

Ain't A Hero – Episode 8

by Bryan Schuder

Bach flips through a series of pages in a large medical textbook. His eyes wearily scan the words and drift between the paragraphs. It grows harder and harder to focus on the text and actually read the material. After a few minutes, he closes the book, tosses it to the side on the bed, and shuts his eyes as lets his head sink into the pillow. He rubs his eyes and blinks a number of times until his vision clears back up. He throws himself up to a seat on the bed and spins to place his feet on the floor. Pulling his back into a stretch, he yawns, stands up, and plods to the door. Bach looks out the window to see the rain still coming down and opens the door to the hallway.

Bach walks into the large living room and notices Aristespha sitting on the couch, staring a hole through paperwork on the coffee table. Bach slides over next to the arm of the couch and concentrates his gaze upon the piles of paper with an electronic tablet or two shuffled in between. Aristespha shakes her head side to side in an attempt to wake up and sits up straighter. She rubs her long ears and catches sight of Bach out the corner of her eye. “Oh! Sorry. I’m trying to finish up some paperwork. I should be done in an hour or... so... Then, we can work on your training and my materials research...”

Bach surveys the scene. Stacks of paperwork litter the area into roughly organized piles. There’s a few boxes of receipts and invoices that sit on the floor around the coffee table. Bach points to a seat cushion on the couch. “You want help? After working through that last book, this seems like a nice change of pace. Feels like I could be somewhat constructive here.”

Aristespha perks a brow and eyes Bach curiously, as she scoots over on the couch. “Which book?”

Bach carefully slides a pile of papers over and sighs with frustration. “Greyhawk’s Guide to Magical-Biological Interactions.”

Aristespha cringes and nods in commiseration. “That’s a rough one to get through. I burned up one coffee maker keeping myself awake when reading studying it. But, it does contain the best information I’ve found on that topic.”

Bach shrugs and leans his head over to idly read some random piece of paper. “Yah, but it’s actually nice to get the official terms for stuff. Calling everything That Thing was getting old quick.”

Aristespha chuckles to herself, stops as she remembers something, and fishes out a packet of papers from a stack next to her. “Speaking of official terms, if you could fill out how and where you want your pay, please.”

Bach takes the packet she offers him and flips through it with a bit of confusion. “Oh. Um. Okay. So, how does this all work out?”

Aristespha smirks with pride, pulls out a tablet from between a pile of papers, and taps commands on the screen. “That’s right. I forgot, you never did your internship year. Well, thankfully, I created a few diagrams a year or so ago when we got together to formalize the financial process.”

She slides the tablet between Bach’s hands, swipes through some diagrams, and selects one to expand to full size. “Depending on the mission, quest, or contract, the payout goes into our group’s company account with the guild. We deduct any related expenses, then the money gets distributed evenly to everyone’s individual guild accounts, up to a quota we all agree upon once every few months. Any excess gets put into another company account that is for shared party expenses, up to a quota. Anything above this quota at the end of the month, is divided out as a bonus to everyone.”

Bach analyzes the diagrams, zooms in on sections, and watches the various animations of the process on the tablet. He eventually nods in agreement and hands the tablet back. “Makes sense to me and seems pretty fair. Sounds like it avoids a lot of that money drama.”

Aristespha takes a deep breath and exhales with relief from past memories. “Yes, it does. Money issues break apart a lot of adventuring groups. Just ask Dretphi or Cideeda, they’ve got a few stories.”

Bach lifts up a section of paperwork before him and puzzles at Aristespha. “I hope this is just a backlog of paperwork, because this is might actually be scarier than facing those cyber-zombies.”

Aristespha laughs, passes Bach a pen, and takes one for herself from behind her ear. “Yes. Chasing and confronting Noxian put A LOT in the back log. It’s normally only a few dozen pages of legal documents that amount to a few signatures. I’ve got most the accounting handled by software applications. Most of time, the only time consuming part comes from matching receipts and invoices to account transactions. But, I’ve got logging software on a tablet to help that process.”

Bach stares at the mass of paper, readies his pen, and pulls a wary grin. “So, where do you need me to start?”

