

## Ain't A Hero – Episode 6

by Bryan Schuder

Samantha lunges right into the mercenary leader's face and yells, "What do you mean, you don't do rescue missions?!"

Despite the outburst, the leader remains stoic and strictly business. "We were hired to guard key targets. We have guarded them to extraction and we will remain with them until they are away from this site."

Samantha steps back, her face redens in anger, and she growls, "You can't be serious! I've got a whole camera crew unit trapped down there and you bunch of fuckin' tools won't move a god's damn finger to rescue them."

The leader glowers over Samantha, more resolute than ever, and points over to The Next Adventurers of Nexus. "Ma'am. We guard these people until they leave the site. That's our contract. Period."

The rage boils into Samantha's face and she grits her teeth. "Then, what do YOU propose I do with my trapped camera crew?!"

The guard quirks his brow and points a finger to direct Samantha to something behind her. "I don't know. Hire them?"

Aristespha leads Dretphi, Cideeda, Sotalia, and Bach, and she stops right behind Samantha. "I assume you are in charge here?"

Samantha spins around to greet Aristespha with momentary shock. "Hello- I- Oh. Hello! Yes, I'm in charge for all practical purposes, and I'm so glad you are here!"

Aristespha sighs and maintains an unamused expression. "Okay. Here's the deal. We picked up an emergency broadcast at another site and figured out it was coming from here. What's the situation?"

Samantha blinks and gathers her thoughts after Aristespha straight-to-the-point address. "Yes. It seems some of the outpost defenses have been reactivated. We got everyone out except a camera crew unit of six people that got separated in the chaos."

Aristespha nods and holds her hand out. "Give us a copy of the map and mark where they were last seen. Also, any recent communications from them?"

Gerald over hears the conversation from nearby, scrambles over, and pulls out his map materials. "Here! We were last together there and they've radioed that they've barricaded themselves here."

Aristespha passes the marked map to everyone else for study. "Okay. What are we facing?"

Samantha shakes her finger to few bodies near the entrance of the outpost. "Over there. They look like cyber-zombies or something."

Aristespha signals the rest of the group and they walk over towards the entrance. Samantha follows off to the side with Gerald in tow. A distance behind some barricades and equipment, Chad Bosch eyes the group and ignores the requests of a guard as he power walks around him. He darts over to Samantha and stops her. "What's going on here?! I thought we were going to get a chance to go back down!"

Samantha talks to Chad and the two enter a heated argument. The group splits out to inspect the strange bodies littering the entrance. Aristespha twists her mouth and sneers as she continues a closer examination. "Oh my. Haven't seen these in a while."

Sotalia stands next to Aristespha and leans over for a glance. "Cybernetic soldiers. Eww. Looks like these have been out of the stasis pods for awhile."

Aristespha waves her hand around with a glow in her eyes. She moves her hand over the body and motions. Parts of the body move with Aristespha's hand motions. She investigates further. "Yes, they have. The preservative bio-gel is spoiled. There's barely enough to keep basic functions going."

Sotalia shakes her head and covers her nose. "That's a lot of decay. Probably very little natural tissue left. I wouldn't be surprised if it's just the grafted tissue functioning."

Aristespha ponders a moment and, with a gesture, a chunk of rotting flesh pulls off the leg of the body. Sotalia snaps her head the other way and gasps. "Dammit, girl! Warn me before you do that!"

Cideeda, Bach, and Dretphi huddle around a similar corpse. Cideeda traces a finger above the many exposed implant lines in the body. "These are serious cybernetics here. A lot of power throughput."

Dretphi searches the area and finds a stick. She takes the stick and taps it on the body. "Armor reinforcement in key places. The 9mm rounds did nothing to those. I question if vital shots did anything."

Cideeda eyes stop at a spot around the neck. She holds her hand out for Dretphi's stick. Dretphi passes the stick along and follows Cideeda's gaze. Bach scoots over to get a better view. Cideeda pries a severed cable from the neck. "I bet that's what stopped this thing."

Bach hovers a hand over the cable and his eyes glow faintly. "That looks like a power cable and I'm feeling some voltage in it."

Bach shifts his gaze to a round metal cover on the chest of the body. "This has to be power source, I feel it."

Cideeda taps the metal cover with the stick and bites her lip. "I think these use removable power cores. You want to try to open it?"

