

## Ain't A Hero – Intro Bit

by Bryan Schuder

"We're Nexus News! At the great battle between the Chosen One, Sebastian Warwick, and the Dark Lord Noxian! The Chosen One's party have made their way to the magical rift that Dark Lord Noxian is attempting to consume. Wait! The moment is here! The Chosen One is charging in to give the final blow and-"

"And that was the last transmission received from our on-site action news crew. Our condolences go out their families. The aftermath of the battle has been inconclusive. Thankfully, the magical rift was sealed, but Dark Lord Noxian is rumored to be on this plane of existence. Unfortunately, the only thing found of the Chosen One was the Legendary Sword of the Spirit Realm-"

-CLICK-

A brown haired, slightly overweight man sits on the couch in dirty t-shirt and boxers. He tosses the remote onto the makeshift milk crate and 2x4 table in front of him. He sinks into the old, ripped couch and blows the white streak in his hair out of his eyes. It's been a somber weekend after hearing the news and it sinks in more today. "Shit, bro. Fuck. Man, I can't believe it. You had your shit together, you got an awesome party. And even THE magical sword. Should have had that motherfucker's ass in a sling after that attack."

"I know, Bach. I thought I had that bitch. Jackass had one nasty trick up his sleeve."

"Well, what the fuck would have been that powerful to take you down-"

Bach pauses, finally noticing the ethereal, echoing voice next to him. His head slowly pivots to the ghostly figure lounging on the other half of the couch. Bach's blue eyes widen as his pupils almost slam shut from narrowing so quickly. The shriek of "manly" terror achieves an octave short of shattering the nearby glassware. Bach backpedals hard out from the couch, launching himself a meter away before hitting the floor. He continues the backpedal slide through the carpet littered with takeout boxes, dirty laundry, video games, "entertainment" books, and empty cans of both alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages.

"AHHH! AHHH! AHHH!-"

The ghostly figure rockets from the couch into the air, oddly holding his hands to his ethereal ears. He zooms to within mere centimeters of Bach's face. "FUCKING SHUT UP!"

" ... "

The figure removes his hands from ears. "By the gods, I've forgotten how loud your shrieking is!"

"S-s-s-sebastian?!"

"Yes."

Bach quietly blinks with horror bubbling into his face. "Oh gods! You've come to haunt me! All those times I got revenge against you- You're going to make me pay now!"

"No! Calm down, brother! I'm not here to haunt you."

"Okay."

"Well, not exactly."

"Okay..."

Sebastian rights his ghostly form in front of Bach, as he regains his footing and stands up.

"Long story short. I died, but I'm not dead."

"No shit."

"Stop being a smart ass."

Bach takes a rickety seat in the small combo kitchen/dining area. "Fine."

"The Sword was able to capture the magical energy around the area. It captured my spirit as it left my body and was able to recover most of my body and store it within. Bad news. I'm bound to the sword."

"Good news?"

"I can be brought back with a substantial amount of magical energy infused into the sword."

Bach sits up straight for a moment, lost in thought. "I see. With enough energy the sword could restore your body whole, rebind your spirit to it, and then bring you back. Like one of the old school resurrection spells."

Sebastian with a grin on his transparent face. "EXACTLY! It's good to know those years in adventuring school weren't wasted!"

Bach grimaces. "Dammit, man, don't bring that up. I know all the shit. Just never cared for the whole risk your life every day thing."

"Well, that's why I'm here! I know you know all this stuff! And you can help me out... Right?"

An awkward silence hovers between the two. Sebastian hovers closer to Bach, as he leans over to his fridge, pulling out a cola. He uses one of the cabinet handles to pop the cap off. Bach sighs at his brother. "Ah fuck it! I'll try it for you!"

Sebastian's ethereal form momentarily brightens. "YES! I knew it!"

Bach sets up a swig from his drink. "Okay. So, where are we going to get this ancient power source of magic to charge the sword up? Ancient ruins? Magical rift? Old magi focal points? There's a few things out there, but it'll be a hunt to find one substantial enough."

"Lord Noxian's Heart."

Bach eyes spring open as he swallows almost half the bottle of cola in one, painful gulp. He struggles to swallow it down, tears welling, and finally gasping for breath. "NOXIAN'S HEART?!"

"Yes, and you must be the one to plunge the sword through it."

"ME?!"

"You're my twin!"

"Fraternal twin! The sword knows that, right?! You did tell it that?!"