Aristespha taps the packet with her pen and finds a tablet for Bach to use. “First, fill our your payment information. You can use the guild account system if you don’t have a bank account, but they’re not too terribly fancy. Then, you can use this tablet to catalog receipts and invoices. It has the better camera for that.”

Bach shifts his attention to the packet and reads a few lines before a thought crosses his mind. “Hey, just curious. How much is the monthly individual quota?”

Aristespha leans next to Bach, traces a finger down the page of the packet, and stops next to a numeric amount. Bach follows the trail of text down to the spot. His eyes widen, jaw drifts down, and head slowly tilts. Aristespha grins with satisfaction and returns to her stack of papers. “Why do you think anyone considers this line of work? The actual pay can vary. We’ve had some slow months and you are starting at the end of a month. But, Sebastian

wanted you to have his share for this month. As a... How did he put it? An apology for abducting you and flipping the fucking table of your life.”

Bach blinks, makes a few attempts to form a response, and eventually shrugs with appeasement. “Ya know. I’ve now come to full acceptance of that incident and look forward to our future business ventures.”

Aristespha rolls her eyes with smile and circles her finger over a box of receipts at next to her foot. “Let’s see how you feel after sorting through this box.”

Bach captures a picture of the last receipt from the box and enters a series of commands into the tablet to associate the receipt with a transaction. “By the gods, you guys have must have single-handedly kept Pancake Shed in business for the last few years.”

Aristespha twists her mouth and quirks a brow at Bach. “You find another restaurant that widespread, near every major highway, open all hours, and that takes you as you come with no questions.”

Bach puts a check mark on the last receipt and stuffs it under a rubber band with other receipts. “Fair enough. The one in High Alton served as the perfect place to recover from the crazy misadventures I had to rescue Sebastian from. Their hash brown are really good, too.”

Aristespha places her pen, tablet, and papers down on the coffee table and sinks back into the couch. “Indeed they are. And Pancake Shed is very accommodating to adventures. There’s one in Perimeter that lets you order your captive’s food off the children’s menu. That way bounty hunters can save money on food.”

Bach lifts his upper body away from the tablet and slowly pivots his head to Aristespha. “That’s... Interesting.”

Aristespha sways forward to put herself on her feet and stands up. “A lot of fugitives try to hide out in the Perimeter Weird Zone. Most are very thankful when a bounty hunter finds them so they can get escorted out.”

She steps around the coffee table, brushes her faded T-shirt off, and guides a number of stray silvery blue hairs over her ears. “I’m going to make some tea. Do you want any?”

Bach tidies up his immediate area and carefully pulls himself up to avoid upsetting any nearby piles of paper. “Uh, sure. Are we done with this for now?”

Aristespha rotates a carousel of single-serving drink packets on the kitchen counter, plucks two of them from their spots, and loads one into the counter top brewing machine. “Yes. It’s not going anywhere, so I’m not too terribly worried. Thank you for helping to make some progress on that mess.”

Bach settles into a chair at the dining table and looks around aimlessly. A question finds a place in his mind and he quizzically looks at Aristespha. "So, you've been in a weird zone? You mentioned Perimeter and the Perimeter Weird Zone."

Aristespha fits a mug underneath the brewing machine and presses a button. While the machine hums and water flows inside of it, she ponders a moment. "Yes. I've been in a few. They were some of the spots I visited during my research into spirits, sprites, and other such entities."

This piques Bach interest. He keeps his attention to Aristespha and watches her reactions. "So, what do you know of magic in that realm of study?"

She pulls out the spent packet, pitches it into the garbage can, and sets that mug off to the side. With a quick series of motions, she loads the next packet, hits the button, and slides another mug underneath the machine. This noticeably distracts Bach and Aristespha smirks smugly. "Studying at The Grand Library, you learn how run these things as fast as possible. But, as for spirit magic... I focused on sensory, communication, and projection types of magic. Honestly, that's all I was really interested in. I know the theory behind the rest of the spirit family of magic."

Aristespha eyes the mug as it fills and waits for the last drop to hit before taking both mugs in hand to the dining table. She places a mug in front of Bach and takes a seat across from him. "I just don't care for how those spirit mages perform most of their magic."

Bach puts his fingers through the handle of the mug and lifts it up to his nose for a sniff. He feels the heat off the brew and lowers it back down on the table. "What about it don't you like?"

