

# Ain't A Hero

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Season 1

Bryan Schuder



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## Season 1

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# Dedications

First and foremost... A special thank you to all the crazy humanity loving folks over at /r/HFY ! Out of all the places on Reddit for writing, you all are the most accepting and welcoming bunch of them all. As long as humanity is involved some how and you want to write, /r/HFY will give you a place to call home. I was not only surprised to find people interested in this crazy tale, but people who repeatedly read episode after episode... And still wanted more. I will try to deliver more!

So, in an inconsistent arbitrary order of me looking through the series posts, thank you to these fine folks that provided commentary (both praises and criticisms) and those who subscribed. (Please let me know if I missed anyone!)

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KillerKolonelz	WandererOfTheMind	smeik111
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Twister_Robotics	barely_harmless	LIKE100ONINJAS
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K2MnO4	MavenDeviant	Admiral_Sylvor
zymurgist69	HardAtomicSmile	TRN42
ChainsawNagitana	testicouille741	Golddrake
Eater_of_yellow_snu	Deathcoolbro	Repeated_613
Jonfirst	SirSchmoopy111	Voobwig
Nuke_the_Earth	Halefor	

"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 two by four 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."

Another voice in the room echoes. "I know, Bach. I thought I had that bitch. Jackass had one nasty trick up his sleeve."

Bach holds his hands up in the air and puzzles. "Well, what the fuck would have been that powerful to take you down-"

Bach pauses and notices 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. "AHHH!"

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! AH-"

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!"

Bach's mouth seals firmly shut as he stares wide at the ghostly figure. The figure removes his hands from ears. "By the gods, I've forgotten how loud your shrieking is!"

A flash of recognition jump on Bach's face. "S-s-s-sebastian?!"

Sebastian leans closer and eyes Bach. "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!"

Sebastian holds hands out and slowly waves them up and down. "No! Calm down, bro! I'm not here to haunt you."

Bach turns his head away slowly, keeping his eyes on Sebastian. "Okay."

Sebastian twists his mouth and averts his eyes momentarily. "Well, not exactly."

Bach slowly mouths out the words, the unease taking hold of his expression. "Okay..."

Sebastian rights his ghostly form in front of Bach. He regains his footing and stands up. "Long story short. I died, but I'm not dead."

Bach drops his eyelids down slightly and glares. "No shit."

Sebastian glares back with a sneer. "Stop being a smart ass."

Bach gets back onto his feet, walks over to the kitchen island, and takes a rickety seat in the small combo kitchen/dining area. "Fine."

Sebastian walks next to the same island and recounts quickly. "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."

Bach quirks a brow. "Good news?"

The ethereal brother cracks a small smile as he eyes Bach. "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."

Sebastian grins even wider. "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 his brother, as Bach 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."

Sebastian quickly directs his eyes and voice away from Bach. "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?!"

Sebastian snaps a point right at Bach. "Yes, and you must be the one to plunge the sword through it."

Bach sputters and cough, swing back away from the ghostly finger. "ME?!"

Sebastian puts his hands up in the air off to his sides. "You're my twin!"

The bottle clanks on the kitchen island and Bach hastily wipes his mouth. "Fraternal twin! The sword knows that, right?! You did tell it that, right?!"

Sebastian shrugs and rolls his eyes. "As long as we share enough chromosomes, it'll work!"

Bach places his hands on his head and then throws them forward. "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."

Bach crosses his arms, sighs, and drones in a lower tone. "You do realize, I was never really in a fighting shape."

Sebastian grin tinges with devious hints. "Well, I guess we ALL are going to have to work extra hard to get you there, whether you like it or not."

Bach's eyes spring all the way open. "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. Or actually... OUR 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."

Bach stares at his brother, his head turn side to side as his eyes examine him from different angles. Sebastian backs away after noticing. "What?"

Bach pulls his mouth to a corner and perks an eye brow. "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."

The flash of ego resides and Sebastian crosses his arms and motions his head to the door. "Well, officially. Could you answer the door? I don't want to keep them waiting."

Bach walks over to the door and realizes 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 stand at the door step to Bach's small house in the small outskirts town. None have most amused expressions, except the Fvalian. She

gives a greeting smile, with her sharp teeth.

With a few remain shreds of confidence, Bach smiles and holds a finger up to the group. "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. Sebastian bounces his eyes to either side. "What?"

Bach springs his hands to the sides and bobs his down. "Dude? Privacy? I gotta dress."

Sebastian rolls his eyes and waves his hand as he drifts towards the front of the house. "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 tall, muscular 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 top of 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 black 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 long, furry 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 and stands a moment to ponder before grimacing at the bright sun beating down. With a frustrated sneer, she pulls the toque off her head, letting down her dark red hair and 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, shifts a number of blonde hair braids, and removes her armored leather jacket. She tosses it in the back of the humvee. "Not the worst change in weather experienced. Surprising still."

Sotalia nods to the Grath woman. "I know, Dretphi!"

Cideeda rolls her eyes and turns over on her back, letting her legs and arms drape over the vehicle to stretch. "I'll agree with Dretphi. But, 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?"

Sebastian pridefully puffs his chest out. "Of course, my dear!"

She breathes a sigh of relief. She twists her foot inside her boot and discomfort flashes on her face. She places the sword down to her side and 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, she 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 Evuukian woman with a toothy grin. "Hey! Aristespha! Sebastian! 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, tufted ears perk towards the house. The rest of the party stops the discussion and quietly glance over towards 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 seizes 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 ahead 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. Local knowledge works to his advantage, power-sliding down back streets and access roads. This forces the humvee to take longer routes, but eventually the humvee's better overall speed 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!"

Sebastian forces his face forward. "FUCK YOUR DRIVING! WHAT ABOUT HELPING ME?!"

Bach narrows his eyes at his brother and a strange, faint blue glows 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 DISCLOSURE!? 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, eyes pulsating blue. Sebastian breaks his rage upon sight. Bach cocks the back of his left 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?!"

Sebastian grumbles in a low tone. "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 draws herself forward from her back seat between Sebastian and Aristespha. "How do you want us to capture him?"

Sebastian sighs. "Alive."

Dretphi rolls her eyes and slowly shakes her head. "And?"

Sebastian groans and as he stares forward at the motorcycle in front of the humvee. "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."

Cideeda glances at Sotalia before returning her eyes to the road. "Can you focus it at range?"

Sotalia nods confidently. "Yes. Pretty far, too."

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 a bit closer."

With a manic grin, Cideeda floors the accelerator and closes the gap between the humvee and motorcycle. Bach glances back 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 the motorcycle seat into his ass. Sotalia blinks with embarrassment and quickly gathers more energy for 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!"

He snags his backpack in the sidecar, and throws it over his shoulder. He keeps grip on the handle bar and the engine completely gives out to a slowing coast. When the motorcycle nearly stops, he leaps and runs into the forest off to the side of the road. The humvee slides to a stop. The back door flies open and 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 twists his head back to see Dretphi barreling through the forest. She powers through the dense floor and glides over the terrain without 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 her hand hovers 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. Somehow. Outran. ME!"

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

Dretphi flits her eyes up to the sky through the canopy and notes the location of the sun. "Yes."

The radio blares out with Cideeda's voice. "Okay. THERE! We found a clearing up ahead. Keep chasing him!"

Bach coughs and sputters, as the forest around him thins out. He watches upcoming 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 witness 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, the projectile bouncing away as a golden transparent disc appears. Cideeda cocks the shotgun again and fires. Again, the projectile

bounces off the shield. Bach regains his footing, flings the shield right at Cideeda, and knocks the shotgun out of her hands. She catches the golden disc from the rebound off her shotgun. "How the fuc-"

Bach sprints across the field. Aristespha confidently strides out from 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 manages to stand, as a curious Aristespha carefully approaches. She aims her gloved hand steadily 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 bobs from the effects of the spell. He remains still and standing, while Aristespha's curiosity shifts to genuine caution. Bach's head rises back up with the effect of the spell fading and his senses coming back. Shock sparks on Aristespha's face and she releases another wave of energy, collapsing Bach into an unconscious heap. Sebastian's ethereal form floats next to her. She snaps her head at him with a harsh frown. "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 and still holds the golden disc at her side. "Wow! He sure put up a fight! I'll have to use my specially 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 pauses from investigating 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."

Sotalia glances over to Cideeda with curiosity. "Have you found any artifacts on him?"

Cideeda eyes side to side and then returns to Sotalia. "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 concentrated attention upon him and glides over to Sotalia. "Yes?"

Sotalia narrows her eyes at Sebastian and takes a step forward to bring her face closer to his. "You said he FAILED out of the mage program!"

Sebastian's eyes dart around 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!"

Sebastian shrugs, biting his lip. "Well, what do you call not passing your fifth year finals?"

Sotalia's jaw drops and she cringes. "Wait! He made it through FIFTH YEAR?!"

Sebastian looks desperately around for a better response. "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 holds his hands up in the air as he struggles for a response. 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 a thumb at 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."

Sebastian grins half-heartedly as he shifts his eyes between everyone else. "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. Conversation hit his ears. As his brain reconnects with consciousness, he assesses his situation. Ropes bind him. He feels the bumps of the road shake the vehicle. And, voices of those he failed to escape surround him. He resigns to the loss. He slowly and stealthily opens an eye and 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 to make it more comfortable. To either side are seats. Aristespha holds onto the sword and sheath across her lap with her seat reclined back. Sebastian sits opposite, 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 as she reverts her attention back to Sebastian. “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 and stares towards the floor boards. “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’s face grows more concern and she focuses on Sebastian. “What. Happened?”

Sebastian turns his head to the side and grimaces. “They ran into a Nightmare Geist.”

Silent looms in the vehicle, save the sounds of the engine and road. Everyone cringes 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. Though everyone except Bach needed to be hospitalized.”

Dretphi shifts her position higher in the back seat. “There are old legends in my clan. Whole villages destroyed by that creature. Most we have ever done is seal them away. Secure the vessel far from anything we value.”

Cideeda’s happiness drains as something more solemn rises. She goes quiet. Her breath occasionally shudders as memories spark and occupy all attention not towards driving. Sotalia rotates 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 and after a few false starts responds. “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!”

Sebastian rests his head on his hands and echoes an ethereal sigh. “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 and moves some pillows around. “I think we may be able to help your brother.”

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

Dretphi stares out a side window and squints in thought. “No. We will. Before he seemed incapable of fighting. It is different now. He can fight. He just is not.”

Bach continues his silence and feels fatigue washing over him again. An argument against a majority seems fruitless at the moment. Even awkward sleep beats hearing 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? Come with us?"

Bach takes a breath in. "Yes. I don't have it 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. Bach scans his gaze across the front the house and glances behind him. "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 with a slightly twist in the corner of her mouth. "She has wanted one. Among other things. Refused to leave without it."

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

He plods 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 television. "Probably best I stay out of the way?"

Dretphi nods once and holds a hand at the television. "Yes. That would be best. Maybe you can find some channels for now."

Bach agrees and takes a seat on the couch, reaching for the remote. He idly messes with the settings on the television'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 as her eyes follow the settling pages. "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 television 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."

Aristespha smirks as she slides the document closer to her. “My property agent recommended it, and 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.”

Bach rolls his voice with a growl. “To YOU.”

Sebastian throws his hands to the side. “To everyone asshole! Dark Lord Noxian is going to cause trouble again and we’ve been THE group closest to stopping him.”

Bach’s lip curls and he scoots over to one side of the couch. “Man, fuck you. This all about you and I’m just being used as your fuckin’ proxy.”

Sebastian places the palm of his hand on his forehead with a grit of the teeth. “DUDE. This is a chance to get you in the game! Like we talked about when we were in school! All the adventures 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 as he settles opposite to Bach on the couch. “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 television screen. It’s a few minutes before either actually pay attention to what is on the TV.

Sebastian cringes and grumbles. “Could you change it? I can’t.”

Bach flips the channel 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.”

Bach sinks into couch cushion and lets his eyes search his mind. “Well, that’s the currently 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 derive 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.”

Bach turns his upper body to Sebastian and gestures with his hands. “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.”

Sebastian cracks a smile and punctuates with a waving finger at Bach. "I like this. Either way, you still need to get you into fighting shape."

Bach settles back to his half the couch and sighs. "Fine. I'll try. But, let me try to find a better route to getting you back along the way."

Sebastian smirks as he shifts back to his side of the couch. "Deal. Either way, it'll be good to get you fighting again."

Bach rolls his eyes and shrugs. "Sure."

Sebastian thinks for a moment and uneasily glances at Bach. "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 cushions. "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 television and that thing was on its last legs anyway."

Sebastian resumes a stare at the television. "Yah, that place was a real hole in the wall. Plus, you're a shitty housekeeper."

Bach shakes head and eyes Sebastian. "Fuck you. It's called depression, asshole."

Sebastian tilts his head to the side. "Fair enough. Honestly, I haven't been anywhere long enough lately to really live in a place."

Bach gazes at the television. "So, how's the whole dead and ethereal thing been for you?"

Sebastian scratches his head and rocks his head side to side in thought. "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 television. Channels flip as the two catch up and 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-"

Sotalia dismissively waves in the general distance. "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 and places her hands together. “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 and 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 glides 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. Still formed and solid, it shows no signs of decay. An evil grin grows, her golden eyes glint with a newfound glee. She pulls off her hoodie and begins stretching and humming a happy, ominous tune. Bach steps cautiously off the hovering disc. “Something happened. I’m not sure what-”

Sotalia circles a finger to a point at Bach with a sway of the hips. “I know what you are.”

Bach freezes, nervous. “What am I?”

Sotalia arcs her back and pops 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 carefully witnesses the 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.”

Bach’s eyes scan side to side in a vain attempt for an explanation. “Okay. This has just officially turned weird. Is that magical sparring gear you are putting on- Oh. Shit.”

Bach tenses up and surveys 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...”

A brow quirks on Bach’s face as he understands this situation no further. “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 could 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 table top. She plays with the holographic menu, flipping through the contents of the holoplayer. Aristespha turns through old tomes and other scripture, scribing notes in a journal. The ethereal form of Sebastian hovers near her, examining the material. Dretphi sits on the couch, caring for 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 drags the sliding door shut. 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. Bach staggers to the couch and drops onto it, opposite her. Cideeda, Aristespha, and Sebastian examine Bach as he stares blankly ahead.

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."

Sotilia perks an eye brow with a wry smile. "And you miss out on all this great training? I'd like to try some magic homing missiles out."

Sotalia finishes the drink, 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 resumes their tasks. Bach stares forward still. "So... Dretphi? Does your training tomorrow include fire, ice, bolts of energy, manic gleeful laughter, and repressed emotions feeding near bloodlust?"

Dretphi rotates her head slightly with a tilt. "No. Just training weapons. Padded armor. Simple exercise routines."

Bach nods. "That sounds nice."

Dretphi analyzes the state of Bach's attire. "You want a new shirt? I think mine will fit you."

Bach curls a lip and shakes his head nonchalantly. "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.

Drephi cracks a slightly smile out of the corner of her mouth. “Maybe after training tomorrow, we will get you... battle-ready clothing.”

Bach nods. “That would be nice.”

Bach lays on the bed in his new bedroom. He stares above at the ceiling fan, as it spins and pushes air down. The bedroom is actually decent. It's the smallest in the house, but there's far better and more furniture than what his old place had. Bach plays with the alarm clock on the nightstand and realizes he can't remember ever having a nightstand at his old place. His attention shifts to points around the room. Despite circumstances leading to this point, he admits it's an improvement. A knock sounds from behind the door. Bach pulls himself to a seat on the bed. "Umm... Come in?"

The doors opens and Dretphi, the tall, strong Grath woman, walks in. She masterfully balances a large stack of clothes that are familiar to Bach in one hand and holds onto the straps of a backpack in the other. With a quick twist and slide of the hand, she places the clothes stack on top of the wooden dresser. She steps forward to Bach, calmly holding out the backpack. "I have made sure to recover most of your belongings. I apologize that we had to go through them."

Bach holds his hands palms up in front of him. "I did run and try to escape... I honestly can't blame you there."

He grasps the backpack with both hands, pulls it into his lap, and unzips the top. He inspects it to find most of the major items. Dretphi drops her head slightly and sighs. "I have not recovered your holoplayer. Cideeda has that. She refuses to let it out of her possession. She is difficult when obsessive."

Bach pauses from sorting stuff along bed and gives Dretphi a slight smile. "Hey, I'm glad to get anything back. I mean apart from the holoplayer it looks like everything is here."

Dretphi places her hands on her hips. "Either of us may have luck retrieving it later, when she finds another toy to obsess over."

Bach shrugs and puts the backpack down on the floor next to the nightstand. "Honestly, I really haven't felt like listening, reading, or watching anything lately. I'm trying to process everything that's happened in the last... two days? Wow..."

Concern hints through Dretphi's face as she breathes purposefully, crossing her arms. "That was not how we wanted our initial meeting to go. We should have shown better respect to you..."

A few moments of silence punctuate the air. Bach holds his hands up and pulls his mouth to a corner. "Well, it wasn't my finest moment either. Half hour after I promised my brother in his time of need to help him... The first opportunity to actually get into adventuring... I tear off running like some chicken shit coward."

He lowers his head into his hands, shaking his head. Dretphi examines Bach and cracks a minute smile. "You are not a coward."

Bach tilts his head up to peer over his hands with a prominent lift of the brow. "How do you figure?"

Dretphi thinks for moment and meets Bach's eyes as his head lifts out of his hands. "After years of little contact, your ghost brother demands you help him destroy the evil that destroyed him. He knows you have never seriously adventured. Your brother's party is at your front door. You have very little time to pick up everything you established to join him. It seems you have no choice."

Bach's eyes slide side to side in thought, before directing his head to gaze at Dretphi. "That sounds about right."

Dretphi nods and continues to explain. "Not a desirable situation. You retreated. You hoped to get into a better position. Maybe force a change in the situation that would benefit you."

Bach sighs with a curl of his upper lip. "Some would still say I ran like a coward."

Dretphi shifts her weight to another side and perks an eyebrow. "Some who have never been in bad situations."

Bach tilts his head to the side and focuses on Dretphi, fighting confusion on face. "I still might run away some more--"

The slight smile morphs seamlessly into a smirk. "You will not."

Bach's confusion taints with an incredulous twist. "I'm perfectly capable of making a good effort to escape."

The smirk edges towards grin upon Dretphi's face. "You are still here."

Bach straightens his back and attempts a retort. "Well, I--"

Dretphi maintains her gaze at Bach and focuses upon Bach. "There have been opportunities for you to escape. You can dismiss your brother. Outrun me. Dodge Cideeda. Resist Aristespha's magic. Hold your own against Sotalia. There is an escape vehicle you are familiar with in the garage. We are in an area we are not familiar with."

Bach opens his mouth to say something and fades back from saying anything. He crosses his arms and slouches forward, breaking eye contact with Dretphi as he idly scans the floor while his mind thinks.

Dretphi continues her break down of the situation. "You did not attack us. Try to harm us. Attempt to sabotage us. Try to find escape routes last night. You came back from practice

with Sotalia today. I stand without armor or weapon, in my casual clothes. There is no desire to attempt escape.”