Bach tilts his head and groans. "Ah, I don't know. But, it'd probably be best if we could make sure they had no power. I'll give it a shot."

Bach moves his hand right above the metal cover and concentrates. A blue glow illuminates his eyes. After a minute, he smirks and the metal cover unscrews itself. The cover floats off to the side, locking mechanisms disengage, and a metal tube with a row lights along the side rises out of a chamber. Cideeda and Dretphi focus on the metal tube. Dretphi notes a series of characters etched on the side. "It is military issue. High capacity power core."

Cideeda widens her gaze at the metal tube. "Holy shit. The thing is almost fully charged."

Aristespha and Sotalia peer above the others. Aristespha shakes her head and sighs. "That means they have plenty of power to make up for the lack of biological tissue."

Bach grabs the power core and stands up. Cideeda and Dretphi follow suit. Aristespha holds her chin and thinks. She briefly pivots her head to Samantha who is now arguing with Chad, Tassilda, Trakenthin, Deedri, and Mordoran. She turns towards Bach and Cideeda. "You two. Make sure these cyborgs out here are disabled. And, get ready at the entrance."

Aristespha pivots in place to witness the now loud and feverish argument going with Samantha and adventurers. She regains her proper composure, adjusts her outfit, and takes a deep breath in. "Sotalia. Dretphi. Get what equipment we need ready. I'll inform... Them... That we are going in."

Chad stands and glares defiantly at Samantha with two other adventurers donning similar expressions. "Listen, WE are suppose to be the Next Adventurers of Nexus! So, why are we not adventuring back down there?!"

Samantha twitches her cheek under her eye and focuses her ire at Chad. "This was suppose to be a simple mission to get all of you familiar with each other and establish a group dynamic. Cybernetic zombies was NOT in the plan."

Tassilda pouts, tosses her hair, and puts her hands on her sides. "This is a perfect opportunity and you are WASTING it on another group!"

Samantha curls her lip and bares her teeth in a glare. "Opportunity?! You HAD an opportunity and you all RAN!"

Chad, Tassilda, and even Trakenthin explode in retorts and arguments at Samantha. Mordoran leans against an old outpost fence post with Deedri. He perks a brow and crosses his arms. "Well... This turning out to be quite the day of entertainment."

Deedri watches the infighting and nervously rubs her hands together. "Why are they fighting so much?! Aren't we on the same team?"

Mordoran holds his hands up and shrugs nonplussed. "I don't know. The only thing I can figure is that we've got three A-type personalities all wanting a chance to impress."

Deedri turns her head slightly towards Mordoran. “A-type personalities?”

Mordoran smirks smugly and snorts. “Assholes.”

Deedri returns her head to face the scene, takes a deep breath in, and sighs. “Yes. That seems to be the case.”

Aristespha carefully approaches Samantha from behind and lightly taps her on the shoulder. Samantha spins out mid sentence, halts her speech, and puts on a welcoming face. “Yes? How can I help you?”

Aristespha stoically meets the glares from the adventurers and turns her attention to Samantha. “We are going in now. We will have quite the discussion AFTER we rescue your people. Please have your guard mind the entrance in case anything tries to come out.”

Samantha genuinely smiles and exhales in relief. “Thank you so much! We’ll do what we can up here. Please, get the crew back to safety.”

Aristespha pivots away and walks calmly to Bach, Sotalia, Dretphi, and Cideeda. Chad squints and frowns at Aristespha. She continues towards the entrance and gestures her group over. Just inside outpost, past the entrance, she grumbles loudly. “Rotten little shits. They were just happy enough to get out of the place, but the second someone else shows up they want to act like heroes.”

Sebastian materializes next to Aristespha and shares a similar expression on his face. “I do not like that Chad guy. Something just doesn’t seem right with him. But, enough about those guys. We got some people to rescue.”

Sebastian visually checks everyone and notices the handle for a large machete on Dretphi’s back and an energy shield gauntlet. She still holds her sub-machine gun at the ready, but rehearses motions to switch to her machete and shield. Cideeda checks the chamber of her shotgun and cycles it once to get a round in. Sebastian nods and speaks to the group, “Okay. Similar to last time. I’ll scout ahead. Dretphi and Cideeda, keep the front covered. Sotalia and Aristespha, hit them at range. I’m guessing electrical attacks and anything that slices and dices will be the right type of attacks?”