"As long as we share enough chromosomes, it'll work!"

"DUDE! Lord Noxian almost wiped you clean from existence! And you want ME to try that?!"

Bach leans in to glare at his brother. His brother returns the favor and the two stare each other down.

"Listen, we don't know where Lord Noxian is and his power is weak. He won't be trying anything soon. Plenty of time to get YOU into fighting shape again."

"You do realize, I was never really in a fighting shape."

"Well, I guess we ALL are going to work extra hard to get you there, whether you like it or not."

"We ALL?"

A door bell rings out throughout the small house. Bach scans around for the source of the sound. "I have a door bell?"

Sebastian shifts partially into the kitchen island with a sly smirk. "Well, they're here. My party."

Bach expression melts into one of nervous dread. "All them?! The Half-Emin, Grath, Fvalian, and that Evuukian?!"

Sebastian with an evil ear to ear grin. "Yes. All of them, ESPECIALLY the Evuukian want me back among the living."

" ... "

" ... "

" ... "

"What?"

"You and the Evuukian?"

Sebastian puffs his chest confidently with a sly smirk. "Yes."

Bach laughs and shakes his head. "Holy shit! I thought their whole cultural bias thing would never allow it."

"Well, officially. Could you answer the door? I don't want to keep them waiting."

Bach walks over to the door, taking a moment to realize the state of dress he's in. He musters a bit of courage and carefully cracks the door open. "Oh hey! Everyone!"

The Half-Emin, Grath, Fvalian, and that Evuukian are all standing at the door step to Bach's small house in the small outskirts town. They don't have the most amused expressions on their faces, except the Fvalian. She gives a greeting smile, with her sharp teeth.

"If you give me a few minutes, I'll get ready and come on out. I wasn't expecting to travel so soon."

The large, muscular Grath woman grumbles in a low tone. "Hurry. Up."

Bach nervously grins shifting towards a grit as the door closes. He looks expectantly at his brother.

"What?"

"Dude? Privacy? I gotta dress."

"Oh, right. Sorry, being on the adventuring road so much, you start to not worry about that."

Sebastian slips through the front wall of the house to meet the greetings of his party members. Bach pauses for a moment, thinking about what his brother just said. "Damn bro."

The party intensely discusses future plans. The Grath woman takes a large map and rolls it out upon the hood of the modified humvee, using her long arms to get it out in one motion. The Fvalian hops out of the driver's seat over the front window. She lays down on the back of the hood, stretching her lithe frame along the edge of the map to keep it down. She immediately taps out point on the map with a claw tip. The half-emin steps up in front of the grill and flips the hood off her short cape. Placing her hands on the sides of her waist, she picks at her belt of pouches with long nails. She sighs and glances with her golden eyes to the Fvalian on the hood. She leans forward and places a nail point on another part of the map. "Cideeda, we talked about this! There's no reason for Noxian to go back there!"

Cideeda's tail flicks out from behind her and she taps the same point from before. "I know! But, Sotalia you can't deny there might be some stuff left. Maybe notes or some clues to where he may have gone!"

Sotalia straightens her back. She stands a moment before grimacing at the bright sun beating down. With a frustrated sneer, she pulls the hat off her head, letting down her dark red hair, revealing her swept back horns. "What is with the weather around here?! It was near freezing last night at the hotel, now it's damn near summer weather!"

The Grath woman wipes beads of sweat off her forehead and removes her armored leather jacket. She tosses it in the back of the humvee. "Not the worst change in weather I have experienced, but surprising."

"I know, Dretphi!"

Cideeda rolls her eyes and turns over on her back, letting her legs and arms drape over the vehicle to stretch. "Better than it being as cold as it was on that mountain getting here."

Sotalia and Dretphi each nod in agreement, before continuing the debate over where to go next.

Standing off to the side a fair skinned, delicate figure, confidently holds a large sheathed sword. Sebastian's ghostly form glides over to her side. She smiles gently as he approaches. "So, did he agree to help us?"

"Of course, my dear, Aristespha!"

She breathes a sigh of relief. She twists her foot inside her boot, as discomfort flashes on her face. She places the sword down to her side as she kneels down. After undoing a few belts, she eventually works her leg out of the knee high boots. "The finest artisans crafted these boots for my family and, yet, they still manage to find every loose rock in area!"

She energetically shakes her boot, until a stray rock tumbles out. Balancing on one foot, Aristespha slides her leg back into the boot, taking a few moments to readjust her fine clothing back to proper.