Bach sighs loudly and signals defeat. He shakes his head, shrugs, and places his hands on his knees, before looking up at Dretphi. He confirms that she is indeed wearing a simple dark green tank top, blue gym shorts, and socks. “You got me. I figuratively and literally have nothing left to hide. As awkward as it was yesterday, this is honestly the best opportunity presented to me in years. I get a chance to help my brother out, actually get into adventuring, and maybe keep Dark Lord Noxian from causing another world war in my lifetime.”

Dretphi unfolds her arms and places her hands back to her hips. She gives a solid smile to Bach. “Good reasons. The ones I hoped to hear.”

Bach winces with a grit of the teeth as he analyzes his situation. “But, I’ll be honest, I have no real idea what I’m doing. I’m just doing what little I can that makes sense to me at the moment.”

Dretphi shrugs. “A sentiment that I share some days.”

Bach thinks within the quiet moment and scratches his head to briefly puzzle at Dretphi. “Not that I don’t appreciate it, but you’ve been pretty open and straight forward to me.”

Dretphi cocks her head slightly and faintly twists her mouth. “So have you. I hoped I would have caught you in the forest, so I could talk to you. Maybe explain the situation better. I wish Sebastian had gone with my recruitment plan.”

Bach breaks from thought and looks curiously at Dretphi. “Which was?”

Dretphi draws a long breath and exhales slowly. “Lunches, dinners with everyone to acquaint you. A chore quest from the local job board to give you a taste of adventuring. An offer to join us on your terms.”

Bach nods with a mixture of mild surprise and amusement. “That probably would have worked pretty easily on me. I didn’t have much going on. Why didn’t he go with that plan?”

Dretphi rolls her eyes before she returns her attention at Bach. “Sebastian is impatient. Aristespha is encouraging it.”

Bach twists his mouth, before gritting his teeth and hissing a breath in. “Yah... Sebastian is easy to convince when routes opposite of his mind are taken.”

Genuine amusement warms to Dretphi’s face. “I believe that is not a recent behavior.”

Bach exaggerates a series of nods. “You are most correct in that belief.”

Dretphi briefly glances towards the door and back. "I need to finish armor repair. Continue laundry for everyone. I wish to start on good terms. Your training with me tomorrow will demand much from you. I wanted an understanding beforehand."

Upon hearing laundry, Bach leans over to the side to look around Dretphi and examines the stack of clothes more. "Wait. Did you wash my clothes?"

Dretphi pivots to the direction of the clothes on the dresser. "Yes. They had a smell to them."

Bach drops his eyes while rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment. Dretphi smirks slightly. "You need a change of clothes after what Sotalia did to your current ones. I gave your laundry priority."

Bach holds his shirt, checking out the holes and damage from Sotalia. Keeping magical defenses close to his body, leaves his clothes in harms way. He pokes his finger out of a hole in his shirt. "Thank you. Really. I... really do mean it."

Dretphi shifts to a light smile and walks towards the door. "We will start early. Rest up. I will fit you for armor afterwards."

Bach watches Dretphi walk through the doorway and close the door. He stands up from the bed and steps over to the clothes stack. He sorts through the pile until he finds a shirt, peels off his old shirt, and works into the clean shirt. Bach resumes a seat on the bed. After a few minutes of idle but deep thoughts, he plays around with the settings of the alarm clock, trying to get it set up for tomorrow.

Another early morning rises. Bach drags his feet each step to the next, moving towards the spot in the backyard Dretphi stands. He grumbles about the morning schedule one last time before arriving in front of Dretphi. Bach looks around the area and sees no equipment. "Huh. I thought you'd have some training gear or something..."

Dretphi shakes her head. "Not at this time. In the future. We focus on an exercise routine for you first."

Bach cringes and drops his head. "Okay..."

Dretphi crosses her arms and slowly moves right in front of Bach, her head craning to make direct eye contact. "When is the last time you exercised?"

Bach raises his head back up and averts his eyes from Dretphi's gaze as she tries to lock on. "Ahh- Umm... Well..."

Dretphi takes another step closer and tilts her head gradually down to finally intercept Bach's eyes. She only stares. The truth finally escapes Bach, seeking refuge far from Dretphi. "Dammit- I guess three- four years ago when I got on some self-improvement kick. I went full on for a day, ached for a week, and never did it again."

With a simple nod, Dretphi thinks for a moment. She perks a brow. “Stand up straight.”

Bach shrugs. He rises out of the slouch, straightens his legs out, squares his shoulders, and pulls his head back. It takes a minute to settle into a posture he’s uncomfortable with and so believes is proper posture. Dretphi circles around reaching out to adjust Bach’s posture. She stops in front Bach and with a level head looks right into his eyes. “You might be taller than your brother.”

Bach darts his eyes around and eventually puzzles at Dretphi. “Really?”

Dretphi stands tall next to Bach, but the difference of height is much smaller than before. “Your brother can look me in the eye with his boots on. You can with regular shoes. You need to stop slouching.”

Bach’s head pans down to his now more apparent gut. Dretphi reaches a hand out and firmly pokes a section of Bach’s gut. “If this bothers you, do what I say.”

Dretphi pivots and steps away from Bach. He relaxes his stance and rubs the pain away from the poked section of his belly. Dretphi halts, spins to Bach, and points to the ground. “Set up for sit-ups. Do twenty five of them.”

Bach blinks at Dretphi. She returns a stern glare. Bach warily walks over to the spot Dretphi points to, lays down on the ground with his knees up, and puts his hands behind his head. Bach breathes in and out a few times and attempts to lift his upper body up. He closes his eyes, grits his teeth, grunts and groans. The meager momentum dies short of halfway through the sit-up. He strains in place for seconds, before the remaining hold-outs of his pride and honor finally abandon him. Bach’s upper body drops onto the grass, punctuated with a sad sigh. He keeps his eyes closed, shame plain on his face. “You know you probably have exercise you need to do. I’ll work on this. No one needs front row seats to witness this shit show.”

Dretphi eases down to a spot beside Bach and prepares for sit-ups, too. Bach hears movement beside him and opens his eyes to her looking right back at him. “You are correct. I need to do twenty five sit-ups.”

Without a bit of hesitation, Dretphi cleanly and properly does a sit-up and calmly sets up for the next. “Your turn.”

A mix of emotions contend for a place on Bach’s face. With an exhale, Bach steels himself for another attempt at a sit-up. “You realize I’m about to embarrass my entire lineage.”

Dretphi nods. “Let them be embarrassed now. You will impress them later.”

Bach closes his eyes, grits his teeth, and grunts as he tugs his upper body to his knees. Similar to the last attempt, he runs out of strength right before the halfway point. As the strain is about to get the best of him, Bach feels a hand on his back and gradual force pushing him

forward. With the extra little bit of force to get over the halfway point, Bach pulls himself the rest of the way up. He lowers himself slowly back down and pauses staring at the passing clouds in the skies above him and Dretphi. "I... I knew this was going to be demanding physically. The psychological... Not something I anticipated."

Dretphi gazes at the clouds above, too. "When we take a break, I will tell you of my first time training with my birth father."

Bach glances over to Dretphi. "Does it include embarrassing the family name?"

Dretphi grins slightly as she executes a sit-up and readies for the next. "Does almost stabbing one of my house fathers with a magic sword count?"

Bach flashes an amused expression. "I'll count it."

Dretphi rotates her head towards Bach. "Your turn."

Bach shakes the grimace off to determination and attempts another sit-up.

"Twenty- URK. Five!"

Bach collapses face first into the grass, quickly turning his head to rapidly gasp for breath. Dretphi swiftly switches from a push-up stance to a sitting position next to Bach. "Your other exercises need work. Your push-ups are not bad."

Bach draws the strength to roll up and face the sky and breathes heavily in his sweat drenched shirt. "I'm just glad I didn't have to resort to the cheater push-ups."

He rests his head towards Dretphi. "I'm going to ache so much tomorrow."

Dretphi calmly breathes deep and wipes a few beads of sweat off her forehead. She leans forward and lifts herself up. She holds down a hand to Bach. "Yes. You will be sore. You should still do the stretches I showed you."

Bach clumsily lifts a hand to grab onto Dretphi's. He throws himself up and she pulls him up the rest of the way. "I'll try. But, I'll be honest, the pain might be too much right in the morning... I'll try in the afternoon."

Dretphi strolls towards the house, stretching her arms and back along the way. She gestures Bach to follow. She reaches into the side pocket of her shorts and pulls out an aetherphone. A few taps and a time appears on the screen. "That's all for now. Lunch will be ready soon."

Bach startles and snaps his head up to the sky to see the sun directly overhead. "Really?! Did I really take that long?"

Dretphi glances back. “We did walk the laps in between the exercises.”

Bach hangs his head. “Yah...”

Dretphi slows down and waits for Bach to move next to her. She pats his back. “Hold yourself to high standards. Do not hang yourself with them.”

Bach’s eyes drift along with his head to Dretphi. “Is that another one from your birth father?”

She nods with a smile. “Yes. He has many. Despite all he taught me, I am certain he has more saved for the right moment.”

Bach tightens his smile. “Still can’t believe you nearly harpooned your house father.”

Dretphi sighs and shrugs. “My birth father warned him to not sit close when we sparred. It is not the worse that has happened to him. I have heard tales from my mother about how wild of adventurers they were.”

Bach lifts a hand up and counts off with his fingers. “So, three fathers and one mother in your house?”

Dretphi nods and nonchalantly glances over to Bach. “Yes. My mother and birth father were the heads of it.”

Bach’s watches his mind as he processes the concept. “That sounds like an interesting childhood.”

Dretphi tilts her head side to side gauging her thoughts. “I do not know. It seems normal to me. The only excitement ever came from my two younger brothers getting into trouble.”

Bach nods and groans. “Know how that can go.”

Dretphi grows a subtle, sly smirk. “Any tales to share about your brother?”

Bach chuckles evilly as he flashes a devious smile to Dretphi. “Oh, I got plenty. I’m sure he’s told you about his heroic exploits in High Alton?”

Dretphi rolls her eyes and nods begrudgingly. “Yes. Many. Many. Times.”

A sinister grin roots itself in the corner of Bach’s mouth, as he narrows his eyes. “Ever tell you all the time he called me at three in the morning from the bathroom of another dorm with two Fvalian women getting into a territorial fight in the bedroom?”

Dretphi eyes shoot open wide in honest, absolute shock and she faces Bach. She points Bach to a walking path near the house that leads away. “Can we walk more?”

Bach gives a simple long nod. “Yes. Yes we can.”

Bach steps out of the shower stall, grabbing a towel to dry off. He wraps the towel around his head to absorb water from his long hair. He puts on underwear, a loose fitting shirt, and a pair of old shorts. He squirms a moment and feels his muscles mildly annoyed rather than sore. Tomorrow will not be so kind. The bathroom door opens and he carries dirty clothes and towels down the hall to the large living room. Dretphi looks up from sorting through laundry and points to a basket. Bach tilts the basket up with his foot and sees his name written on it. "Nice. Thanks."

Dretphi shrugs and returns to the clothes sorting. "It makes it easier."

Bach deposits dirty clothes into his basket and the towels into the community basket. "So, when do you want to fit me for armor?"

Dretphi finishes the last stack of clothes and sweeps it onto the couch. She reaches for a large toolbox nearby and slides it along the floor next to her. "Now. Stand here. Straight posture with your arms out."

Bach side steps to the spot Dretphi indicates. She flips the toolbox open and takes out a tape measure. She leans forward, gets to her feet, and pulls out a length of the measuring tape. She kneels down, tucking an end between Bach's big and second toe, and leads the rest up to near the top his head. "190 to 192 centimeters? Hmm."

Dretphi continues her examination with other measurements along various points on Bach's body. She writes a few down in a notepad on the coffee table. The sliding glass door opens. Sotalia casually and happily strides in. "Ahhh... I was dubious about spending the extra coin per month for a hot tub. But, I. Am. Sold. Now."

She waits moment to figure out what is exactly going on with Bach as he stands still with his arms out. Sotalia sees Dretphi taking measurements, then the clean laundry in her basket behind Bach. She flings the colorful beach towel draping on her to Bach's outstretched arm. She struts by Bach in her two piece bathing suit with a hint of a sinister grin. Bach blinks in momentary confusion as he twists his head to check the towel now hanging off his arm. He mutters to himself. "Really?! The fuck?!"

Dretphi leans away from Bach to look at Sotalia. "I got most the stains out of your armored cloak."

Sotalia quickly digs through the basket and pulls out the cloak. "Oh, thank you! The enchantments on this thing always interfere with any cleaning spells I try. What did you end up using?"

Dretphi directs her voice at Sotalia and returns to writing a few figures in the notepad. "Denatured alcohol."

Sotalia holds the cloak away from her and examines it thoroughly. "Wow! That was tougher than I thought. Amazing work as usual."

Dretphi resumes her attention to Bach, taking more measurements and writing them down. Bach maintains a lazy gaze forward and attempts to trance out. But, another object falls onto his arm with the towel and interrupts. Bach's head slowly rotates and tilts down to see the new article on the draped towel. Parts of Bach's brain puzzle at what exactly is now on his arm, when a streak of insight erupts forth with an answer. The article is the top to Sotalia's bathing suit. Bach eyes widen as the rest of his mind confirms. Mere moments later, another article lands on Bach's arm. It is the bottom of the bathing suit. Bach carefully pivots his head forward with eyes locked center.

Sotalia voice oozes with a provocative tone behind Bach. "Yes! Nothing like putting on freshly dried clothes!"

Bach feels a force attempt to pivot him around. His head snaps down to glare at Dretphi as she attempts to spin him around by grabbing his waist. She glances up from reading her measures on the notepad. "I need to double-check measurements on your other side."

Bach's eyes look at hers, look the parts of Sotalia's bathing suit, and hint over his shoulder repeatedly in rapid succession. Dretphi returns with indifference, the impedance of her task simmering annoyance. Bach feels her grip tighten and watches her arms ready. He quietly pleads to Dretphi. "No. Don't. She throws fire."

Dretphi torques Bach in place, spinning him around to greet the clothed Sotalia. She finishes slipping on a shirt, pulling it into place. She lifts her head up with a sly grin, steps forward, and reaches for her towel and bathing suit on Bach's arm. "Thank you. I didn't want these to pick up dust and dirt from the floor."

Bach waits to feel his heart resume beating before responding. "Not a problem?"

Sotalia strides to the hallway and exchanges a glance with Dretphi out of eye sight of Bach. Dretphi perks a brow at Sotalia, who only responds by holding her hands up in the air in a grand dramatic shrug flavored with a playful sarcasm. Dretphi rolls her eyes before resuming business. "Sotalia. Could you bring out the backup equipment chest?"

Sotalia stops in thought. "Is it the one in the store room or the office?"

Dretphi pauses momentarily in thought. "Store room."

Sotalia slips through the archway into the hallway. "Be right back."

Dretphi taps Bach's arms. "You can rest your arms."

Bach drops his arms to the sides, taking a few moments to roll the aches out of his shoulders. Sotalia drags in a large metal, machined chest that serves as a frame to a series of thin drawers. "So what are you going put him in?"

Dretphi kneels down and slides out one of the drawers. Bach moves closer to the chest, just as Dretphi reaches her whole arm into the few centimeter thick drawer. “Wow! A chest of linked pocket dimensions?!”

Sotalia quickly shakes her head. “Nah. Folded space frames.”

Bach leans in closer to the chest to examine it. “Ah! I heard these are becoming popular.”

Sotalia gets on her knees next to the chest and opens the top lid. The space inside reveals a volume slightly larger than the chest itself with the frame acting as doorway. This space is filled with bits and pieces of armor, weapons, and tools. Sotalia digs around and holds up a wearable, adjustable flashlight to Bach. “Oh, yes. We had a few bags of holding and a chest of storage. But, after one bag lost connection to its pocket, we all decided to switch over to the folded space chests.”

Bach takes the flashlight in hand. “Better to have your stuff launch out onto this plane of existence than have the pocket drift in another.”

Sotalia groans and shudders. “I know. It took Aristespha a month of her communing with spirits every night and astral projecting before we tracked that pocket down and relinked it. Almost lost my arcane book collection.”

Dretphi lifts herself and her arms out of the drawer with her hands holding something. “Nearly lost a rare rifle in the same pocket.”

Sotalia and Bach both train their eyes on the object Dretphi holds. Sotalia quirks with surprise when she recognizes it. “That’s Sebastian’s OLD helmet. The first one I ever saw him in.”

Bach reaches his hand out to it with a smile on his face and Dretphi passes it to him. “Wow. He kept it.”

Both Dretphi and Sotalia exchange intrigued glances and look to Bach. Bach rolls the high tech helmet in his hands, pausing to inspect signs of battle damage. “Yah. Sebastian spent his all his summer job money getting his first full suit of armor. He didn’t have enough money for a good helmet. So, I did some research and got him this one. Titanium mesh construction, ceramic plating armor, a kevlar outer coat, ballistic visor, and attachable respirator mask. Did some basic magic deflection enchantments, too.”

He holds the helmet down in one hand and clicks on the flashlight to shine into it. “Even personalized it a bit for Sebastian.”

Sotalia grasps the helmet and adjusts it to her view. Her eyes widen then squint as she reads the text. “With a skull as thick as yours, you probably won’t need this. But every warrior needs a helmet to hold in photographs. Love ya, you shithead. Bach.”

Dretphi leans herself up with head next to Sotalia's to read the writing, too. "I never knew this was written here."

Sotalia leans back on her hands laughing. "Well, that explains why he never let anyone else hold the helmet for very long."

Bach gazes at the helmet with a sigh. "Yah. Don't know how much he used it-"

Dretphi continues searching in the chest. "All the time."

Sotalia grins at Bach. "Oh yah. First sign of trouble, that helmet went right on his head. It out lasted a few suits of armor. I think he was looking for suit to go with it for a long time."

Bach smiles hearing that. Dretphi stirs around the next drawer, but takes moment to glance at Bach. "There is armor that can go with that. I think you should try it."

Bach works the adjustment mechanisms in the helmet and fits it onto his head. "Let's see what we got."

The alarm clock beeps constantly. From under the bed covers, a hand emerges to seek out the source of the jarring noise. With a collapsing strike, the hand drops on top of the alarm clock's snooze button and remains motionless. Moments later, the body attached to the hand stirs under the sheets. The bed linens pull away from the head board and reveal the awkwardly morning adverse face of Bach. One eye opens and aims at the alarm clock, slowly drifting in a scan of the room. Stopping at the coat rack, now an impromptu armor stand, Bach admires the eclectic assembly of armor: His brother's helmet, a synthetic fiber duster, composite shoulder pads, a segmented kevlar breastplate, a pair of plain plate bracers, leather gloves, combination shin and knee guards, and a pair of old mithril/adamantite alloy plated boots from Dretphi. The boots also have gel insoles from Dretphi's supply, as per her personal recommendation.

Bach remembers Dretphi's mild expression of curious approval at the configuration. He grumbles as he distinctly remembers Sotalia's failure to contain her laughter as she asked how he was suppose to cast spells in that. A thought echoes in his mind. "Note to self... Casting the Hover Disc spell with a dramatic flip of the middle finger is to be avoided in the future. Also, expect more cheap shots when sparring with Sotalia."

Bach gazes back up at the ceiling fan and grins. At least his brother thinks his armor looks fucking awesome. Bach finally concedes to start his day. He moves and sits up with great enthusiasm... and immediately freezes. His eyes widen, face contorts, and mouth emits a faint strangled yelp of pain. His seized body falls to the side on the bed. Bach moans and hopes the post-work out muscle pain will subside in time.

