

## Ain't A Hero – Episode 9

by Bryan Schuder

The humvee rolls into the empty parking lot in the middle of the forest clearing. With a swift turn of the front wheels, it pulls into the parking space closest to the wide pathway between the few small buildings. It stops and the powerplant inside winds down to silence. Doors open on the humvee. Cideeda hops out from the driver's seat and wears a happy grin as the wind blows through her short hair. She stretches her arms out and lets the breeze ripple across her dark green, short-sleeve shirt. Sotalia steps out to the pavement and flips open a pair of sun glasses. She places them on her face and smiles as another gust tosses her loosely worn button down shirt over her bikini top and shorts. Aristespha glides down from the vehicle and turns around to retrieve a backpack behind her seat. She puts her arms through the straps, hoists it up, and adjusts the backpack straps and her indigo blouse. With a final check, she shifts the hilt of the Sword of the Spirit realm comfortably in the middle of her back, hiding the sheath's straps with the backpack straps. Aristespha lifts another backpack and hands it to Cideeda, before putting on her floppy hat. Bach slides himself out of the vehicle, lugs a large backpack around from behind his seat, and throws it on over his loose-fitting t-shirt. Dretphi shuffles out from the backseat and out the passenger side after Bach slides his seat forward. Sotalia puts on her belt of pouches and confidently struts out to survey the area. "Well, this doesn't seem so bad. It's starting to get that abandoned feel, but better than some places we've been."

Aristespha circles around the front of the humvee and walks to Sotalia's side. "It said in the briefing that they've done everything short of officially closing the reserve to the public. All events canceled, no posted times, and all services suspended."

Cideeda checks the doors on the humvee, verifies they are all closed, and engages the security system with a key fob. "So, what's the plan?"

An ethereal voice emanates from Aristespha's back. "Check the visitor area and then hike the main trail? It sounds like whatever was scaring people wasn't isolated to any particular spot, so we might as well try the major paths."

Bach flexes his shoulders and settles his backpack into a more comfortable spot. He scans the vicinity, stops his gaze on a few of the buildings, and curls his upper lip. "Sounds decent enough. But, I'll admit a few of these buildings look straight off a horror movie set."

Dretphi steps forward to join the group, checks the position of the knife stealth on her thigh, and cinches up the straps on her backpack, guiding them over her tank top. "I think we could be mistaken for hikers."

Aristespha scrutinizes everyone's appearance and nods with satisfaction. "Close enough. Nothing in the briefing indicates disturbances that would actually cause great physical harm. But, best to keep it low-key and avoid unnecessarily escalating the situation."

Sotalia holds her arms up high, arches her back in a stretch, and relaxes her arms back to the sides. "So? Building by building? They don't seem too big."

Aristespha retrieves her aetherphone from her capri shorts pocket and searches for map of the area on the device. “The largest building is the visitor center. There’s one building for gift shop stalls and one on the opposite side for vending. Finally, there’s the bathrooms and the utility building.”

Sebastian’s voice resonates from the sword on Aristespha’s back. “Check the small buildings and meet up for the visitor center? I’ll stay out of view for now. Don’t think most hikers have a ghost following them around. Anyway, keep around the area and hit the alert on your phone if anything gets weird.”

Aristespha stands outside the visitor center on the long, wide walkway leading to the main doors. She narrows her eyes at the many windows trying to catch a glimpse inside. Cideeda perches herself up on a wooden fence near Aristespha and smiles contentedly. “Well, nothing in the utility building, except for a lock on the door. But... That wasn’t too hard.”

Aristespha gently turns her head towards Cideeda and crosses her arms in thought. “Everything look normal?”

Cideeda digs her claws into the wooden beam she’s holding onto, leans herself back, stretches her legs out, and balances herself gracefully on the fence. “Everything looked turned off properly. There was some marks on the door frame around the handle. Looks like some kid with too much time and a stick tried their best.”

Cideeda tilts her head back, recognizes the rest of the group approaching, and changes her balance to move herself back into a sitting position. She pushes her arms down on the wooden beam, lifts herself up, and swings her legs over to the other side of the fence, pivoting on one hand. Now facing the group, she waves. “Seems like nothing too exciting happened with everyone else.”

Aristespha slowly twists her body to watch everyone else arrive. “Anything to report?”

Drephi shakes her head and tries to work out a stale grimace. “Bathrooms are clear. They have not been visited for some time... Including cleaning staff.”

