

Ain't A Hero – Episode 5

by Bryan Schuder

The lock on the door to the two bed hotel room beeps loudly and disengages. The door swings open and a woman and cameraman rush in. The cameraman hurries over to a desk near the large room window, places his camera down, flips up a laptop, and connects the camera. The woman throws herself onto one of the beds, pulls herself to the edge, and fishes a laptop out of a carrier bag. “I can’t fucking believe it! Howie is going to love this! Gerald, when you get the video downloaded, send it straight to his aethermail!”

Gerald swiftly moves the chair from the desk, jumps into it, and types on the laptop. “Will do! Howie’s going to flip when he see this in his mail tomorrow.”

The woman snaps a wicked grin on her face and toggles the speakerphone on her aetherphone. “Tomorrow?! He’s seeing this tonight!”

Gerald halts in brief shock and spins his head to the woman. “Are you sure about that, Samantha?! It’s pretty late his time and last time we called him late... It wasn’t with good news.”

Samantha places the phone next to her, taps the screen, and situates herself on the bed. “Oh, he’ll be fine once he sees the video.”

The phone rings, rings again, and again. After the fifth ring, it clicks loudly with sounds of silence from another place broadcasting into the room. A loud cough, a phlegm choked growl, and begrudging moan blasts out from the speaker. “Oh gods... Who the fuck is it at this hour?”

With her sweetest and most innocent voice, Samatha replies, “It’s me Howie!”

A long pause hangs in the room, then the voice groans with pleading dread, “Dear gods, please tell me one of the lemmings hasn’t gotten themselves killed already-”

Samantha twists with annoyance and speaks with tinges of disappointment. “NO! They’re all alive. Check your mail, Howie.”

The phone resonates with the sounds of Howard stirring around. He grumbles to himself, then directs his frustration over the phone. “GERALD. Are you there?!”

Gerald cringes, pauses from his work on the laptop, and leans his head over to direct his voice. “Yes. I’m here and I warned her!”

Movement noises stop and Howard sighs. “Okay, I’m opening it. I swear this had better be good. I’m coming down from a night of fun I may not remember in the morning, and my head is pounding. If this isn’t good, I’m booking you two rooms at the roach motel the lemmings are-”

Silence over the phone steals the attention of Gerald and Samantha. Loud gasps from the phone interrupt the glances Samantha and Gerald exchange. A series gleeful cackles prompt Samantha and Gerald to curl celebratory fists to each other. A pleasurable moan rolls in from the phone. "Oh... Oh my. This... This is why I keep you two around. You two can find the speck of pure gold in a sea of shit."

Samantha lowers her head to her phone with an inquiring expression. "How should we proceed?"

A few hums and clicks of the mouth play over the speaker before settling. "You two keep on task. I'll mail over a copy of the mission our adventurers are going on start of the work week. Some simple survey of some musty old ruins. There's a few on the list they had, so I got the one closest to town. I'm going to pound down two aspirin and a liter of water, sleep some happy dreams thanks to you two, and call in a few favors certain people didn't realize they owed me."

Samantha smiles and sinks into her pile of hotel bed pillows. "Will do. Oh, and they've already had some encounters with each other."

Howard's anticipation exudes acoustically from the speaker. "Oh? Do tell."

Samantha's smile morphs to a full evil grin. "Deedri held up Aristespha and nearly drove her to drawing the sword. And Trakenthin flirted with Dretphi... and got shut down."

Howard releases a satisfied moan and chuckles darkly. "Oh my, dear. If you talk any dirtier to me, I might need to start paying per minute."

Samantha laughs and reaches over to her phone. "Then, I guess I need to let you off. If we get any more goodies, we'll let you know."

Gerald directs his voice at Samantha's phone. "Hey, Howard. You wouldn't happen to know who the new guy is in the group? I've never seen him before."

Samantha nods in confirmation to Gerald and waits for Howard's response. The wait is the longest stretch of silence yet, but eventually a whisper of genuine surprise finds its way over. "Oh my. That's Sebastian's brother! Bach Warwick. Oh, I am interested now."

