

Ain't A Hero – Episode 7

by Bryan Schuder

Samantha finally kicks the shoes off her feet onto the hotel floor as she adjusts her aetherphone on her nightstand. “So, after the Greater Azure Alliance specialists, that we ran into at the Amaranth Dining House, blasted the barrier off, they put their own up and sealed the area off tight. Thankfully, we got the trailer power cell back in one piece, so that’s a deposit we’ll get back.”

Howard’s vocal tone maintains neutral and calming. “Interesting. I’m glad that everyone got out in one piece. Be sure to give Radnae, Urdi, and... Well, even that Ol’ Harris a week off and coupon to that hot springs we got the advertising deal with an hour or so north of town. So, how much footage did you all manage to get?”

Samantha winces and sighs heavily, before drawing a deep breath in. “A little. Between the military lockdown, that electrical thing which corrupted a bunch of recordings, and then not having power for most the equipment... I’m surprised we even got that much! I’m not sure if its enough for an episode. I mean what kind of episode is this going to be?! They boldly eat, fail miserably on their first mission, and then go home to lick their wounded egos?”

A low laugh grows into loud cackling through the speaker. Samantha stares at her phone, not sure if confusion or concern is appropriate at this moment. Gerald halts work on his laptop to slowly rotate his head and focus on the phone, too. Howard stops laughing and exhales with a sinister glee. “Yes. Just that. With a little twist.”

Samantha leans over to keep an ear closer to her phone and contorts her face in thought. “What kind of twist?”

Howard chuckles to himself and explains with a proud plotting tone. “You see. We have a team of young, ego-heavy, special little snowflakes that just got their spotlight stolen by another team; a team of old, experienced adventurers that made them look like complete chumps. On soon to be national television.”

Samantha blinks and her eyes try to map out Howard’s thought process. Her expression widens as the pieces link together in her own mind. Gerald and Samantha quickly match similar looks. Samantha mutters under her breath, “Holy shit.”

Howard snickers as he hears Samantha’s epiphany and beams with pride through the phone. “Yes. We have something to catch all these young egos’ frustrations and ire. Challengers. Conflict. Catalysts. We don’t have to do anything. We just need these two groups to be in the same area as each other.”

Samantha draws an evil grin and listens to her phone with anticipation. “So, what’s the plan? What do you need?”

The sound of Howard scratching his chin stubble resonates through the speaker. “Keep the crew checking the spy cameras in their rooms at that roach motel. With those living condition

and today's humiliation, I'm pretty sure their in THE best moods. I want you to arrange some video journal segments and pry as hard as you can into how they feel about the other group. I've got a few informants to call up. I wonder where Sebastian and crew are staying... I wonder what's around there..."

Bach steps out of the bathroom doorway in socks, shorts, and a simple shirt. He presses the towel on his head over his hair, getting the last majority of the water out. He plods through the hallway and out into the living and dining area. Bach scouts out a nice spot on the couch, but halts. He pulls the towel back and down out of his face. He then faces the dining table. Aristespha and Sotalia sit in chairs opposite of each other, at the end of the table. A chair at the very same end slides out, and both Aristespha and Sotalia watch Bach expectantly. Aristespha directs Bach to the chair with a gloved hand and a reserved smile. "Have a seat, Bach."

Bach cautiously approaches the chair and maintains an awkward eye contact between the two. He sits down and notices two items on the table. The golden shield disc, from the day Bach met everyone, still remains solid and stable. And the magical cord still ensnares the cyber-commando plasma rifle. Bach sighs deeply and lowers his head. "Okay... So where do you want to start the inquisition?"

Aristespha gently lifts her open hands off the table and cranes her head to look Bach in the eye with concern and honesty. "Bach. We just want to ask some questions, if you are comfortable with them."

Sotalia sits straighter in her chair and gives a grateful smile to Bach. "You saved our asses yesterday. So, thank you. And, we really want to help you out, but... Dammit! You've got to give us something to work with!"

Bach feels a hand pat his shoulder softly. Aristespha maintains a calm and purposeful voice. "I know it's a touchy subject, but we need to know more about your abilities. How are you able to perform these feats. And importantly, why you got to this point. We can help you. You can definitely help us. But, we need some information to start with."