Bach runs the water from the kitchen sink faucet in his bowl, swirling it around before dumping it into the sink. With a quick rinse, he cleans the spoon and places both the bowl and spoon in the dish washer. He sluggishly moves over to the dining room table where Cideeda is already laying out weapons, boxes, tools, and parts out on the surface. With a wince and strain from muscle, Bach settles into a chair across from Cideeda. "So, what's your training going to be about?"

Cideeda blinks blankly at Bach. She searches her mind as the large furry ears on the sides of her head twitch in sync to the passing thoughts. With perk of the ears and sharp smile, she leans to the side to reach down on the floor. One at a time, she places three small stylish wooden lockboxes on the table and slides them to Bach. She then leans the other way reaching down under the tabletop, grasps hold of something in a satchel, and with a flip unrolls a very worn and old set of lockpicks. "You can help me unlock these things!"

Bach examines the tools before him. He rolls a pick between his fingers, inspecting every bit of it. "You want me to open these... with these lockpicks?"

Cideeda tilts her head to one side, lowers her ears, and narrows her eyes at Bach. "What's wrong with that?"

He holds the pick closer and closer to Cideeda. "This pick is almost worn to nothing! I mean, I'll try! But don't expect any results any time soon."

With a sly smirk, a quirk of a brow, and lift of the ears, Cideeda reaches and presses Bach's hand back to him with a finger. "Good, you do have some knowledge. I want you to try. And no cheating!"

Bach growls as he pulls his hand back the rest of way and grabs a torque wrench from the set. "Fine. What are these anyway?"

Cideeda scoots a metal chest along the tabletop to her and sets it up for her operation. "Those? Some old personal chests we found in an old ruin. Probably don't have much in them, since Sotalia and Aristespha didn't detect anything. But, the chests are in good shape and early era is really popular right now."

Bach drops his head down and surveys the chests. "Really?"

Cideeda lifts her head up from attending to something below the tabletop and nods excitedly at Bach. "Oh, yah! I've got buyers willing to give me a couple hundred for each one even before I do any clean-up on them. Kids these days and anything retro."

Bach rotates one of the small chests around on the tabletop, examining in disbelief. "A few hundred for this?"

Cideeda shrugs and rolls her eyes, shaking her head. "I don't make the fads. I just sell to them."

Bach nods in agreement and applies his focus upon the small box in front of him. He inserts the torque wrench loosely in his the old lock and feels around the inside of the lock with the pick in hand. He concentrates to dredge up old lessons from adventuring school and all the times he had to spring Sebastian out of awkward situations. Sifting for relevant knowledge, he breaks from the trance as the unmistakable sound of a high speed, geared motor spins up. Bach snaps his head up from the task to see Cideeda wrapping a bandanna on top of her head, pulling her multi-colored hair out of her face. She snatches up and flips out some safety glasses from the table. Finally, she hoists up a cordless power drill with one hand and a loads a drill bit into the chunk. Indignation manifests as a sneer upon Bach's face, with his hands turning upwards. Cideeda grasps hold of the drill's chuck, then feels something. Her ear closest to Bach twitches and she pivots her head toward him. She meets his sneering face with awkward confusion. "What?! These metal chests aren't worth THAT much and I can recore the lock once I drill the old one out."

Disbelief squeezes next to indignation as the sneer on Bach's face breaks down to puzzlement. "NO. CHEATING?!"

Cideeda pauses momentarily before drawing a smug smirk with a strange seductive highlight in the eyes to Bach. "Oh. That. You see, you are a beginner and need to learn. I am an expert."

The drill briefly spins up and jerks to stop as the held chunk spins down to a halt on a the drill bit inside. Cideeda flashes a toothy grin with a wink. "Experts get to cheat."

Bach examines the small, stamped gold token in his hand. "Are you sure?"

Cideeda nods. "Yes! You unlocked all the chests and kept the locks working! That's at least fifty a piece I can charge more for them being historically intact."

Bach ponders a few moments and pockets the token. "No objections here."

Cideeda digs around the area below and near her chair, tail occasionally flicking up into view. "And I saw how little you had in your wallet."

Silence punctuates Bach's unamused expression. Cideeda's hand places tools and other items from the floor onto the table. Most notable is Bach's holoplayer. Bach watches Cideeda carefully as she arranges rifles, pistols, blades, and tools on the table and drops down below the tabletop to sort through containers on the floor. When Cideeda dips down, Bach makes his move. His arm reaches carefully over the table. Bach glances between his hand and Cideeda's bent over back. As his open hand hovers over the holoplayer, Bach feels five sharp pin pricks around the base of his forearm. He halts and realizes Cideeda's hand grasping his forearm, each claw point on each finger in position. His stare shifts along her arm to see a pair of focused eyes greeting his. Bach attempts to close his hand around the holoplayer and retreats as five claw points dig in sync into his arm. He make other motions to acquire his holoplayer and each is met with an equal amount of clawed deterrent. After a

minute of deadlock, Bach moves his arm away. The grip around his arm loosens until a complete release. Bach rubs his arm, the five pressure marks from Cideeda's claws still visible.

Cideeda draws an evil, toothy grin. "Not today?"

Bach shaking his head in defeat. "Not today."

She sits back up in the chair, the grin fading to a happy smile. "Good! Because today I want to give you a gun!"

Bach, put off-guard by the quick change of attitude, awkwardly stumbles to an amicable attitude. "Really? Okay. That sounds good. I wouldn't mind having one."

Cideeda happily slides pistol to Bach. "That's what I like to hear. Here's one I picked out for you."

Bach continues sliding it closer to himself to inspect. "It... It's an Arc and Spark Plasma-Um. Damn, what model is it- Ah... Shit. It's been awhile. Plasma Power Pulse Six?"

Cideeda fidgets in her seat with giddiness. "Correct! And it's yours to use if..."

Bach picks up the pistol and does some routine checks. "If?"

A sly air hangs around Cideeda. "If, you can get it to work."

Bach sighs, but continues to examine the pistol. "So what's wrong with it."

Cideeda rolls her eyes and grumbles. "Well. Sotalia says she doesn't know. But, I think she tried experimenting on it and fucked it up."

Bach gazes up from the pistol to Cideeda. "What exactly did she fuck up?"

She coyly rests her chin on her hand and winks. "That's for you to find out."

Bach pinches the bridge of nose and groans. "Fine. Give me some decent tools and I'll get it fixed."

Cideeda slides a flat rectangular box to Bach apologetically biting her lower lip. "Well, good luck on that. Here's the service kit I got back from her."

He flips the lid of the kit and his expression deflates to incredulous disappointment. "What the-?! I guess these will work, but damn. I don't know how you expect me to do this-"

Cideeda leans in towards Bach and asks him directly. "By the way. How did you do the mods to the holoplayer?"

Bach puzzles a second and shifts his attention to Cideeda. “What do you mean? I just installed the mod chips and did the tweaks.”

Cideeda’s tone reveals genuine curiosity and honest inquiry. “How did you DO it? The method. The warranty seals are intact. The mods are done, but there is no sign of the disassembly needed to install them. The work, from what I can tell, is ridiculously clean. You know tech, you may have done this. But, I can’t figure out how.”

Bach presents a smug smirk and confidently sits back in the chair, placing his hands together by the finger points. “I’ll show you. But, I want my holoplayer back-”

Cideeda narrows her gaze and curls a lip up around a canine.

Bach gauges the reaction and continues. “In a few months after you have enjoyed borrowing it.”

Cideeda scratches her chin and soon begrudgingly nods. “I can work with that.”

Bach rolls his hand out flat, places the plasma pistol on top with the other hand, then hovers the free hand over. A blue glow flickers in his eyes. For nearly a minute Bach is motionless save a few facial twitches. Cideeda leans forward watching for any signs of activity. She just about shifts back in her seat when both her ears find a target. With a twist and turn, Bach moves his hands perpendicular to the table and slowly draws them apart. The pistol erupts in activity as it floats in the middle of Bach’s hands. Both sequentially and simultaneously, screws spin out, latches depress and release, components unlock, and pieces drift methodically away along paths. When Bach’s hands stop, the pistol hovers, exploded into its assembly pieces. Cideeda’s jaw drops, her pupils wide open, and bright wonderment adorns her face.

Bach grins and rolls his eyes. “You know this is technically cheating.”

Cideeda holds a finger up. “You under the supervisor of an expert. After this one... Can we do a few more?”

Bach sighs and shakes his head. “I don’t know. I have to check out all these parts on this pistol you gave me-”

Without taking her eyes off the scene, Cideeda holds up a part. “She fried the main power coupling. Here’s a spare.”

The power coupling hovers out of Cideeda’s fingers. The bad power coupling drops onto the table top as the new part moves into place. Bach slides his hands underneath the scene. In almost perfect reverse, the pistol reassembles itself. A flurry of activity as components lock in place, pieces snap together, and screws tighten. The plasma pistol feather falls down to Bach’s awaiting hand. He presses the self-test button, and the pistol status lights blink different colors. They all turn on and stay green, with a happy digital chirp signaling the end of the self-test.

The kitchen back door opens with Sotalia backing into the room with a wrapped pack of sports drinks. She hoists up the pack on the counter and opens the fridge. She pokes a hole into the plastic wrap and rips open pack, then loads them into the fridge.

There's a bit of uncertainty in Bach's voice. "Hmm. Doesn't feel right..."

Cideeda's voice replies back. "You have to release the clip first."

Bach voices acknowledgment. "Ah, there we go."

Cideeda grumbles on the verge of a growl. "Shit. The sear spring bent again! I'm going to have a word with Ralado next time I see him. That's the second spring I got from him that's done that. Well, here's a replacement."

With some quiet sounds of metallic activity, Bach's voice comes in from the living room. "And back together we go."

Sotalia breaks from loading the fridge. She takes a bottle from the pack and moves over to the bar window in the kitchen looking out in the dining area, shifting attention to Bach and Cideeda at the dining table. Cideeda lifts up a rifle and places it in Bach's open hands. Sotalia twists opens the bottle and tilts it to drink, pondering why Cideeda is expectantly waiting her seat. Sotalia catches the blue flicker in Bach's eyes, then her mind attempts to understand the rifle rapidly self-disassembling midair. She attempts to gasp in shock and sucks the sport drink into her airway. Her lungs realize the error and forcefully send the fluid back up. A portion of the sport drink returns to the bottle, most of it expels out the mouth and nasal passages. Sotalia slams the bottle on the counter, and launches her self to the kitchen sink. She hacks, gags, and wretches as her body sorts out which way fluids and gases should go. Bach and Cideeda search in the direction of the kitchen. Bach's eyes still glow as the rifle disassembly floats. "Are you going to make it?"

Sotalia rips off some paper towels from the nearby roll and quickly wipes the combination of orange sport drink and spittle off her face, with some attempt to clean her splattered shirt. She darts from the kitchen into the dining area, pointing at the hovering rifle in pieces. "WHAT IS THIS?!"

Bach shrugs in confusion at Sotalia's outburst. "Just something I've been working on since adventuring school. It was originally going to be my master's thesis."

Sotalia calms herself down, pulls a chair out next to Bach, and sits. Before speaking, she halts herself, holds up a finger, and turns her head to the hallway entry. "Aristespha! Could you come in here! Like, right now!"

Aristespha's voice disapprovingly echoes down the hallway. "I am in the middle of important-"

Sotalia interrupts louder. "Just get in here! You need to see this!"

A series of faint footsteps hit the hardwood floors, eventually the proper and dignified figure of Aristespha trots out into the room. "What is this all about-"

Aristespha processes the scene and the words stop in her mouth. Sotalia gestures at her and to the floating disassembled rifle. Sebastian's ethereal form passes through the wall. He looks at everyone, then Bach, and finally notices what everyone is looking at. "Holy shit, bro! You've gotten really good at that! Much better than you were back in school!"

Sotalia and Aristespha lock onto each others faces, then cooperatively turn their glares to Sebastian. Sebastian feels a strange sensation that pulls him from his wonderment at Bach's recent spectacle. He bounces his head between the condemning expressions of Sotalia and Aristespha, settling on Aristespha. "Don't look at me like that! I told you about his research! Even what it was-"

Aristespha eyes Sebastian with a quirk of an eyebrow. "You said he was looking into ways to take apart things."

Sebastian points at the hovering rifle parts pleadingly. "Was I wrong?!"

Aristespha darkly narrows her eyes at Sebastian. "No. You were correct."

Sebastian cringes as he judges Aristespha's expression. "How do you make that sound like a bad thing?!"

Aristespha releases a pile of books upon the dining table in front of Bach. He reflexively recoils from the loud slap of book leather upon the wooden tabletop, as the early morning haze breaks free from his mind. He tries to catch a glimpse of Aristespha's face as she properly walks to a chair across from Bach. With a constant air of confidence, she slides the chair back, sits down, and locks eyes with Bach. He backs further into his chair from the hard stare of Aristespha. She narrows her glare. "I am a Master Sage of The Grand Library, caretaker and researcher of the Sword of the Spirit Realm, and specialist in magics of the mind, body, and spirit. I serve as the doctor, historian, and the spirit expert for this team. None of which I expect you to learn. It takes a lot of knowledge, experience, and discipline. Any questions?"

Bach searches his mind for a question, but also ponders if that last bit from Aristespha is a well-disguised insult. He eventually settles for pointing at the books on the tabletop. "So, what are these for?"

With a finely gloved hand, Aristespha lifts the front cover of the book resting at the top of the stack. She opens the book fully to reveal the title page. "These are books that will provide basic knowledge of first aid, psionic magics, and spirits. I expect you to read them as soon as possible."

Bach flips through a few pages, glancing at the material, before he returns his eyes to Aristespha. "Is there going to be a test or something?"

Aristespha maintains the stern glare at Bach, that somehow grows a bit colder. Bach gives the stack of books a more concerned inspection. Aristespha groans with a slight shake of her head. "No. There will NOT be a test. But, if you want to be a productive member of this team, I expect you to retain some of this knowledge."

Bach carefully closes the book and neatly rearranges the stack. He warily nods to Aristespha, trying his best to relate honest sincerity. "Okay. I'll get right on it. It sounds important and I'll do what I can. I can start right now if you want me to?"

Bach strangely feels Aristespha's mood lighten, despite her ever so slight shift in expression. The phenomena confuses Bach and also somewhat disturbs him. Aristespha slides over an electronic tablet, nearby on the table, in front of her. She taps on the screen a few times before pressing the side button to release a pen stylus. "Read them and retain the knowledge. That's all I can ask. I want you to be prepared as we have encountered much in our adventures."

Aristespha straightens in her seat and perks a brow at Bach. "So, I've already filled out the information I know, but I will need to ask some questions of a medical nature. We have found

that keeping medical histories when we travel is vital, since we never quite know what clinics, hospitals, or temples will be around.”

Bach agrees and sits up in his seat, ready to answer questions. “That makes sense. I guess, ask away?”

An ethereal voice beside Bach mockingly questions him. “When was your last sexual encounter?”

If the mental gears inside Bach’s head seize any harder, the strain may become audible to others. Bach snaps his head towards the source of the voice, his face flush with shock. Sebastian’s ghostly face hovers with a shit-eating grin. “So? When was it?”

Bach immediately realizes who it is and launches from shock into outright irritation. “Gods damn it, you asshole.”

Sebastian drifts his ethereal form down into the chair next to Bach. “Morning to you, too! So... when was it?”

Bach grimaces, defensively crosses his arms, and defiantly glares at Sebastian. “I ain’t you telling you shit.”

Sebastian rolls his eyes as he dramatically throws his head away from Bach. “Oh! So a Not Applicable, still?”

Bach remains silent and stares sternly at his brother. Sebastian just shrugs and shakes his head. “Oh, lighten up! It’ll happen for you. Don’t have to be so uptight about it. I’ll help you out-”

Sebastian smiles at his brother and notices the devious smirk forming on Bach’s face. Bach slowly pivots his head to Aristespha, the smirk now a full grin. “So one time I was working at the bowling alley when Sebastian walks in with each arm around an Emin woman-”

Bach purposely pauses as ethereal hands and arms try in desperate vain to cover his mouth from speaking. Sebastian continues to flail his arms around Bach’s mouth. “DUDE. Shut up! Brother to brother confidentiality!”

Bach twists in his chair to see Sebastian glowing light red with fingers curled in frustration. Bach turns up two middle fingers to Sebastian and cackles while wagging the fingers. “Whacha gonna do ghost boy! Haunt me?! Too late!”

A stern and cold voice resonates throughout the room. “AHEM.”

Sebastian immediately transforms back into his normal hazy white form and focuses his attention to Aristespha. Bach slowly puts his hands down and settles back into his seat. Aristespha takes in a long, calculated breath. “Sebastian. I am trying to get some work done.

You'll have plenty of time to harass your brother after I am done. I'll only have this room to myself and Bach for another hour before everyone is back from chores and practice."

Sebastian accepts his cue, floats out of his seat, and walks towards the sliding glass door. "Okay. Sorry, dear."

Aristespha aims her eyes to face Sebastian as he looks back before exiting. She slyly smiles to him and concentrates her eyes on his. Sebastian pauses to comprehend something in his mind, his face contorting. With a lift of a sculpted eyebrow and a gleam in her violet eyes, Aristespha grins subtly and Sebastian manages to briefly blush. He then contentedly smiles and walks through the sliding glass door leading outside.

Bach waits patiently for Aristespha to resume her focus on him and enjoys exclusion from immediate events. She taps the pen stylus on the tablet. "So, any known allergies?"

Aristespha finishes writing a few last notes on the tablet. "Thank you for answering my questions."

Bach sits back in his chair with an apprehensive look. "That wasn't too bad. So, what's next?"

Aristespha places down the tablet and slides it away to the other part of the tabletop. She gestures to Bach. "Hold your arm out across the table."

Bach unfurls his arm onto the tabletop with his palm open and up in front of Aristespha. She reaches out with both hands, resting one underneath Bach's hand and the other holding the underside of his forearm. She briefly drops her head and lifts back up with her eyes glowing brightly violet. "I'd like to examine your magical ability closer. So, I'm going to watch you as you cast a few basic spells. Let's start with any basic light spell."

Despite parts of his mind begging him to remove his arm to safety, Bach stretches his fingers and readies himself. "Okay. What are you trying to find out?"

Aristespha briefly lifts up on Bach's arm to punctuate her serious tone. "I am trying to make sure how you are casting spells won't lead to serious injury, eventual permanent damage, or other more immediate side effects."

Bach's morbid curiosity gets the best of him as he grits his teeth and turns his head with his eyes still on Aristespha. "Immediate side effects?"

Aristespha's tone remains the same with her response. "Rupture of organs, self-immolation, and in some cases... Detonation."

Bach slowly blinks, aghast, as his mind's eye puts on a vivid, albeit cartoon, display of those very side effects applied to himself. Aristespha's gaze shifts up to Bach's face and narrows. "Now. Cast a light spell."

With a brief, reflexive twitch of his fingers, a small hovering blue-white light orb instantaneously appears above Bach's open palm. Aristespha witnesses with a stare, eventually closing her eyes momentarily with distinctly uncertain body language. She shifts her head back and slants it to the side, keeping her eyes trained on the small, few centimeter wide orb of light. Her stern, stoic demeanor crumbling around the edges to show genuine confusion. "Please release that and do it again."

Bach's eyes dart around seeking resolution to a new problem. "Ah... Umm... Okay."