Cideeda waves over to Sebastian and Aristespha with a toothy grin. "Hey! You two going to join in on his argument or do you want to be 'alone'."

Aristespha picks up the sword and resumes a distinguished posture and gazes lovingly over to Sebastian. "Let's not keep them waiting."

The group eventually settles upon a rough plan. Sebastian takes the lull in the debate to look over towards Bach's house. The Cideeda's long, tuff-tipped ears perk towards the house. The rest of the party stops the discussion and quietly glance over at the house. Sebastian hovers over and sticks his upper body through the front wall. He pulls back out for a moment of puzzling, before going all the way through into the house. Cideeda's ears perk again. "That sounds like the kick starter of a motorcycle."

"MOTHERFUCKER!!!"

The ethereal, booming, echoing eruption of sound gets the attention of everyone. Sebastian launches out of the building with his ghostly figure billowing red with ethereal flames. "THE BASTARD SQUEEZED HIS FAT ASS THROUGH THE BATHROOM WINDOW AND IS ESCAPING ON HIS BIKE! GET HIM!"

The rumble of a motorcycle blasts. Tires spin and gravel peppers the back of the small house. The party throws everything into the humvee, each jumping aboard. Cideeda floors the accelerator and spins out towards the back road behind the house.

Sebastian stands on the roof, floating in sync with the humvee and glares at angrily at the man on the side-car motorcycle a few dozen meters down the back road. "WHERE ARE YOU GOING, BACH?!"

The Bach looks behind him to see the ethereal figure, flaming red with rage. Bach snaps his head to the front, screams in fright, and opens up the motorcycle all the way.

Bach drives the motorcycle as fast as it will go. The small town streets thankfully empty on an early holiday morning. He takes advantage of local knowledge, power-sliding down back streets and access roads. This forces the humvee to take longer routes, but eventually the humvee's speed overall keeps the chase going. Sebastian launches from the roof of the humvee towards Bach. He attaches himself in front of the motorcycle, holding onto the handle bars opposite of Bach. "I THOUGHT YOU WERE GOING TO HELP ME BACH!"

Bach shifts his head left and right around Sebastian's ghostly form, each time meeting the enraged, transparent face of his brother. "DAMMIT SEBASTIAN! I'M TRYING TO FUCKING DRIVE HERE!"

"FUCK YOUR DRIVING! WHAT ABOUT HELPING ME?!"

Bach narrows his eyes at his brother, a strange faint blue glow coming from his pupils. "Well. Maybe you should mention needing to destroy a world ending horror BEFORE asking your brother to help! Full disclosure, man!"

Sebastian continues his ranting. "FULL DISCLOSE!? I was trying to be nice! Because YOU are GOING to HELP ME whether you like it or not-"

Bach nods his head and raises it, his eyes pulsating blue. Sebastian breaks his rage upon

sight. Bach cocks the back of his right hand away from the handle of the motorcycle and stares at his brother. "Full disclosure. This might sting."

With a blur, a loud resonant clap follows the impact as the back of Bach's hand pushes into Sebastian's shocked face. His ethereal figure tumbles loose from Bach's motorcycle and flies right back into the sword on Aristespha's lap. The four in the humvee can only glance wide-eyed. The sword stirs in Aristespha's lap and Sebastian reforms next to her with a frustrated expression. Sotalia spins in her seat to Sebastian. "How the fuck did he do that?!"

"I told you. My brother, despite being as human as he is, is full of surprises. He was ranked the same as ME in adventuring school."

Dretphi crawls forward from her back seat between Sebastian and Aristespha. "How do you want us to capture him?"

"Alive."

"Apart from that?"

"No... Permanent injuries. Please."

Cideeda pulls herself over the steering wheel and focuses her eyes on the motorcycle. She returns to her seat and reaches a cupped hand above her, forcing some of the flowing air into her face. She sniffs the air carefully. "It's a biodiesel engine! Sotalia how cold can your freeze spell get?!"

Sotalia pivots herself to Cideeda. "Below freezing easily."

"Can you focus it at range?"

"Yes, decently enough."

Cideeda points out a series of tubes on the engine. "Those are the fuel lines! Freeze them and it should stall the engine out."

Sotalia rolls her sleeves back and stands up in her seat. Her cape flutters around, as she takes aim with one arm grasping the top of the windshield and the other extended. She points and chants while symbols along her arm glow brighter and brighter. "Get me closer, Cideeda!"