Aristespha sighs and draws a tight slight frown on her face. "Most spirit mages are absolute ASSHOLES to all those entities."

Bach snaps to attention and focuses on Aristespha. "Really?!"

She nods, lifts her mug to her mouth, and sips a bit of tea before lowering it back down. "I could go on for hours about it. They coerce, con, and manipulate spirits to do their bidding in exchange for some magical energy. Now, the smarter spirit types will negotiate up front, but the simpler ones are lucky to get anything after getting controlled by spells. Thankfully, there's a growing movement towards spirit magic that is far friendlier. I actually spent a week with the teacher that sparked it."

Bach sits down in his chair and ponders with bewilderment toiling on his face. "Wow. That's. Surprising. I've met a few spirit mages, but I didn't realize that what they were doing. Never had any of the same classes with them after the first year."

Aristespha shakes her head and stares down at her cup of tea. She smiles kindly. "I really didn't want anything to do with spirit magic after learning that, but meeting that teacher changed my mind. His name is Harold Marcus. A simple, older looking man on the outside that holds the favors of thousands of spirits, sprites, daemons, and ghosts. He keeps to a forest out in the wilds of some unclaimed territory."

She lifts the mug to her lips, drinks a moderate sum, and stares off distantly. “That is the most beautiful forest I’ve ever been in. The density of spirits inhabiting that area is a magnitude of order greater than anywhere else. It actually affects the biology of the flora and fauna out there. As for Harold, he is very laid back and kind man. I learned much from him. But, he always summed up his lessons to two things.”

Bach breaks from listening and remembers to actually drink some of his tea. “What were those?”

Aristespha snorts with a humoring grin and looks at Bach. “Ask nicely and be reasonable.”

Bach guides the thoughts in his head with his eyes and eventually shrugs. “I guess that makes sense. Seems to work for him.”

Aristespha takes a deep breath in and tenses her voice. “It does. His resident Elder Geist told me that’s why it lives there.”

Bach eyes slam wide open and his jaw hits the table. He barely maintains enough cognizance to gently place his mug on the table and keep the tea from dribbling out of his mouth. “Uh. Eh. Hu- What?! You mean the five meter tall, creature formed of pure elder energy, that has been around since after the first cataclysm?”

Aristespha takes a long sip of her tea and meets the shocked gaze of Bach. After she finishes, she places the mug back down on the table, and cracks a nervous little smile as she remembers. “Yes. It was my last day there. I was talking to Harold. It came over. Sat down next to me. Apologized for not meeting with me sooner, as it took it a while for it to go through its memories. It translated some audio transcripts I had played for Harold. And then, it showed me the location, on my tablet’s map, of an ancient ruin that housed a library and created a passcard for me to use to get in. It wished me well, said it would see me again in the future, and left.”

Bach gawks in awe at Aristespha as she exhales in an attempt to calm herself. He finally blinks and recovers enough to form words again. “What did Harold do?”

She playfully sneers as she curls an upper lip. “Oh, just absolutely fucking fail at holding back his laughter as I was scared for my very existence.”

The morning sun lights the rural area. The two lane road running through the country side dries in the growing heat of the sun. Patches of the land still pool with water from the two days of rain before, but most the excess finds its way to the drainage ways and the nearby stream. The garage door on the ranch style house is open. Sounds of mechanical work echo from inside out into the vicinity. Bach tightens a frame bolt with a wrench and removes the wrench after the last twist on the bolt. He stands back to look at his side-car motorcycle. Now the motorcycle shines with the dirt of Bach’s escape attempt wiped away. No dents remain with the repairs from early this morning. The motorcycle looks better than when Bach originally bought it.

“Sweet machine you got there, bro.”

Bach turns around to see Sebastian hovering through the door leading inside the house. “Oh, yah. Cleaned it up and checked everything. Should be good for a ride, man.”

Sebastian flies over the vehicle and appreciates it from different angles. “A lot nicer to look at when you aren’t riding the handle bars.”

Bach gives single laugh and shakes his head at Sebastian. “Well, it’s not like I gave you that long to take it in.”