He reaches out with his free hand, pinches the light orb between his fingers, and carries it off to the side. It continues to hover in place when Bach lets it go. Aristespha's violet, glowing eyes follow the chain of events and her face quirks with further confusion. "I said to release it?"

Bach worriedly shrinks back into his seat, arm still held, as Aristespha's face locks onto him. "I-I-I... Umm... I can't. I made that one independent. It'll go out on its own in about 30 minutes or so."

Aristespha hears this and removes her hand from underneath's Bach's forearm. She snatches the glowing orb and brings it closer. She holds the light orb in front of her face, spinning it around with her fingers. The violet glow in her eyes intensifies as she focuses on it. "There's a hover enchantment, surrounded by an energy containment field, wrapped in a light conversion matrix, and all within a... Structure..."

Bach sheepishly interrupts as he smiles on verge of a grit. "It's a stabilized lattice with a static charge so it can stick to things."

Aristespha's attention drifts away from the light orb to Bach, the intense violet glow from her eyes continues. Bach nervously explains to Aristespha as he resists urges to squirm in his seat. "You can throw it and it'll hover along the release path until it hits something. Then, it'll cling to it until the stored energy is used up."

Aristespha blinks slowly, the glow from her eyes flashing against Bach's face. Bach fights unease and nerves against the visual onslaught. "I-I-I... I created it when I couldn't pay the power bill one month. I got tired of wandering in the dark at night, so I crafted this spell."

Aristespha releases Bach's hand and rests her elbows on the tabletop. Her palms meet and she rests her chin at the peak. Her eyes close in deep thought. A minute passes, before she reopens her eyes to glare at Bach. "We will need to do different testing."

Bach nervously crosses his arms and backs further into his chair. "Don't know how to take that."

Bach stands several meters away from Sotalia, Aristespha, and Sebastian in the makeshift backyard training area. Sotalia readjusts her training gear and listens to Aristespha explain a plan. Bach's head bounces between Sotalia and Aristespha, eventually settling to Sebastian between the two. Sebastian catches his brother's sight, and only shrugs as he gestures between Sotalia and Aristespha. After a few minutes, Aristespha calls out to Bach. "For this exercise, I need to you to dispel the magic bolts we cast at you. Sotalia will cast small training bolts. I will cast larger bolts when appropriate. We will start out slow and speed up to your limit."

Bach assumes a defensive stance, slowly holding his hands out at the ready. "Okay. It's been awhile."

Sotalia playfully grins, stretching during her prance into position with her hands giving off a faint yellow glow. "Don't worry, I'll hold your hand like a good little girl."

Bach shakes his head and rolls his eyes as Sotalia casts the first barrage of slow moving glowing orbs. The multi-color orbs fly roughly a meter a second with Sotalia casting two at a time, carefully aiming. Bach moves his hands and body to intercept the bolts, pulses of magical energy forming from his palms. As his hand nears a bolt, a pop of energy erupts and contacts the bolt. In a fraction of a second, the bolt breaks down with a faint puff of energy. Sotalia's takes great care to track the rate Bach counters the bolts, adjusting her cast rate and the bolt speed to keep a constant challenge. The whole time Aristespha observes with her violet eyes radiantly glowing.

In a few minutes, the pace between Bach and Sotalia speeds to feverish. Despite the concentration demands, the two exchange banter constantly. Sebastian excitedly watches the two, floating higher in the air to get an ideal view of the exchange. Sotalia trick shots a few bolts and yells to Bach with a grin. "Where's all this misplaced confidence coming from?!"

Bach dispels the tricky bolts and cracks a smile in return, wiping some of the sweat from his head. "Well if this the best you're throwing, I think it's placed where it should be!"

Aristespha examines the scene and raises her eyes to the nearby, floating Sebastian. "Sebastian. How close is Bach to performing as he did in school?"

Sebastian glances below and behind him to Aristespha. "I've seen him do faster. But, not by that much more."

Aristespha quickly swirls her arms and hands in regimented, purposeful motions and flicks out a large potent bolt towards Bach. "Good."

The large bolt blazes by and twists between the other bolts, homing exactly in on Bach's midsection. Sotalia startles as the bolt suddenly weaves into her stream of small bolts. Bach's face flashes to surprise as he whips his hand out towards the path of the large bolt streaking to his chest. The bolt crashes into the pulse of energy from Bach's palm, and only

breaks down with the quick emission of another larger pulse. Bach takes advantage of the gap in small bolts from a recovering Sotalia to adjust his stance for Aristespha. “Okay! I think I still got it here!”

Bach interleaves his focus between the intermittent large bolts and the small bolt barrage. The burgeoning confidence fades as the larger bolts fly more often. With a stern and calculating stare, Aristespha launches two large bolts. Bach’s eyes widen and he grits his teeth. He flings his arms to intercept the two bolts. The counter blasts of energy from each palm erupt more violently than before, immediately disrupting the large bolts. “OKAY! I think I’m at my limit! I don’t got this! We can stop now!”

Sotalia halts her casting and turns her head to Aristespha. “I think that should be good. I’m getting a little tired, honestly.”

Aristespha narrows her brilliant violet eyes at Bach and seeks something. “One more test.”

She rapidly gestures, chants a few incantations, and heaves both hands towards Bach. Three large bolts simultaneously rocket out. Happening too quick for the shock to register on his face, Bach’s hands dart out for two of the bolts, and catch them. The bolts struggle against some kind force, then disappear with faint essence misting away into Bach’s body. Both of Bach’s hands then arrive together in front of him to contain the third bolt. It almost immediately disappears similar to the other two. Bach shakes his hands out and breathes heavily, watching for anything else from Aristespha and Sotalia. “Wow... Could you warn me next time. I’m bit tired. I haven’t dispelled that much in a while. Not ready for that much.”

Sebastian flies right in front of Bach. “Holy shit, dude! That was awesome! Took me back to training back at school. We’ll have you in shape in no time with shit like that!”

Bach hangs his head down with a smile as his brother hovers around him. Sebastian tries to pat him on the back. Bach lifts his head up and chuckles at some of his brother’s oddball methods praise and encouragement. Sotalia and Aristespha gawk, stunned in shock with jaws agape. The glowing stops in Aristespha’s eyes as she forgets to maintain her ability. Sotalia blinks a few times and slowly resumes conscious thought processes again. “Was that... A complete spell decompilation?”

A rare, genuine bewilderment overtakes Aristespha. She attempts to put together a cohesive thought and voice it. “Yes. Three of them. In under two seconds.”

Sotalia slides over and pivots in front of Aristespha and looks quizzically at her. “What... What were you trying to test? This?!”

Aristespha arrives back to her senses and shakes her head, puzzling at Sotalia. “N-no! I was trying to flush something out to the surface.”

Sotalia steps close and leans in, lowering her voice to whisper. “Like what?”

Aristespha draws a thoughtful breath in and her eyes search her mind for a proper explanation. “There’s a strange feel to his energy flow. I don’t know much more. I was hoping putting a little stress on him would reveal more. Well, more about that. This was unexpected.”

Sotalia crosses her arms and glances back to Bach and Sebastian talking. She taps her fingers on her arm and returns to facing Aristespha with intrigue and curiosity showing. “I wonder what spells he’s developed. He has to have a few that use his abilities. That might reveal more than testing for things we don’t know to... or even how to test for?”

The proper and dignified facade reforms on Aristespha. She smiles slyly and turns her focus to Sebastian. “Sebastian? You once told me about a particular spell of Bach’s you liked?”

Aristespha, with the regained air of dignity, strides over next to Sebastian and flashes a loving smile to him. Sebastian catches her smile and pauses from the playful hassle of his brother. He thinks for a moment and turns to Bach. “Dude! Can you do the D-Ball right now?”

Bach drops his head and scratches the back of it. He lifts his head back up shaking. “Nah. I’m not used to casting anything that powerful yet. That’s going to take me awhile to figure out.”

He halts and his eyes light up. Bach smiles with hope and holds his hands out. “Wait. I got enough left in me for a Plasma Bolt.”

Sebastian settles next to Aristespha as Sotalia joins them, and gestures towards Bach. “This one is pretty cool. We used this one to get through a whole section of the fourth year team assessment tests.”

Bach scans the vicinity and finds one of the thick steel plates Cideeda uses for target practice. He plants his feet and extends his hand out and up. He remains still and concentrates in silence. Air swirls towards a point above his palm, condensing to a mist and a faint glow forms around the mist. The air charges and Bach’s hair rises up. With a loud, low thump, his hair drops back down, the air grows cold around him, and the mist ignites. A low hum rises in pitch and the contained mist glows red. The mist glows brighter, the color shifts from red to white, and the hum pitch rises more. In a matter of seconds, the orb glows a bright, brilliant blue, in silence. Bach orbits his hand behind the orb and takes slow, careful aim at the metal plate. He braces his hand with his other, as the bolt spins fast in place. With a loud crack-boom, the newly formed plasma bolt streaks in the air and bores into the steel plate. A mix of vaporized steel and plasma explodes from the front and erupts out the back. The remaining mass of the bolt bounces off the ground. It finally dissipates in an expulsion of leftover plasma after a few more bounces.

Bach stumbles back a few steps and tilts himself forward. He regains balance and rests his hands on his knees. He straightens back up and shakes his hand. “OW! Damn thing launched too fast and broke the sound barrier next to my hand. Dammit that stings!”

Sebastian glides out to cheer and talk to Bach. Aristespha and Sotalia survey in astonishment. Sotalia holds her jaw and eyes Aristespha. "I think he can do a simple mission with us."

Aristespha nods slowly. "I'll start checking the forums, boards, and guilds. There should be a few things in the area. We'll also need to stock up on some supplies."

Sotalia puts her hands on her hips. "Cideeda mentioned seeing a few good places we could check out when she was driving through town. I think a group trip into town this weekend would be perfect."

Bach finishes eating the last bit of the leftover bacon from breakfast. Resting on the top of his bed, he flips a page in the First Aid handbook. Bach reads the new page, mentally churning the concepts. Fragments of biology and other past courses float up to the surface of his mind. Sebastian passes his ghostly upper body through the window above Bach. "Man, it's a nice day outside and you are bookworming it up in this bitch."

Bach rests the book open on his chest. "After all the crash course training this week, I'm really enjoying not doing anything right now."

Sebastian pulls the rest of his ethereal body through the window and coasts to rest down next to Bach on the bed. "So, what are you reading anyway?"

Bach flips the book up and turns it to the cover in view of Sebastian. "Not a bad read so far."

Sebastian recognizes the book and settles back to looking up at the ceiling. "It's not bad. One of the few books Aristespha made me read I actually liked and found pretty useful."

Bach quirks a brow in thought and aims his eyes to Sebastian. "So, you and Aristespha are pretty serious?"

Sebastian searches his thoughts and contorts his face. "It's complicated."

Bach rolls his eyes and flops the book back down. "Really? That line?"

Sebastian throws his arms up in the air and gestures. "Yes! Here's the break down for you. Aristespha is the fifth child in a moderately powerful Evuukian ruling family."

Bach interjects and posits. "So powerful enough to control a bunch of decent land, but not that many votes on the Evuukian Ruling Council?"

Sebastian nods in agreement. "Pretty much. I think her family gets five votes instead of the default one all the minor ones get. So anyway... She's the fifth child, her older brothers and sisters have already taken all the cushy positions in the household and drained coffers of any

easy money for upper tier school tuition or even investment capital. So, no ruling prospects and no easy money, she goes to discount adventuring school.”

Bach reacts to a thought jumping across his mind. “Did she go to our-”

Sebastian motions with both hands. “Nah! She DID go to the sister school in Evuukian lands. She completely aced everything as medical mage, and got a fellowship to The Grand Library. Enjoying it all. A little sad that the family doesn’t give shit about her accomplishments, but no political bullshit.”

Bach nods and sighs. “Yah, that’s true. That’s crazy about her family. The medical mage program is brutal and The Grand Library doesn’t hand out fellowships! Usually people have to donate more than what the fellowship pays to get those.”

Sebastian angles his head toward Bach. “Fuck, I know! Mom and dad would be thrilled to death if we were janitors at The Grand Library. So, yah... She gets in. She’s studying ancient history for old medical spells with the TV in the background and one of those ghost hunting shows has a marathon running. She notices that some of the ghosts weren’t trying to scare people off by yelling gibberish, but begging them to stay in their ancient, forgotten languages.”

The significance hits Bach and he sits up. His face blanks as his brain processes and puzzles over the concept. Bach’s amazement rushes out as he looks back to his brother. “Holy shit! That was her?! I remember reading up about that new line of research over at the The Grand Library.”

Sebastian throws himself up and excitedly continues talking to Bach. “She wrote the grant proposals, dove head first into spirit studies, hit a few ruins, and came back with more history in a year than half the Elders ever did in ten years! They made her a Master Sage on the spot. The youngest one EVER.”

Bach exclaims with a righteous tone in his voice. “Well, fuck yeah! You make a discovery like that you get some well deserved recognition.”

Sebastian darkly sighs and frowns as his eyes drift down. “Yah... Recognition she got.”

Bach feels the drastic change in tone and focuses on his brother. He realizes the problem. “Aww, fuck no...”

Sebastian nods grimly. “Yep. The whole family recognized that achievement. Everyone now paying all kinds of attention to her... And her achievements to tout to the other families. What’s worse the first major research assignment entrusted to her was the Sword of the Spirit Realm. It awoke and said it was instrumental to destroying Lord Noxian... the world’s latest pain in the ass.”

Bach holds his mouth briefly and slides his hand down to his chin. “Wow... That’s some crazy Murphy’s Law bullshit.”

Sebastian shakes his head frowning. "I know! I was really hoping we'd defeat Noxian. Then the Sword's quest is done! We return the damn thing back to The Grand Ol' Library, and go adventuring far from the fanfare. And..."

Bach cranes his head down to see his brother's somber face hung low. "And?"

Sebastian sits up with a faint hope in him. "See if she would be willing go official and public about our relationship. It's already hard given how the most Evuukians are staunchly against any kind of intermarriage. Disowning family members is pretty common. But. Despite all the bullshit, she does still care for her family."

Bach straightens back up and calculates the drama in his mind. "Well. Maybe the man who killed Noxian would have gotten a free pass? But... Damn. Just, damn. But, man, that's her call on that front."

Sebastian dropping his head in his hands. "I know! So, I haven't really brought it further up to her, since I'm not going to put that kind of pressure on her. But, holy shit, I will be her best backup the day she decides to tell them to deal with it!"

Bach draws a smile and looks at his brother. "You know. I'd never would have thought you'd go for someone so serious... So seriously."

Sebastian chuckles and shakes his head, leaning towards Bach. "Don't let that proper and uptight appearance fool you! She's just as crazy as I am, and it's amazing."

Bach holds his hands up and twists his head away slightly. "Alright. I don't see it, but I'll believe you."

Sebastian simply shrugs with an uncomfortable demeanor. "But, well, so much for those plans. I got to get myself back together again, before I worry about all that."

Bach pivots on the bed top to face the edge of the bed, and places his feet on the floor. He laughs to himself once. "Yah, you're not the only one with plans that got wrecked."

Sebastian floats around in front of Bach with concern. "Hey. I've been a real dick in pulling you into all this mess as hastily as I did. I promise to work with you and make things right and all-

Bach waves his hands to signal a halt in front of Sebastian. "Whoa! Hold up. Let me finish."

Sebastian hovers in anticipation. Bach takes deep breath and concentrates on his words. "I hoped that you would have defeated Lord Noxian. Because after all the fanfare was over and your group resumed normal, simple adventuring... I was going to ask if you'd let me join up."

Sebastian yanks his head back in sheer surprise and shudders at the full realization. “R-r-really?! I thought you didn’t want to do the whole adventuring thing, risking your life, and all that.”

Bach dramatically shakes his head side to side and groans. “No. No. No. That was some bullshit I spun to hide the real problem. That encounter with the Nightmare Geist... It left me a lame mage... I couldn’t tell people that, especially not mom and dad.”

A distant glare at some point beyond this room masks Bach’s face. Tears run down when he closes his eyes. Sebastian tries to hold onto Bach’s shoulder, to only pass through, and settles to a voice of encouragement. “Well... That’s obviously changed for the fucking awesome.”

Bach looks up to his brother, with a rebellious grin. “Yah. It has. Took me over five fuckin’ years to figure it out. But, I’ve got a way, again. I just wanted to join you when I at least had it working decently enough first.”

Sebastian shines brightly with an ear to ear smile. “I think you’re decent enough right now. Hopefully, Aristespha finds a good local job soon and we’ll get you on your first real quest.”

Bach rubs the back of his neck, unsure. “You think I’m ready? It’s only been a week of training and-”

Sebastian lays back and drifts in the air. “Ah. Don’t worry. Simple task. Nothing too fancy. I looked over Aristespha’s shoulder when she was browsing the job listings. There’s a bunch of ruins in the area the county needs adventurers to check up on to make sure nothing moved in or awoken there the last few years.”

Bach tilts forward off the bed, swings an arm out to snag his shoes, and stands up. “Sounds good. And, you know, you’re right. It’s nice day, I should at least take a walk outside, see what everyone is up to.”

Sebastian floats off towards the door. “Speaking of which, I’m going to go see what Aristespha and Sotalia are up to. They’ve been studying magic texts all morning, and talking about a light orb spell or something...”

Dretphi kneels next to the steel plate target. Cideeda reaches into her tool bag’s front zipper pocket and retrieves a micrometer caliper. She examines the hole straight through the plate and ponders to how it got there. She takes a few measurements with the caliper and plops to a seat on the ground with legs stretched out. “What put a twenty five millimeter wide hole through thirty millimeters of steel armor plate?!”

Dretphi investigates the outer rim of the hole and focuses on a detail. “This was not a kinetic projectile. This was melted.”

Cideeda groans and lays back in the grass. “It couldn’t have been magic. Aristespha doesn’t care much for those type of spells. And Sotalia wouldn’t be able to put that clean and round of a hole into the thing.”

She throws out her arms to the air and lowers them at the target. “This looks like the work of an anti-tank plasma cannon.”

A familiar voice sounds out nearby Cideeda and Dretphi. “Well, I kind of modeled the spell after one.”

Cideeda’s tail twitches and she rolls her head back to see Bach standing behind her. She agilely twists and twirls herself up to hop up and stand in front of Bach. She crosses arms and gives an inquisitive gaze up to Bach. “Really? Now. I’m not mad. I’m just disappointed I wasn’t here to see it happen.”

Dretphi taps the steel plate and it rings with a muffled tone. “One of your spells did this?”

Bach slouches forward and hangs his head. “Yah. Sorry about the plate. I got a little carried away yesterday showing off, with Sebastian cheering me on.”

Cideeda glances over at the plate and snorts. “Ha! The plate was doomed the day I bought it from the scrapyard. Dretphi and I are going to sight her anti-armor rifle with a new scope we picked up some time ago today.”

Dretphi drags a heavy frame over next to the metal plate. “We use paper targets. Hang the plate at an angle behind to bounce the rounds into the dirt.”

Bach looks embarrassed and walks over to the metal plate. “Ah, shit. Let fix that then. Don’t want to be the cause of any bad ricochets off that hole.”

Dretphi calmly attempts to ease Bach’s concerns. “It is okay. That hole should not cau-”

Cideeda holds a finger in front of Dretphi’s face and flashes a sly, toothy grin to her. “Let him fix it. I’d like to see this.”