With a manic grin, Cideeda floors the accelerator and closes the gap between the humvee and motorcycle. Bach glances back and with more worry. Sotalia maintains careful aim with concentration and releases the spell. The humvee tire rolls over a large rock. The beam of energy lances out, hitting a much higher target. The beam contacts the area of Bach's back above his butt and drags upwards to the region between the shoulders. Bach screams in agony, tensing up and nearly drawing in his motorcycle seat into his ass. Sotalia blinks with embarrassment and quickly gathers more energy to make another attempt. "Dammit! Stupid bump! I'll get it this time!"

Another beam of energy reaches out and hits the tubing around the engine, forming a solid layer of misting ice. Bach recovers from the shock of the ice to his back to notices the motorcycle engine sputter. He leans over to see the ice on the fuel lines. "FUCK!"

Bach snags his backpack in the sidecar, and throws it over his shoulder. He keeps grip on the handle bar, the engine completely giving out to a slowing coast. When the motorcycle gets to a near stop, he leaps and runs into the forest off to the side of the road. The humvee

slides to a stop. Dretphi flings herself out to land in a full break sprint. Bach runs with slight stumbles through the forest floor. Loud snaps and shuffles erupt from behind him. He snaps his head back to see Dretphi barreling through the forest. She powers through the dense floor, gliding over the terrain without a sign of trouble. Bach's eyes open wide in abject horror, with a slight blue glow, as Dretphi moves right next to him. She reaches out to Bach. As she hovers her hand over to grab firmly onto his shirt, Bach speeds forward out of her grasp. She watches in astonishment as not only do his footsteps grow faster but each stride increases in length. With speed unfitting of his body, Bach leaves Dretphi behind. A crackly voice sounds off in Dretphi's ear from a radio ear piece. "Dretphi! Have you caught him?!"

Between heavy breaths Dretphi responds. "No. He's somehow. Outrunning. ME!"

A very confused Cideeda continues on the radio. "What?! How?! Nevermind. We found an access road! Are you still running west!?"

"Yes."

"Okay. THERE! We found a clearing up ahead. Keep chasing him!"

Bach coughs and sputters. He can't keep the pace up any longer. The forest around him thins out. He looks upon the clearing with some relief. As Bach lands his first step into the clearing, Cideeda shoots up from the tall grasses and points a strange shotgun at him. She pulls the trigger and a payload of netting and weights explode outwards. Bach's luminescent blue eyes watch the expanding mass and he dive-slides immediately, unnaturally to the grass and dirt. The net aimed for a standing person flies over the prone Bach. Cideeda cocks the shotgun with zeal and she aims down. A pull of the trigger sends another strange projectile with electrical probes out the barrel. Bach sees the blast of the shotgun and the projectile spinning towards him. He raises his hands up instinctively to protect himself, bouncing the projectile as a golden transparent disc appears. Cideeda cocks the shotgun again and fires. The shield bounces the projectile again. Bach regains his footing and flings the shield right at Cideeda, knocking the shotgun out of her hands. She ends up catching the golden disc in her hands from the rebound off her shotgun. "How the fuc-"

Bach sprints across the field. Aristespha confidently walks out behind a tree on the other side of the clearing. With a fast chant and gesture, waves of energy pass through Bach. He staggers, each step more lethargic and exaggerated. Eventually, he barely maintains a stand, as a curious Aristespha carefully approaches. She keeps her gloved hand steadily aimed at Bach. "Strange. Most creatures fall completely asleep. There may be something to your brother's claims after all."

Something inside Bach stirs as his head nods from the effects of the spell. He remains still and standing, while Aristespha's curiosity turns to genuine caution. Bach's head rises back up with the effect of the spell fading and his senses coming back. She briefly expresses shock before releasing another wave of energy, collapsing Bach into an unconscious heap. Sebastian's ethereal form floats next to her. She snaps at him, "You did not mention how difficult he would be to capture!"

Sebastian drifts back and shrugs. "I knew he could be difficult, but I honestly didn't expect he'd be able to pull this much off."

Cideeda arrives, still holding the golden disc at the side with her hand. "Wow! He sure put up

a fight! I'll have to use my special made restrains on him!"

She passes off the golden disc to Sotalia as she stops from a jog. Sotalia examines the disc with confusion and intrigue. After digging through her cargo pants pockets, Cideeda pulls out a collection of restraints and rope. She puts the devices on Bach, wrapping him up in rope. In between securing restraints, Cideeda pats Bach down, turning out pockets and searching through his backpack. "He was planning to run pretty far! A bit of money, passport, and a fake ID."