Cideeda nods and points around her neck. “There looks like a main cable for the cybernetics in the neck. So, I’d aim for there first.”

Dretphi thinks for a moment and sighs. “Attacking vital areas is not effective. I saw many bullet impacts around vital areas, but only one or two around the cybernetic components on each body outside.”

Sebastian’s eyes search his mind and he looks to Bach. “Bro, watch the rear, provide support, and try to pull the power cores out of these things. It seems like these things need them to work, so lets make sure they don’t have them.”

Sebastian floats over to the first intersection, scans all directions, and then glances back at Aristespha. She flips through a small packet of maps, scrutinizes a page, and then points toward the right direction. Sebastian grins as the group readies themselves. "Let's do this."

A streak of electricity arcs out onto a plodding figure. It shudders and shakes as the current flows into it. Sparks erupts from the cybernetic cabling that decaying, near necrotic flesh isn't covering. Sizzling flesh belches out smoke before the figure falls stiffly onto the floor. Another nearby cybernetic creature notices the downed the cyber-zombie and roughly swings its head down a hallway. A series of muffled pops and mechanical clacks echo the halls and holes rip into the creature's neck. After a few more holes, a bright flash explodes from the neck and the cyber-zombie collapses to the ground. The ethereal form of Sebastian zips around the corner of the intersection, points down a corridor, and holds three fingers up. Cideeda and Dretphi position themselves at the sides of the hallway and Aristespha stands slightly back in the middle, starting a spell incantation. Sebastian nods, turns back down the hallway, and ignites his form brighter. "Come get some, fuck faces!"

He backs away perpendicular to everyone else and holds a hand out to signal the others. Three cyber-zombies trudge out into the intersection in a loose group after Sebastian. A laser dot appears on the neck of one. When the three cyber-zombies near the middle of the intersection, Sebastian yells out, "NOW!"

Aristespha throws out a hand and releases a large wave of translucent energy that expands to the walls of the corridor. The wave travels down, reaches the middle of the intersection, and coats the creatures in a thick, transparent energy. They struggle to move against the substance, but only manage the tiniest bit of motion. Cideeda lines up her sights and pulls the trigger on her shotgun. A loud kaboom blasts out and the middle upper chest region of a cyber-zombie liquefies into a gray green, chunky goop. A light flickers within the goop and the creature stops fighting against the energy enveloping it. Dretphi fires her sub-machine gun in bursts and places numerous holes into a cybernetic horror, leaving its sparking corpse frozen in the energy. Aristespha flings out her other hand and focuses a beam of light across the neck of the remaining creature. The initial binding energy dissipates and the leftovers flop onto the concrete floor. A head rolls along the ground and comes to rest on a laser cut neck stump.

Sebastian gives the group a double thumbs up and squints down the hallway. "This way looks clear and I think there's a big door here."

Aristespha straightens herself and retrieves the collection of maps from Gerald. She traces a path on one of the pages and looks up to Sebastian. "That should be it!"

The team quickly reassembles, rushes through the intersection, and goes down a hallway to a large door. Bach lags behind and kneels down to the corpses of the cyber-zombies. He hovers a hand above the metal chest cover and within moments extracts a power core. Within seconds, he extracts the final power core and stuffs it with the others in his duster. Dretphi takes a watch position towards the unexplored hallway past the large door. Cideeda types on an active control panel and it blares out error tones. "It's locked, that might be a good sign."

Bach stands up from the pile of bodies and notices something strange as he lifts his head. In the shadowy, unexplored stretch of hallway opposite of the intersection to everyone else, Bach sees unusual movement. A sleek figure moves precisely and purposefully, head tracking Bach perfectly with a slight rock in each step. Just as Bach can discern the faint red glow coming from where the eyes should be, the sleek figure lifts up an object with a barrel in its arms. Bach's eyes flash bright, brilliant blue with recognition and he slams his hands forward. At the same moment, both Sotalia and Aristespha sense a strange surge in magical flow and seek the source in Bach's direction. A burst of magical flow rockets around and in Bach's body, concentrating simultaneously to one point in front of Bach's hands. The flow condenses at the spot and splinters out in a golden web of hexagonal fractal framework. In fractions of a second, the framework expands to the ceiling and the corridor's two corners at the intersection and fills in with golden transparent energy. The sleek figure smoothly engages the trigger on its weapon. A stream of plasma orbs bolt out of the weapon and contact the golden barrier. Each shot that impacts the barrier either bounces off, explodes into plasma splatter, or dissipates into the barrier. Bach staggers back and barely remains on his feet. "WHAT THE FUCK ARE THESE?!"