Bach shrugs indifferently and points a thumb over to the gift shop stalls. “It looks like someone may have been there a while ago. But, I think it was probably the park service taking what stock remained out. Nothing recent from what I saw.”

Sotalia swallows down a bite from chocolate bar and directs everyone’s attention to the vending area with the bar. “Well, someone broke the windows on all the vending machines and nearly cleaned them out.”

The unwrapped chocolate bar keeps everyone’s attention shortly before focus shifts to Sotalia. Her eyes dart between the everyone’s gazes underneath the sun glasses and she defensively puffs herself up. “What?! This was the last one left! If you want, there’s plenty of granola bars left.”

Aristespha rolls her eyes and returns to face the visitor center. “Anyway... I’m getting a strange feeling from the visitor center.”

Sotalia blinks and squints at the visitor center. “I’m not feeling any strong magic from there.”

Aristespha shakes her head and holds her chin as she scrutinizes the area more. “It’s not magical. I’m not sure. We’ll have to get inside and investigate.”

Cideeda hops off the wooden fence, walks towards the front door. “Let me check those front doors out.”

She ventures over to the metal framed glass window doors and examines them. She looks through the glass windows at angles to view the locks and other mechanisms. She scans the outer frame and puts her face up to the glass to peer inside. Her eyes stop on a top and bottom deadbolts and she steps back with confusion on her face. “They don’t seem locked. The deadbolts on both doors are disengaged. And, I don’t see anything that’s obviously a trap.”

Cideeda steps back from the door and gestures a hand towards the doors. Sotalia cracks a slight grin and stretches her arms and hands out. “A telekinetic pull sound good to everyone?”

Aristespha, Bach, and Dretphi collectively nod and move off into the grass near the concrete path from the doors. Sotalia chants some magical phrases and goes through a sequence of motions. She reaches a hand out in a gesture of grabbing onto one of the door handles. With a sly smile, she pulls back and the visitor center door opens in sync with her hand and arm motion. When the door opens a quarter of the way, Sotalia startles and reflexively throws her hand open. The door slams shut with an explosive crash. She tilts her head, grimaces with a growing lack of confidence, and carefully retreats back to the group. “Something. Broke my hold of the door. That was really WEIRD. I felt there was magic behind it but something else, too?”

Aristespha trains her gaze at the door and she approaches cautiously. When she gets within a few meters of the door, Sebastian’s ethereal form immediately materializes in front of her. “STOP.”

Aristespha halts in place and blinks concerned at Sebastian. “Okay, but why though?”

Sebastian hovers around and searches the area in vain for something. “I don’t know. I just felt something strange. The sword picked up something and I felt it, but I don’t know how to interpret it. Ahh... I’m at a lost here, but I KNOW I felt something unusual.”

He continues checking the immediate area until he settles his stare right at the front doors. He straightens up and warily watches the doors. “There’s... Some things... Behind the door? I see some faint, wavy shapes.”

Bach, Cideeda, Dretphi, and Sotalia ready themselves into defensive postures. Sotalia holds her hands forward in preparation of a cast. Bach, Cideeda, and Dretphi each unzip a side pocket of their backpacks, reach inside, and wait. Aristespha extends an open palm to the

team and squints her eyes as they glow violet. Her eyes widen and her jaw hangs agape. She shakes her head and recovers her senses. Standing up straight and hands held close, she closes her eyes and concentrates. A few moments later, a field of shimmering energy forms between her hands. Dretphi looks at the door and then turns her attention to Aristespha. "What is at the door?"

Aristespha opens her eyes and they cast a violet light. "We are about to find out."

With a swift motion, she flings her two hands out to either side of her. The shimmering energy expands into a bubbling wave that swells out into the vicinity. As the wave passes through the visitor's center, dozens of small glowing entities appear at the front doors along with a large entity that resembles a huge badger. It tightens claw grips on the interior handles for the front doors. Aristespha meets its glare. "Well."

Cideeda gawks at the badger entity and points a finger at it. "Okay, what is that?!"

Dretphi draws her head back and ponders what she sees. "That form is similar to a dire badger."

Sotalia keeps her stance at the ready and desperately glances at everyone else for a hint as to what to do next. "Okay. That's probably a spirit? Maybe a sprite? That's really fucking big sprite..."