Sebastian hovers over her and joins her in examining all the random things in Bach's backpack. Sotalia finally takes a moment from examining the golden disc. "Where did this come from? Did he have it with him?"

Cideeda pulls her head from backpack looting. "Umm. No. It appeared when I tried shooting him with the stunner rounds. Pretty weird."

"Have you found any artifacts on him?"

"No. Nothing I think is magical."

Sotalia holds the golden disc in front of her. "So you're saying he conjured this?!"

Cideeda tilts her head to the side. "I guess. I didn't see him do any kind of incantations. It just appeared."

Sotalia cranes her head over to Sebastian with a glare. He eventually realizes the glare concentrated on him and glides over to Sotalia. "Yes?"

"You said he FAILED out of the mage program!"

Sebastian's eyes dart confused. "Yes. He did."

Sotalia holds up the golden disc in one hand and points with the other. "THIS isn't the work of a failed mage!"

"Well, what do you call not passing your fifth year finals?"

"Wait! He made it through FIFTH YEAR?!"

"Yes?"

Sotalia's grits her teeth and shakes the disc, waving her hand to punctuate her thoughts. "Fifth year is the last year for school work! The only reason for the sixth year is internship hours!"

Sebastian shrugs. Dretphi steps up, taking huge breaths and long strides to recover from the long sprint. "Sebastian. There are things you have not told us about your brother. You need to inform us."

Sotalia points up to Dretphi behind her, keeping her glare on Sebastian. "Exactly! While your brother sleeps, we are going to have a nice long discussion."

Aristespha crosses her arms and slants her hips behind Sebastian. "All of us are going to have a nice long discussion."

Sebastian smiles nervously, pivoting between all the unhappy faces. He only finds difference with Cideeda's face, as she points to an electronic device freshly fished from Bach's backpack. "What?"

With the most innocent batting of the eyes, Cideeda asks with glee, "Can I have this?! These are really RARE! I've been looking for one FOR. EVER."

"Sure. Go right ahead."

Cideeda squeals with joy and continues to sort through Bach's backpack. Sebastian shrinks with the walls of his party closing in and points over to the humvee. "How about we get on the road and discuss this further on along the way?"

The world returns to Bach's senses. He feels moving. Sounds of conversation hit his ears. As his brain reconnects with consciousness, he assesses his situation. He's tied up, inside a vehicle, surrounded by the voices of the people he was trying to escape. He resigns to the loss. Slowly and stealthily opening one eye, he surveys the area. Inside the humvee, he lies in the middle aisle between everyone. He looks up to the back seat to see Dretphi laying out on the bench seat with a few pillows making it more comfortable. To either side are seats. Aristespha holds onto the sword and sheath across her lap with her seat reclined back. Sebastian is sitting in the opposite seat, despite not needing one. Looking down the aisle to the front, Bach sees Cideeda in the driver's seat flipping through the holographic list of music on his Universal HoloPlayer Pro. Sotalia excitedly points out a selection in the list and taps to start playing it. "I can't believe he has a copy of this! These guys were totally my favorite band back in my gloom and doom phase!"

Cideeda chirps back. "I told you this thing is amazing! And it's got all the unofficial modifications and unlocks!"

Aristespha sighs and groans, "Back to the discussion at hand... So Bach made it to the end of his fifth year and just dropped out."

Sebastian nods with arms crossed. "Yes. He didn't even take the final test. Just walked away from it all."

Sotalia twists in the seat towards the back. "You don't just walk away after all that and getting that high of marks. What happened before he left?"

Sebastian sighs, "Something happened on an assignment he went on with his instructor and a few other students. Things went really bad. Bach was the only one to get out without any serious injuries."

Sotalia face grows more concern and she focuses on Sebastian. "What. Happened?"

Sebastian lowers his head. "They ran into a Nightmare Geist."

The entire vehicle goes silent, save the sounds of the engine and road. Everyone grimaces and squirms as the thoughts of such a creature rise up from hearing its name. Bach winces as memories echo. Sotalia breaks the silence, "A Nightmare Geist?! They all lived?!"

Sebastian eyes side to side with a shrug, "Yes. Everyone except Bach needed to be hospitalized."