A loud sigh sounds from Bach. He briefly grits his teeth, furrow his brow, and grimaces. He then relaxes and resigns to an acceptance of the situation. He raises his head and settles back in his seat. "Okay. I guess it's only fair. And, I don't want to leave you guys in the dark. Here's the quick and short version. After the encounter with the Nightmare Geist, I was left with limitations on the magical energy reserves I could use safely. I could get maybe one low level spell off, then that was it for half an hour or more. So... I was a lame mage."

Aristespha keeps her focus on Bach, but Sotalia squirms at the mention of a "lame mage". Aristespha narrows her eyes and pays particular attention to Bach's mannerisms. "What restrictions do you have?"

Bach takes in a deep breath and thinks a few moments. "My throughput from the abstract prism to myself is limited. What I have stored within me, I can use just fine. But, if I use too much of that and well, I risk a complete drain out."

Sotalia blinks wide-eyed and eases her gaze right at Bach. “That explains the physical weakness after the big stuff. But, you recover quick enough.”

Bach shrugs nonchalantly and smirks indifferently. “My reserve capacity is roughly like it was before. I just can’t get the throughput to do any normal spells, even with direct casting.”

Aristespha continues her examining stare of Bach and removes her hand from his shoulder to tap on the golden shield disc. “You’ve found a way around that limitation. Describe it to me.”

Silence aggitates the attention of Sotalia. She alternates a confused look between Bach and Aristespha. Bach frowns lightly and he searches his mind for the words while his expression drifts at a lost. Sotalia curls a lip in frustration and pokes Bach hard in the arm. “Well?! Describe it!”

Bach snaps out of the stupor and rubs his arm. “Ow! I’m trying! It’s just a bit hard to describe. I don’t know the official words for it.”

Sotalia crosses her arms and quirks a brow with a twist in her lips. “Well, how did you figure it out? Start there.”

Bach nervously rubs his hands together and eventually forms a cohesive explanation. “I was pretty depressed about not being able to cast spells. So, I thought about it and obsessed over magical energy efficiency. Direct casting helped a bit, but it was still too inefficient. So, while laying aimless in my bed I tried to...”

Sotalia goads Bach again and holds her finger into his arm. Bach reflexively sneers and shifts his body in the seat away from her prod. She leans towards him and concentrates a glare. “Stop drifting off mid sentence.”

Bach grumbles, places his elbows on the table, and holds his head with his hands. “Sorry! It’s going to sound completely insane, but I tried to SEE the process of casting in my mind. To see a Foundation Construct function. To look... Where the Foundation Construct connects to the Abstract Prism? But that doesn’t make any sense...”

A strange feeling flows through Bach. He glances over at Sotalia and she can only return an expression of bewilderment. He shifts over to Aristespha. She nods with understanding and genuine interest. “Bach, what you are describing is called Flow Perception. It’s a process many at the Grand Library have been using for years to study magic. It’s a method of back-tracing how magical energy is manipulated.”

Sotalia snaps her head to Aristespha as the very idea flusters her. “What?! This is a thing?! Why haven’t I heard of it?!”

Aristespha lifts an eyebrow with a playful smile to Sotalia. “Well, how many advanced theory classes and high-level magical analysis courses have you taken?”

Sotalia snorts dismissively, rolls her eyes, and pushes back into her chair. Aristespha returns focus to Bach and maintains a respectful smile. "I guess you studied what you saw, experimented, and eventually got some results."

Bach nods within the confines of his hands and lifts his head up. "Yes. Took a long time, but I kept on figuring out how to use magic more efficiently, control flow better, and perform new magical operations. The individual parts aren't hard to figure out, but having to apply them properly is intense to say the least. It's gotten easier with familiarity."

Sotalia crosses her arms and taps her fingers. It's not long before she grumbles and slides her chair back. "Let's take this outside. The mission yesterday bumped our training time, so lets do it now. I want you to show me what you are talking about."

She shoots up out of her chair, marches to the sliding glass door, throws it open, and swiftly walks out to the training field. Her body language hints at a building annoyance. Bach scratches his head as he twists his head back from staring out at the door. Aristespha shakes her head, and calmly rises from her seat. "Don't worry. She was just hoping for an answer she should easily understand and immediately use for her practice of magic. She's a powerful and capable mage."