Bach eases to his knees in front of the steel plate. He scans the area and picks up one of the larger chunks of steel slag. A blue glow flows into his eyes. With a flick of the wrist, the large chunk floats out from Bach’s hand and maintains a set distance. He guides the chunk near the ground and sweeps around the vicinity of the steel plate. Small specks and chunks of steel hop out of the grass and off the dirt to join the chunk. The collection of metal grows larger as more bits attract each other. Eventually, the sounds of metal bits impacting the metal collection stop. Bach opens his free hand near the hole in the plate and closes his eyes to focus. The metal around the hole morphs gradually. The entry and exit point edges warp flush with the surfaces of the plate and the interior of the hole smooths out. Bach opens his eyes to concentrate on the collected steel mass. The mass glows orange-red as it melts into a molten ball. Bach directs the ball of molten steel into the hole in the plate. The mass oozes into and onto the rest of the plate, forming a smooth plug that is flush to the edges. The

heated glow shifts from the middle of the plug to the outer edges, briefly glowing brighter before fading completely.

Bach waits a few moments to collect himself and wipes the sweat off his forehead. He stretches his legs out from underneath and sits his butt down on the grass. "That should do it. Unfortunately, I couldn't find every little bit I blasted out, so there's an indentation on the back of the plate. Got most of it though."

At this point Bach realizes that Dretphi and Cideeda are to either side of him. The two stare at the plate in awe. Bach pivots his head to both sides, and settles to face forward. A large hand rests on Bach's shoulder and Dretphi leans in. "Your training now includes armor and repair work."

Another smaller, clawed hand lightly grips Bach's other shoulder. Cideeda's sly, toothy grin widens. "You are going to save this team so much money on repairs and replacement parts. And also, make a lot of money by fixing up and modding all the extra gear we pick up for sale."

Bach closes his eyes and groans with begrudging acceptance. Dretphi pats his shoulder. "Do not feel bad. You grow in value to the team by the day."

Bach grumbles and lowers his head. "As a magical multi-tool."

Cideeda playfully squeezes Bach's shoulder. "That's not a bad thing to be. You don't see those other two mages pulling shit like this off. Anyway, we'll make it worth your while. You want to shoot guns with us?"

Bach rocks his head side to side in deliberation and quickly nods. "Yes. Yes, I want to shoot guns."

All three stand up and set off to ready the range.

Sotalia leaps over the couch arm and flings herself onto the nearest cushion. She searches the coffee table for the remote, grabs it, and flips through channels on the TV. "Damn it! What station is it around here?!"

Cideeda leans on the dinner table scrolling through a holographic schedule listing from the holoplayer. "Channel three dash ten!"

Sotalia peeks down at the remote and presses a few buttons. Dretphi scoots between the couch and coffee table and settles on the middle cushion. She places a large bowl of popcorn on the coffee table and scoops of handful for herself. Aristespha, in more casual clothes, glides into the nearby reclining chair and pulls it back, releasing the footrest. Cideeda launches into the remaining spot on the couch. Bach wanders into the area and looks at everyone. "What's going on?"

Cideeda reaches for a handful of popcorn and talks to Bach in between bites. “The two hour premiere for the new season of Next Adventurers of Nexus is on tonight!”

Bach pulls a chair over from the dining table next the couch. “I’ve heard of this. I’m surprised you all watch it.”

Sotalia throws out her feet onto the coffee table and sinks into the couch. “Oh, it’s a total shitshow, but we can’t help but to watch the trainwreck each season. One of those guilty pleasures and all.”

Sebastian pops in through the wall above the couch. “Did I miss anything?!”

Aristespha shakes her head and spreads a blanket over her. “No. Just the introduction. They haven’t gotten to announcing the new party.”

Bach sits in the chair expectantly as the announcer goes into his routine.

“Welcome ladies and gentlemen to the new season of the Next Adventurers of Nexus! We have an amazingly diverse party to follow this season! Without further ado, let’s get to know our Adventurers! Hailing fresh out of school from High Alton, Chad Bosch!”

The show cuts to prerecorded segments of all this season’s cast with extensive editing and special effects.

“Hello, people. I’m the heroic, all mighty leader of the Flames of the Phoenix adventuring group. Let us fight your fires with our fire!”

Sotalia breaks out in a cackle. Aristespha cringes with an eye roll. Cideeda snorts and shakes her head. Dretphi groans. Sebastian looks at Bach and points at the TV. “See. This is why we don’t have a team name. Period. Used to want one, saw one episode of this, now I’m just happy to have the registration number only.”

“Excellent slogan there! Next on the roster is Tassilda Evernia, the Emin enchantress!”

The show cuts to a voluptuous, sultry woman with long raven hair, swirling horns, piercing blue on black eyes, and showing more gray, patterned skin than clothing by an order of magnitude. “No one can escape my charms... and my spells.”

Aristespha quirk a brow. Sotalia disapprovingly twists her head side to side at the sight. “Damn. There’s a whore somewhere pissed at her makeup being stolen.”

“But, what’s a party without some muscle!? Here to lead the charge into battle is Trakenthin Stakken Olig Brecomin the giant Grath warrior!”

The camera starts at the midsection of a very large Grath man and rises up to his face. He wears a stoic expression, deadpan all the way. The camera pauses for dialog, only to pick up a solitary, loud grunt on the microphone.

Dretphi pinches the bridge of nose in aggravation. She glares daggers at the screen. "Our native language contains more words than the other languages. A palette of diction at your disposal. You... Grunt."

Sotalia and Cideeda pat Dretphi on the arms, playfully soothing her frustrations. The announcer continues. "A stunning statement none the less! Next on the list is the infiltration specialist a mysterious Evuukian, Mordoran Lotherin!"

A very well dressed Evuukian man steals the scene. He stands prominently, his dusky skin contrasting his white hair. He brushes back the hair from his face following his long pointy ears back. "I've put my abilities towards the greater good in spite of my Dark Evuukian heritage."

Aristespha reflexively shouts. "Bullshit!"

She throws her arms to the side and leans forward in the chair to the TV. "Bullshit! There hasn't been a Dark Evuukian in Nexus since the last cataclysm! Damn children these days! Just because you have a darker skin color, does NOT mean you have ANY ancestry to those raving, back-stabbing, psychopathic head cases!"

Sotalia snickers at Aristespha's outburst. "Well, tell us how you really feel, why don't you?"

Aristespha crosses her arms and drops back into the couch chair and shakes her head in disgust.

"An enthralling back story I'm certain! Finally, last in the pack but the one who you want to watch your back, the Fvalian healer, Deedri Preetta!"

Cideeda's jaw hits the floor and she stares wide-eyed at the screen. "Is... Is... Is bitch wearing bell around her neck?!"

The TV shows a very excited and young Fvalian woman hopping around energetically, waving to the camera. She wears an extravagant top matching her long skirt. Medic magical script decorates the attire. A necklace with a large bell adorns her neck. She shows the peace sign, before holding her hands up in cat-like gestures. "Meow! I hope they never need me, but I'll always be here to patch everyone up in no time!"

Bach watches Cideeda fling herself back into the couch and growl in anguish. "So, how many years did that set the Fvalian race back?"

Cideeda rolls her eyes, sighs, and speaks through gritted teeth. "About fifty, if she doesn't keep the cat routine up."

“This season, we’ve decided to set our adventurers out in new territory! Let’s see how their first day went...”

The show fade cuts to dialog between party members as they drive on the highway. The camera focuses on a grand roadside sign. Bach feels an odd silence strike the room as the words “Amaranth Valley” come into clear focus. He sees everyone stunned and thinks back in his mind to recent events. He glances at Sebastian. “I’m guessing this is the sign I missed because I was asleep when we all drove through?”

Sebastian simply nods. “Yep. That’s the big town nearby.”

Bach returns to watching the TV, not quite sure whether to feel excitement or dread at this development.

Sebastian floats in the middle aisle of the humvee. “Okay, everyone. Here’s the plan. Aristespha, you got medical supplies, and digging for any kind of info about the ruins in the area.”

Aristespha flips through a menu on her tablet and taps in a few entries. “Any problems with self-adhesive bandages or the quick patch spray I got last time?”

Dretphi shakes her head. Sotalia points to Cideeda across from her the in driver’s seat and Cideeda also shakes her head. Sotalia twists in her seat and leans out to look at Aristespha. “We’re good here.”

Aristespha nods and writes down notes into the tablet with the pen stylus. Sebastian turns to Dretphi sitting in her back seat. “Dretphi, stock up on the food and expendable gear. Since we’ll probably be back to ruin exploration, if you find a good deal on decent spotlights, grab a few please.”

Dretphi confirms silently as her eyes focus on her aetherphone and she enters some words on a list. Cideeda gets Dretphi’s attention through the rearview mirror. “Hey, if you find any more of that jerky in the yellow and green bag, get me a few packs.”

Dretphi gives a thumbs up back to Cideeda. Sebastian shifts his attention to Sotalia. “Sotalia, you know what magical stuff you need to get, but keep an eye out for any more of those disposal magic detector sticks. Also, work with Aristespha with getting any local history, recent and ancient.”

Sotalia peers back into the aisle from the front passenger’s seat and glances at Aristespha. “You hitting the pharmacy first?”

Aristespha shifts her gaze up to meet Sotalia. “Yes. I’ll message you my list of magical supplies I need, real quick. There.”

Sotalia checks her aetherphone. “Got it. Message me when you get done and we’ll figure what places to check out.”

Aristespha confirms with a gloved hand, as she resumes making more notes into tablet. Sebastian cranes his head over towards Cideeda. “Cideeda. Ammo, tech toys, selling of loot, and some updated reading material? Anything I’m missing?”

Cideeda shakes her head, keeping her eyes on the road. “Not that I can think of, I’ll message Aristespha if I think of anything, unless the sword has figured out how to use the AetherNet.”

Sebastian perks a brow and turns his head to glare at the sheathed sword in the aisle next to Aristespha. “No, turns out a thousand year old relic isn’t keen on keeping with the times. Not much of a conversationalist either, since I moved in.”

Sebastian finally turns to Bach. “As for you Bach, I figured you could tag along with Cideeda and-”

He lunges his head forward to stare intensely at the old flip aetherphone Bach holds in his hands. Sebastian reflexively laughs at seeing the old device. “Holy shit! And get you a new phone! Speaking of a fuckin’ relic, is that the same one you had in school?!”

Bach defensively darts his head around and quickly realizes the attention towards his old phone. “Y-Yes. What about it?! It still works just fine!”

Sebastian raises his hands up and attempts to calm Bach. “Hey now! No judging here. I’m gonna hook you up, bro. Cideeda, can you get this man a proper phone?”

Cideeda momentarily flicks her eyes into the rear-view mirror, with her signature toothy grin. “Will do! I saw one or two places that should carry decent phones.”

Sotalia spins completely around in her seat and peeks over the head rest at Bach. Her eyes widen and she smirks. Sotalia’s hand whips out and snatches the phone right out of Bach’s hand. “Ooo, let me see!”

Bach blinks at the sudden loss of his phone, then tries to reach around the front seat after it. Sotalia slaps a hand underneath her seat and pulls a bar up. She slides her seat forward and mostly out of range of Bach’s effective arm reach. “I’ve haven’t seen one of these since graduate school! Does it have any of the good games on it?”

Bach settles back down and crosses his arms, accepting defeat and remembering which way Sotalia’s horns point. “A few. I’d like my phone back, please.”

Sotalia playfully sighs and rolls her eyes. “Okay. Here you go.”

Sotalia holds the old phone over and back behind her seat. Bach takes his phone back, flips it open, and checks it. Sotalia pulls the bar underneath her seat again and attempts to slide the seat back, but only manages a few centimeters. She struggles against a force acting upon the seat. Dretphi gives a slight smile at the scene. Sebastian looks down at Bach and Bach’s boot pushing against Sotalia’s struggling seat and shakes his head. Bach holds a finger up and searches through his phone’s menus. “Just making sure she didn’t do anything to it.”

Sotalia crooks her head around the seat and traces Bach’s leg to the back. “I didn’t do anything to it! Really! Can I have some knee room now!?”

Bach flips the phone closed and removes his boot from the back of the seat. Sotalia finally slides the seat back away from the dash.

Aristespha points to Bach with her eyes trained on the tablet. Her arm goes through Sebastian, who cringes momentarily at the sudden intrusion. “Sebastian. We need to get Bach officially registered with our group.”

Sebastian side steps clear of Aristespha’s arm and thinks a moment. “Let’s see... Ah! After we are all done, we’ll all meet at the local guild office. Sounds good, everyone?”

The gathering agrees in their own ways, as the familiar sign to Amaranth Valley comes into view.

Cideeda pushes open the door of Aether Innovations and Retailers and holds the door for Bach. Bach steps through with a plastic bag around his arm and pokes at a new aetherphone, completely perplexed at the device. “Okay... How do you make call with this thing?!”

Cideeda snorts and points to an icon on the screen. “The phone icon.”

Bach grumbles and sighs. “Thank you.”

Cideeda quirks a brow and eyes Bach with a grin, while the two walk on the sidewalk of the open-air mall. “A man who can weave together technology and magic in ways that astound me and freak-out our mages, undone by a phone.”

Bach continues to navigate through the new menus, icons, and screens. “It’s massive increase in complexity to a device that didn’t require much from me! But, having the expanded band two-way radio is nice.”

Cideeda nods and she pushes her phone into a brand new case. “It costs extra but a good feature for our line of work. We’ll have to mod it up with the extended frequency chips I got from... the usual sources.”

Bach slips the phone into his side pocket and shrugs. “Sounds good to me. So, where to next?”

Cideeda directs Bach towards a game shop. “There. Need to pick up some reading material, and I might be able to sell one of the early era chests.”

Bach changes his route to match Cideeda’s as she strides to the doors of the game shop. Bach opens the door for Cideeda and both enter the store floor. The store contains a variety of vices for the Nexus nerd, geek, or dork. Boxes of comic books fill a few aisles of tables. Board games and books sit on shelves along the wall. A display counter showcases a variety of cards, miniatures, and dice. A few locals sit in the chairs around open tables, playing games and/or just discussing the latest episodes of shows. Some give a momentary peek at the door, then resume their activities. Bach scans over the place and stops with a confused

look to Cideeda. “Why are we in a game shop? Not that I wouldn’t mind grabbing out the latest issue of Tales of Orion, but...”

Cideeda smiles and gestures to Bach, as they continue navigating the store. “Well, you have your brother to thank. Sebastian recruited me right out of a comic book shop. I was between groups and decided to catch up on the issues of Tinkering Tina I missed.”

Bach thinks a moment and his face grows unamused as memories of his brother’s normal tactics come to mind. “He tried to flirt with you didn’t he?”

Cideeda rolls her eyes and giggles. “Pitifully so. But, I humored him, found out he needed a technical expert, and I got with the group. So, I can’t complain about that.”

Bach lowers his head shaking and sighs. He puzzles at Cideeda. “What about the comic books?”

Cideeda flips through a few wrapped comics in a box, judging her position in the collection. “Turns out two comic book geeks are enough for it to get contagious. And comic books are perfect for down time when you are too far from the Aethernet relays and you have a few hours of night watch to kill.”

Bach tilts his head side to side to mull over the idea and eventually agrees on the concept. “Makes enough sense to me. I’m going to look at the miniatures they have.”

Cideeda pauses a moment and catches Bach’s attention before he wanders off too far. “Wargaming or RPGs?”

Bach holds an indifferent gesture with his hand. “A little bit of both, but really got interested in miniatures when I figured out how to morph the metal and plastic into custom poses for people. People pay a lot for custom figures.”

Cideeda ponders the idea in her mind and a devious smile forms at the opportunities to be had, before she resumes her search through the comics. Bach makes his way to the display and kneels down to examine the various miniatures through the glass.

A frustrated voice from above the counter and away from Bach mumbles out. “Dammit... Still doesn’t work... Why won’t it work?”

Bach peers over the counter and sees the shopkeeper attempt to stare a hole through a paperback book on the counter. The large, round man keeps his fists on his sides and frowns, quietly muttering to himself. Bach stands up and sneaks a peek at a page of the book, while casually drifting towards the register. Various magical symbols adorn the page with some brief instructions. Bach recognizes the book as one of the many from the “Teach yourself magic” genre. He grits his teeth and curls his lip in disgust. Most of the books in that genre typically have errors, mistakes, and just failures in quality, and Bach recognizes this one keeps the stereotype alive and well. The shopkeeper puts his hands on either side of the page and concentrates. Bach actually senses a slight stir of energy, but something on that

page hinders it. Bach stands next to the register across from the shopkeeper. A few moments later, the shopkeeper notices Bach, double-takes, and startles slightly. “Oh! Hello, welcome to Amaranth’s Wrath Game Emporium! The name is Steve. Umm... Can I help you?”

Bach makes eye contact with Steve and twirls his finger at the book. “You have the ink bottle that came with this?”

Steve looks to either side of him and then spots a bottle sitting on the shelf underneath the counter. He fetches the bottle and curiously eyes Bach. “Here it is. Um... Are you magically inclined?”

Bach holds his hands up and shrugs. “Somewhat. I’m kinda getting back into it.”

Steve happily grins at Bach and respectfully pleads. “Man, I don’t want to bother you, but if you can share any tips, I’d really appreciate it. I’ve been trying every book around nothing seems to work. I feel it, but nothing seems to happen.”

Bach holds his hand out for the bottle. Steve passes it over and Bach twists the cap off. He wafts the bottle underneath his nose, then seals the top with a finger and briefly turns the bottle upside down. He lifts the finger and licks it. Steve blinks stunned and confused. Bach quirks his face and groans. “Yep. This mix is pretty watered down. And if its the same stuff they use to print that page, unless you got a lot of magical energy to brute force the thing... It’s not going to work. You got any salt and... A lime, maybe?”

Steve returns to his senses and pivots around searching. He finds a salt packet in a fast food bag. He then leans over to a small mini-fridge behind the counter and opens the door to show a bunch of canned drinks and a lone lime-shaped plastic bottle of juice. “Will lime juice work?”

Bach nods, cracks open the paper salt packet, and dumps it all into the ink bottle. Steve holds out the plastic lime juice bottle. Bach picks it up, flips the cap, and squirts a healthy amount into the ink bottle. “Okay. Cap that bottle with your finger, shake it a few times, and hold your finger out. We’ll test to see if the rest of the mix is still good.”

Steve follows Bach instructions and looks at him quizzically. “So, what’s this suppose to do?”

Bach points at the bottle. “Recharge the mix. The watering down messes with the electrolyte mix and pH often gets screwed up during bottling.”

Steve stops shaking the bottle, places it down, and then holds out his ink spotted finger. Bach stares at Steve. “Okay. Now I want you to concentrate and direct your flow to that point on your finger. If the mix is good, it’ll glow.”

Steve nods, closes his eyes, and tries his best to focus. Bach faintly feels a stir in magical energy and watches as the spot on Steve’s finger dimly glows orange. “Steve... You’re forcing it too much. Don’t listen to what those guides on the Aethernet said. Calmly guide it.”

The glow now shines bright enough to be seen from a distance and catches the attention of others in the store. Bach smiles confidently. "Steve, open your eyes."

Steve cautiously opens his eyes and lowers the gaze to his finger. His eyes widen as he processes what the glow on his finger means. The awe overtakes him and an ear to ear smile grows. Bach snaps his fingers and points at glow. "Now that's a good sign. So you want fix this page right with your recharged ink?"