Dretphi shifts her position higher in the back seat. "There are old legends in my clan about whole villages being destroyed by such a creature. The most we have even done is seal them away. And secure the vessel somewhere far from where it could do harm."

Cideeda's happiness drains from her as something more solemn takes hold. She goes quiet.

Her breath occasionally shudders as memories take hold, occupying all the attention in her mind not put towards driving. Sotalia turns her head to Cideeda and gently holds Cideeda's shoulder. Cideeda's breathing calms and she pats a free hand on Sotalia's. Aristespha narrows her eyes at Sebastian, "So, how did they seal... It?"

Sebastian pauses in thought and after a few false starts, "Sealed? It was destroyed- Maybe. No one was sure, but there was no trace of it. Maybe it just left? I don't know!"

Bach close his eye and keeps quiet.

Sotalia rubs the bridge of her nose in frustration. "They didn't say anything?! Did your own brother say anything?! This is pretty damn significant!"

"No! He's never said anything about it. In fact, that's when he grew distant, and then just stopped doing the whole school thing. I tried to get him to tell me, but I could tell something bad happened and he didn't want to talk about it."

Dretphi settles down into the back seat again, moving some pillows around. "I think we may be able to help your brother."

Sebastian twists his form to look at Dretphi. "I hope so-"

"No. We will. Before he seemed like he was incapable of fighting. It is different now. He can fight. He just is not."

Bach keeps quiet. He was feeling tired again and at this point he really didn't want to get into an argument with such a one-sided majority. Plus even some awkward sleep would be preferable to hearing all the discussion about him.

Bach wakes to firm tapping of a finger on his forehead. His eyes greet Dretphi's as she glares stoically at him from above, her platinum blonde braids draping down. "Will you cooperate and come with us?"

Bach takes a breath in, "Yes. I don't have in in me to run at the moment anyway."

Dretphi leans back into the seat and directs Bach up with a hand gesture. Bach throws himself up to a sit. With a few motions and twists, Dretphi undoes the restraints on Bach. He then grabs hold of the seats to the side of him to pull himself up the rest of the way. He turns to the open humvee side door and steps outside to a gravel driveway. Dretphi follows him a few moments later, her imposing frame maintaining reach of Bach. Bach slowly spins around to survey the area. It is remote, out of the way, and only a single road in sight. Thankfully, the house at the end of the gravel driveway seems really nice. A single level, ranch style with a full assortment of amenities.

"So, this place got cable TV?"

Cideeda pushes the sidecar motorcycle past Bach and Dretphi, "Not yet! The installer is coming tomorrow, sometime between 8 in the morning and 8 at night. At least, they're honest about it around here."

Bach watches as his motorcycle rolls up into the garage, and a very eager Fvalian examines it. He glances over to Dretphi. She shrugs. "She's always wanted one, among many other things. And refused to leave without it."

Bach puts his hands in his pockets and shrugs. "At least it's here."

He walks slowly over to the front door, with Dretphi occasionally directing him via a firm, but gentle, nudge of the hand. As Bach crosses through the front door, he notices the house is furnished and decorated in a neutral style. The hard wood floors are really nice and well cared for. He walks into the big living/dining room and sees Sotalia and Aristespha going over a document at the window bar leading into the kitchen. He points to the couch in front of a big screen TV and Dretphi nods.

"Probably best I stay out of the way?"

"Yes. That would be best. Maybe you can find some channels for now."

Bach nods and takes a seat on the couch, reaching for the remote. He idly messes with the settings on the TV's tuner and listens in on the conversation going on.

Sotalia sits down on a stool and flips through a stack of papers. "That's the checklist, everything looks in order. You want to drop this by the leasing office in town tomorrow?"

Aristespha nods. "I need to stop and talk to a few representatives of a guild or two for some work while we get our investigations and... training started."

Bach narrows his eyes at that remark, watching the TV auto-scan for over-the-air channels. Sotalia drops the stack of papers on the bar counter. "Not a bad deal for a six month lease at the price."

"My property agent recommended it, said it would be perfect for adventurers needing a base to operate from."

Sebastian appears next Bach on the couch. Bach groans as he senses his presence. Sebastian turns to this brother, "Look man. I know we got off to a BAD start, but this is important stuff."

"To YOU."

"To everyone asshole! Dark Lord Noxian is going to cause trouble again and we've been THE group closest to stopping him."

"Man, fuck you. This all about you and I'm just being used as your fuckin' proxy."