She glances at the open sliding glass door and her tone lowers. "And she's developed quite the competitive streak and temperment to match, too."

Bach shrugs and throws his hands up in the air, at a lost. "I don't know what to tell her. I couldn't do anything of significance for two years even after figuring out... the basics of this? Only recently have I gotten the hang of the big things you all have seen. I just about gotten all my old spells adapted."

Aristespha stands near Bach and waits for him to get out of his chair. "This is a woman who has always had top of the class energy capacity and throughout. She's never needed to optimize. There's spells she can cast with ease that would stress me too much. So, her style of magic isn't subtle in the slightest. But now, she wants to explore that horribly neglected avenue. I've tried to advise her before, but she's a difficult student. So, she's tried a bunch of gimmicks. At least her focus on direct casting is an actual method."

Bach stands up, holds his arm out, points along his forearm, and gives quizzical look to Aristespha. "Are the magical runes on her arm another attempt at optimizing her spell casting?"

An immediate eye roll from Aristespha follows Bach's statement. She groans and rubs her temple. "Thankfully, they're just surface dyes that will fade out eventually. Gods, they look ridiculous."

Sotalia, Aristespha, and Bach face a series of stone targets in an open field. Sotalia stretches her arms out and arches her back. She plants her feet down, raises an upright palm into the air next to her, and closes her eyes to concentrate. A few seconds later, the runes on her arm illuminate, and a flaming ball of orange and yellow hovers a few centimeters above her palm.

Sotalia confidently grins with a wily glint in her eyes when she glances back at Bach and Aristespha. “A fire bolt, direct cast, with runic optimization. Now show me your best version, Bach.”

Bach puzzles a moment at his predicament. He then pulls a devious smirk from the corner of his mouth. Aristespha notices the change of his expression, places her hands on her sides, and watches in anticipation as Bach walks up next to Sotalia. He stares forward to the target, lifts a hand palm up, and firmly grabs underneath Sotalia’s hand with the fire bolt. Sotalia’s confident expression pops and the sudden grip on her hand dumbfounds her. A blue glow dimly pulses in Bach’s eyes as the fire bolt’s outer flame dissipates. The bolt shrinks slightly as the color shifts from orange to blue and a blowtorch hiss replaces the gentle rolling flame noise. Bach moves Sotalia’s hand and directs it behind the bolt. He aims for a target, releases Sotalia’s hand, and the bolt darts off to a large stone. A loud crack happens mid flight as it breaks the sound barrier. It then explodes upon the stone surface. A very light glow fades from the stone surface over the next few seconds.

Sotalia gawks at the stone and the cooling spot on the surface. Aristespha holds her chin in thought with a slight violet glow in her eyes as she carefully surveys. Bach poses and nods with smug accomplishment. Sotalia recovers to her senses, twists her hand, snatches the collar on Bach’s shirt, and yanks him down to her level. She bares teeth and her eyes drill into Bach, each word from her mouth punctuates a resting growl. “WHAT. WAS. THAT?!”

Bach presents a calm exterior as he slowly meets Sotalia’s piercing glare. “My best version of a fire bolt?”

She furrows her brow, squints, and uses her other hand on the collar to draw Bach closer. “Don’t be CUTE with ME.”

Aristespha beams with self-satisfaction as she witnesses the scene unfold. Bach places his hands on Sotalia’s forearms and gently pulls them away as she reluctantly releases her grasp upon his shirt collar. “I’ll show you the best I can. It will not be easy, but I will show you some basics.”

Sotalia rolls her shoulders, settles back into a ready stance, and tries to put forth her previously confident posture. “Go ahead. I’m ready.”

Bach extends his palm up to towards the stone targets as a gesture. “Well, get another fire bolt ready.”

Sotalia holds her hand out, concentrates, and quickly summons another fire bolt. She maintains a wary watch of Bach. He hovers his hand next the side of the fire bolt, ponders a moment, and with a blue glow in eyes plucks the fire bolt off Sotalia’s hand. He levitates the fire bolt between both his hands and hums while he analyzes it. Sotalia’s jaw drops as she opens and closes her now empty hand. “The hell is this?!”

Aristespha grins mischievously and shuffles over to Sebastian now floating near her. Sebastian points to Sotalia and Bach, and asks, “What’s going on here, dear?”