Steve slowly raises his head to Bach with sheer determination in his eyes. "Fuck. Yes. I do."

A small gathering of store regulars surround the counter and watch as Bach continues an impromptu lesson on arcane dynamics to Steve. "Now... Trace those last outlines and put some curve on those sharp angle corners. They do that to save on ink, but with the poor print quality it really does a number to the energy flow."

Steve hovers his head over the page with an attentive eye and carefully applies new ink to the page, applying many Bach suggested corrections. He stands back up and looks to Bach expectantly. Bach examines the page one last time and crosses his arms with smile. "Alright. Give it a shot."

Steve places his hands down on the sides of the page and takes a deep breath. His eyes narrow and he focuses intensely. In mere seconds, a flow of orange glow travels along the traces and paths on the page. Upon reaching the center, the energy materializes and forms a simple rotating cube that floats up from the page to a fixed point. Steve slowly removes his hands from the page and the cube remains for a number of seconds before dissipating away. The awe-struck crowd remains in silence for a moment before cheering Steve.

"I got it on video, Steve! Fucking awesome, dude!"

"Holy shit, you finally did it!"

"It looked better than how-to videos on the Aethernet!"

Steve reaches back and slides a stool behind him. He drops himself on it and thinks with disbelief and wonder fighting for position on his face. He places his hands to the sides of his head. "Wow. I... I... I don't know what to say. I've been trying all these months and all these guides and... I did it."

Steve's drifting attention locks onto Bach. "You... Man. Thank you. I don't know how to pay you back."

Bach puts his hands in his pockets and acts nonchalant. "Don't worry about it. I've kinda been there before. Know how it feels."

Steve pats his legs and stands up in triumph. “I got it! Your next few visits, including this one... Twenty-five percent discount on purchases.”

The rest of the gathered crowd astound at the announcement and discuss between themselves at the sheer rarity of a discount, much less such a significant one. Over in comic book aisles, a particular pair of furry ears flick to attention and home in. Bach bashfully chuckles and scratches his head. “That’s quite the honor. I’ll have to find something to-”

A voice speaks beside Bach. “Sweetie, there were a lot of issues we didn’t have. Would it be okay if we got them all?”

Bach’s expression remains unchanged, but elements of his psyche spit-take and scramble to understand the situation. The voice is familiar. The tone is strange. Claw tipped hands place a stack of comic books, graphical novels, and other media onto the counter. Someone wraps arms around Bach’s arm and playfully leans on him. Bach calmly and purposefully aims his head down the length of his arm to see Cideeda acting affectionate. Bach’s expression quirks, twists, and twitches as confusion, frustration, embarrassment, and indignation argue too much for any to take control. Cideeda reveals the screen of her aetherphone discreetly and winks cutely to Bach. Bach silently reads the note on the screen. “25% discount!!! Play along! PLEASE!!!”

A part of Bach’s mind awakes from a long slumber and strides confidently into the mental control room. It throws its hat perfectly onto the hat rack, adjusts its proper attire, and grins with sly determination. It amusingly perks at seeing a new mission target, but considers someone other than Sebastian a fresh new challenge. The other elements of the psyche await in wary anticipation as it takes control.

Bach assumes a suave but humble demeanor and calmly addresses Cideeda. “Well, I don’t know, dear. I wouldn’t want to impose too much upon Steve’s generosity.”

Steve bounces his head between Bach and Cideeda, and finally arrives at a conclusion. “Oh! No, man! It’s completely cool! It’s no problem at all! I thought I wasted my money on those magic workbooks. But with what you taught me, it’s going to be an absolute trip going back over those and practice inking all those tweaks in.”

Bach slyly shrugs and glances at Cideeda. “Well, if he has no objections, I have none for you, dear.”

Cideeda smiles softly, reaches into a pouch on her side, and turns her attentions to Steve. “Steve, question. You know anyone who would be interested in one of these?”

Cideeda pulls out Bach’s holoplayer, presses an option on the holographic menu, and projects the hologram of an early era chest. Steve and other store regulars affix their gazes upon it. Eventually, Steve strokes his chin with great interest. “That looks genuine early era. Does it have a working lock and key?”

Cideeda tugs on Bach's arm to get his attention and grins slyly. "A working lock and maybe a key, if keys aren't that much different than miniatures. Are they, sweetie?"

Bach forces a smile to Cideeda with a brief twitch in the eye, as she skips off to get the chest from the humvee. "We'll find out, won't we?"

Cideeda pats Bach hard on the back, as the two walk through the large automated doors of the large book store. "Come on! That was pretty good on the spot acting you did back there."

Bach rolls his eyes and grumbles, with his hands in his pockets. "I've had plenty of practice getting out of awkward situations thanks to Sebastian. Didn't think I'd need to use that to con someone to give you a discount."

Cideeda twists her mouth and raises a brow at Bach. "Con, nothing. You just used your given discount to buy everyone their reading material."

Bach remains silent and grumbles to himself. Cideeda speaks in a contrasting genuine tone, "Bach, you shouldn't feel bad. You helped Steve significantly with his magic. He got to repay you with a decent discount for you and assumed lady friend. He also got a good deal on a genuine early era chest with working lock and a key custom formed on the spot with magic before everyone's eyes."

Bach stops walking and shifts full focus on Cideeda. She continues. "As someone who was a game shop regular and worked a lot behind the counter a decade ago... That would have been a hard day to top for many, many years."

Cideeda crosses her arms and resumes her normal tone of voice. "Now, if you are a little angry at me putting you on the spot... I'll accept that and apologize."

Bach eventually accepts and dismisses the charges. "It's okay. Really. It just brought back memories of some crazy moments with my brother that I'd conveniently forgotten."

Cideeda nods and checks her aetherphone. "I understand. Do you see Sotalia anywhere? She messaged me that she was in here."

Bach looks above the tops of the display shelves and scans around for her red hair and swept back horns. Near the history section, Bach spots Sotalia and points her out to Cideeda. "There. Way down this next aisle."

Cideeda peers down the aisle and catches sight of Sotalia. "I see her."

Bach blinks as his vision notices something else and he snaps his focus to a new target. His eyes widen and he bites his lip in punctuation. "FUCK."

Cideeda freezes and glances back at Bach. "What?!"

Bach watches as a familiar Emin woman struts confidently toward the area near Sotalia and a small camera crew closely follows behind. “We need to get over there and warn Sotalia quick!”

Sotalia lifts a book up from the shelf and flips it over to read the summary. Her eyes trace the lines of text, but abruptly halt. She rotates her head to follow her eyes and sees both Bach and Cideeda frantically signaling her over from around the shelf end. She squints and tilts her head. “What?”

Bach quickly points to something behind Sotalia. She checks over her shoulder and immediately tenses. “Oh shit.”

Sotalia spins her head back forward, replaces the book in her hand on the shelf, and power walks over around the shelf to the aisle behind it with Bach and Cideeda. “Thanks. Did not want to get caught up in that bitch’s path.”

Bach raises his head just above the top of the shelf and surveys the events. He ducks back down when the cameras shift and the Emin woman sets up to pose in front of the shelf. A human woman in the mix of the camera crew reads notes from a tablet and prompts the Emin woman. “Okay, Tassilda, talk about what books you’d recommend for people wanting to learn more about magic.”

Tassilda strikes a pose in front of the shelf next to the “Magical History” section. She seductively draws a book from the shelf and holds it suggestively close to her chest. “I will always recommend a favorite of mine, the Collected History of Nexus Magic series. It always captivates my attention and the details are all so enthralling.”

Bach cringes at the suggestion. Sotalia contorts her mouth in disgust and seeks a spot in the books to spy through the shelf. “Really, woman? Out of all the books on this shelf, you pick the one that’s a proven insomnia cure.”

Tassilda gradually places the book back into the shelf, adding a purposeful bounce in the process to highlight personal assets. Sotalia eyes Tassilda and grumbles to herself, annoyed. “Oh, and I bet you are the first to take offense at about people comparing you to a succubus.”

Tassilda plucks another book from the shelf and advertises her prominent aspects during the task. “Another one I’d only suggest to the most dedicated is The Great Magical Handbook of Nexus.”

Bach slides his head right next to Sotalia’s and he peeks through the opening to see the back of the infamous volume. “She’s got to be getting kickbacks from a publisher. I remember spending way too much money on that damn thing in school. It was pretty shitty doorstep, too.”

Cideeda quizzes Bach and Sotalia smugly. “Well, if you two are such experts, what book would you recommend?”

Sotalia holds her face and thinks to herself about the subject. Bach steps back and examines the books on the shelf. He walks down the aisle and searches the shelves, following the order. He stops walking and puts a finger on the books, reading titles. He tilts a paperback out from the shelf and hands it to Cideeda. “The Illustrated Guide to Magical History. Pretty much first semester magic history in illustrated novel style.”

Sotalia stands up straight and stares at Bach incredulously. “Really?”

Cideeda opens the book to the table of contents. Bach carefully points out the subjects in the listing. “It covers the Three Cataclyms, the Three Periods, the Abstract Prism, Foundation Constructs, and even Magical Flow Dynamics.”

Sotalia perches over Cideeda’s shoulder and seems honestly surprised. “Huh. It goes into how ridiculously dangerous Elder Energy is and even how it caused the Third Cataclysm and prompted the creation of the Abstract Prism.”

Bach hears no activity on the other side of the shelf and checks over the shelf. “See. It’s not bad at all. It has textbook parts after the story section, but it does a good job explaining it all. Even has a decent high-school romance subplot. I think we’re in the clear, they’ve moved on to coffee shop.”

Sotalia searches around the area and takes out her aetherphone. “Good. I messaged Aristespha to see how far along she was and- Oh. Oh my.”

Cideeda and Bach shift their attentions to Sotalia. Cideeda scoots next to Sotalia, reads the screen, and covers her mouth in astonishment. “She’s just MAD right now.”

Bach worriedly moves in view of of Sotalia’s screen. “What’s going on?!”

Sotalia extends her phone away to give the other two a better view and emphasize the situation. “Wow. She’s gone full Low Evuukian in her rants back to me. I can only make out half of this, but I think we’re not the only ones who ran into one of the show stars.”

Cideeda groans and hovers her claw tip over a few characters. “It’s the Fvalian. I recognize that term. Looks like she’s stuck behind her in line.”

Bach squints and focuses on a new line of characters in a language he doesn’t fully comprehend. “Uhh, that’s something not good. I’ve never seen half of these before.”

Sotalia draws her phone up close and carefully rereads the line a few times. She grits her teeth and then snorts. “She’s furious. She’s dropping out parts of proper sentence structure. What do you all think this direct translation means? Brain devoid furred abomination destroy time. Yank bell broomhandle feed, necklace reach rip start bell expedient ass exit.”

Bach stares nonplussed and scratches his head. “Umm... We should check to see how Dretphi is doing?”

Sotalia nods in agreement and cringes as another line pops on her screen. Cideeda stows away her phone and points towards a general store through the store’s glass front. “Dretphi says she is still waiting for the staff to get her order together over there.”

The three sneak out from the aisles to the front door. Bach shakes his head as they pass through the front doors. “Poor Sebastian. Hiding in the sword strapped to Aristespha’s back right now.”

Sotalia draws breath through her teeth. “Yes. But, he’s the only one keeping her calm right now.”

Bach grimaces at the thought of Sebastian having no escape and defusing the rage of his significant other. “I hope he’s gotten better at that.”

Dretphi stands at the Amaranth Valley General Store counter and sighs with annoyance. The general store stocks a variety of goods for locals and adventuring parties. Amaranth Valley advertises itself as the last big spec of civilization before the borderlands and other wild places. So, the general store takes up the slack. Given the range of goods and services, the store front is modest. But, this is possible thanks to the massive warehouse attached. Unfortunately, this delays larger orders and forces customers to wait. A fact that Dretphi finds exceptionally bothersome given the large muscular Grath man that’s been trying non-stop to flaunt himself and acquire her attention. He remains a few registers away, waiting for his order to be fulfilled. Dretphi avoids all contact with him. She also cares not for the bored cameraman nearby, watching.

The cameraman retrieves his aetherphone from his belt holster and talks into it. “Hey, Samantha. ... The Unit C is still here with Trakenthin. He’s failing to flirt with some Grath woman. ... Hmm? Sure, I guess.”

The cameraman takes the phone off his ear, aims the camera on the device, and taps the screen with his thumb. A few more taps and he places it back on his ear. “Sent you a picture. ... You know, now that you mention it, she does look familiar. ... Unit A saw an Evuukian woman with a sword strapped to her back? ... Hmm, I’ll definitely let you know if anything changes.”

Trakenthin struts confidently over towards Dretphi, his hand gliding over the counter rail. Dretphi reads a new message on her aetherphone and searches with her head up. She seeks past Trakenthin and waves past him. He smiles smugly and picks up the pace. Sotalia, Cideeda, and Bach hurry by Trakenthin right to Dretphi. Trakenthin smoothly changes direction and leads himself back to his original spot. The cameraman chuckles and mutters to himself. “Denied.”

Dretphi breathes a much needed sigh of relief and a quietly addresses everyone. "I am glad you arrived. I believe IT was going to talk to me."

Sotalia crosses her arms and tips her head back towards Trakenthin. "You mean the two meter and then some tall ego back there?"

Dretphi groans and draws back an upper lip. "Yes. Unfortunately."

Sotalia grins with a tinge of evil and her voice radiates with sarcasm. "Come on Dretphi, I'm sure he's quite the accomplished man. Probably has plenty of trophies he wants to show you in the bedroom."

Bach looks at Dretphi with a bit of worry. "Do you want us to do anything? Is there something about him we should know? Sorry to pry, but you seem pretty upset."

Dretphi glances at Bach and smiles warmly. "It is okay. I thank you for your concern. He is an unfortunate nuisance of the Grath culture. One day he may achieve great things."

She narrow eyes and views Trakenthin without moving her head in his direction. "For his caliber, his deeds will receive a paragraph in the history of the Grath. Men of the level of my fathers write the history that paragraph will go in."

Sotalia laughs and puts her hand on Dretphi's shoulder. "You keep that bar high for the rest of us."

Dretphi straightens up and crosses her arms, grumbling. "It is my bar to set."

Cideeda snickers and checks a new message on her phone. "Well, Aristespha is going to meet us at the guild office. I don't think she's in the mood to do any researching today."

Dretphi perks a brow. Bach leans in. "She got held up by one of the Next Adventurers of Nexus."

Dretphi shakes her head, notices a clerk coming to the register, and turns around in anticipation. "A sentiment I appreciate."

The young clerk stands behind the register and he promptly types a few keys on the system. "Sorry about the wait, but your order is ready! We've processed payment to your company card and here is your claim ticket. One of our warehouse assistants will cart it out to your vehicle."

Dretphi takes hold of the claim ticket and her company credit card with a nod. The clerk directs the group to a side door, and they move out. The cameraman finishes taking one last photo and presses the send icon on the screen. A few moments later, a message window pops up on the screen. "This is getting WEIRD now. Unit B is wrapping up with Tassilda. Meet me in the parking lot when you get done."

Aristespha marches with her fists clenched and back straight, maintaining a severe glower. She stops in front of Bach, Sotalia, Cideeda, and Dretphi. Aristespha opens her mouth and a resonating voice from behind her interrupts. “Dear, take a deep, long breath first.”

Aristespha grimaces and winces, but closes her eyes and slowly draws in air to fill her lungs. She exhales with a long growl hidden in the mix. The same voice from before continues. “You might need another breath.”

Aristespha grits her teeth and adjusts her attire to a more orderly fashion. “I’ll be fine, Sebastian.”

She finally calms herself down to a demeanor close to her normal and sighs. “Well, it seems that some children’s cereal is giving away medical mage licenses as the prize in the box. Despite the excessive delay, I was able to get the medical supplies we need.”

Sebastian’s voice echoes from the sword on Aristespha’s back. “So, medical supplies, check. Sotalia?”

Sotalia stops biting her tongue from Aristespha’s display and reports. “Magical supplies are good. Nothing of value at the big book store. No Local Lore section I found.”

Sebastian resumes his run down. “Okay. We’ll try the local library and see if the college has some adventurer access service. Dretphi?”

Dretphi clears her smirk. “Food and gear acquired. I did find the jerky requested.”

Cideeda happily grins and reflexively licks her lips. “Thank you! Oh! Bach has a new phone. And we got the reading material at a really good price. Also, got a good source to sell any ancient trinkets in the future. Didn’t get to the ammo, today.”

Sebastian sighs but his tone sounds understanding and appreciative. “We’ll see about tomorrow. Right now, I think we should get Bach registered and get out of here before we run into anymore celebrities. While Aristespha, Bach, and I handle the registration, rest of you check to see if there’s any missions, quests, and jobs you like out there.”

The group enters the guild offices. Off in the distance a cameraman and woman casually hang out by a van with the Next Adventurers of Nexus show logo plastered on the side. Despite the idle conversation, the two keep a very attentive eye on the guild office.

The doors of the guild office open. The team walks out with Bach trailing behind, examining his registration card. Sebastian floats in his ethereal form behind Bach and peeks over his shoulder with a proud smile. “It’s pretty thing, bro.”

Bach feels the card's facets, takes his wallet out, and carefully settles the card into the most prominent spot. "Well, I'm only technically an intern."

Sotalia glances over at the card in Bach's wallet. "Still pretty cool that they can work it as an internship and have it count for college credit."

Aristespha takes a peek at the card, too. "The paperwork is significantly easier now. Now the paperwork for denoting an authoritative proxy due to your team's leader being a soul stuck in a sword on the other hand..."

Sebastian catches Aristespha glare and shrugs. "Hey, if I could actually sign stuff, you know I would!"

Aristespha winks playfully, reaches behind her, and taps the handle of the sword. "Before you scare the locals, Sebastian."

Sebastian's visage swirls into the sword. His voice echoes a few moments later. "I know. Just wanted to see Bach's registration card in the light. Vision is so weird in the sword. Anyone find anything good on the boards?"

The rest scroll through their aetherphones and take turns reading job descriptions. Debates follow after each reading and the team discusses jobs on their way to the humvee. Nearby a particular van, a cameraman tracks the group and a woman stares with her jaw nearly on the floor. She checks the cameraman. "By the gods, I hope you recorded all that."

The cameraman grins widely. "Oh, yes. There's a reason I get to be on my own unit."

The woman flips open the cover on her tablet and tap-types furiously into it. "I can't believe it. It's them and they are here."

Evening falls at the house. Most retire to recreational activities after the unexpected stresses of today. Aristespha closes the door to her room, removes the sheathed sword from her back, and places it on the bed. She slides the sword to a corner and sits down on top. She removes her boots and other attire until she achieves comfort. She lays down the rest of the way on the bed and exhales. Sebastian's visage reforms and floats above her. "You okay, dear?"

Aristespha rubs her eyes and keeps them closed as she stretches out on the bed. "Yes. Just the state of things bothers me. I was accepting certain elements, now new ones got thrown in."

Sebastian hovers down next to Aristespha on the bed. "I know. But, we are making good progress. Bach is going on his first quest soon!"

Aristespha twists her mouth and thinks. “Sebastian, your brother is still an unknown factor. Not a bad one. But, still unknown.”