Sebastian eyes his brother with smug smirk and rolls his eyes. His ethereal form lightens and his expression softens. “Hey. Thanks for saving everyone. It’s been rough getting used to just being an over-glorified cheerleader slash doomsayer, and mostly feeling useless. It could have gone really bad down there, but you delivered us the leverage we needed to make the best happen.”

Bach rubs the back of his neck and sheepishly shifts his shoulders up and down. “Man. I couldn’t just let that happen to anyone and not do something. But, I’ve got to be honest...”

He turns his head to Sebastian gritting his teeth and complete lack of confidence. “I was totally pulling that shit completely out of my ass! I knew the theory. I’d imagined a few designs in the past. But... That was the first time I’ve ever implemented an EMP bomb of all things! That was ridiculously complicated piece of machinery, I just-”

Bach drags his hands through his hair and walks towards the garage door with worry in each footstep. “Holy shit! I mean it’s great that it worked and we got out, but- Dammit! It could have gone so wrong! If the blast wasn’t enough, if they were fully insulated, or even if they just took cover in broom closet- I just- Well- I- FUCK!! Two weeks ago I was just happy enough to get out of bed and read a decent story on an Aethernet forum!”

Bach holds his half-open hands shakily out in front of him and his eyes shift between the bullet points of his rant. “Somehow in less than two weeks, I gone from living in an over-glorified shack seen as a failure of a mage to somehow resuming our dream of adventuring together! I’m all for getting my life back on track, but it feels like I’ve been strapped to the front of a runaway train! I try to keep focus on the many positives. But, I can’t shake these feelings I’m setting everyone up for disappointment... And... And...”

He lets his arms go limp and flop to his sides as he tries to find a moment serenity in the peaceful day outside. Sebastian looks to the floor with each step to Bach, shaking his head with a knowing smile. He circles around in front of Bach and waits until his brother realizes he’s there. “Good. You’ve gotten to the freak out and awareness stage. I was getting worried.”

Bach refocuses his eyes on Sebastian with a dumbfounded expression. “W-what? This is... Normal?”

Sebastian doubles over laughing with an ethereal echo and holds a hand up to Bach. “Oh, gods yes! It happens to any sane adventurer! In fact, most of the veterans get worried when they think someone isn’t freaking out or worried or not aware of how fucked-up their profession is!”

Bach blinks as his gaze drifts around the area. He follows his gaze and walks around the driveway in thought. Sebastian keeps a close hover by Bach. Eventually, Bach halts in place and shifts his view of the world to Sebastian. “So you went through this, too?”

Sebastian nods with a ghostly snort. “Yes. Yes, I did. I tried to hide it from the group I interned with because I was trying to impress them. We were camping out in these woods up in the Southern Crags near High Alton clearing out this invasive species of dire rat. I volunteered for firewood gathering duty right off the bat and did it for a week. I didn’t realize it, but they were totally expecting me to freak out after the first few days of fighting these things. Totally nasty, angry things. The ranger finally tracked me when I left the camp for firewood and figured out why I was so willing to do firewood duty.”

Bach quirks a brow and darts his eyes side to side before settling back on Sebastian. “Which was?”

Sebastian throws his hands up to the sides and exaggerates a comical shrug. “Oh you know. Cursing the job, party members, school, the world, and so on... All the while chopping at trees like an ax murderer with blue balls.”

He pauses his story for a moment as his mind stumbles upon a random tidbit. “By the way, I so need to show you how to throw an ax if you don’t already know. Learned the basics from that ranger, after she enjoyed watching me rant and rave.”

Bach narrows his eyes at Sebastian, figuratively staring right through him... And literally to an extent. Sebastian matches Bach’s scrutiny and places his hands on his sides. “What? Why are you-” His eyes search his mind and he relaxes his posture. His eyes widen and a goofy, unapologetic grin sneaks onto his face. A few attempts at words fall out his mouth and he put his hands behind his head. “Well, you know. She made a really good point about not letting such youthful energy go to waste.”

Bach lifts his head up to the skies, rolls his eyes hard, and settles his face into the palm of his hand. He slowly slides his hand down off his face and just shakes his head at Sebastian. “I shouldn’t be surprised. Especially, after all those times I had rescue you.”

Sebastian smirks and jokingly shakes a finger at Bach. “Hey! I’m trying to pay you back for all those times. You feeling any better?”