Aristespha leans close to Sebastian and gestures between Bach and Sotalia. “Your brother is instructing Sotalia in the finer aspects of magical optimization.”

Sebastian turns to Aristespha in shock. “Is she actually listening to him?”

Aristespha shakes her head, but still maintains the grin. “Not exactly. He’s having to just blatantly show her in ways she can’t ignore. It’s been very effective. I’ve learned a lot by watching.”

Sebastian squints at the exchange between Bach and Sotalia, as he continues to pick apart and examine her fire bolt. “What’s Bach doing right now?”

Aristespha giggles to herself and winks to Sebastian. “He’s telling Sotalia the issues with her spell. I think he’s quite literally picking it apart before her eyes and critiquing it.”

Sebastian cringes and grits his teeth. “Oh, he doesn’t know how she gets. She’ll- Wait- Is she actually paying honest attention and not going on the defensive?!”

Aristespha nods and laughs to Sebastian. “She’s actually receptive. This is something she knows nothing about. She actually WANTS to learn it. And Bach has made it very apparent that she should shut up and pay attention. So... She actually is!”

Sebastian peers forward to Bach and Sotalia. “This is going to be good. Gods, I hope this will get her to stop spending money on all those magical gimmicks.”

Aristespha puts her hands together and looks upwards with desperate hope. “Oh, that would be so nice...”

Sotalia twists her mouth, locks her eyes to her hand, and winces from the sheer focus. Bach keeps his hand underneath Sotalia’s as the fire bolt slowly takes form. The fire bolt reaches the final stage and appears to be just like the many before. Sotalia gasps and exhales with relief. “Oh gods. That took forever!”

Aristespha taps a button on her tablet while she sits on a nearby log, still relishing the training Sotalia is going through. “7 minutes to be exact!”

Bach takes his hand out from underneath Sotalia’s and approves of her effort. “Well, that’s one tweak you can do. Just practice that a bunch and we’ll cover the many others later.”

Sotalia wipes a few beads of sweat from her head and brushes some of her hair over a horn. “This is ridiculous. This is so excruciating! The amount I have to hold back and little details I have to handle!”

Bach pivots his head back to Aristespha and Sebastian, while Sotalia continues to rant. He simply shrugs and Aristespha shakes her head and rolls her eyes. She stands up from the log, walks over to Sotalia, and pats her on the back. “Welcome to what the rest of us have to deal with.”

Bach sniffs the air and searches the afternoon skies. He points over to the house and walks that direction. "Let's go back inside. I'm getting a bit hungry and it's getting really cloudy. The dark kind of cloudy."

Aristespha joins Bach at his side and keeps pace with him. "Question about the magical materials you create. How are you stabilizing the magical energy? I've done research in similar for medical uses, but longevity has been an issue."

Bach searches his mind briefly and furrows his brow in thought. "Geometric substructures. That's what's given me the best results. I found that most spells don't bother messing with the substructures of the magical energy lattices and matrixes, since they aren't intended to be permanent things. I created my first stabilized energy dish after watching a chemistry show on fullerenes."

Aristespha's expression grows a keen interest to the last statement and she quizzes Bach. "So a disc, similar to the one on the dining table?"

He shakes his head. "No. Dish. Like the ones you eat on. It's a bit embarrassing but... I hadn't washed dishes that week and didn't want to waste money on paper plates. So, I got inspired to form one. It worked decently enough. It faded away after a week, but I refined it. In fact, I eventually made a set of dishware for eight that included dishes, bowls, saucers, tea cups, glasses, and spoons. Knives and forks were a bit hard to-

Bach stops talking as Aristespha slides right in front of him. The exasperation in her face highlights the cutting glare right into his eyes. "You mean to tell me, your kitchen was stocked with stabilized energy DISHWARE?!"

Sebastian snaps his arm out in front of Sotalia and they both stop a few meters behind Bach. Sebastian immediately recognizes that particular tone of Aristespha's voice. He gestures to Sotalia to go around and she unquestioningly agrees. The two circumnavigate around at a safe distance and maintain a careful watch of the situation. Aristespha pinches the bridge of her nose, closes her eyes, takes a deep breath, and exhales. "It's okay. It's fine. A little frustrating that a development in magical materials was used to manufacture dishware. And, now I guess some shady landlord has them?"