"DUDE. This is a chance to get you in the game! Like we talked about when we were in school! All the adventurers I've been on, you should have been a part of them!"

Bach sighs as he flips through the channels. "If you weren't ethereal, I'd tell you to eat corn out of my shit right now."

Sebastian meanly eyes Bach, "Well, if I wasn't ethereal, I'd shove you head first into the shitter to suck my shit!"

The two are silent on the couch and just stare angrily at the TV screen. It's a few minutes before the two actually pay attention to what is on the TV.

"Could you change it? I can't."

Bach flips the channels to the weather, something a bit more tolerable. "Already on it."

Silence falls again until Bach drops his head and sighs, "Goddammit. I want to help you Sebastian. But, holy shit, there's GOT to be a better route than going to Noxian to get you

released.”

Sebastian leans in to whisper to Bach, “That’s what I thought too, man! But, Aristespha was pretty adamant about Noxian.”

“Well, that’s the known source of that energy. But- There’s GOT to be other places. Most artifacts just need that type of energy, doesn’t matter where it comes from. Okay, listen, Noxian is basically a conduit of really old school Elder magical energy. Rawest energy stuff. Most magical energy sources today are really tame in comparison to that. But, all them evolved from Elder and Elder used to be the only source for a very long time.”

Sebastian scratches his chin. “I see. There’s got to be some old ruins that might still be an easy source of that Elder energy.”

“Exactly! Even if there isn’t enough in one location, there’s probably enough residual around to charge up the sword. So, we explore some ruins, find enough Elder energy, charge up the sword, get you back, and we both get back at Noxian.”

“I like this. Either way, you still need to get you into fighting shape.”

“Fine. I’ll try. But, let me try to find a better route to getting you back along the way.”

Sebastian smirks. “Deal. Either way, it’ll be good to get you fighting again.”

“Sure.”

Sebastian thinks for a moment, “Hey, your house back in that town- Umm- Do we need to do anything to handle the rent or-”

Bach shrugs and falls back into the couch cushion. “Not really. My lease was up this month, already sold most of my non-valuable stuff to make last month’s rent. I didn’t expect my deposit back when I signed up for the place. So, about the only thing I didn’t cram into my backpack and the sidecar was the TV and that thing was on its last legs anyway.”

“Yah, that place was a real hole in the wall. Plus, you’re a shitty housekeeper.”

“Fuck you. It’s called depression, asshole.”

“Fair enough. Honestly, I haven’t been anywhere long enough lately to really live in a place.”

“So, how’s the whole dead and ethereal thing been for you?”

“You know. Not bad. Not good. It’s been... Interesting. I can get away with A LOT in this form.”

Both Bach and Sebastian settle in and watch the TV, channels flip as the two catch up as the other members settle in.

The sun rises slowly in the early morning, as the dew glitters and life stirs in the area. Standing in the middle of the large field near the house, Sotalia paces in lecture to Bach. “Okay, so let’s find out what you can do. Stand up here. I want you to cast the standard mage bolt you learned in first year.”

Bach rises up shakily, yawning and wiping the sleep from his eyes. He shambles up to the spot Sotalia points out. She crosses her arms and waits. Bach points out into the area in front of him, “So... any target you want me to-”

“Just cast it in the air, it should dissipate before it hits anything.”

Bach sniffs and stretches, “Okay.”

His arms move through the motions of the spell, exaggerating points and drifting others. His incantations jumble and the magical phrases run into each like customers in a crowded checkout line. But somehow, a perfect mage bolt forms from his hand and flies off into the distance. It eventually stops by hitting a tree, a kilometer away.

Sotalia glares with a facial twitch. “That was THE sloppiest gesturing and the worst pronunciation I’ve EVER heard. But, somehow-”

She takes a deep breath in. “Okay. Let’s try something that is more sensitive to proper spell work, the Hover Disc spell.”

Bach shrugs and goes through the motions. He pauses at movements to scratch, yawns at parts, and leaves the verbal and gesture components out of sync at the end. But, somehow a large hover disc forms without any trouble. Sotalia’s glare intensifies, as she pops individual knuckles out of building frustration at what she sees. “Step. On. It.”

Bach gazes down at the hovering disc and places a foot on top. He puts his weight on the disc and it does not move, even when he lifts his other foot off the ground. The disc then moves with Bach’s slight leaning directions. Sotalia’s anger seeps into her thoughts and she meets eyes with Bach. Just as she’s about to react, she notices the blue glow in his eyes. Her anger flashes over to curiosity and wonder. “I’ll be damned...”