Bach, Sotalia, Dretphi, Cideeda, Aristespha, and Sebastian sit around the dining table. A collection of documents, tablets, and a holoplayer litter the tabletop. Bach sits back and occasionally looks to his brother, while the others debate and argue about what quests to do and when to do them. After fifteen minutes, Sebastian manages an ethereal whistle and seizes everyone's attention. "Okay. I think we're all in agreement that we'd all like to slum it a bit with a whole bunch of easy jobs. Correct?"

Sotalia throws her head back in her seat and sighs loudly. "Yes! Just some straight forward gigs for once. Preferably anything that a few good fireballs can fix. Simplicity, you know?"

Cideeda stretches her arms out across the table and rests her head on the tabletop. “That would be nice. But, I still like mine. It’s not everyday a local government gives free reign to crack open an old military installation.”

Dretphi nods with both her hands propping her head up above the table. “I second that job. Not now. Later. We need a simple, safe job now.”

Aristespha uncrosses her arms and shrugs. “I’ll admit after all we’ve been through, a few easy jobs would be nice. BUT. We will need to start thinking about looking for signs of Noxian after this.”

Sotalia, Cideeda, and Dretphi agree. Sotalia lifts her head forward to face Sebastian. “So, what’s the plan?”

Sebastian points out to three job papers and gestures for Dretphi and Cideeda to group them together in the middle of the table. “Well, these three seem simple and straight-forward. And, since this will be Bach’s first mission, I think he should choose.”

Bach startles back to the situation and feels the eyes upon him. He leans forward, reaches an arm out, and pulls the three jobs closer. He reads and recalls the debate beforehand with each one. After some deliberation and swapping the papers around, he settles on one and points it out to his brother. “I think I like this one best.”

Sebastian’s ethereal form drifts closer to the papers and nods at his brother’s choice. “So, tell us, why that one?”

Bach sits up straight and thinks for a moment. “Umm... Well, it’s a survey job. The place is an abandoned outpost for a long dead government. It was last reported inactive and all they want is a group to go out and make sure it still is inactive. If all goes well, we tour a piece of history, take some pictures, and go home without any trouble. And, if this one isn’t too much trouble, it looks like they’ve got a few similar places that need surveying, too.”

Sebastian ponders and gazes at everyone. The group shows some individual indicator of agreement. Sebastian crosses his arms and smiles. “Alright. We’re doing it. We’ll see how this one goes and pick the next one from there.”

Aristespha leans out of her seat over the table and takes the job. She keys some identification numbers into her tablet. “I’ll send our bid in. I should get confirmation sometime tonight, and we’ll set off tomorrow morning.”

Sebastian glances over to Bach with a grin. “How does it feel to have chosen your first mission?”

Bach blinks, takes a deep breath, and groans. “I don’t know. Excited and worried? I don’t know which is winning right now.”

Sebastian nods and throws his hands to the sides. “That’s par for the course. It means you’re keeping in mind Murphy’s Law.”

Sotalia laughs and slyly smirks at Bach. "Don't worry, if the mission is a bust we'll just blame you."

Cideeda perks a brow at Sotalia from across the table and tilts her head into a hand with a grin. "Oh, like no one has ever chosen a bad job before."

Sotalia averts her eyes away from the gathering momentarily and sneers briefly. "One time. Just one time. And no one will let me live it down."

A low grumble emanates from Dretphi and she stares out into that distance that only prominent memories allow. "Dried slime in my hair... WEEKS... Afterwards."

Bach rotates his head carefully to Sebastian and gives him an unsure look. "Do I want to ask?"

Sebastian stands tall, chuckles, and rubs the back of neck as his bravado fades. "That. Uh. That was not one of our finer missions. Admittedly, there was moments. Funny moments to remember, now."

Aristespha cringes and shakes her head side to side as memories surface back up. "We were to check out an unexplored ruin for a new county, since the ruin was in their land grant from the state. The only history we could find was that a very strange mage from the second era lived around there. Strange mage indeed..."

Sotalia groans and gestures with her hands to punctuate and elaborate points. "Turns out that mage had some crazy idea to find a commercial purpose for this breed of ooze he found on some trip. It was a herbivore slime that for all practical purposes was harmless."

Cideeda narrows her eyes, grimaces, and squirms a bit in her chair. "Harmless physically."

Bach moves his expectant gaze between everyone and hopes that someone reveals the critical piece of missing information. Dretphi catches Bach's attention. She closes her eyes and monotonously speaks, "They spit slime. A lot of slime. Everywhere."