Bach bites his lip and warily nods. "Yes. When I was abducted and then released to my room here, I called my landlord to sell or keep whatever was left to pay this last month's rent. It wasn't bad dishware. Non-stick. Microwave safe. Looked pretty. Hate to say it, but I'm pretty sure my old landlord probably has already rented the place out again. Knowing her, she's probably advertised it as furnished now to scam a higher rent."

Aristespha grumpily pivots away from Bach and with posture upright as she steps away. Bach scans around the area and follows behind her. "I can create more. Would you like a set? I'm sorry! I don't know what is significant or what isn't these days with magic. I've been out of the loop for some time!"

Aristespha sighs heavily, relaxes her posture, and halts in front of the sliding glass door. A thought crosses her mind and a recognition of opportunity is in her eyes. She lifts her head to

face Bach with an unamused, but faintly forgiving expression. "I actually have many magical materials I've designed for medical use. I can create small batches, but they are prototypes. You help me create them, I'll start teaching you medical magic. You'll need to know it anyway to properly manufacture the materials."

Bach puts both thumbs up in agreement. "That's fine with me! Just let me know what you need."

A cunning smile emerges on Aristespha's face and she glances at the cord on the dining table. "Let's start with ten meters of the magical cord stuck on that gun and enlightening me on its properties."

Bach, Cideeda, and Dretphi sit around the dining table. Roll-out pads and cloths cover spaces on the table in front of each of them. Dretphi detaches the barrel of her sub-machine gun from the field stripped assembly and runs a cleaning rod down the length. Cideeda checks the ejector of her shotgun, oils a few areas, and then removes the bright orange safety plug from the chamber. She cycles it a few times, puts the safety plug back in, and stows it into a carrying case. Bach hovers the exploded parts and pieces of his plasma pistol between his hands. He makes some final tweaks and the pistol reassembles itself, floating gently down to the pad in front of him. Cideeda shakes her head with a toothy grin after watching the pistol rebuild itself. "That's still fascinating to me. By the way, since you are done, could you..."

Cideeda leans over in her chair below the table and hoists the bound up plasma rifle to the tabletop. She taps a claw on the rifle. "If you could remove the jam in and on this thing, I'd really appreciate it."

Bach reaches over the table grabs the magical cord still attached the rifle. He follows the length and draws up the slack. Coiling the bundle in his hand, his eyes flick blue, the magical threads on the gun retreat to the cord end, and the cord releases from the weapon. Bach lifts the cord off the table and searches for a spot to toss it. Dretphi notices Bach looking around the vicinity. "What are you looking for?"

Bach twists his mouth and hums indecisively. "Trying to find a place to put this. I don't want it. And I'm full up energy wise, so breaking it down is a waste."

Cideeda presents an evil smile and holds her hand out to Bach. "Let me have it! I got an idea."

He passes the coil of cord to Cideeda with apprehension. She gestures both Bach and Dretphi close and lifts the cord as a point of attention. "Sotalia has been wanting this ever since we got back from the mission. But, she knows I want the plasma rifle."

Bach tilts his head to the side and blinks in confusion. "Why would she want the cord? Aristespha seems more interested in all magical materials than Sotalia."

Dretphi chuckles softly to herself, eyes the hallway, whispers, "She likes to collect magical oddities. Of all varieties."

Cideeda playfully groans and slides her chair back. "That's a nice way of putting it. When it comes to oddball magical garbage, she's practically a hoarder. If it wasn't for all the folded space frame carriers we have, we'd need a separate trailer to haul it all."

She peers at the hallway entry and then walks softly over towards the kitchen. She steps next to the garbage can, waves the cord side to side at Bach, and places it prominently next to the garbage can. After a few steps, she directs her voice to the hallway. "Hey, Bach."

Bach snaps his head to Cideeda. She points at Bach and throws her hand from her mouth. Bach's eyes widen in recognition and he pivots his head towards the hallway. "Yes?"

Cideeda gracefully slides herself into her chair and continues the faux conversation. "What do you want me to do with this magical cord from the plasma rifle?"

Bach searches his mind for a response and aims his voice towards the hallway. "I don't know. I don't want it. Just put it by the garbage can in the kitchen for now."