Bach relaxes his stance and his focus drifts between the many small orbs tightly hovering behind the badger. He takes his hand out his backpack pocket and zips it back up. Cideeda and Dretphi both notice. Bach puzzles at the situation for a few seconds and directs attention to the orbs. "Hey, everyone. I think the badger is defending the sprites by holding the door shut. Maybe we should ease back here."

Cideeda and Dretphi each zip up the side pockets of their backpacks and relax their stances. Sotalia puts her hands down but still keeps an eye on the ghostly dire badger. "Okay, fine. But, how is the over-sized sprite defending anything by holding a door shut?!"

Aristespha takes a breath in as she rolls her eyes and exhales a groan of disappointment. "Bach. After you are done with that copy of the Spirit Guide, give it to her! This is NOT a sprite. It's a full fledged daemon! Fairly powerful and intelligent spirits that are usually sentient and quite capable."

"Correct."

Aristespha's eyes slowly tow her head to face the daemon. Cideeda's ears aim forward at the door. She remains motionless as her face fills with unease. Dretphi maintains her calm, stoic exterior, but tightens her lips. Sotalia stays speechless and cocks her head in disbelief. Bach and Sebastian exchange glances, shrugs, and gestures. Aristespha regains her composure and addresses the daemon. "Why are you here, holding the doors closed?"

A low voice resonates through the air around the front doors. "Defend."

Aristespha nods as hints of concern well into expression. "From?"

The badger daemon's ghostly eyes search for the words. "Abuser. People here. Abuser avoid. Hide safely. People not here. Abuser near. I defend. I can ignore abuser. They can not."

Bach's mind flings up recent memory to the front of his thought processes. The concept forms in his mind and he realizes what the daemon might be trying to say. "Oh shit. There might be a spirit mage in the area."

Sotalia thinks on that idea and eventually nods in agreement. "That could explain the strange disturbances. I'm certain they would have figured out if someone was using regular magic to cause problems. But, spirit stuff is harder to identify."

Aristespha crosses her arms and looks into the daemon's eyes. "Where and who is this abuser?"

The same detached voice echoes into the area. "Big path. Always near. Awake now. Will find. Careful. Bold now. Waiting. Similar to you."

Aristespha lowers her head and puzzles over this. "Similar to me? Interesting."

Sebastian shrugs and dissipates back into the sword on Aristespha's back. "I guess, we do some hiking?"

Aristespha gives a slight bow to the daemon and readjusts her hat. "That sounds like the plan. Keep alert and let's see if we can find this abuser and what's causing the disturbances."

The daemon's voice emanates out from the door. "Must stay here. Good fortune. Hide now."

The group reassembles and makes its way to the main hiking path. Bach lingers behind to get a last look at the spirits entities as they visually fade away. He walks around the corner of the building and hears a high pitch whine coming from his backpack. This snaps him to attention. He stops immediately and quickly unzips the backpack's side pocket. He reaches his hand back in and audibly clicks a switch that gradually silences the noise. Bach lets out a sigh of relief and zips the side pocket back up. He lifts his face forward and feels something. Something near. He pivots towards the building to see the daemon staring curiously at him through a window. A voice softly sounds near Bach's ears. "You. Hide. Hold. Why?"

The question catches Bach off guard. A series of emotions bubble up on his face, each splashing up and washing away to the whims of another. Confusion. Shock. Worry. Embarrassment. Finally, an overwhelming sense of honesty cuts through the turmoil and Bach drops his head with a frown. "Fear."

The badger daemon simply nods and moves away from the window. "Understand, now. Not forever."

Bach rushes along the path to catch up to the group. His mind contemplates the daemon's question, but he quickly changes his thoughts to the task ahead. Though, he fully expects his introspective dreams to only get weirder now.

Sotalia exhales in frustration and clenches her fists in front of her. "Dammit! You keep on telling me that series gets good and it's just been a non-stop drama rollercoaster!"

Cideeda chuckles to herself with a smug grin as she directs her eyes at Sotalia. "You have to invest into it. Patience, girl."

Sotalia groans and shakes head, tightly pursing her lips before blowing air out and relaxing her face. "Okay. But, if I pull my horns off from the frustration, I'm blaming you."

Bach shrugs contentedly with a smile. "This is why I stick to reading Tales of the Orion. No drama fatigue."

Dretphi watches the clouds go by in the blue sky between the foliage of the trees as she walks with everyone. "Forest canopy is now thick."