The group snaps their collective focus to the golden barrier as plasma bolt after plasma bolt pounds it. Bach raises his head up from the ground and his pupils narrow. He watches another sleek figure dart around the corner of a passageway in the unexplored section of hallway behind Dretphi and everyone. With another bright flash of blue in his eyes, Bach throws his hand forward. "BEHIND YOU!"

From a glowing orb on the palm of his hand, a woven centimeter thick cord of stabilized magical energy launches from Bach. The front end of the cord jets into the air, arcing over the group, and flies with a force guiding it to a target. The sleek figure trains its plasma rifle at Dretphi, just as the cord lands and attaches itself to the weapon. From the contact point, a web of blue energy threads spider out on the rifle. The figure attempts to pull the trigger, but can't. Bach grasps onto the cord and sends a pulse of energy down it and the plasma rifle propels itself out of the figure's hands. The sleek figure puzzles a moment, attempts to process the drastic change of situation, and detects an ominous shadow projecting on itself. Dretphi raises the large machete with both hands as its gleaming edge glows bright in the off-color outpost lightning and crashes it down into the figure, splitting the meeting point between the shoulder and neck. A stream of transparent red blood waterfalls down the body from the machete. The figure shudders and fights a few moments before going limp off the blade into a heap.

The tension wells in the minutes of silence and stillness. Everyone watches either end of the hallway for any signs of activity. Dretphi scans her direction with sub-machine in one hand and machete in the other. "I think we are not under threat right now."

Bach drags himself up in a slight daze. "Okay. Door? Please?"

Sebastian phases his upper body through the thick doors. The two crew members leap in fright as the angry ghostly figure materializes through the door. Sebastian glances between the two crew members. "Will someone please... OPEN THIS FUCKING DOOR! So we may live long enough to RESCUE YOU!"

Sebastian hovers in front of a few crew members and summarizes. “So, you actually got into the control center and something brought the system out of standby mode?”

One of the cameraman nods and shrugs. “We can’t figure out if one of the adventurers hit something or if it was remotely triggered. But, the place was silent. Before we knew it, alarms were going off. Our group ran into those cyber-commandos... Or whatever the fuck they are... And we were lucky to get everyone into this old barrack.”

A half-emin engineer sighs and shakes her head. “Unfortunately, the only thing we’ve managed is to get the door to lock and off the security system. Poor Radnae caught a plasma bolt to the shoulder blade. Harris got a bunch of ribs broken by a few punches. And Urdi got her ankle twisted when one of them sweep kicked her.”

Sebastian drifts in thought a few moments and returns their expectant gazes. “Okay. Hang tight, I’m going to scout our path back. I get the feeling these cyber-commandos are the real defense force here. Meanwhile, I’ll have my team help the injured and work on a plan for getting everyone out safely.”

Sebastian waves to Aristespha as he flies to the large entry door. She nods back and resumes her medical treatment of the large Fvalian man with a very serious plasma burn on his shoulder. “You are very lucky. It looks like your camera harness and backpack broke the plasma bolt early. These are pretty terrible burns, but you still have a shoulder and shoulder blade. I’ll apply some initial healing and preventive magic, and synth skin cover. Anything else will have to waiting until we get to the surface.”

The Fvalian man does his best to nod in spite of laying on his belly and some muscle in pain. “Yes, ma’am. Umm... Is Urdi’s ankle serious?”

Aristespha smirks slyly and pats him on his good arm. “Oh. It’s only a sprain, she was lucky to see that sweep kick and dodge most of it. But for you, Radnae, I have a question.”

Radnae blinks and twists his head carefully up to Aristespha with curiosity. “What’s that, ma’am?”

Aristespha leans close to one of Radnae’s big furry ears and whispers softly, “Do you know of any really nice restaurants in Amarath Valley? Because from the way Urdi has been trying to catch your eye, you might be going to one.”