Bach lifts his shoulders and chest up with a breath of air in and relaxes them back down with an exhale. “A bit. If I am going insane, at least I’m on schedule which somehow makes it normal. Right?”

Sebastian floats directly next and presents an honest and genuine smile and tone. “Listen. We do good work for good reasons to achieve good things. But, that doesn’t change the fact that what we are doing ranges from being a bit fucked up to really fucked up.”

He stares directly into Bach's eyes. "It's normal to feel this is insane. It's insane to feel this is normal."

Bach and Sebastian stare at each other for a minute. Sebastian waits as Bach's mind processes everything. Bach's mouth moves and forms words as determination hints onto his face. "Yah, it's insane and fucked up when you break it down. But... Everyone got out safe and we kept those cybernetic monsters from getting loose."

Sebastian nods with pride and steps back with satisfaction. "And that's what you have to focus on. It's a hard balance between striving for the best outcome and keeping aware of what it is you actually do. But, that's a balance you want to maintain. I've seen what happens when it goes too far one way or another."

Bach scans around the front yard area and sighs. He takes in the nice sunny day and gazes off across the road into the large open field. Sebastian traces his eyes and stares off into the same distance. "Too nice of a day for any more heavy shit, bro."

Bach simply nods. "Yah. I'm feeling okay for now, bro. Thanks for the talk. By the way, what's everyone else up to?"

Sebastian tilts his head to the side and flips through recent memory. "I think Sotalia and Aristespha were analyzing the magical material stuff you made yesterday."

Bach twists his mouth into an unamused frown. "Not going in there for awhile. Already feel like enough of a lab rat for them."

Sebastian directs a thumb towards the side of the house with a scheming glint to his eyes. "Dretphi and Cideeda are sorting through all the random melee weapons we've picked up-

Bach swiftly moves towards the side of house with an arm out ahead to signal Sebastian. "Sold! Sounds like fun to me!"

Aristespha slides a box of paper with her foot out of the way of the recliner and off to a corner of the room. She swiftly glides into the recliner, pulls the handle for the foot rest, and spreads a blanket over her. "We've got about fives minutes or so. Last week's rerun is finishing up."

Dretphi switches out the bowl under the spout of the hot air popcorn popper with another and hands Bach the popcorn filled bowl. He carefully escorts the two in his hands over to the coffee table. Sebastian flies through the sliding glass door and drifts to Aristespha's side. She wraps herself tighter in the blanket and gives a curious gaze to Sebastian. "Where have you been, Sebastian?"

Sebastian points a thumb out the sliding glass door and pulls his mouth to the side with intrigue. "I saw some lights coming from a house on the big plot diagonal to us. First time I've ever seen activity over there."

Aristespha settles deeper into the cushions of the recliner and suggests to Sebastian, “Probably the property management company getting it ready for some new renters.”

Sebastian hovers closer to Aristespha and directs his attention towards the television. “That makes sense. I couldn’t get close enough to make out anything. But apart from that, not much else is happening in the neighborhood.”

Bach lowers a bowl of popcorn near to Aristespha. She happily lifts her hands underneath the blanket and Bach places the bowl right in the middle of where she indicates. Bach drops off the other bowl on the coffee table. Aristespha checks to see if anyone is paying attention to her. She smiles mischievously, makes routine hand gestures underneath the blanket, and murmurs incantations. Violet briefly flickers in her eyes and a small quantity of popcorn drifts from the bowl into her mouth. As she crunches down on the popcorn, she catches the mock judgmental glare of Sebastian. “Whut?”

Sebastian shakes his head as he sways it away back to face the television. Aristespha rolls her eyes and another small grouping of popcorn leaves the bowl. “Oh please. You’d do it, too.”

Bach moves next to Dretphi and she immediately switches out another bowl under the popcorn popper. She gives the freshly full bowl to Bach to hold. Cideeda walks through the hallway archway and leaps onto the couch spot next to an arm and the bowl of popcorn on the coffee table. The last of the popcorn flies out of the popper. Both Dretphi and Bach carry a bowl each from the kitchen into the living room. Dretphi shuffles between the coffee table and couch into the middle spot of the couch. Bach lines up to get between the coffee table and couch.