Cideeda grabs hold of a chair next to her and slides it around. She then points down at the table and whispers, "Now act like you're working and wait for the show."

The three work on their tasks. Each occasionally sneaks a glance to the door out without turning their heads. After a few minutes, Sotalia confidently strides out of the hallway. She casually peeks at what everyone is doing along her way to the kitchen. She hums a tune to herself as she adjusts her loose fitting t-shirt in front of the refrigerator. She opens the door to the fridge and gazes into it. She briefly darts her eyes to the dining table, analyzing the situation from the corner of her eyes. Her head tilts down and she ducks down in front of the fridge and out of sight from everyone else. It is easy to hear the noise of someone rummaging through the refrigerator. The sound of someone reaching across a distance across a tile floor to slide an object over is harder to hear, but not impossible.

After a minute of refrigerator sorting noises, Sotalia pops up into view again with a vegetable snack pack and a sports drink in hand. She pulls her shirt down over the waistband of her shorts and closes the fridge door. Then, swiftly but carefully, she moves back towards the hallway. Cideeda winks to Bach and Dretphi. As Sotalia passes by her, Cideeda flicks a part off the table to land nearby Sotalia. "Dammit. Hey, can you get that for me, Sotalia?"

Sotalia freezes mid step, pivots to face the part, and nervously smiles. "Oh! Sure."

She squats down to the floor and keeps her back straight, her midsection less flexible than usual. With a free hand, she snatches the part from the floor, slowly rises to stand, and drops it in Cideeda's awaiting hand. "Back to reading! You all have fun with your... fixing stuff."

Sotalia steps the rest of the way through the hallway entrance. A series of faster footsteps echo seconds after she's out of sight. Cideeda places her elbow on the table, props her head up by her hand, and just shakes her head. Dretphi returns from watching the hallway and smirks. "She does try."

Cideeda shrugs and throws her hands up. "I know. Wrapping the cord around the waist wasn't a bad idea. I've got to give her some credit this time."

Bach scratches his head and settles his attentions back to his plasma pistol. "Huh. Why be so secretive?"

Cideeda laughs and motions towards the hallway. "Oh, it's because we've given her so much shit about collecting all that magical crap. She said many times she's going to prune her collection. But, when something catches her eye, she'll try to get it without anyone us noticing. That way we don't have a chance to call her out on it."

Dretphi taps Bach on the shoulder with a smile. "It is similar to when she stole your last piece of bacon. At the Amaranth Dining House."

The moment flashes back into Bach's mind. His jaw drops as the memory replays the scene and the order of events. His expression falls into disbelief as the most probable explanation factors into this recent, little mystery. "The fuck? After acting all snotty about my choice of breakfast? She steals a piece of my bacon?"

Cideeda covers mouth and giggles. "OH GODS. That's right. I thought I saw her fork move down on his plate, but she actually moved quick that time. I only caught a bit of it out of the corner of my eye."

Bach leans forward in his chair, a tight frown on his face, as he tries to decide how to feel about this latest development. Dretphi locks the last part into her sub-machine gun and places the reassembled weapon in its case. She uncovers something on the floor. Her arm muscles tighten as she raises her machete over the tabletop and carefully places it down. She sorts through her repair kit, withdraws a magnifying glass, and starts to inspect the edge of the blade. Bach examines the part of the blade closest to him. "So, what are you looking for exactly? It seems like it doesn't have a scratch on it."

Dretphi uses a metal pick along the edge of the blade to feel out a spot, and then looks up from the magnifying glass. "Inspecting the blade. Verifying the enchantment upon the edge. Our last enemies were very hard when hit."

Cideeda breaks from examining the plasma rifle and turns to Bach with an inquisitive gleam. "Speaking of which. Bach? Have you done any weapon or armor enchantments before?"

This statement abruptly changes the thoughts in Bach's mind. He flips through past projects in his head, analyzing each one, and eventually arrives at a conclusion. "No. I don't think I've ever tried. Never had any spare weapons or armor to experiment with."

Dretphi grins slightly to Cideeda who returns with a toothy grin. Cideeda leans close to Bach and flutters her eyes at him. "Would you like some?"