Aristespha glances up and searches overhead as she holds her hat from a strong breeze. "It has. I wonder if we are- Did it just get darker?"

Dretphi squints her eyes and notices something strange with the sky. "Yes. Something is shading the sky from us?"

Sebastian's voice comes from the sword softly. "Heads up. The sword is feeling some activity."

Bach, Cideeda, and Sotalia stop their debate and survey the area. The wind fades away and leaves behind a still air. The amount of light in the area declines rapidly. The group halts.

"WHO HAS DEFILED THE SANCTITY OF THE FOREST BY THEIR PRESENCE?"

Heads seek the source of the low, booming voice. The thick leaf cover and lack of bright sunlight makes it difficult for even an expert eye. Sotalia takes off her sunglasses, closes them up, and places them in her shorts pocket.

"I SEE A KINDRED. BUT, I ALSO SEE A BRUTE, A DEMON, A BEAST, AND-"

Bach closes his eyes and breathes out in begrudging anticipation and straining a grin.

"A FILTHY MOTHER TERRA DEFILING FUCKING HUMAN!?!?"

The rest of the group glances at Bach, who can only place his face into his palm and grumble to himself. He rubs the bridge of his nose and vainly tries to suppress his simmering annoyance. "Why? Why put that on me? Don't even know me and dumping that shit on me. Powers that be, fuck me."

“I WILL SHOW MY GLORIOUS MERCY UPON YOU THIS ONCE... IF YOU LEAVE NOW AND NEVER COME BACK!”

The last part echoes throughout the area and fades into a dead silence. The group stands resolute and waits expectantly.

“MAYBE I NEED TO DEMONSTRATE MY NEW POWER!”

In the distance a chorus of trees rustle as a wall of wind rockets down the path, dirt and other debris swirling inside. Sotalia quickly calls out incantations and steps forward with a both hands flung out. A thick energy shield rises from the ground to just above Dretphi's head level. Aristespha finishes her casting and throws a hand up into the air. A barrier bubbles over the group and meshes with Sotalia's shield. The wall of wind blasts past, sticks and tiny rocks pelt the shield and barrier. After a half a minute, the wind dies back down. Sotalia and Aristespha release and dissipate their energy barriers.

“SO, YOU DEFY ME! I HAVE SOMETHING SPECIAL FOR THAT!”

Cideeda spooks and instinctively leaps away towards the middle of the path. “LEGS! Watch your legs! Something tried to grab me!”

From the underbrush, swarming masses of vines slither and whip out. Dretphi draws her knife and postures herself defensively. She swipes purposefully and counters attack after attack, slices taking end segments of vines each time. Sotalia backs away from the swarm and prepares a spell. As Sotalia raises her hand back for the final part, she feels a strand wrap around her arm and yank her back. Long stretches of ivy peel off the trees and descend upon the melee. Cideeda nearly rips off the zipper of her side pocket and draws out her laser pistol. With careful flicks, she carves paths through the vines with blue beams bursts. Bach runs and grabs hold of the vine pulling Sotalia with blue radiating from his eyes. Part of the vine snaps out from Bach's grip, cleanly cut. Sotalia forcibly uncoils the vine wrapping her arm and finishes her spell. She releases a freezing jet onto the vine mass after her. The vine mass frosts over and snaps into pieces when she kicks through it with her boots. Aristespha releases the buckles on her backpack straps. She lets the backpack fall, firmly grabs the sword's handle, and swiftly draws it. She steps forth, spins, and slashes low with the momentum. Then, she cuts high to split a descending vine and drops the blade down onto the dirt for a vine sneaking along the trail. Bach watches in astonishment and then recognition dawns on his face.

Sebastian materializes above the group and initially follows the scene in shock. He recovers and calls out attacks. “Dretphi, 12 high! Aristespha, 9 low! Cideeda, 6 mid!”

More vines rip from tree trunks and whole sections of the ivy covered forest floor flow towards the battle. Bach witness a mass of ivy pull from two trees and join a rolling swarm. He shakes his head, grits his teeth, and pulls his plasma pistol out from his backpack side pocket. “MAN, FUCK THIS!”

Bach hits the power button and disengages the safety. The pistol skips the priming sequence and releases a plasma bolt into the center of the rolling heap of vines when Bach pulls the

trigger. The bolt impacts and explodes into a fiery super-heated eruption of gas, incinerating a huge chunk of plant matter and igniting good portion of the rest to billowing fire.