“Hey Bach!”

Bach freezes, stands up right, and pivots in place towards the hallway archway. He sees nothing around there, but briefly feels fast movement directly behind him. Immediately following, he hears sounds of someone scrambling over a couch arm into the last seat on the couch. Bach turns back around. Sotalia slowly stretches her legs onto her part of the coffee table, settles into the cushions, puts her arms behind her head, and grins with smug self-satisfaction. “Too bad. I guess you’ll just have to get your own seat.”

Bach narrows his eyes at Sotalia. Everyone else quietly watches the situation unfold. Sotalia maintains her smug attitude as she gently twists into the cushions more, with a suggestive smile. Bach stares at her for a few moments, then a smirk forms. The smirk soon morphs into a growing grin and he focuses his gaze at Sotalia. “Well... I guess I will.”

Bach moves the bowl of popcorn into another hand and he raises the free hand up. A blue glow illuminates his eyes. Sotalia’s smug attitude falls flat as her eyes widen and her body tenses. Everyone else holds their collective breaths. Bach’s hand flips over and drops down to stop just above the height of the couch. A framework of magical energy flows out from Bach’s hand and reaches down to the floor. Within seconds, the framework fills in to reveal a structure. The structure arranges itself and shifts as parts materialize into existence. In under a minute, a stabilized energy deck chair solidifies completely with translucent

cushioning material in all the right places. Without saying another word, Bach lays into the chair, magically adjusts it, and takes a handful of popcorn.

Sotalia gawks at the new chair. Dretphi suppresses and hides with a hand a laugh. Cideeda gives a quick thumbs up to Bach. Both Sebastian and Aristespha nod with approval. The television blares out the iconic intro music for the Next Adventurers of Nexus.

“With that recap out of the way ladies and gentlemen, let’s see what our adventurers were up!”

The screen cuts to a shot of Chad Bosch. He sits by himself in a room for individual interviews that’s decorated with simple chair, background, and some lighting. “We decided to pursue a contract to investigate an old military facility where there may have been some recent activity. As the leader, I believe it would be the perfect mission to test team cohesion. But first, we needed to get supplies and equipment.”

Clips and segments showcase the adventurers shopping. A video journal segment shows Deedri uncomfortably sitting the individual interview room. “Well, I’ve only done small medical supplies orders for myself. I never had to get everything for a whole team! It took a lot longer than I expected. But, the people at the pharmacy were really nice and understanding! Unfortunately... There was this one Evuukian woman. She didn’t seem happy. I overheard her grumbling and-”

A piece of paper finds its way into Deedri’s hands and she looks at it with confusion. “What is this?”

From off camera a woman’s voice speaks, “That’s a translation of what that woman said.”

Deedri’s eyes follow each sentence. Each line distresses her a little more, until she covers her open mouth in shock. Finally, she grabs hold of the bell on the collar around her neck, causing a muffled ring. “She wanted to put my bell WHERE?!”

Everyone in the living room drifts their eyes to Aristespha as she crosses her arms. She returns an unamused and unapologetic glance. “I’m not sorry.”

Another clip shows Trakenthin trying for Dretphi’s attention and ultimately getting denied by the group arriving. Trakenthin watches from the distance carefully and notices Dretphi giving a warm smile to Bach. Trakenthin focuses a sneering glare right at the back of Bach’s head. The chair Bach sits in somehow grows a bit uncomfortable witnessing Trakenthin crack his knuckles.

The next clip shows Tassilda posing for the camera and presenting her choice goods... and books. Through the narrow gaps between the tops of books and shelves, Sotalia, Bach, and Cideeda occasionally show up in frame of the shot. A few more shopping segments play out before a cut to the adventurers meeting together and planning for the mission. The show fades to the next day, with an outside shot of the Amaranth Dining House. A swipe cut inside, Chad walks and talks to the camera. He takes time to greet the soldiers and then focus turns

towards Aristespha, Bach, Cideeda, Dretphi, and Sotalia sitting at their table. The video playback hangs on the group to almost a dramatic freeze frame, with different angles of the group and quick shots of each member. Unease flows through the living room.