Aristespha sinks back into her chair with a slight frown. "That was such a nice top and matching skirt."

Sotalia nods somberly to Aristespha. "I know. It really looked good on you."

Sebastian draws a breath in and grins sinisterly. "Destroying the spawning pool and lab was fun though."

Sotalia giggles and flexes her hand in spell casting motions. "We were on our WORST behavior. Fried so many of those little shits. We totally wrecked that place."

This surprises Bach and he takes in the displays of satisfaction and vindication. Aristespha breaks from her reminiscing. "Don't worry. The slimes were an invasive species and despite filing it to the Grand Library, that mages notes read worse than a fetish fanfiction."

Dretphi looks forward, unamused. “At first, we felt our actions were excessive. We felt justified after an hour with the garden hose. In the fall. Before we could go into the hotel to shower.”

Cideeda snickers, puts her head into her hands, and rocks back into her chair. “Oh gods! You should have seen the front desk clerk. That was a brave man to stand up to us and tell us we had to wash ourselves off before going any further.”

Aristespha smirks and sighs. “To be fair, they did just get new carpet in the rooms and hallways when we were there.”

Sotalia rolls her eyes and snorts. “And that was probably the best job that guy had going for him in that town. Can’t fault him for wanting to keep it.”

Sebastian floats away from table and addresses everyone. “Okay. Well, lets get everything filed and everyone get ready. We’ll head on our early tomorrow and see if we can find a good place for breakfast.”

The humvee stops in a parking space behind a large diner. The engine cuts off and doors open. Cideeda hops out, adjusts the tactical vest over her compression body suit, and places her keys in a pocket of her cargo shorts. Sotalia steps down, ruffles through her armored cloak, unfastens her belt pouches, and places them on her seat before closing the door. Aristespha confidently glides down to the ground from her seat. She brushes off her elaborate top and skirt combination, checks the feel of her boots, and cinches a strap to the scabbard of The Sword on her side. Bach steps out of the vehicle and scans the area. A gust of wind fans his duster and blows his long hair around. Bach smirks as the fluttering duster dramatically reveals the rest of his armored attire, and for a brief moment Bach feels bad-ass. Sotalia rolls her eyes with a smile and walks towards the front door quietly snickering. Dretphi works her way through the aisle of the vehicle and outside. Her tall stature imposes even more with the dark gray soft armor plating layering her body. The group gathers and walk around to the front door.

Bach aims his voice toward Cideeda. “Easier parking in the back?”

Cideeda tilts her back. “That and it keeps us from tipping other people off easy.”

Sotalia pulls open the front door to the building. “We were having THE WORST luck with capturing bounties when we got the humvee. Then, it dawned on us that even an old model humvee was just suspicious enough.”

Cideeda walks through the doorway. “I always thought the old battered work van was scarier than an antique military vehicle. But, maybe it just fit the environment more.”

Aristespha strides in front of the group to the restaurant host and greets them with a calm smile. The host returns the smile and surveys the group. “Hello! Welcome to the Amaranth Dining House, we are currently serving breakfast! Seating for five?”

Aristespha nods and pats on the sword at her side. "Yes. A table please. Is there any issue with this?"

The host glances down to the sword and shakes his head. "None at all. We just ask that melee weapons are sheathed and locked, unload any large firearms and place them into those lockers over there, and no casting of powerful or dangerous spells on the premises."

This statement pleases and slightly surprises the group. Bach relaxes his shoulders and tilts his head to the side. "That's a pretty permissive policy."

The host grabs a stack of menus, taps commands to a tablet on a podium, and gestures the party to follow him. "Here at the Amaranth Dining House, we like to accommodate adventurers, mercenaries, and specialists. We even have seating geared for such groups to make it easier to enjoy your dining experience!"

Bach chuckles to himself, as the group moves through the walkways between sections of tables. "Probably to keep from scaring the locals."

The host turns his head back, quirks a brow, and smiles. "Actually, it's quite the opposite. There's a yearly speculative fiction convention at a resort an hour away that has annoying habit of bothering our adventurers. So, if we ask for registration cards, that's because the convention is happening."