In a much higher pitch, the voice blares out into the area. "W-w-w-what are you doing?! You fucking maniac! Are you trying to cause a forest fire!?"

The vines abruptly halt their attacks and many drop limp. Flaming vines separate from the swarm and beat themselves out and roll into the dirt. Meanwhile, Bach slowly cranes his head behind him to face the group and points his free hand to his ear. "Did that sound like a teen-aged girl to anyone else?"

Cideeda tilts her head and goes over the voice in her head a few more times. She eventually agrees. "Yes. Yes it did."

Bach quizzically points to Sotalia. She think a moment and pulls an evil grin across her face. "I don't know. Maybe we need to hear it again?"

Drephi perks a brow, Sebastian gives a thumbs up, and Aristespha nods once. Bach picks another still mass of vines and squeezes the trigger. Another bolt flies out the barrel and sets another bundle of plant matter ablaze.

"Oh. My. Goddess! What is wrong with you?! This is a FOREST! Stop setting fires!!"

Sotalia puts her hands on her hips and attempts to process this new information. "That's. That does sound like a teen-aged girl."

Aristespha quirks brow and closes her eyes. She sighs and shakes her head. "I think we're dealing with a child. That wind wall was very weak. Impressive looking, but very little power behind it."

Drephi kneels down and examines the inert vines at her feet. She takes part of a vine in each hand and pulls them apart. With weak snap, the vine breaks in two. She twists her head back to everyone. "These are thin vines. Even the tree vines are not thick. Only a few attacked at a time."

Sebastian drifts down to touch his feet to the ground, perplexed. "You know. I'm surprised the tree roots didn't spring up and the tree branches did reach out. We've encountered worse before"

Bach aims down the sights of his pistol at another pile of leafy vines. "She either doesn't know the spell or isn't powerful to cast it. Hold a second, she's almost got the last two put out."

He pulls the trigger again and ejects another ball of plasma into vine mass on the forest floor. The vines erupts into flame as bits explode out in the area.

"AHHH! STOP!"

Aristespha opens violet glowing eyes and analyzes a bundle of limp vines. Her eyes follow the twisting mass up a tree and into the overhead canopy. She taps her foot and bites her lower lip as her mind pieces together the situation. “The magic in use is just spirit control magic. It looks like sprites are doing all the grunt work. Unfortunately, there’s too much going on with the sky and voice illusions to easily see where it leads to.”

Dretphi scans overhead with a tight frown on her lips. “If we could locate her...”

Curiosity creeps onto Bach’s face and he gazes at the group. “I wonder if we get her frustrated or mad enough, and if that will strain her concentration. It seems like she can barely maintain what she’s got.”

Sotalia sways her hips to a side, grins slyly as she gets Bach’s attention. “Well, YOU are the- What was it? The filthy fucking human?”

She winks at Bach. He nods slowly, curiosity gives away to mischief in his expression, and he gauges everyone’s reaction. “I AM. Am I?”

A toothy grin appears on Cideeda’s face. Dretphi smiles and nods. Aristespha reservedly agrees and returns to staring at the tree cover above for signs of activity. Sebastian gives an encouraging chuckle. Bach takes a few step in front of the group, waves his plasma pistol loosely around, and laughs loudly in a dramatic bad guy tone. “Stop? Stop! Why, this human filth you so proclaim is only getting started! I quite enjoy a good bonfire. In fact, I need another on right... HERE!”

Bach snaps his pistol at a resting mass of vines, activates the trigger, and sends yet another bolt of plasma straight into the center. The brilliant super-heated gasses escape through the spaces between the vines and vaporize much of the plant matter. Bach resumes to holding his pistol loosely and almost prances as he steps around the trail. “AH! Ever SO enjoyable! I could do this all day.”

“OH! OH! You! You are! You are not filth, human! You! You are a THREAT! T-t-take THIS!”

Aristespha’s head snaps to attention and she narrows her eyes at something moving in the canopy. “Incoming! Energy bolt of some kind, can’t make it out clearly yet. It’s taking a long route this way.”

Sotalia turns herself in the same direction as Aristespha faces. “That’s straight magic this time. I can feel that.”

Cideeda’s ears perk and quirk until they train on a new faint sound, and she points a clawtip. “It’s moving down behind that tree!”