A flush of pink fills Radnae’s face and he lowers his head to hide it from view. “Y-you really think that- She’d ask me out?”

Aristespha grins and chuckles softly to herself while applying the next stage of Radnae’s treatment. “Oh, call me old fashioned, but I think when a brave man shields a lady from a ball of super-heated gas, he should at LEAST get a nice dinner of out it. Now, make eye contact and wave at her with your good arm.”

Sotalia sits nearby lightly applying the last strip along a middle-aged man's side. The side of his chest is heavily bruised and sore. He groans and grumbles with each unintentional move that causes pain. Sotalia reaches into a belt pouch and pulls out a small vial of blue liquid. "Now drink this."

The man eyes the vial with suspicion and furrows his brow at Sotalia. "What's it do?"

Sotalia quirks an eyebrow back and holds it closer to the man's face. "Oh, you know, prevents you from experiencing tremendous amounts of pain when the brace strips I put on you activate and move your broken ribs away from your internal organs."

The man glares at the vial again. Sotalia rolls her eyes and sighs. "It's blue raspberry flavored, if that helps, Mr. Harris."

Harris twists his mouth and takes hold of the vial. "Like the slushies at the convenience store?"

Sotalia nods. Harris twists opens the top and pours the solution into his mouth, tilting his head back. He swallows and gives a nod of approval at Sotalia. "Not bad. So, what's next?"

Sotalia grins and presses her hand on the side of Harris. "This."

Harris's eyes widen as the strips glow and a few ribs shift slightly underneath his skin and the strips. He checks his side, gently pokes the bruises, and lifts his intrigued expression to Sotalia. "Man, that is such a fucked up feeling."

Sotalia applies a cover pad over the strips and laughs with Harris. "I KNOW! I've used these a few times and I never get used to that."

Cideeda, Dretphi, and Bach sit on the ground around the cyber-commando Dretphi put her machete through. It lays inside the barracks near the door with power core missing. Bach rests his head back on the wall and whistles. "These are some serious cyborgs. I'm glad you had that machete, otherwise we'd probably still be fighting it."

Dretphi sits up, draws a small knife from her belt, and attempts to cut the outer layer on the cyborg. The blade presses firmly on exterior surface, but no amount of pressure leaves a mark of any kind. Cideeda growls and shakes her head while she waves a scanner device. "Damn this thing! It's like my scanner pulses are going right through."

Bach tilts himself forward and gets his legs underneath him. He rises up and momentarily braces himself against the wall. Both Dretphi and Cideeda reach out to catch him. Bach waves his hand and chuckles. "I'm good. Leg fell asleep sitting on that floor. I'm decently recovered in the magic department."

Dretphi stands up, walks around the cyborg, and pats Bach on shoulder. "I need to say, thank you for shielding us and disarming it."

Bach hangs his head and shrugs. "Ah, not a problem. But, I get the feeling when we get out of this Sotalia and Aristespha are going to take turns grilling me for how I did all that."

Bach feels a familiar embrace around his arm with a head leaning against. He follows along his arm to see the toothy grin of Cideeda. She winks and lets go. "Hey, you're getting the results that keep us alive. That's good enough in my book."

Cideeda glares down at the cyborg and kicks it away from her. "Let's get away from the dead thing."

Dretphi and Bach agree and follow Cideeda as she leads them to Aristespha and Sotalia. Bach briefly looks back at the cyborg corpse and squirms a bit. "Still feel a bit weird about killing that thing."

Dretphi nods solemnly and turns her head to Bach. "It is never easy when it is something you can sympathize with. It did force a decision upon us all. It or us. Do not feel bad for choosing us along with yourself."

Cideeda aims her head over her shoulder to Bach and Dretphi with a faint frown. "And honestly, if there's any souls trapped in those things, I think we're doing them a huge favor."

Bach ponders quietly in thought for a moment and sighs. "Yah... Especially, those rotting ones. That's has to be some kind of hell."

Sebastian rockets through the closed large doors and meets everyone in the middle. "Everyone... We have a situation! Gather around!"

Sebastian hovers in the middle his group and the crew with a serious expression of concern. "I checked most the way back. And everywhere we ran into the cyber-zombies, we have cyber-commandos waiting for us. What's worse is that they are able to coordinate with each other. After the first few shot at me, the rest stopped trying."