The rain pours down around the rural area outside Amaranth Valley. Water flows through the natural drainage paths and into some artificial ones near the road. The creek in the nearby woods swells to the edges of its banks. The chorus of drops upon the roof creates a low background drone inside the house. Bach places down another large rifle barrel next to the few others on the tabletop. He traces the length of the barrel with uncertainty. "I might be able to do something. Um, anti-friction coating inside the barrel? Maybe some micro-grooves on the rifling?"

Cideeda energetically pantomimes something bursting out in front her. "Can you make it so the rounds sent through it explode into fire on impact?!"

Bach's face blanks out after processing her request. Cideeda's excitement wanes as her expectations lower from witnessing Bach's reaction. Bach lowers his head down to inspect the barrel closer. Inspiration brews in the back of his head. He mumbles to himself as thought processes work out the details for the master plan. "But... Put mechanisms to... How much energy can I take from the round and convert... Then..."

Cideeda's ears perk and move to amplify the mumbling. Excitement flushes back into her face. Dretphi reads her expression and awaits in anticipation. Bach takes a deep breath and holds his forehead with his hand. Eventually, the thought processes reach a stopping point and present their reports to the front of Bach's mind. He lifts his eye brows up, takes his hand off his forehead, and holds his hand up to the air. "It would take A LOT of testing to get it right."

Dretphi and Cideeda smile at each other. Cideeda sits back in her chair and stretches her arms back. "More reasons to shoot guns? I'm not going to argue."

Bach picks up a sub-machine gun round on the table and picks up a shotgun shell in the other hand. "I might be able to do something with these rounds. Your sub-machine gun is gas-operated, so I'll have to work to emulate that, else it'll stop after one shot. Shotgun shells I can definitely work with. But, depending on what you want, we may need to treat the barrel with something."

He sinks back into the chair and sighs as the logistics calculate. "It'll take some time to figure it out and I can only make so many a day. But, if you want simple part performance tweaks, that I can do fast enough."

Cideeda and Dretphi discuss among themselves ideas for weapon improvements. Both point out aspects of the party arsenal and debate what would be the most useful. Each seems to take turns finding firearms, energy weapons, or ammunition to examine and hypothesize about. Bach casually picks up his plasma pistol still sitting on the pad in front of him. He removes the power pack and presses the safety discharge button a few times. Holding up in the air, pointing to the ceiling, he rotates the weapon in thought. In his mind, he visualizes the inner workings of the device, plays out the processes of its function, and finally notes the bottlenecks in the way of enhancement. He closes his eyes and relaxes, clearing his head out for the next step.

Flows of magical energy creep along his arm up onto and into the plasma pistol. Bach opens his bright blue eyes and trains them on the pistol. The pistol partially disassembles in specific

places. For each part that moves, new components magically form and bind themselves to existing pieces. The top lifts up, the sides of the barrel housing expands outwards, and the muzzle shifts forward a few centimeters. The gaps between the outer casing fill with magical plating supporting the new and existing pieces. It's a slow, methodical process, but within minutes the plasma pistol is now something a bit more powerful looking. A confident, roguish smile cracks from the corner of Bach's mouth.

Bach admires his handiwork. He's not really certain if the device will fire or even operate properly, but nothing a few adjustments can't fix. His overwhelming feeling of satisfaction fades when he catches the awkward stares of Dretphi and Cideeda. Cideeda resorts to waving a hand in front of Bach. His face drops into neutral and his eyes dart around the room. "Uh... Y-yes?"

Cideeda exhales briefly with relief and resumes a smile. "Good, you're back with us again! You zoned out for a while there. We didn't want to interrupt you, but I figured you were done when you started to admire your latest doomsday weapon like some kind of evil mad scientist."

Bach shudders and quickly frowns at the phrase "evil mad", while his gut tenses up. He eyes the plasma pistol with less enthusiasm than before. "Well, this might be a bit overkill."

Dretphi pats Bach on the shoulder and shares some advice. "Overkill today. Just enough kill tomorrow."

Cideeda nods and gives Bach a knowing gaze honed from experience. "Don't be afraid to put a few aces up your sleeves. The key is to keep them hidden until they are needed the most. A lot of people forget that part right up until its too late."

There's an odd sense of comforting wisdom that Bach finds in Cideeda's words. He relaxes and agrees with an accepting nod. "Yah. But, until then..."