Bach pivots towards the tree and awaits the attack. The small magical energy bolt whips out from the base of the tree and flies at Bach. He tenses in anticipation for a few moments. When he gets a clear view of the bolt, he relaxes and dons an expression of moot disappointment. He snatches the bolt out of the air when it approaches his reach.

“What?! How did you do that?!”

Bach plods over to the group, confining the small magical bolt above the palm of his hand. He turns off his plasma pistol and returns it to his backpack. When he reaches everyone else, he displays the bolt. Aristespha drops her head down, and just shakes with a sigh. Sotalia stifles a snort and then bursts out in laughter. “HAH! A training bolt! That’s her attack! AHAHA!”

Dretphi groans, takes a deep breath in, and sighs deeply. “Can we flush her out? Capture her? The day is nice. I want to enjoy it.”

Bach perks a brow as the magic bolt starts to warp and change, and his eyes glow. “I think a return to sender is in order.”

The magic bolt morphs into a larger, energized version and Bach tosses it up into the air. It jets off down the reverse of its original path. It flies faster with an angry, high-pitched buzz. A single teen-aged girl’s voice cries out, “Huh?! What the fuck is THAT?! Oh shit!”

A cacophony of leaves rustling, branches snapping, Evuukian expletives, and someone rushing through the tree tops resounds into area. Cideeda’s ears twitch and adjust to pick out the bigger target, while she tracks the sound with a finger point to everyone else. A crack. A branch drops from a tree. Someone hastily slides down a tree and runs out into the trail path. The thin, lithe figure dive rolls into the dirt path as the angry magic bolt dive-bombs her. She scrambles back to her feet in a panic. Stick, leaf, and vine adornments in her hair and on her clothes fall out from the activity. The bolt whips sharply around and powers right at her head. She covers her long ears and dirt-caked golden hair, and squats to the ground. She summons enough frustration to defiantly stand back up. The bolt takes a long bank near the group and rockets down the trail straight at the girl. As the bolt get near, she holds both her hands up and projects an energy shield with the last bit of defiant pride on her face. The bolt gets within centimeters of the shield then makes a right angle drop below the shield. It makes another sharp turn, blasts between her legs underneath her tattered skirts, and holds position behind her. The girl shrieks from surprise as she feels her skirt ruffle and grabs the skirt in front to hold it down. The bolt detonates in a burst of force which smacks onto her backside and drives her forward onto the dirt. As the girl gathers her senses, the group approaches in careful, purposeful steps.

Aristespha leads the group and her eyes light up in recognition as the girl lifts her face off the ground. She laughs out loud and garners the attention of everyone else, including the girl. “Of all the people in this whole world.”

Aristespha stands off to the side and gestures to the Evuukian girl on the ground with a devious grin. “Behold everyone. Valavera Tala Erisa. Fourth child of the Verherin house.”

Valavera shudders and freezes. She slowly raises her head up to Aristespha and blinks her eyes for clarity. Her shock and bewilderment surge as the back of her mind desperately tries to dredge something up from the past. “H-h-how d-d-do you know my name?!”

Aristespha takes dignified hold of her hat, gently slides it off, and tosses her silvery blue hair around. She glares a dark, tooth-baring grin down at Valavera, with a strange shadowing to

her face. “Oh, after ALL the years I spent changing your diapers and baby-sitting to help out your mother... How could I EVER forget THAT face.”

Valavera gasps with her wide eyes and fast narrowing pupils. She defensively draws herself up and shrieks in sheer terror at who is before her. “A-A-A-ARISTESPHA!!!”

Valavera sits on the grass near the utility building with her legs and arms crossed. She occasionally sneaks a glance back at the towering Dretphi behind her. Dretphi meets her glance with a commanding glare and Valavera snaps her head back forward. Valavera lowers her head down and meekly rubs her hands. Aristespha stands with her back against the humvee and just shakes her head disapprovingly. Sotalia slides next to her, crosses her arms, and sighs incredulously. “That’s something else right there. She turns eighteen and has a paid ride to school. Then, runs off to join a damn Evuukian supremacy cult.”

Aristespha winches, rubs her temples and groans in frustration. “I know. Her mother is pretty strict, but she’s very nice and fair most of the time. I just hope all this humbles that little brat. She’s always been difficult, but this is a whole new level of stupid trouble.”