The party enters an area with larger tables, significantly more room separating the tables, and reinforced steel chairs with extra cushioning. Two other groups sit and eat their meals. A dozen of specialist military personnel from the Greater Azure Alliance dine and converse between two tables. A group of three people wear the markings of Borderland Rangers. The host directs the party to a table, distributes menus in each of the placements, and bows. "Your server will be with you shortly, please, enjoy your experience."

Everyone slides the sturdy chairs out and sits down to browse the menus. Dretphi perks a brow and twists her mouth. "Grath style steak and eggs. Interesting. I shall see how Grath is it."

Sotalia points to a spot on the menu. "I saw that. I think I'm going to play it safe with a the pancakes, bacon, and eggs platter."

Bach places the menu down and nods. "Think I'll have to do the Grand Tour."

Sotalia picks her menu back up, flips to the specials, reads, and shakes her head with an eye roll. "Oh, he's definitely your brother, Sebastian."

A quiet ethereal voice resonates from Aristespha's side. "You and your food bigotry, Sotalia."

Sotalia tosses the menu back down and smirks. "I'm sorry, your home country has some of the weirdest combinations of food I've ever seen."

Bach stacks his menu on top of Sotalia's and shrugs. "Well, that's what you get when your country serves as the safe haven from a lot of conflicts in the last hundred years."

Cideeda licks her lips, agrees with herself, and passes the menu down to the forming pile. "Fruit, yogurt, and juice for me."

Bach looks at Cideeda perplexed. "That's all?"

Cideeda nods and points to herself. "I've small lithe figure to maintain and I don't have the convenience of being able to nuke calories like you spell casters. Plus, I really want to get a dozen of those honey buns to go."

A server arrives at the table with a tray of mugs and a pot of coffee. She sets out the mugs, and places the pot of coffee in the middle of table. Afterwards, she stands by ready to take orders, and sweeps her eyes to everyone. "Hello, I'm Cynthia and I'll be your server. Are you all ready to order? If you have any special dietary needs, please me know and I'm certain we can arrange a solution."

Aristespha finally closes her menu up, drops it upon the pile, and straightens her posture. "Yes. I have some particular dietary needs."

Cynthia snaps her attention to Aristespha and awaits. "Yes, ma'am. We offer many dishes without meat, eggs, or types of grains! I'll be happy to have a special order made for you."

Aristespha draws a wicked smirk and places her hands together in front of her. "Oh no. Nothing that complicated. I was just curious if after they cooked my orders of sausage and bacon, if they could fry my eggs in the grease. It'd really remind me of home, if they could do it. Also, the whole milk, please."

Cynthia blinks stunned, but quickly recovers with delighted smile. "Of course. I'm sure they can do that."

Cynthia rotates around the table and records everyone's order. She leaves towards the kitchen and pauses to talk to the manager currently watching a series of vans pull into the parking lot. The "Next Adventurers of Nexus" logo prominently adorns each of the vans. Samantha exits out of one of the vans, closes the driver's side door, and walks to the back. Gerald hops out, slams his door, and rushes to the back where Samantha is pulling out equipment. He picks up his camera and hoists it onto his shoulder. "Okay, so what's the plan?"

Samantha flips through her tablet, furrows her brow, and takes a deep breath in. "Okay. The kids will get here in the next few minutes. We'll run them through some video journal bits and get them in there. If you could, can you record some scenery bits?"

Gerald nods and takes a quick survey of the area. "I think I'll get the sign and go from there. You going to confirm with the manager here?"

Samantha sighs and puts on her pocketed vest. "Yes. Get them prepared and make sure all the arrangements are still good."

Dretphi chews on her steak. Bach takes a break from his meal and judges Dretphi's reaction. "So, are the steak and eggs really Grath style?"

Dretphi swallows and puts on an indifferent face. "They are not bad. They do not have a proper stone slab grill. Still cooked decent."

Aristespha devours her bacon and pauses at the stare from Sotalia. "What? It's been months since I've been able to eat some greasy breakfast food. Medical magic needs some serious fuel, anyway."

Sotalia snickers, holds her hands up, and continues back to her plate. "Hey! However you want to justify it."

Cideeda's ear flicks repeatedly, until she perks it up towards a source. She pops her head up and focuses her eyes towards the entry lobby. She grimaces with a wince in her eye. "Oh gods dammit."

