanks to Sebastian."

Bach listens to his mother talk. "He's doing well enough, all things considered. ... Yah, still getting used it myself. So, he's been keeping you update to date with- Well, I guess Aristespha has, since he hasn't figured out a way yet."

He quirks his head to side and ponders a moment on something said. "I guess his voice would sound weird over the speakerphone. When did you last talk to him? ... Good. Give me second, I think I got this figured out on the phone."

Bach takes the phone and aims it at his registration card, presses a few buttons, and then returns the it to his ear. "Did you get tha-

He stops and gently smiles, with a tear welling in his eye. His mothers voice, happy and excited, calls out to someone in the background and announces what she sees. The voice calls out loud enough to even be audible to anyone nearby Bach. "Well, it's about fucking time!"

Bach rolls his eyes with a snort and shakes his head. "Thanks, dad!"

Bach's mother continues, asking questions in excited rapid succession. Bach interrupts, "Hey, mom, I'll answer all those. But, there's something I've been working on that I want you to see first. Let's see if I can figure out this feature."

Bach holds his hand out and palm up, keeping the phone trained with his other hand. Bach presses an icon on the screen and a video stream of his mother face appears in a smaller window on top of the video of the palm of his hand. Bach concentrates and faint, flickering outlines appear. The framework fills in with a transparent form, details and color materialize. In a few seconds, the vague outline of flowers morphs into a bundle of violet-like objects crafted of stabilized magical energy. He witnesses his mother's face flood with awe and pride. He presses the icon again and puts the phone back to his ear. "I kind of wanted to show you in person, but I figured with everything going on I'd show you now. I'll get it in the mail to you soon."