Bach stops moving the disc around and apprehensively raises a brow to Sotalia. “I’ll be damned- What?”

Sotalia opens up her large satchel and rummages, eventually pulling out the same golden, transparent disc from yesterday’s chase. It was still formed and solid, showing no signs of decay. An evil grin grows, her golden eyes glint with a newfound glee. She and pulls off her hoodie and begins stretching and humming a happy, ominous tune. Bach steps slowly off the hovering disc. “Something happened. I’m not sure what-”

“I know what you are.”

Bach freezes, nervously. “What am I?”

Sotalia arcs her back and popping a few joints. “A Direct Caster. You actually got all the way through the mage school with high marks and they never tried looking for it.”

Bach cautiously witnesses this scene unfold. “Huh? I’m not following you all the way-”

Sotalia now smiles with a spring in her step. She brushes her long red hair out of her face and around her horns. “You see those motions and sounds YOU make, don’t mean anything to you. You don’t NEED them. You just did them to pass the tests, but they don’t help you get into the whole spell casting mindset. Somehow your brain just does that on its own.”

“Okay. This has just officially turned weird. Is that magical sparring gear you are putting on- Oh. Shit.”

Bach tenses up and scans around the area. He holds his hands up to Sotalia. She grins with delight. “You see, Bach. I’ve been teaching myself to direct cast, but I’ve never run into anyone that naturally did it. And to find someone that got through school without anyone figuring it out.”

“Alright, still confused at the change of attitude here.”

With a mischievous, evil grin, Sotalia winks at Bach, holding her hand up with a ball of fire forming, “I thought I was going to have to play kindergarten teacher to some oddball dropout. Instead, I’ve just gotten the sparring partner I’ve been wanting to learn all I want from. Don’t worry. If all goes well, you’ll have my respect.”

Bach’s eyes widen as his expression shatters to worry and fear. A blue glow sparks in his eyes. “That does not fill me with any good feelings! Why don’t we have a nice sit down class and talk about things-”

The ball of fire fully forms in Sotalia’s hand, illuminating her face, “Oh, class IS in session. Right now, your real training begins.”

Cideeda sits at the dining table with various bits and pieces strewn about the surface. She plays with the holographic menu, flipping through the contents of the holoplayer. Aristespha turns through old tomes and other scripture, making her own notes in a journal. The ethereal form of Sebastian hovers near her, trying to keep up with the material. Dretphi sits on the living room couch, taking care of armor and other equipment. The sliding glass door of the living room opens. Sotalia struts in with an ear to ear grin, wiping sweat off her face with a towel around her neck. “That was NICE.”

She continues around the dining table, straight into the kitchen, where she opens the refrigerator, and pulls out a sports drink. Sebastian eyes Sotalia. “Where’s Bach at?”

Bach steps through, and slowly closes the sliding door behind him. He’s missing spots of his shirt, his pants are now frayed, uneven shorts, and he wears only one shoe. Dretphi lifts her head up from cleaning equipment. Bach staggers to the couch and drops into it across from her. Cideeda, Aristespha, and Sebastian examine Bach as he stares blankly ahead of himself.

In between chugs of the sport drink, Sotalia points to Bach while standing very confidently. “You did REALLY good. After I catch a shower, we’ll continue for the rest of the day.”

Bach blinks, still not moving his head. “You should treat yourself. Take a nice. LONG. bath. Relax. Take the REST of the day off.”

“And you miss out on all this great training? I’d like to try some magic homing missiles out.”

Sotalia finishes the drink and tosses the bottle into the nearby garbage can, and walks out of the room down a hallway to one of the bathrooms. Attention briefly returns to Bach, before everyone resume what they were doing previously. Bach still stares forward. “So... Dretphi? Does your training tomorrow include fire, ice, bolts of energy, manic gleeful laughter, and repressed emotions feeding near bloodlust?”

Dretphi turns her head slightly with a tilt. “No. Just training weapons. Padded armor. And simple exercise routines.”

Bach nods, “That sounds nice.”

“You want a new shirt? I think mine will fit you.”

“Nah... It’d only get destroyed. Thank you, though.”

Dretphi nods and slides over a bottle of water to Bach on the coffee table. Bach reaches out, grabs hold of the bottle, removes the cap, and starts drinking it.

“Maybe after training tomorrow, we’ll get you some better... battle-ready clothing.”

“That would be nice.”