Chad's voice cuts mid way into the scene with a hard cut over to Chad in the individual interview room. "This group. I got a strange feeling about this group. There was something about them I couldn't quite put my finger on."

Tassilda's voice interrupts an individual shot of Sotalia. "I've had to deal with her kind before..."

Sotalia sneers and narrows her eyes at the screen. "MY kind? That BITCH."

The screen shows Tassilda in the interview room, lounging with a suggestive pose. She takes in a deep breath and exaggerates her chest movement with a sultry smile. "She's of the ilk that try, often in vain, to tap into the magic potential of their ancestry. But, unfortunately for them... And especially for her... Their distance from their Emin ancestors is often too far to produce any productive results."

Sotalia's eye twitches in confined anger and both Bach and Aristespha carefully watch for signs of it developing into something further. The show cuts to a clip of Aristespha before switching to Mordoran. He calmly sits in the interview chair, arms stretching behind his head and a smug idle smirk on his face. "I don't know everyone's problem is. I thought the Evuukian was pretty hot. Certainly didn't mind watching her walk away when they left the restaurant. I wonder if she's spoken for."

Sebastian's normal calm blue-white ghostly form grows hints of small flame-like distortions around the edges. A clip plays back Cideeda awkwardly waving to Deedri. Cideeda cringes and sinks into the couch. "Dammit, they used that clip."

Deedri sits in the interview chair and excitedly shakes. "There was another Fvalian! She seems really nice and even waved at me! I hope I get a chance to talk to her in the future!"

Cideeda views the screen in abject horror at the very concept of interacting with that creature. She slowly shakes her head and dramatically mouths the word, "No."

A video clip with Dretphi comes up on the screen. After a few moments, it cuts to Trakenthin. He silently stares stoically to some point off camera. The camera shifts and zooms on Trakenthin as gives a dismissive snort, then the show cuts to another segment. Dretphi groans to herself, places her face into her palm, and breathes a hard sigh.

The show highlights some footage of Bach at the restaurant. Instead of a single member reaction, each member chimes in a fast series of bits. Chad holds his nose high and vents out his arrogance. "Well, I guess it's nice they're helping out a drop out get back on the right path."

Tassilda quirks brow and rolls her eyes. "I guess they thought they needed a token human."

Deedri searches overhead in her mind while tapping a finger on her lips. She then shrugs. "I guess he seems okay. What does he do?"

Mordoran's attention lies elsewhere. A female voice coughs a few times and Mordoran snaps his head back to the camera. He squints his eyes at something off camera. "Huh? Oh. Um? Whatever."

Finally, Trakenthin crosses his arms, narrows his eyes with splinters of anger, gusts in air through his nose with a rattle, and spits a wad of phlegm onto the floor. Bach's jaw rests on the floor. He sits leaning forward, face in shock, and his arms to the sides. "THE FUCK WAS THAT?!"

"Looks like our Adventurers may have some friendly competition... or not! Who are these people? Why are they here? And more importantly... What did they do NEXT!? All will be answered after we return from break!"

The music drops into a dramatic tone and the video clips fade in. Chad sits in the interview chair with disgust and resentment. "We hit a snag. That's to be expected with any adventure. We were regrouping and getting ready to make the rescue and be heroes. Then... They showed up. Strangely, right at THE perfect time."

The show transitions to another clip with Tassilda. She crosses her arms and pouts defiantly. "They kept us away. We never got a chance to go back in there. How DARE they take that away from us!"

There's a final clip before the commercials of the adventurers gathered around a table complaining back and forth, and getting upset and yelling at each other.

Sotalia shoots up from the couch, steps out behind the coffee table, and marches over to the kitchen. She opens the cabinet above to reveal a variety of different glassware. She opens some doors below the counter top and retrieves multiple bottles of alcoholic beverages. She straightens up and wryly smirks to everyone in the living room. "So. Raise your hand, if you want a drink."

Hands go up for everyone, including Sebastian. This garners the attention of everyone else and he shrugs. "I know. But, I can still want one."

Aristespha breaks off her glance with Sebastian and turns her head towards the kitchen bar. As she changes her view, she notices a new alert on one of her tablets. She grabs hold of the tablet, props it up on her lap, and taps in a password. Flipping through the notification and alerts, a message from the local guild offices draws her attention. She opens the message and reads the first few lines. Her head pulls back in confusion and then she immediately leans close to the screen to carefully read each word. Sotalia gets out some glasses and surveys the resources she has available. "Okay, I mix a few good one with these. What do you want, Aristespha?"