Bach and Sotalia twist in their chairs to the front. Dretphi focuses her gaze and frowns. Aristespha lifts her head up and angrily bites a breakfast sausage in half. Sebastian echoes from the sword. "Umm... I'm obviously missing something here. Anyone want to fill me in? Inside sword vision is pretty limited."

Bach turns back and settles in his seat. "The Next Pains of Nexus want breakfast, too."

The leader of the Borderland Rangers eyes steely over to the entry point. He growls low and returns to his meal, shaking his head. "If you see our server, flag him down, Heccaeh."

The Fvalian man nods, takes a moment to scan the area, and then resumes eating. Sebastian senses tension immediately near him. "Dear, just enjoy your meal, and we'll leave before they get too stupid."

Aristespha maintains a low grumble in between bites. Dretphi glances over to Aristespha with an amused smirk. Cideeda continues eating, but gives a disdainful glare at Deedri. Bach returns his attention to his plate, but stares confused while his fork hovers over an empty spot. Sotalia quickly draws in the piece of bacon between her lips into her mouth. She straightens up and aims the fork back to her own plate.

A flurry of activity erupts a few tables down and recording crew seek positions near but out of the intended shot. The Next Adventurers of Nexus stride prominently to their table. The face of the group, Chad Bosch, leads the pack and stops in front of the Greater Azure Alliance specialists. "It's always good to check the local places to see what other adventurers and heroes are in town. Like our men and women in uniform."

The specialists cheer roughly together in a halfhearted display. Chad continues down the path. With a bright smile, he stops beside Sotalia and Aristespha at the end of the table. "Why hello fellow-"

Chad examines the group quickly. He quirks a brow and twists the corner of his mouth. "Diverse adventurers. What brings all of you to this fair town?"

Aristespha takes a breath in, molds her posture to establish an air of propriety and superiority. "Simple tasks and chores, and other bores to fine adventurers like yourselves. Hopefully, we will be moving on to other quests soon enough."

Sotalia sizes Tassilda up. Tassilda returns the favor and smugly judges Sotalia with a long glare. Dretphi assumes a stoic silence and adverts her eyes away from Trakkenthin. Deedri happily and excitedly waves to Cideeda, the bell around her neck ringing with the motion. Cideeda weakly waves back and her forced smile barely hangs on. Bach continues to eat slowly and attempts to not draw any specific attention. Chad nods and his eyes analyze each member, eventually pausing at Bach. "My knowledge of adventuring allows me to figure out everyone... Except you."

Bach carefully turns head to the strange gaze of Chad. He can't quite isolate it, but something unnerves him about this particular look from Chad. "Um... Intern. Just learning the ropes. Picking up my degree where I left off."

Chad's expression flashes back his iconic, non-threatening smile. "Ah! It's good for a group take on someone and help them on their journey. It's was good to meet all of you, but we must be off."

The Next Adventurers move to the final table before their own. The Borderland Rangers manage to get their ticket from the server and stand up. The leader just manages to get his wide brimmed, pinched-front hat on, when he pivots towards the aisle to meet Chad. Chad extends a hand to shake. "I'm Chad Bosch, Leader of the Flames of the Phoenix adventuring group. Pleasure to make your acquaintance, sir!"

The Borderland Ranger leader squares his shoulders as muffled sounds of cybernetics actuate. He reaches with his right hand into his jacket pocket and hands a roll of cash and the bill to Heccaeh. "You two go pay up and wait in the truck. I'll be out soon."

Heccaeh and another woman ranger push their chairs and weave through the crowd of adventurers and crew. The ranger leader fixes his cold, steely eyes directly at Chad's. He crosses his arms and taps upon his right arm with a cybernetic left hand. "Captain Hays of the Borderland Rangers. Acquaintance made. Any business with me you need to discuss?"

Chad bolsters his bravado and attempts a similar glare to Captain Hays. "Maybe. Any news?"

A dry smirk cracks across Hay's mouth and he bows his head slightly to shadow his face. "Hauled what was left of some group of would be adventurers after a geist had its way with them. You all look real similar to them."

Moments of harsh silence weigh between Hays and Chad. Chad finds it difficult to not tense his muscles, as his body fights to squirm. Captain Hays's smirk grows to a thin grin across his scarred cheeks, nearly touching both gray sideburns. "Do us all a favor, keep out of the borderlands for... a while."