Bach walks up to the two at the humvee, uncoiling a section of garden hose on his arm every meter. He places down the remainder of hose and the end with a handle sprayer nearby. “Well, turned on the power and water pump to the well. Seems to have enough pressure to do the job.”

Cideeda rounds the front of the humvee. She steps towards the group, holding a dirty, worn satchel at arms length. She keeps her nose pointing upwind from the thing, with mild disgust. “It was exactly where she said it would be. Could have tracked it down by her smell, though. Found an aetherphone with a dead battery and cracked ID chip. Apart from that, just some other junk and a Terra Priest handbook.”

Sebastian’s ethereal voice echoes from the sword on Aristespha’s back. “How do you want to handle this, dear? As far as I’m concerned, we’ve completed the contract. I’m pretty sure if we just told the park service folks we scared off some dumbass kids and gave them that book, they’d believe us. So, thoughts from everyone else?”

Sotalia puts her hands up behind her head, leans onto the humvee, and rolls her eyes. “She’s not worth turning in to the police. She’s an idiot. But, I think she deserves a chance to make another choice this time. Plus, I got a good laugh out of it.”

Bach shrugs and directs a thumb over his shoulder at Valavera. “She put on a good show. But, I recognize that look of impending regret anywhere. The justice system has better things to deal with than her.”

Cideeda swiftly flips opens the top cover of the satchel, shows how full of vending machine food wrappers is it, and laughs amused. “She was going to starve anyway. She’s been eating out of the vending machines and I bet she tried to open the utility building. Girl is in way over her head.”

Aristespha rubs the bridge of her nose and breathes a deep sigh. "I'm certain it was her mother that put in the other bid now. Evuukian politics at their finest. They probably tracked her down to this area through her phone. And, I'm sure they were trying to get to her without being obvious with their resources. When she left, it probably got the attention of some other houses. It just happened that her mother saw we were in the area and decided to bid in hopes we'd handle it. Some timing and luck there."

Sebastian's voice resonates from the sword. "And, I'm assuming they knew about the source of the park service's problems well before the job got posted. Probably didn't want the average batch of adventurers to take her down."

Aristespha nods grimly and stares at Valavera. "She has no idea how fortune she is."

She steps calmly away from the humvee and arrives next to Dretphi. "We were thinking of getting her back home. Do you have any objections?"

Dretphi focuses on Valavera, shakes her head with a firm frown, and shifts her look to Aristespha. "No. She is scared. Tired. Hungry. Defeated. Send her home."

Aristespha agrees with Dretphi and catches Valavera peering over her shoulder. Aristespha concentrates her full attention on Valavera and dons a stern expression and proper posture. "Stand up. Face me. Now."

The tone of Aristespha's voice frightens Valavera into compliance and she follows the commands exactly and promptly. Aristespha narrows her eyes at Valavera and cuts a stare right through her. "Do you have any more surprises for us or are you going to cooperate?"

Valavera trembles and lowers her head. "N-n-no. That was all I had. It took me two weeks to work out. When, people stopped coming here, I had time to set something bigger up than what I was doing. But the daemon kept the rest of the nearby sprites away from me. So, I don't have anything else now."

Aristespha maintains the glare and continues her orders. "Good. We are going to take to our place for now. Then, home."

Valavera's face lights up and she shows some honest relief. "Okay. So, should I get in the vehicle and wait or-"

Sotalia cackles as she tests the hose sprayer and sends a jet of water off to the side. Cideeda closes the back door of the humvee and gives a toothy grin to Valavera while holding a bottle of liquid dish soap in one hand and a stack of clothes in the other. Bach chuckles to himself with an anticipating smile. Valavera blinks with bewilderment and looks to Aristespha for an answer. Aristespha firmly bellows one word. "Strip."

Valavera's face pales and her eyes dart around in fear. She summons the last bit of courage in her and she defiantly responds. "NO!"

Aristespha puts her hands to her sides, tilts her head, and examines Valavera. "If you think we are going to let you track that stench into that vehicle and inconvenience our ride home,

you are wrong. Now. Either you cooperate or I'm certain Dretphi will be happy to slice that filth off of you."

Dretphi smiles and unsnaps the guard on her knife's sheath. Valavera shrinks back and weakly nods. She glances at Aristespha then Bach, and returns to Aristespha with a pleading and embarrassed expression. Aristespha aims her voice back to Bach. "Bach, could you try to see if you could get that phone working and away from here for awhile? Please?"