Sebastian frowns lightly and turns his head to Aristespha. “I know. I wish I knew more to tell you. He did mention the Nightmare Geist incident to me. And... how it left him a lame mage.”

Aristespha eyes snap open and she twists her head to lock a glare on Sebastian. “Anything else?!”

Sebastian blinks blankly from her sudden change of expression. “No. I didn’t want to push the issue. I was amazed he mentioned it without me pestering him. I’m hoping he’ll open up more once he gets some confidence back.”

Aristespha closes her eyes and rubs her forehead in thought. Sebastian quickly lifts up and looks over and down at Aristespha. “What’s wrong? Is there something wrong with Bach?!”

Aristespha opens her eyes with a faint glow, reaches her hands up, and places them around Sebastian’s face gently. “Your brother is just fine. It’s just... He has his abilities, but I don’t know how or even why he arrived at them.”

Sebastian places a hand on one of Aristespha’s hands and smiles. “I’m sure you’ll figure it out soon enough or he’ll eventually tell us. I’m just happy to have him along, just like we promised each other when we were kids.”

Aristespha lovingly returns the smile as she feels Sebastian’s face. “We shall see. But, I want some answers eventually.”

Bach examines his new aetherphone while he lays on his bed. He flips through menus, settings pages, and lists of icons and eventually settles back on the home screen. He mumbles to himself, “Well... It’s about time...”

Bach presses the phone icon and taps a series of numbers on the shown numeric pad. He holds the phone next to ear and waits. After a few moments, Bach hears a familiar voice. “Hey, mom. It’s me. Got a new phone and everything. Thanks to Sebastian.”

Bach listens to his mother talk. “He’s doing well enough, all things considered. ... Yah, still getting used it myself. So, he’s been keeping you update to date with- Well, I guess Aristespha has, since he hasn’t figured out a way yet.”

He quirks his head to side and ponders a moment on something said. “I guess his voice would sound weird over the speakerphone. When did you last talk to him? ... Good. Give me second, I think I got this figured out on the phone.”

Bach takes the phone and aims it at his registration card, presses a few buttons, and then returns the it to his ear. “Did you get tha-”

He stops and gently smiles, with a tear welling in his eye. His mother's voice, happy and excited, calls out to someone in the background and announces what she sees. The voice calls out loud enough to even be audible to anyone nearby Bach. "Well, it's about fucking time!"

Bach rolls his eyes with a snort and shakes his head. "Thanks, dad!"

Bach's mother continues, asking questions in excited rapid succession. Bach interrupts, "Hey, mom, I'll answer all those. But, there's something I've been working on that I want you to see first. Let's see if I can figure out this feature."

Bach holds his hand out and palm up, keeping the phone trained with his other hand. Bach presses an icon on the screen and a video stream of his mother's face appears in a smaller window on top of the video of the palm of his hand. Bach concentrates and faint, flickering outlines appear. The framework fills in with a transparent form, details and color materialize. In a few seconds, the vague outline of flowers morphs into a bundle of violet-like objects crafted of stabilized magical energy. He witnesses his mother's face flood with awe and pride. He presses the icon again and puts the phone back to his ear. "I kind of wanted to show you in person, but I figured with everything going on I'd show you now. I'll get it in the mail to you soon."

The door lock to the two bed hotel room beeps loudly and disengages. As the door swings open, a woman and cameraman rush in. The cameraman hurries over to a desk near the large room window, places his camera down, flips up a laptop, and connects the camera. The woman throws herself onto one of the beds, pulls herself to the edge, and fishes a laptop out of a carrier bag. "I can't fucking believe it! Howie is going to love this! Gerald, when you get the video downloaded, send it straight to his aethermail!"

Gerald swiftly slides the chair from the desk, jumps into it, and types on the laptop. "Will do! Howie's going to flip when he see this in his mail tomorrow."

The woman snaps a wicked grin on her face and toggles the speakerphone on her aetherphone. "Tomorrow?! He's seeing this tonight!"

Gerald halts in brief shock and spins his head to the woman. "Are you sure about that, Samantha?! It's pretty late his time and last time we called him late... It wasn't with good news."

Samantha places the phone next to her, taps the screen, and situates herself on the bed. "Oh, he'll be fine once he sees the video."

The phone rings, rings again, and again. After the fifth ring, it clicks loudly with sounds of silence from another place broadcasting into the room. A loud cough, a phlegm choked growl, and begrudging moan blasts out from the speaker. "Oh gods... Who the fuck is it at this hour?"

With her sweetest and most innocent voice, Samatha chimes. "It's me Howie!"

A long pause hangs in the room, then the voice groans with pleading dread. "Dear gods, please tell me one of the lemmings hasn't gotten themselves killed already-"

Samantha twists with annoyance and speaks with tinges of disappointment. "NO! They're all alive. Check your mail, Howie."

The phone resonates with the sounds of Howard stirring around. He grumbles to himself, then directs his frustration over the phone. "GERALD. Are you there?!"

Gerald cringes, pauses from his work on the laptop, and aims his head over to direct his voice. "Yes. I'm here and I warned her!"

Movement noises stop and Howard sighs. "Okay, I'm opening it. I swear this had better be good. I'm coming down from a night of fun I may not remember in the morning, and my head

is pounding. If this isn't good, I'm booking you two rooms at the roach motel the lemmings are-

Silence over the phone steals the attention of Gerald and Samantha. Loud gasps from the phone interrupt the glances Samantha and Gerald exchange. A series gleeful cackles prompt Samantha and Gerald to curl celebratory fists to each other. A pleasurable moan rolls in from the phone. "Oh... Oh my. This... This is why I keep you two around. You two can find the speck of pure gold in a sea of shit."

Samantha lowers her head to her phone with an inquiring expression and speaks with a similar tone. "How should we proceed?"

A few hums and clicks of the mouth play over the speaker before settling. "You two keep on task. I'll mail over a copy of the mission our adventurers are going on at start of the work week. Some simple survey of some musty old ruins. There's a few on the list they had, so I got the one closest to town. I'm going to pound down two aspirin and a liter of water, sleep some happy dreams thanks to you two, and call in a few favors certain people didn't realize they owed me."

Samantha smiles and sinks into her pile of hotel bed pillows. "Will do. Oh, and they've already had some encounters with each other."

Howard's anticipation exudes acoustically from the speaker. "Oh? Do tell."

Samantha's smile morphs to a full evil grin. "Deedri held up Aristespha and nearly drove her to drawing the sword. And Trakenthin flirted with Dretphi... and got shut down."

Howard releases a satisfied moan and chuckles darkly. "Oh my, dear. If you talk any dirtier to me, I might need to start paying per minute."

Samantha laughs and reaches over to her phone. "Then, I guess I need to let you off. If we get any more goodies, we'll let you know."

Gerald directs his voice at Samantha's phone. "Hey, Howard. You wouldn't happen to know who the new guy is in the group? I've never seen him before."

Samantha nods in confirmation to Gerald and waits for Howard's response. The wait is the longest stretch of silence yet, but eventually a whisper of genuine surprise finds its way over. "Oh my. That's Sebastian's brother! Bach Warwick. Oh, I am interested now."

Bach, Sotalia, Dretphi, Cideeda, Aristespha, and Sebastian sit around the dining table. A collection of documents, tablets, and a holoplayer litter the tabletop. Bach sits back and occasionally looks to his brother, while the others debate and argue about what quests to do and when to do them. After fifteen minutes, Sebastian manages an ethereal whistle and

seizes everyone's attention. "Okay. I think we're all in agreement that we'd all like to slum it a bit with a whole bunch of easy jobs. Correct?"

Sotalia throws her head back in her seat and sighs loudly. "Yes! Just some straight forward gigs for once. Preferably anything that a few good fireballs can fix. Simplicity, you know?"

Cideeda stretches her arms out across the table and rests her head on the tabletop. "That would be nice. But, I still like mine. It's not everyday a local government gives free reign to crack open an old military installation."

Dretphi nods with both her hands propping her head up above the table. "I second that job. Not now. Later. We need a simple, safe job now."

Aristespha uncrosses her arms and shrugs. "I'll admit after all we've been through, a few easy jobs would be nice. BUT. We will need to start thinking about looking for signs of Noxian after this."

Sotalia, Cideeda, and Dretphi agree. Sotalia lifts her head forward to face Sebastian. "So, what's the plan?"

Sebastian points out to three job papers and gestures for Dretphi and Cideeda to group them together in the middle of the table. "Well, these three seem simple and straight-forward. And, since this will be Bach's first mission, I think he should choose."

Bach startles back to the situation and feels the eyes upon him. He leans forward, reaches an arm out, and pulls the three jobs closer. He reads and recalls the debate beforehand with each one. After some deliberation and swapping the papers around, he settles on one and points it out to his brother. "I think I like this one best."

Sebastian's ethereal form drifts closer to the papers and nods at his brother's choice. "So, tell us, why that one?"

Bach sits up straight and thinks for a moment. "Umm... Well, it's a survey job. The place is an abandoned outpost for a long dead government. It was last reported inactive and all they want is a group to go out and make sure it still is inactive. If all goes well, we tour a piece of history, take some pictures, and go home without any trouble. And, if this one isn't too much trouble, it looks like they've got a few similar places that need surveying, too."

Sebastian ponders and gazes at everyone. The group shows some individual indicators of agreement. Sebastian crosses his arms and smiles. "Alright. We're doing it. We'll see how this one goes and pick the next one from there."

Aristespha reaches out of her seat over the table and takes the job. She keys some identification numbers into her tablet. "I'll send our bid in. I should get confirmation sometime tonight, and we'll set off tomorrow morning."

Sebastian glances over to Bach with a grin. "How does it feel to have chosen your first mission?"

Bach blinks, breathes deeply, and groans uncertain. "I don't know. Excited and worried? I don't know which is winning right now."

Sebastian nods and throws his hands to the sides. "That's par for the course. It means you're keeping in mind Murphy's Law."

Sotalia laughs and slyly grins at Bach. "Don't worry, if the mission is a bust we'll just blame you."

Cideeda perks a brow at Sotalia from across the table and tilts her head into a hand with a smug smile. "Oh, like no one has ever chosen a bad job before."

Sotalia averts her eyes away from the gathering momentarily and sneers briefly. "One time. Just one time. And no one will let me live it down."

A low grumble emanates from Dretphi and she stares out into that distance that only prominent memories allow. "Dried slime in my hair... WEEKS... Afterwards."

Bach rotates his head carefully to Sebastian and gives him an unsure look. "Do I want to ask?"

Sebastian stands tall, chuckles, and rubs the back of neck as his bravado fades. "That. Uh. That was not one of our finer missions. Admittedly, there was moments. Funny moments to remember, now."

Aristespha cringes and shakes her head side to side as memories surface back up. "We went to check out an unexplored ruin for a new county, since the ruin was in their land grant from the state. The only history we could find was that a very strange mage from the second era lived around there. Strange mage indeed..."

Sotalia groans and gestures with her hands to punctuate and elaborate points. "Turns out that mage had some crazy idea to find a commercial purpose for this breed of ooze he found on some trip. It was a herbivore slime that for all practical purposes was harmless."

Cideeda narrows her eyes, grimaces, and squirms a bit in her chair. "Harmless physically."

Bach moves his expectant gaze between everyone and hopes that someone reveals the critical piece of missing information. Dretphi catches Bach's attention. She closes her eyes and monotonously speaks. "They spit slime. A lot of slime. Everywhere."

Aristespha sinks back into her chair with a slight frown. "That was such a nice top and matching skirt."

Sotalia nods somberly to Aristespha. "I know. It really looked good on you."

Sebastian draws a breath in and grins sinister. “Destroying the spawning pool and lab was fun though.”

Sotalia giggles and flexes her hand in spell casting motions. “We were on our WORST behavior. Fried so many of those little shits. We totally wrecked that place.”

This surprises Bach and he takes in the displays of satisfaction and vindication. Aristespha breaks from her reminiscing. “Don’t worry. The slimes were an invasive species and despite filing it to the Grand Library, that mages notes read worse than a fetish fanfiction.”

Dretphi looks forward, unamused. “At first, we felt our actions were excessive. We felt justified after an hour with the garden hose. In the fall. Before we could go into the hotel to shower.”

Cideeda snickers, puts her head into her hands, and rocks back into her chair. “Oh gods! You should have seen the front desk clerk. That was a brave man to stand up to us and tell us we had to wash ourselves off before going any further.”

Aristespha smirks and sighs. “To be fair, they did just get new carpet in the rooms and hallways when we were there.”

Sotalia rolls her eyes and snorts. “And that was probably the best job that guy had going for him in that town. Can’t fault him for wanting to keep it.”

Sebastian floats away from table and addresses everyone. “Okay. Well, lets get everything filed and everyone get ready. We’ll head on our early tomorrow and see if we can find a good place for breakfast.”

The humvee stops in a parking space behind a large diner. The engine cuts off and doors open. Cideeda hops out, adjusts the tactical vest over her compression body suit, and places her keys in a pocket of her cargo shorts. Sotalia steps down, ruffles through her armored cloak, unfastens her belt pouches, and places them on her seat before closing the door. Aristespha confidently glides down to the ground from her seat. She brushes off her elaborate top and skirt combination, checks the feel of her boots, and cinches a strap to the scabbard of The Sword on her side. Bach steps out of the vehicle and scans the area. A gust of wind fans his duster and blows his long hair around. Bach grins as the fluttering duster dramatically reveals the rest of his armored attire, and for a brief moment Bach feels bad-ass. Sotalia rolls her eyes with a smile and walks towards the front door quietly snickering. Dretphi works her way through the aisle of the vehicle and outside. Her tall stature imposes even more with the dark gray soft armor plating layering her body. The group gathers and walks around to the front door.

Bach aims his voice toward Cideeda. “Easier parking in the back?”

Cideeda tilts her back. “That and it keeps us from tipping other people off easy.”

Sotalia pulls open the front door to the building. “We were having THE WORST luck with capturing bounties when we got the humvee. Then, it dawned on us that even an old model humvee was just suspicious enough.”

Cideeda steps through the doorway. “I always thought the old battered work van was scarier than an antique military vehicle. But, maybe it just fit the environment more.”

Aristespha strides in front of the group to the restaurant host and greets them with a calm smile. The host returns the smile and surveys the group. “Hello! Welcome to the Amaranth Dining House, we are currently serving breakfast! Seating for five?”

Aristespha nods and pats on the sword at her side. “Yes. A table please. Is there any issue with this?”

The host glances down to the sword and shakes his head. “None at all. We just ask that melee weapons are sheathed and locked, unload any large firearms and place them into those lockers over there, and no casting of powerful or dangerous spells on the premises.”

This statement pleases and slightly surprises the group. Bach relaxes his shoulders and tilts his head to the side. “That’s a pretty permissive policy.”

The host grabs a stack of menus, taps commands to a tablet on a podium, and gestures the party to follow him. “Here at the Amaranth Dining House, we like to accommodate adventurers, mercenaries, and specialists. We even have seating geared for such groups to make it easier to enjoy your dining experience!”

Bach chuckles to himself, as the group moves through the walkways between sections of tables. “Probably to keep from scaring the locals.”

The host turns his head back, quirks a brow, and smiles. “Actually, it’s quite the opposite. There’s a yearly speculative fiction convention at a resort an hour away that has annoying habit of bothering our adventurers. So, if we ask for registration cards, that’s because the convention is happening.”

The party enters an area with larger tables, significantly more room separating the tables, and reinforced steel chairs with extra cushioning. Two other groups sit and eat their meals. A dozen of specialist military personnel from the Greater Azure Alliance dine and converse between two tables. A group of three people wear the markings of Borderland Rangers. The host directs the party to a table, distributes menus in each of the placements, and bows. “Your server will be with you shortly, please, enjoy your experience.”

Everyone slides the sturdy chairs out and sits down to browse the menus. Dretphi quirks a curious eyebrow and twists her mouth. “Grath style steak and eggs. Interesting. I shall see how Grath is it.”

Sotalia points to a spot on the menu. "I saw that. I think I'm going to play it safe with a the pancakes, bacon, and eggs platter."

Bach places the menu down and nods. "Think I'll have to do the Grand Tour."

Sotalia picks her menu back up, flips to the specials, reads, and shakes her head with an eye roll. "Oh, he's definitely your brother, Sebastian."

A quiet ethereal voice resonates from Aristespha's side. "You and your food bigotry, Sotalia."

Sotalia tosses the menu back down and smirks. "I'm sorry, your home country has some of the weirdest combinations of food I've ever seen."

Bach stacks his menu on top of Sotalia's and shrugs. "Well, that's what you get when your country serves as the safe haven from a lot of conflicts in the last hundred years."

Cideeda licks her lips, agrees with herself, and passes the menu down to the forming pile. "Fruit, yogurt, and juice for me."

Bach looks at Cideeda perplexed. "That's all?"

Cideeda nods and points to herself. "I have a small, lithe figure to maintain and I don't have the convenience of being able to nuke calories like you spell casters. Plus, I really want to get a dozen of those honey buns to go."

A server arrives at the table with a tray of mugs and a pot of coffee. She sets out the mugs, and places the pot of coffee in the middle of table. Afterwards, she stands by ready to take orders, and sweeps her eyes to everyone. "Hello, I'm Cynthia and I'll be your server. Are you all ready to order? If you have any special dietary needs, please me know and I'm certain we can arrange a solution."

Aristespha finally closes her menu up, drops it upon the pile, and straightens her posture. "Yes. I have some particular dietary needs."

Cynthia snaps her attention to Aristespha and awaits. "Yes, ma'am. We offer many dishes without meat, eggs, or types of grains! I'll be happy to have a special order made for you."

Aristespha draws a wicked smirk and places her hands together in front of her. "Oh no. Nothing that complicated. I was just curious if after they cooked my orders of sausage and bacon, if they could fry my eggs in the grease. It'd really remind me of home, if they could do it. Also, the whole milk, please."

Cynthia blinks stunned, but quickly recovers with delighted smile. "Of course. I'm sure they can do that."

Cynthia rotates around the table and records everyone's order. She leaves towards the kitchen and pauses to talk to the manager currently watching a series of vans pull into the

parking lot. The “Next Adventurers of Nexus” logo prominently adorns each of the vans. Samantha exits out of one of the vans, closes the driver’s side door, and walks to the back. Gerald hops out, slams his door, and rushes to the back where Samantha is pulling out equipment. He picks up his camera and hoists it onto his shoulder. “Okay, so what’s the plan?”

Samantha flips through her tablet, furrows her brow, and takes a deep breath in. “Okay. The kids will get here in the next few minutes. We’ll run them through some video journal bits and get them in there. If you could, can you record some scenery bits?”

Gerald nods and takes a quick survey of the area. “I think I’ll get the sign and go from there. You going to confirm with the manager here?”

Samantha sighs and puts on her pocketed vest. “Yes. Get them prepared and make sure all the arrangements are still good.”

Dretphi chews on her steak. Bach takes a break from his meal and judges Dretphi’s reaction. “So, are the steak and eggs really Grath style?”

Dretphi swallows and puts on an indifferent face. “They are not bad. They do not have a proper stone slab grill. Still cooked decent.”

Aristespha devours her bacon and pauses at the stare from Sotalia. “What? It’s been months since I’ve been able eat some greasy breakfast food. Medical magic needs some serious fuel, anyway.”

Sotalia snickers, hold her hands up, and continues back to her plate. “Hey! However you want to justify it.”