Chad nods slowly and mentally shoves the iconic smile back onto his face to finish up the conversation. "I'll take that as advice, sir. You have a nice day."

The adventurers shuffle over to their table and the camera crew surround them. Captain Hays shakes his head at the spectacle and pivots in the aisle. When his view changes, he recognizes Aristespha, Dretphi, Cideeda, and Sotalia. He halts next to the party's table. "Excuse me. Am I safe to assume you all are who I think you all are?"

Aristespha perks brow, studies Captain Hays, and gently nods. Dretphi, Cideeda, and Sotalia follow suit. Bach watches and remains still. Captain Hays reaches into another pocket on his jacket and pulls out a collection of business cards. "I was told by my commander that if I were to encounter certain persons, I was to give them my contact information. And, I was also to give them assurance that they would have assistance in their quest to eliminate a general pain in everyone's ass when requested."

Captain Hays visits each member around the table, extends a hand to shake, and gives them a business card. When Hays reaches Bach, he pauses a moment, tilts his head, and engages his piercing gaze. "You look... similar."

Bach shrugs nervously. "Umm... I'm the brother trying to get back into the swing of things. And eventually, take on the general pain in the ass."

Captain Hays holds his hand out and Bach shakes his hand. Hays flips the last card out and places it in Bach's hand. "I can appreciate that. Good luck and if you all need to head into the borderlands, let me know. I'll get you all a guided tour."

Captain Hays gives a final tip of the hat and walks to the front exit. Bach rotates the card in his hand and looks at it closely. "Neat. At least somebody is on our side."

Chad narrows his eyes and frigidly stares over his menu, his characteristic smile nowhere to be found.

The humvee parks outside a large perimeter fence. Attached at regular intervals, large signs warn readers in multiple languages. The front passenger's door opens and Sotalia hops out. "That woman is such an Emin Purist. The way she looked at me! She was trying to figure out whether she should call me a half-breed or a mutt."

The rear passenger door swings, and Bach steps out onto the dirt with intermixed chunks of pavement. He scratches the back of his head at Sotalia. "I didn't get that from her. It seemed like two mages sizing each other up to me."

Sotalia crosses her arms and brushes back the red hair in her face to reveal a smug grin. "Ha! That little wannabe has nothing on me."

Cideeda gets out of the driver's seat and groans while securing her vest and backpack. "Gods. I just hope they didn't record me waving to that bitch and use it."

Aristespha exits the vehicle. She stands rigid and proper. Sebastian coasts in front of her. "Hey. It's okay. We're at the job. We're away from them."

Aristespha stretches her shoulders and takes in a deep breath with a grimace. "I'll be fine, Sebastian. I just wanted to have a nice start to the day."

Sebastian smiles and gazes into Aristespha's eyes. "You handled it well. And, we got a good contact out of it. Still a net gain. So... Let's focus on this mission."

Aristespha sighs and eventually cracks a reserved smile with a loving look to Sebastian. "Okay. Let me get the access code into the perimeter fence and let's see the entrance to this place."

Sounds of shuffling and equipment moving emanate from the back of the humvee. Dretphi squeezes out, stands, and adjusts the hard plating over her armor. She takes hold of a bullpup submachine gun and throws the carrying strap over her shoulder.

The group congregates at the perimeter gate. Aristespha reaches over her shoulder into her small backpack and retrieves another of her tablets. She reads a few lines of text on the screen and presses buttons on a keypad lock. A status light turns green, a tone rings out, and the gate lock disengages. With a moderate push, the gate drifts open. The party walks to the entrance of the old outpost. Another series of warning signs decorate the walls near the entrance. Aristespha holds the tablet up to the group. "This was the last picture taken of the entrance."

Everyone takes a long look at the picture on the tablet, often alternating to glance and squint at the entrance. After a few minutes, no one can find anything obviously different. Sebastian confidently postures and puts on daring grin. "Good sign so far. This is looking to be a straight forward-

Low, barely audible noises of utility systems powering up fill the air around the entrance. Dim lights switch on down the hallway after the entrance, and eventually even an exterior lamp flickers to life. Sebastian's posture wilts away to holding his arms out to the side in discouragement. He looks over his shoulder to Aristespha. "This is NOT in the description of how it was, right?"