Members of the crew wither as dread weighs over them. Dretphi crosses her arms and lowers her head, thinking. "Any tactics you witnessed them employ?"

Sebastian nods gravely. "Yah. Plenty. They changed up hiding spots between when I passed them first time and on my return. They're in groups of three now. And, it looks like more are gathered the closer you get to the exit."

Aristespha holds her face and breathes deeply with worry in her voice. "Any signs they are going to break into here?"

Sebastian shakes his head and frowns. "No. They're waiting for us to make a move."

Dretphi growls in frustration. "We were lucky with the two we encountered. It will be a dangerous and deadly fight to get to the surface. If they can communicate, our slow scout and ambush tactics will cease to work. We will be surrounded fast."

Sotalia rubs her temples and winces as her mind runs through options. "There's only so much firepower I've got, but I can throw my heavy hitters. How many are we looking at?"

Sebastian grimaces and lowers his head in grim understanding. "Fifteen or so from my count along the path."

Sotalia blinks, bites her lower lip, and drifts off from the group in frustration with a single word. "Fuck..."

Cideeda paces around near the huddle with her brain churning through scenarios and halts. "We need a distraction or something to just to keep them from attacking us. Just for a few minutes. If we run for it, we should get to the exit easy enough."

Drephi listens attentively to Cideeda and nods in agreement. "Avoid engagement. Move fast. That would be our best option."

Sotalia spins around towards the group and balks. "But, we need a distraction or something to temporarily take them out! I can throw some ball lightning, they didn't seem to like electrical magic that much. But, that only can reach within a few meters of a spot!"

An idea sparks inside Bach, pieces of a puzzle fall into place, and he tilts his head to Cideeda. "When you scanned the cyborg, the pulses were going through it? Not refracted around or absorbed?"

Cideeda lifts a flap on her vest, retrieves the small scanner, and presses buttons to bring up the last reading. "Right through. I got some internal data of the cyborg, but mostly reflections from the micro-mesh reinforced concrete that makes up this base."

A gloved hand reaches behind the scanner and directs it towards Aristespha. "I see. I read about these once. These were infiltration commandos. They might have radar transparency augmentations to avoid being detected in a radar network."

Bach pulls a smirk from the corner of his mouth. "So, how much would a powerful EMP fuck them up?"

Everyone's focuses on Bach. Cideeda perks her ears, opens her eyes. "They probably have some protections, but nothing like a front line cyborg would. It might shut them down for awhile."

Sebastian breaks into a hopeful smile. "Whacha got, bro?"

Bach nods as he feels his plan take form in his mind. "I believe I can construct a device that can release a powerful enough EMP. The construction of the outpost will keep it in the hallways and bounce it concentrated throughout the base. At the very least, it'll take out their communications for awhile."

Sotalia furrows her brow, faces Bach to seek hope, but remains reserved about the plan. “I’m sure between you, Aristespha, and me, we can power this up and make it work. But, if we did have to fight, I don’t know how much magic we’d have left to fight.”

Bach’s eyes glint and the smirk splits to a grin. “Don’t worry, I got most the power covered.”

Bach grabs edges of his duster and fans it open to everyone. Inside the few pockets, the duster contains a collection of a dozen salvaged, nearly fully charged power cores.

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Sebastian flies around and directs people around. “Okay! Dretphi. Shield deployed and machete ready. Bash and slash anything that doesn’t have the sense to get out of the way. Cideeda. Shoot anything that tries to get up in front of us. Aristespha. Ward and barrier the crew. Crew members! Line up two wide. Help Mr. Harris, Urdi, and Radnae along. Bach and Sotalia. When it blows and the crew clears the doors, I want you two to cover the back and make it hell for anything that tries to follow us.”

People form up along the longer wall near the entry point, but with a healthy distance from the actual large door. Cideeda reaches inside the access panel and readies some rigging. Dretphi stretches, holds her shield gauntlet forward as a force field forms into a tower shield, and wields her large, glimmering machete. Aristespha recites incantations, precisely motions her body, and wills a protective warping bubble around the crew members with room left for her group. Bach and Sotalia stand facing each other in front of the door. Bach places his hands half a meter apart in the air front of Sotalia. “Okay. To build this thing real quick, I’m going to need you to flow some energy into it to keep the build processes going. That way I can concentrate on charging it up with the power cores. Okay?”