Aristespha continues to run her eyes over the words on the message. The perplexed expression on her face and lack of awareness quickly captures the attention of everybody

else. She stops and returns to reality as everyone stares curiously at her. “We just got a message from the local guild office. Someone just direct bid an existing contract to us.”

Cideeda jams a claw into the soft plastic power button of the television remote when another segment of Deedri gushing over seeing another Fvalian leading a group. She tosses the remote onto the couch, turns to walk to the dining table and shudders in uncomfortable disgust. “Creepy.”

Aristespha picks up the whiskey glass of dark amber liquor and calmly sips a bit. She directs her voice towards Bach, sitting across at the table. “It’s not unusual for different patrons to all bid on the same contract. In fact, that sometimes helps a common problem get the best group to solve it.”

Sotalia sits back, stirs the mixed drink contents of her glass, and gestures a hand out. “Say a town has a bandit problem. At first, the one merchant that ran into them might set an initial price. Then later as the bandits harass the town, other people with some money will put forth more into the overall pot. Eventually, it gets good enough that a decent team takes it gets it done right, rather than a desperate group attempting it and fouling it up.”

Aristespha nods, holds a finger up, and slowly points down at the tablet in front of her. “But, what can also happen is that a patron can put in a bid with stipulations. Usually, it’s for contract conditions on bounty hunting with the payout difference between the target being dead or alive. It also can be for limiting groups with specific skills sets or conduct conditions. Bids to a specific group is uncommon.”

Cideeda settles into her seat, claws the cap off of her bottle of beer, and shakes her head in bewilderment. “A specific group with an unpublished ID number is... RARE.”

Sebastian’s ethereal self drifts next to Aristespha, his eyes tracing text on the tablet. He takes a moment to appreciate the aroma from Aristespha’s whiskey glass and then returns his focus to Bach. “Most our families know our team’s ID number. And, we’ve gotten direct work by references and even contracts forwarded our way. Some really good ones, too.”

Sebastian directs Bach’s attention to Dretphi. She nods as she holds her large bottle of cider with both hands. “My birth father maintains Grath military connections. There were contracts we were allowed. Those contracts were hidden from the public.”

Aristespha tilts another small amount of her drink into her mouth, exhales, and narrows her eyes at the tablet screen. “But... A direct bid to an unpublished ID number for a two month old contract that only paid pittance to what they were offering before. From a patron, undisclosed, with an ID number I don’t recognize.”

The group around the table ponder into their own thoughts about the situation at hand. Bach abruptly lifts his head up and twists his upper body to look at the television. “And, we got sent the job right after we were on national TV. I bet someone recognized you guys.”

Dretphi puzzles at Aristespha and drops her eyes at the tablet. “What IS the job?”

Aristespha shrugs and shakes her head baffled. “Ah. It’s to investigate some odd disturbances in a forest reserve an hour’s travel from here. No major threats or problems listed. It just some strange activity has been scaring people away when they travel, camp, or visit the area. I really wish there was more to say. The local park service put a really low bid initially, and now it’s a very high sum.”

Aristespha gently guides the tablet to the middle of the table. The payout number displays prominently on the screen. Everyone else leans in together and their faces express different degrees of interest and surprise. Aristespha sits back in her seat and waits for everyone to process the amount. “So, should we investigate? I’m personally intrigued.”

Sotalia drinks a bit from her glass and shrugs with amusement. “Sure! If they want to pay us that much to wander around a damn forest, that’s fine with me.”

Cideeda quirks a brow and gently scratches her chin. “It’s weird how we got this. But, it’s not the first time. There’s more to this, but for that amount I’m willing to take a look.”

Dretphi nods with agreement. Bach watches everyone’s reaction and slowly nods, too. “I’ve got no objections. If it’s not another cyber-zombie den, I can work with it.”

Sebastian grins proudly and claps his hands together. “Sounds good. If tomorrow is good, let’s do it. So, let’s find something else to watch on the TV and get a good night’s rest.”