Aristespha shakes her head. The group checks, primes, and/or readies their weapons and equipment. Sebastian hovers in front of the group. "Alright. I'll scout five to ten meters ahead to check for anything obvious. Dretphi and Cideeda mind the front. Aristespha and Sotalia be ready with magic and range. Bach, support where you can and keep an eye on the back to make sure whatever doesn't try to pull a cheap one us. Let's do this!"

Cideeda rubs her temples in frustration and growls out. "What is going on here?!"

Sebastian drifts back down the dimly lit, concrete hallway to the group, examining spots as he flies along. "Nothing. The lights are on, but... that's about it. I checked behind the doors and

there's a few defense big droids that might be functional. I think there was a room with stasis pods for cyborgs or something crazy. But, it doesn't look like anything has moved in decades."

Cideeda grits her teeth and her ears lower. "This is not right. I've found detection system after detection system not even powered up. I bet the cameras aren't even capturing."

Bach glances up and sees a dome object on the ceiling down the next stretch of hallway. He points it out to Cideeda. She nods, inspects from afar, and trains her ears at the device. She reaches into a pocket, draws out a green laser point, and aims a dot right at the camera. "Yes. That definitely looks like one of them. But, normally, I would hear servo motors adjusting or even high pitch electrical whines from some of the components."

Bach's eyes glow a faint blue and he holds his hand out. A small glowing orb immediately forms in the palm of his hand. With a flick of the wrist, he sends the glowing orb drifting down the hallway. Cideeda carefully watches and listens to the camera. She shakes her head and twists her mouth. "Nothing. It's not even motion tracking."

Aristespha closes her glowing violet eyes, rubs her eyelids. She opens them back up, no longer glowing. "I'm not detecting any kind of magical activity here."

Sotalia spins in place and scans the immediate area, unamused. "I can confirm. Nothing."

She bends over, picks up a small toothpick sized stick on the floor, and holds it for everyone to see. With little concentration from her, the toothpick glows. "The only time I've seen any of these magical detector sticks activate is when I trigger them."

Drephi furrows her brow, kneels down to the floor, and drags a finger along it. Her finger wipes away countless years of dust to reveal the contrast between the dust and floor. "I have not seen any area disturbed. No signs of activity."

Sebastian crosses his arms and stares off in thought. "Dear, does the info you got have a map showing where the command center is?"

Aristespha draws out her tablet and flips through documents until she settles upon one. After a minute, she directs Sebastian down a hallway. "Yes. And it should be on this floor. That way."

Sebastian narrows his eyes down the hallway and continues the stare with a growing determination. "Anyone against going straight to the command center and figuring out what the hell is going on here?"

No one voices an objection. Sebastian nods and floats down the hallway.

Cideeda scrutinizes the massive security door and cringes as she finds more details in her study. "This going to be rough to open. They basically built this thing to only be serviceable from the other side. And, it doesn't look like the door is getting any power. I'm also afraid to

do any kind of override through the access panel on this door. There may be a separate alarm that I don't want to trigger."

Sebastian's ethereal form passes through the door and he wears concern on his face. "The panel looks dead on the other side, too. But, the thing feels like a solid chunk of steel. Nothing hollow. There's some activity going on the computers and electronics in the command center."

Cideeda paces around the hallway between everyone and mutters to herself. "That means there's nothing inside the door. It's a solid chunk. We might be able to cut it, but this thick of door..."

An epiphany sparks in Dretphi and she aims her head at Bach. She steps besides Bach and taps him on the shoulder. "You can precisely melt the steel into a hole. Can you precisely melt the steel out of a hole?"

Bach's face drifts off in thought and returns with refreshing intrigue. "... I think I can. I can melt a pinpoint column through the steel and extract the molten steel. That should effectively cut, correct?"

Dretphi shift her hand from Bach's shoulder to the middle of his back and gives him a light push, directing him towards Cideeda. Bach picks up on the hint, steps over, and kneels next Cideeda as she continues to examine the door. This attracts the attention of Sotalia and Aristespha. Bach taps door with a knuckle. "Okay. Where do want to cut?"

Cideeda pulls a toothy grin, reaches into a pocket on her vest for a white marker, and sketches out a rough outline. "This should be big enough for everyone to fit through without too much trouble without getting too crazy."

Sebastian smirks with pride. "Okay. I'll keep a watch in here to see if any alarms go off."