Sotalia nods slowly and stares at Bach warily awaiting more instruction. “Yes. What do I need to do?”

Bach shakes his hand up and down, bounces his glances between them. “Keep your hands right here, and when I say so just flow energy into it.”

Sotalia cautiously reaches her hands out next to Bach’s. He spins his hands around a center point to the top and bottom, while her hands remain at the sides. Bach takes a deep breath in, as his eyes glow brightly. “Here we go!”

A surge of magical flow erupts from Bach and jets into the space between his hands. The amorphous magical energy solidifies into a ball outer structure and shapes mechanical and technological elements inside. Two disc form and slide on the outside the ball under each of Sotalia’s hands. Sotalia gawks at the creation before her and attempts in vain to follow all that is happening. She barely hears Bach’s voice call out. “Now! Flow into it!”

Sotalia shudders her head, blinks, and stumbles upon her words nervously. “W-w-wait! W-w-what kind of magical energy!?”

Bach lets go of the top and bottom of the creation, searches his duster for a power core, and briefly glances nonchalantly at Sotalia. “Umm. Well, any really. It’ll process it out.”

This answer did nothing to settle the battleground of emotions inside Sotalia. But, she releases a form of magical energy and startles as the discs lock on to the streams from her hands. She studies the device as it builds itself. She could feel the flurry of activity between her hands and the strange processes working. Bach presses a power core into the bottom of the creation. He puts his hand on top again, and concentrates. Sotalia feels hundreds of tweaks throughout the device, shifts in magical flows, and even the adjustments to the discs near her hands. A massive, frightening release of energy pours into the center from the power core. Bach returns the empty power core into his duster and replaces it with another one. Each power core fills the center and it shines brighter. Sotalia only watches in awe, but eventually comes to her senses when she notices a tremble in her hands. Bach stops short of retrieving the seventh power core and puts his free hand on the bottom. "That's all she's going to hold. Time to seal her up and prime it."

With another surge of magic flow, the individual constructions within solidify and the outside changes to a more opaque color. The discs next to Sotalia's hands dissipate into the final form of the EMP bomb. Sotalia cautiously drifts her hands away to the side, but stands fascinated. Bach shifts over to the side and kindly coughs to get Sotalia's attention. "Hey, you might want to move out of the way. It's going to fly out the door when I trigger it."

Sotalia shakes her head, briefly recounts the situation, and then steps away to await the next phase of the plan. She puts on a hasty front of confidence as she moves away. Bach nods to Cideeda. "Open the door."

Cideeda takes her hand off the handle of her shotgun and hits a sequence of buttons. The large doors open and Bach releases the bomb. It rockets off through the door and jets down the hallway. Bach rushes into the protection bubble with everyone else. Cideeda presses another button and the door quickly seals. She hops into the bubble. A tense few moments hang over the gathering. The large door rattles, lights flicker to a very dim glow, the protective bubble crackles with tiny arcs, and a low singular tremor resonates the very structure of the outpost. Cideeda rushes over and pulls an emergency release handle inside the access panel. The hydraulic override of the door releases it open. Sebastian flies forward through the door, checks either way of the hallway, and yells, "LET'S MOVE IT!"

The cyber-commando stumbles around in the middle of the hallway. It partially recovers from the daze enough to receive a powerful energy shield bash and flies into concrete wall with a resounding thud. Another recovering cyber-commando spins shakily around to the noise and shudders when a large machete slices into its neck. It falls and reveals another one of its kind sitting up from the ground. A loud kaboom echoes, a lead slug bounces off its head, and it slams back down onto the ground. Cideeda pumps her shotgun and calls out to everyone, "They're getting back up! Looks like these weren't hit as hard as the others!"

Sebastian rockets around the corner and ethereally shouts down the hallway to everyone. "Last three are still groggy and it's a straight shot out!"

Drephi and Cideeda charge around the corner. There's a loud crackle of energy before the sound of another large mass hitting a wall. Another shotgun blast resonates and metal strikes

against something soft. Sebastian stays in the middle of the intersection, directs, and checks everyone as they run past. Sotalia fires a bolt of lightning behind her and resumes running. Bach sends a volley of plasma bolts from his pistol to cover Sotalia and keep the more alert cyborgs from approaching closer. Sotalia setups for another casting, waits for Bach to run past, and releases another arc of electricity down the hall. Sebastian joins up and flies next to Sotalia and Bach. "Save the firepower and run! We may need it outside!"