Bach shrugs, searches the satchel for the aetherphone, and waves to the group. "Not a problem. Just let me know when you are done."

Aristespha taps the hilt of the sword on her back and gently calls out. "Sebastian, could you join him, please?"

Sebastian forms next the Aristespha, nods, and flies over to Bach's side. Valavera watches carefully and in a mix of surprise and awe. Bach ejects the ID chip from the phone and scrutinizes the small device as he walks further away. Sebastian looks over Bach's shoulder with curiosity.

A girlish shriek fills the air in the clearing. "OH GODS! IT'S COLD! WHY IS IT THAT COLD?!"

Sebastian snaps his head a back momentarily and then looks at Bach. "Huh, guess the water heater is broken."

Bach shakes his head with an evil grin. "Nope. Works just fine. That hose is just hooked up to a cold water only faucet."

Sebastian laughs as a series of shrill complaints spill forth into the air. "Wow. You evil asshole. Nicely done."

Bach simply shrugs with the grin still on his face. "Just making sure she remembers this experience. Oh, by the way? When did you start teaching Aristespha's mom's sword style?"

Sebastian strokes his chin and his eyes search the back of his mind. "Ah, I think it was shortly after she joined. Figured if she was suppose to protect the sword, she needed to know to use it."

Bach pops the battery out of the phone and nods. "Good call."

Valavera sits in the aisle of the vehicle between Aristespha and Bach. Her arms hug her folded legs and her cleaner golden hair drapes over a faded t-shirt. She squirms in the worn pants and sighs. Aristespha glares down at Valavera. "Continue."

Valavera breathes in and tells her tale. "So, I went to the forest reserve to try to scare everyone off and get it shut down. I figured if I did a good enough job and proved myself, the Terra Priests would consider me for membership. But..."

Sotalia chuckles to herself and cranes her head back with a knowing grin to Valavera. “Let me guess, things didn’t go to plan?”

Valavera squeezes her arms tighter around her legs and her ego shrinks even a bit more. “No. After a few days, my friend with the Terra Priests... He stopped responding to my calls. Then, my phone ran out of power and I broke it in anger. The visitor area was abandoned and the utilities got cut off. The daemon locked me out of the visitor center. Had next to no food left. I was losing control of the spirits I could control. And the big thing I set up to maybe get some major attention... Well, you all made short work of it.”

Aristespha turns her face to the girl. “What are you going to do now?”

Valavera sheepishly gazes at Aristespha. “Go home. Go to school. Learn to do magic correctly. Never get involved with any group like this again.”

Aristespha nods and relaxes her demeanor. “Good answer.”

Bach loads the battery into the aetherphone and presses a few buttons on the side. “Okay, battery is charged. I fixed the ID chip. So, in theory it should boot up and come online.”

The aetherphone screen flickers to life with a series of company logos and displays a loading screen with a status bar. After a few seconds, the desktop initializes and presents a collection of icons for the various functions of the phone and the applications loaded onto it. The layout is typical of the device, but the finer decorations fit the tastes of a teenage Evuukian girl. Bach taps the touch screen on a few icons to navigate the system and watches the phone load up an application. “Well, looks like it’s working. And, it seems like it found the network and re-registered itself to it-”

The phone vibrates and chimes a very distinctive ring. Every muscle on Valavera tenses and she remains motionless with wide-eyed horror. Bach squints at the screen and then hands the phone over to Aristespha. “I can’t read Evuukian, I leave this to you.”

Aristespha grabs the phone, quirks a brow at the screen, and smiles. She presses a button on the screen and happily puts the phone to her ear. “Lady Verherin. It has been too long. How have you been?”

The conversation’s language immediately changes to Evuukian, but the rest of group are content with understanding the first part clearly. After a few minutes, Aristespha speaks in a language the group can comprehend. “Yes, of course. The phone battery is fully charged, so take your time. We’ll discuss those details later.”

She removes the phone from her ear and lowers it down to Valavera. “It’s for you.”

Valavera shakily takes hold of the aetherphone and warily brings it to her ear. She speaks a few words in another dialect of Evuukian and waits in silence for a response. Another voice faintly sounds out from the speaker of the phone. While no one else can hear it well enough to decipher that side of the conversation, the cringes and wincing Valavera displays fuels smiles of accomplishment on the faces of everyone else.