Bach situates himself, braces a hand on the door frame, and hovers the other hand a few centimeters away from the door over the sketch line. His eyes glow blue and a pinpoint spot on the door brightens from a dull red to a brilliant white in a matter of seconds. A thin stream of cooling steel specks flow from glowing spot and fall to the ground. The glowing spot creeps along and leaves a growing thin ribbon of space behind it. A minute later, the spot now crawls a few centimeters from its original start. Bach concentrates and determination boils inside him. He opens his hand up wide and stretches his fingers out. Transparent outlines of objects materialize between the door and his hand. Details fill in the objects. They grow more mechanical, technological in nature, traces and pathways with genuine purpose etch on the ethereal objects. The cutting speed doubles from one moment to the next. Another layer of these magical objects appear, interwoven into the previous. Which each addition, Bach's eyes glow brighter and previously unseen magical flows illuminate around and inside his arm. The layers of magical machinery slice the original task to mere minutes.

Bach hovers his hand over the original start point and disseminates the magic back into himself. His eyes dim and the magical flow fades away. He bows his head down, wipes the sweat from his brow, and breathes deeply. When he raises his head back up, he feels the immediate presence of everyone near him. Sotalia and Aristespha are each on a side

attentively watching over his shoulder. Cideeda and Dretphi kneel close to the door. And Sebastian hovers above watching. Bach blinks and pans his head up to his brother. "Weren't you suppose to be watching the inside?"

Attention briefly shifts to Sebastian and he shrugs. "Hey, if the first five minutes of this didn't trigger anything, I figured the last wasn't either."

Bach leans forward to put his feet underneath. He attempts to stand up, feels light-headed, and partially doubles over. Both Sotalia and Aristespha take an arm to support Bach. Sotalia pats Bach's shoulder. "Okay, enough showing off today. I'll take care of the rest."

Aristespha leads Bach away from the door and guides him down on the floor against a wall. Aristespha drops to a knee and performs a simple check over on Bach. Bach catches her serious glare and sighs. "I did something you are going to be questioning me about later."

Aristespha calmly nods and the serious frown softens. "Yes. But, your control and restraint lessens many of my concerns. Just don't forget those. And pace yourself, please."

Sotalia plants her feet back from the door. She shifts her stance, holds her arms out. Sotalia calls out incantations, her arms and hands move with regiment and calculation. Symbols beam brightly on arms, a golden light shines from her eyes, and flows of magic course through the air to her hands. With a final contact of both hands together, she directs a beam of energy to the section of door. Energy envelops the massive chunk and with a tug of the string of energy, the steel slides noisily out of the door. Sotalia presents an air of confidence and glee when the hundred millimeter thick, meter square of steel floats free. With a careful grace, she strides out of the way of the cut steel plate, rotates, and places it down on the ground with a thud. She finishes with a flourish to everyone towards the opening. "Let the tour begin."

The command center seems intact enough. The ceiling remains where it should. The floor exists, but one large growing crack towards a corner raises some concerns. Dretphi sweeps area with a spot lamp, keeping a close hand on her sub-machine gun. Sotalia searches some desk drawers near the entry. Cideeda signals Aristespha to an active terminal that outputs line after line of text. Aristespha traces each line, recognition fills her face. "I don't remember the exact dialect. But, I get the rough idea. It looks like status messages and warnings about environment controls."

Bach notices a dim glow and wipes dust off a screen. "Got a live one here, too."

Aristespha rushes over and reads the text, squinting. "Communications control. It received a status update from another remote site a week ago. And a full alert from another site nearby a few minutes ago? Error... Security offline?"

Dretphi stomps to check the floor and then shines her spot light down a large hole. Cideeda goes to her side and examines the area. "Large power cables in the ceiling with data lines running down to- There's the security system. Looks a geological shift took the security control system and the main power."

Cideeda and Bach feel for their aetherphones. Cideeda whips hers out and widens her eyes. "There's an emergency radio broadcast, but-?"

Bach traces the signal strength and holds his phone next to communications line conduit. "It's weak, but I guess the source is near where these lines end up."

Cideeda quickly confirms with her aetherphone and toggles the speaker output.

"To anyone- ... Mission to Outpost- ... Base security system came online. Part of camera crew for Next Adventurers of... Trapped in Command center. SEND HELP!"

Everyone cringes.