Dretphi and Cideeda leap to either side of the outpost entry and the crew run out with Aristespha in the middle. A number of cheers come from the crowd of the other Next Adventurers of Nexus crew. Samantha and Gerald run out to the rescued crew and immediately lead them to take the injured to nearby vehicles. Deedri rushes over to assist, perky and happy to see the crew and to be of help. Mordoran nods respectfully and gives an honest applause. Chad, Tassilda, and Trakenthin glower at the events unfolding before them. Bach and Sotalia halt and pivot around. Bach breathes heavily and squints down corridor past the entry. "Oh shit... I don't think they're stopping. Oh shit. They might be operating on their own without something to keep them in here."

Sotalia scans down the corridor with Bach and her eyes widen in horror. "They're all coming back online! Even the unconscious ones that we passed by earlier!"

Dretphi takes a deep breath and screams out to the crowds. "MOVE BACK! THEY ARE COMING TO THE ENTRY! GET BACK NOW!"

Sebastian jets out of the entry way, spins around, and watches the growing mass of movement. "It took them out for awhile, but I guess they engineered them to handle an EMP. They're all coming towards the exit."

Aristespha stops behind everyone from a run. "Bach! Do you have another one of those barriers left in you? Even if I call the guild and military, it'll take them at least half an hour to get out here."

Bach's expression goes into a near panic and he starts searching the area. "Uh- I- Uh- Maybe. But, one or two won't get through, but this many?! I need a power source to recharge the-"

His eyes lock onto a large trailer power cell in use by most of Next Adventurers of Nexus equipment. He points out the device and stares at it with sheer determination. "THAT."

Dretphi and Cideeda bolt out to the trailer power cell. Dretphi works on unlocking the restraints and getting the device to roll on its wheels. Cideeda rips out plugs and disconnects cables in bulk to get it free. Aristespha begins an incantation and ends with throwing both hands forward. A massive wave of force funnels down the corridor and launches cyborgs back. Sotalia casts a number of shock wave bolts and each impact sends a cyborg spinning into the air behind the horde. Dretphi lifts the tongue of the trailer power cell and drags the contraption behind her with sheer brute strength. Cideeda rips out the last few cables and clears the way in front of Dretphi of anything that'd stop the wheels. Bach reaches his hand out, his eyes glow, and energy flows into a hexagonal grid in front of him. The grid grows into the archway of the entry and roots itself to the concrete around. Sotalia and Aristespha back

away and keep spells at the ready. Dretphi slides to a stop behind Bach and positions the trailer power cell next to him. "It is here!"

Bach pulls his hand away from the framework of hexes and a woven cord of magical threads form from the palm of his hand. He quickly pivots around, examines the power cell, and flips an access panel covered in warnings. With a quick glance to his cord hand and the insides of the power cell, he jams his hand inside, pauses, and concentrates. The cord flashes to a bright glow and the framework fills in quickly, growing denser by the second. Eventually, a thick golden barrier forms, securely anchored into the structure of the outpost. A series of plasma bolts from inside the outpost pelt the barrier, with no effect. Bach sighs with relief and jogs away from the entryway. "It should be good! I guess... I hope?"

Aristespha hangs up on her aetherphone, walks over to the humvee, and addresses the team sitting inside. "Well, the army should be here soon enough to lock down the area. Local guild office was happy for the containment and information. So, a nice bonus."

Sotalia grumbles as she sits in the front seat and sips from bottle of water. "Still can't believe we had to help them out."

Cideeda finishes crewing down a large piece of jerky and taps Sotalia on the shoulder laughs. "Did you see the look on their faces when we got the crew out? I hope THAT gets put on air!"

Dretphi groans, throws her head back into her pillows, and sinks into her back seat. "I worry what will be on the show."

Bach yawns and stretches his neck. He chuckles to himself and shakes his head. "I don't think they'll have much material to work with."

Aristespha puzzles at Bach and steps closer to lower her voice with a wry smile. "Why do you say that?"

Bach gestures towards the power cell near the magical barrier. "I think that's the only one they brought of those and they have a lot of power hungry equipment. And, I bet the EMP didn't help."