The magical augments gradually vanish and leave the pistol floating in pieces. The parts hover back into place, reassemble themselves, and lock back into their original places. Bach replaces the power pack in the pistol, places the weapon in its holster, and into a case. Dretphi reminds herself of a previous thought and puts her hand on her machete. "What can you do for melee weapons?"

Bach grits his teeth and tilts his head side to side. "Ah. If you get the weapon how you want it, I know I apply a stabilization matrix onto and into it to help keep it the way you had it. Similar to what's on your machete right now. As for putting magical edges on things, I'm a bit wary to experiment on that. Especially, after my experiences making a knife and fork."

Cideeda blinks blankly, catches a similar reaction from Dretphi, and awaits an explanation from Bach. He lowers his head in embarrassment and regains enough composure to explain. "Long story short. The knife sliced through the tough steak I had, right into the last ceramic plate I had left. The fork fell off the table, landed head first, and stuck itself a centimeter into the vinyl and wood floor."

Both Dretphi and Cideeda stare wide-eyed in shock at Bach. He puts his hands to the side in resignation. "I know! After that I've avoided that bit of application until I can make anything like that safe. Well, at least enough for the user."

Bach holds up a finger and smirks. "Spoons on the other hand. I can do just fine."

Inspiration hits Cideeda's mind and she strokes the edge of her ear. "Make me a spoon."

Bach and Dretphi furrow their brows and squint in confusion at Cideeda. She slyly smiles and points to a kitchen counter with cereal boxes nearby. "We'll place it over there, and see how long before Sotalia takes it."

The group share a collective plotting look before Bach holds his hand out, palm up.

Aristespha jots down a few more notes before saving the document on her tablet. She reaches behind her and restacks a few pillows to support her back better. Sebastian's ethereal self materializes next to her on the bed. He nonchalantly puts an arm around her, or as close as he can without phasing through. "So, brushing up that sex scene in the chapter of your latest slash fic?"

She lets the tablet fall forward on her chest and gently swings her head to Sebastian with sarcasm tinting her voice. "Why, yes! I think I've settled on a surprise three-way now, with a voyeur hiding in the closet."

Sebastian grins smugly and meets Aristespha's gaze. "Ooo, is that a double entendre?"

She pauses to review her last statement and snorts lightly. Sebastian looks over her shoulder and gestures her to flip the tablet back up. "So, what were you writing down?"

Aristespha lifts the tablet back up to reveal various notes about magic energy types and studies on extreme, uncontrolled exposure to the different types. "Notes for research. Nothing really that exciting, unfortunately."

Sebastian reads a title line of one of the research papers. "Effects of counter-phased magical energy exposure? Wow. That's oddly specific field of study. What are you reading it for?"

Aristespha gives Sebastian an unamused gaze. "Your brother, of course. So far, inconclusive. Again, more to his story he has yet to tell."

Sebastian drops his head down and groans. "In time. I'm sure he'll tell it all in-"

With faintly glowing violet eyes, Aristespha holds onto Sebastian's hand and speaks with a soft voice. "It's okay. Really. We've all got stories that are uncomfortable to talk about. And, I've got enough information to begin to understand how he manipulates his variant of magic."

Sebastian lightly squeezes her hand and lifts his head to her, puzzling. "Begin to understand? You? Don't you have it figured out? You usually figure these things out, dear."

Aristespha twists her mouth and shrugs to Sebastian. “Sebastian, I consider myself very high on the magical knowledge and proficiency ladder. But, some of the shit your brother does would freak out the experts above me. I honestly can’t perceive half of what he does.”

He blinks in astonishment. A few seconds later, he switches to concern. “Is there anything I can do, I need to look out for, or maybe anything I can ask him?”

Aristespha slides down into the sheets and sinks her head into the pile of pillows. “Not right now. He’s fine. It’s okay. He has outstanding control of his abilities and he more than capable. It’s just...”

Sebastian cranes his head over Aristespha. “It’s just?”

She pulls the sheets up and curls into them. “I’ve diagnosed and treated people who have magical disabilities. I know people who specialize in that field. Many people have found effective ways to treat, compensate, and work around such disabilities. But...”

Aristespha drifts off into thought, gazing at Sebastian’s concerned face. “I don’t believe there’s ever been anyone that has taken this route of Bach’s... And, to such an extreme...”