Cideeda’s ear flicks repeatedly, until she perks it up towards a source. She pops her head up and focuses her eyes towards the entry lobby. She grimaces with a wince in her eye. “Oh gods dammit.”

Bach and Sotalia twist in their chairs to the front. Dretphi focuses her gaze and frowns. Aristespha lifts her head up and angrily bites a breakfast sausage in half. Sebastian echoes from the sword. “Umm... I’m obviously missing something here. Anyone want to fill me in? Inside sword vision is pretty limited.”

Bach turns back and settles in his seat. “The Next Pains of Nexus want breakfast, too.”

The leader of the Borderland Rangers eyes steely over to the entry point. He growls low and returns to his meal, shaking his head. “If you see our server, flag him down, Heccaeh.”

The Fvalian man nods, takes moment to scan area, and then resumes eating. Sebastian senses tension immediately near him. “Dear, just enjoy your meal, and we’ll leave before they get too stupid.”

Aristespha maintains a low grumble in between bites. Dretphi glances over to Aristespha with an amused tight smile. Cideeda continues eating, but gives a disdainful glare at Deedri. Bach returns attentions to his plate, but stares confused while his fork hovers over an empty spot. Sotalia quickly draws in the piece of bacon between her lips into her mouth. She straightens up and aims the fork back to her own plate.

A flurry of activity erupts a few tables down and recording crew seek positions near but out of the intended shot. The Next Adventurers of Nexus stride prominently to their table. The face of the group, Chad Bosch, leads the pack and stops in front of the Greater Azure Alliance specialists. “It’s always good to check the local places to see what other adventurers and heroes are in town. Like our men and women in uniform.”

The specialists cheer roughly together in a halfhearted display. Chad continues down the path. With a bright smile, he stops beside Sotalia and Aristespha at the end of the table. “Why hello fellow-”

Chad examines the group quickly. He quirks a brow and twists the corner of his mouth. “Diverse adventurers. What brings all of you to this fair town?”

Aristespha takes a breath in, molds her posture to establish an air of propriety and superiority. “Simple tasks and chores, and other bores to fine adventurers like yourselves. Hopefully, we will be moving on to other quests soon enough.”

Sotalia sizes Tassilda up. Tassilda returns the favor and smugly judges Sotalia with a long glare. Dretphi assumes a stoic silence and adverts her eyes away from Trakkenthin. Deedri happily and excitedly waves to Cideeda, the bell around her neck ringing with the motion. Cideeda weakly waves back and her forced smile barely hangs on. Bach continues to eat slowly and attempts to not draw any specific attention. Chad nods and his eyes analyze each member, eventually pausing at Bach. “My knowledge of adventuring allows me to figure out everyone... Except you.”

Bach carefully turns his head to meet the strange gaze of Chad. He can’t quite isolate it, but something unnerves him about this particular look from Chad. “Um... Intern. Just learning the ropes. Picking up my degree where I left off.”

Chad’s expression flashes back his iconic, non-threatening smile. “Ah! It’s good for a group to take on someone and help them on their journey. It’s was good to meet all of you, but we must be off.”

The Next Adventurers move to the final table before their own. The Borderland Rangers manage to get their ticket from the server and stand up. The leader just manages to get his wide brimmed, pinched-front hat on, when he pivots towards the aisle to meet Chad. Chad

extends a hand to shake. "I'm Chad Bosch, Leader of the Flames of the Phoenix adventuring group. Pleasure to make your acquaintance, sir!"

The Borderland Ranger leader squares his shoulders as muffled sounds of cybernetics actuate. He reaches with his right hand into his jacket pocket and hands a roll of cash and the bill to Heccaeh. "You two go pay up and wait in the truck. I'll be out soon."

Heccaeh and another woman ranger push their chairs and weave through the crowd of adventurers and crew. The ranger leader fixes his cold, steely eyes directly at Chad's. He crosses his arms and taps upon his right arm with a cybernetic left hand. "Captain Hays of the Borderland Rangers. Acquaintance made. Any business with me you need to discuss?"

Chad bolsters his bravado and attempts a similar glare to Captain Hays. "Maybe. Any news?"

A dry corner smile cracks across Hay's mouth and he bows his head slightly to shadow his face. "Hauled what was left of some group of would be adventurers after a geist had its way with them. You all look real similar to them."

Moments of harsh silence weigh between Hays and Chad. Chad finds it difficult to not tense his muscles, as his body fights to squirm. Captain Hays's smiles grows to a thin grin across his scarred cheeks, nearly touching both gray sideburns. "Do us all a favor, keep out of the borderlands for... a while."

Chad nods slowly and mentally shoves the iconic smile back onto his face to finish up the conversation. "I'll take that as advice, sir. You have a nice day."

The adventurers shuffle over to their table and the camera crew surrounds them. Captain Hays shakes his head at the spectacle and pivots in the aisle. When his view changes, he recognizes Aristespha, Dretphi, Cideeda, and Sotalia. He halts next to the party's table. "Excuse me. Am I safe to assume you all are who I think you all are?"

Aristespha perks up, studies Captain Hays, and gently nods. Dretphi, Cideeda, and Sotalia follow suit. Bach watches and remains still. Captain Hays reaches into another pocket on his jacket and pulls out a collection of business cards. "I was told by my commander that if I were to encounter certain persons, I was to give them my contact information. And, I was also to give them assurance that they would have assistance in their quest to eliminate a general pain in everyone's ass when requested."

Captain Hays visits each member around the table, extends a hand to shake, and gives them a business card. When Hays reaches Bach, he pauses a moment, tilts his head, and engages his piercing gaze. "You look... similar."

Bach shrugs nervously trying to keep up the encounter's motif. "Umm... I'm the brother trying to get back into the swing of things. And eventually, take on the general pain in the ass."

Captain Hays holds his hand out and Bach shakes his hand. Hays flips the last card out and places it in Bach's hand. "I can appreciate that. Good luck and if you all need to head into the borderlands, let me know. I'll get you all a guided tour."

Captain Hays gives a final tip of the hat and walks to the front exit, with a unique sound of his boots contacting the floor and cybernetics actuating. Bach rotates the card in his hand and looks at it closely. "Neat. At least somebody is on our side."

Chad narrows his eyes and frigidly stares over his menu, his characteristic smile nowhere to be found.

The humvee parks outside a large perimeter fence. Attached at regular intervals, large signs warn readers in multiple languages. The front passenger's door opens and Sotalia hops out. "That woman is such an Emin Purist. The way she looked at me! She was trying to figure out whether she should call me a half-breed or a mutt."

The rear passenger door swings, and Bach steps out onto the dirt with intermixed chunks of pavement. He scratches the back of his head at Sotalia. "I didn't get that from her. It seemed like two mages sizing each other up to me."

Sotalia crosses her arms and brushes back the red hair in her face to reveal a smug grin. "Ha! That little wannabe has nothing on me."

Cideeda gets out of the driver's seat and groans while securing her vest and backpack. "Gods. I just hope they didn't record me waving to that bitch and use it."

Aristespha exits the vehicle. She stands rigid and proper. Sebastian coasts in front of her. "Hey. It's okay. We're at the job. We're away from them."

Aristespha stretches her shoulders and takes in a deep breath with a grimace. "I'll be fine, Sebastian. I just wanted to have a nice start to the day."

Sebastian smiles and gazes into Aristespha's eyes. "You handled it well. And, we got a good contact out of it. Still a net gain. So... Let's focus on this mission."

Aristespha sighs and eventually cracks a reserved smile with a loving look to Sebastian. "Okay. Let me get the access code into the perimeter fence and let's see the entrance to this place."

Sounds of shuffling and equipment moving emanate from the back of the humvee. Dretphi squeezes out, stands, and adjusts the hard plating over her armor. She takes hold of a bullpup sub-machine gun and guides the carrying strap over her shoulder.

The group congregates at the perimeter gate. Aristespha reaches over her shoulder into her small backpack and retrieves another of her tablets. She reads a few lines of text on the

screen and presses buttons on a keypad lock. The status light turns green, a tone rings out, and the gate lock disengages. With a moderate push, the gate drifts open. The party walks to the entrance of the old outpost. Another series of warning signs decorate the walls near the entrance. Aristespha holds the tablet up to the group. "This was the last picture taken of the entrance."

Everyone takes a long look at the picture on the tablet, often alternating to glance and squint at the entrance. After a few minutes, no one can find anything obviously different. Sebastian confidently postures and puts on daring grin. "Good sign so far. This is looking to be a straight forward-"

Low, barely audible noises of utility systems powering up fill the air around the entrance. Dim lights switch on down the hallway after the entrance, and eventually even an exterior lamp flickers to life. Sebastian's posture wilts away to holding his arms out to the side in discouragement. He looks over his shoulder to Aristespha. "This is NOT in the description of how it was, right?"

Aristespha shakes her head. The group checks, primes, and/or readies their weapons and equipment. Sebastian hovers in front of the group. "Alright. I'll scout five to ten meters ahead to check for anything obvious. Dretphi and Cideeda mind the front. Aristespha and Sotalia be ready with magic and range. Bach, support where you can and keep an eye on the back to make sure whatever doesn't try to pull a cheap one us. Let's do this!"

Cideeda rubs her temples in frustration and growls out. "What is going on here?!"

Sebastian drifts back down the dimly lit, concrete hallway to the group, examining spots as he flies along. "Nothing. The lights are on, but... that's about it. I checked behind the doors and there's a few defense big droids that might be functional. I think there was a room with stasis pods for cyborgs or something crazy. But, it doesn't look like anything has moved in decades."

Cideeda grits her teeth and her ears lower. "This is not right. I've found detection system after detection system not even powered up. I bet the cameras aren't even capturing."

Bach glances up and sees a dome object on the ceiling down the next stretch of hallway. He points it out to Cideeda. She nods, inspects from afar, and trains her ears at the device. She reaches into a pocket, draws out a green laser pointer, and aims a dot right at the camera. "Yes. That definitely looks like one of them. But, normally, I would hear servo motors adjusting or even high pitch electrical whines from some of the components."

Bach's eyes glow a faint blue and he holds his hand out. A small glowing orb immediately forms in the palm of his hand. With a flick of the wrist, he sends the glowing orb drifting down the hallway. Cideeda carefully watches and listens to the camera. She shakes her head and contorts her mouth. "Nothing. It's not even motion tracking."

Aristespha closes her glowing violet eyes, rubs her eyelids. She opens them back up, no longer glowing. "I'm not detecting any kind of magical activity here."

Sotalia spins in place and scans the immediate area, unamused. "I can confirm. Nothing."

She bends over, picks up a small toothpick sized stick on the floor, and holds it for everyone to see. With little concentration from her, the toothpick glows. "The only time I've seen any of these magical detector sticks activate is when I trigger them."

Dretphi furrows her brow, kneels down to the floor, and drags a finger along it. Her finger wipes away countless years of dust to reveal the contrast between the dust and floor. "I have not seen any area disturbed. No signs of activity."

Sebastian crosses his arms and stares off in thought. "Dear, does the info you got have a map showing where the command center is?"

Aristespha draws out her tablet and flips through documents until she settles upon one. After a minute, she directs Sebastian down a hallway. "Yes. And it should be on this floor. That way."

Sebastian narrows his eyes down the hallway and continues the stare with a growing determination. "Anyone against going straight to the command center and figuring out what the hell is going on here?"

No one voices an objection. Sebastian nods and floats down the hallway.

Cideeda scrutinizes the massive security door and cringes as she finds more details in her study. "This going to be rough to open. They basically built this thing to only be serviceable from the other side. And, it doesn't look like the door is getting any power. I'm also afraid to do any kind of override through the access panel on this door. There may be a separate alarm that I don't want to trigger."

Sebastian's ethereal form passes through the door and he wears concern on his face. "The panel looks dead on the other side, too. But, the thing feels like a solid chunk of steel. Nothing hollow. There's some activity going on the computers and electronics in the command center."

Cideeda paces around the hallway between everyone and mutters to herself. "That means there's nothing inside the door. It's a solid chunk. We might be able to cut it, but this thick of door..."

An epiphany sparks in Dretphi and she aims her head at Bach. She steps besides Bach and taps him on the shoulder. "You can precisely melt the steel into a hole. Can you precisely melt the steel out of a hole?"

Bach's face drifts off in thought and returns with refreshing intrigue. "I... I think I can. I can melt a pinpoint column through the steel and extract the molten steel. That should effectively cut, correct?"

Dretphi shifts her hand from Bach's shoulder to the middle of his back and gives him a light push, directing him towards Cideeda. Bach picks up on the hint, steps over, and kneels next Cideeda as she continues to examine the door. This attracts the attention of Sotalia and Aristespha. Bach taps door with a knuckle. "Okay. Where do want to cut?"

Cideeda pulls a toothy grin, reaches into a pocket on her vest for a white marker, and sketches out a rough outline. "This should be big enough for everyone to fit through without too much trouble and without getting too crazy."

Sebastian smiles with pride. "Okay. I'll keep a watch in here to see if any alarms go off."

Bach situates himself, braces a hand on the door frame, and hovers the other hand a few centimeters away from the door over the sketch line. His eyes glow blue and a pinpoint spot on the door brightens from a dull red to a brilliant white in a matter of seconds. A thin stream of cooling steel specks flow from glowing spot and fall to the ground. The glowing spot creeps along and leaves a growing thin ribbon of space behind it. A minute later, the spot now crawls a few centimeters from its original start. Bach concentrates and determination boils inside him. He opens his hand up wide and stretches his fingers out. Transparent outlines of objects materialize between the door and his hand. Details fill in the objects. They grow more mechanical, technological in nature, traces and pathways with genuine purpose etch on the ethereal objects. The cutting speed doubles from one moment to the next. Another layer of these magical objects appear, interwoven into the previous. With each addition, Bach's eyes glow brighter and previously unseen magical flows illuminate around and inside his arm. The layers of magical machinery slice the original task to mere minutes.

Bach hovers his hand over the original start point and disseminates the magic back into himself. His eyes dim and the magical flow fades away. He bows his head down, wipes the sweat from his brow, and breathes deeply. When he raises his head back up, he feels the immediate presence of everyone near him. Sotalia and Aristespha are each on a side attentively watching over his shoulder. Cideeda and Dretphi kneel close to the door. And Sebastian hovers above watching. Bach blinks and pans his head up to his brother. "Weren't you suppose to be watching the inside?"

Attention briefly shifts to Sebastian and he shrugs. "Hey, if the first five minutes of this didn't trigger anything, I figured the last weren't either."

Bach leans forward to put his feet underneath. He attempts to stand up, feels light-headed, and partially doubles over. Both Sotalia and Aristespha take an arm to support Bach. Sotalia pats Bach's shoulder. "Okay, enough showing off today. I'll take care of the rest."

Aristespha leads Bach away from the door and guides him down on the floor against a wall. She drops to a knee and performs a simple check over on Bach. Bach catches her serious glare and sighs. "I did something you are going to be questioning me about later."

Aristespha calmly nods and the serious frown softens. “Yes. But, your control and restraint lessens many of my concerns. Just don’t forget those. And pace yourself, please.”

Sotalia plants her feet back from the door. She shifts her stance, holds her arms out. Sotalia calls out incantations, her arms and hands move with regiment and calculation. Symbols beam brightly on arms, a golden light shines from her eyes, and flows of magic course through the air to her hands. With a final contact of both hands together, she directs a beam of energy to the section of door. Energy envelops the massive chunk and with a tug of the string of energy, the steel slides noisily out of the door. Sotalia presents an air of confidence and glee when the hundred millimeter thick, meter square of steel floats free. With a careful grace, she strides out of the way of the cut steel plate, rotates, and places it down on the ground with a thud. She finishes with a flourish to everyone towards the opening. “Let the tour begin.”

The command center seems intact enough. The ceiling remains where it should. The floor exists, but one large growing crack towards a corner raises some concerns. Dretphi sweeps the area with a spot lamp, keeping a close hand on her sub-machine gun. Sotalia searches some desk drawers near the entry. Cideeda signals Aristespha to an active terminal that outputs line after line of text. Aristespha traces each line, recognition fills her face. “I don’t remember the exact dialect. But, I get the rough idea. It looks like status messages and warnings about environment controls.”

Bach notices a dim glow and wipes dust off a screen. “Got a live one here, too.”

Aristespha rushes over and reads the text, squinting. “Communications control. It received a status update from another remote site a week ago. And a full alert from another site nearby a few minutes ago? Error... Security offline?”

Dretphi stomps a foot down to check the floor in front of her and then shines the spot light down a large hole. Cideeda goes to her side and examines the area. “Large power cables in the ceiling with data lines running down to- There’s the security system. Looks a geological shift took the security control system and the main power.”

Cideeda and Bach feel for their aetherphones. Cideeda whips hers out and widens her eyes. “There’s an emergency radio broadcast, but-?”

Bach traces the signal strength and holds his phone next to communications line conduit. “It’s weak, but I guess the source is near where these lines end up.”

Cideeda quickly confirms with her aetherphone and toggles the speaker output.

“To anyone- ... Mission to Outpost- ... Base security system came online. Part of camera crew for Next Adventurers of... Trapped in Command center. SEND HELP!”

Everyone cringes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mordoran grins smugly and snorts. “Assholes.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cideeda, Dretphi, and Bach sit on the ground around the cyber-commando that Dretphi put her machete through. It lays inside the barracks near the door with power core missing.

Bach rests his head back on the wall and whistles. "These are some serious cyborgs. I'm glad you had that machete, otherwise we'd probably still be fighting it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sebastian hovers in the middle his group and the crew with a serious expression of concern. "I checked most the way back. And everywhere we ran into the cyber-zombies, we have

cyber-commandos waiting for us. What's worse is that they are able to coordinate with each other. After the first few shot at me, the rest stopped trying."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cideeda takes her hand off the handle of her shotgun and hits a sequence of buttons. The large doors open and Bach releases the bomb. It rockets off through the door and jets down

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

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

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

Dretphi and Cideeda charge around the corner. There's a loud crackle of energy before the sound of another large mass hitting a wall. Another shotgun blast resonates and metal strikes against something soft. Sebastian stays in the middle of the intersection, directs, and checks everyone as they run past. Sotalia fires a bolt of lightning behind her and resumes running. Bach sends a volley of plasma bolts from his pistol to cover Sotalia and keep the more alert cyborgs from approaching closer. Sotalia sets up for another casting, waits for Bach to run past, and releases another arc of electricity down the hall. Sebastian joins up and flies next to Sotalia and Bach. "Save the firepower and run! We may need it outside!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The sound of Howard scratching his chin stubble resonates through the speaker. “Keep the crew checking the spy cameras in their rooms at that roach motel. With those living conditions and today’s humiliation, I’m pretty sure they are in THE best moods. I want you to arrange some video journal segments and pry as hard as you can into how they feel about the other group. I’ve got a few informants to call up. I wonder where Sebastian and crew are staying... I wonder what’s around there...”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She glances at the open sliding glass door and her tone lowers. “And she’s developed quite the competitive streak and temperament to match, too.”

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

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

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

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

Sotalia, Aristespha, and Bach face a series of stone targets in an open field. Sotalia stretches her arms out and arches her back. She plants her feet down, raises an upright palm into the air next to her, and closes her eyes to concentrate. A few seconds later, the runes on her arm illuminate, and a flaming ball of orange and yellow hovers a few centimeters above her palm. Sotalia confidently grins with a wily glint in her eyes when she glances back at Bach and Aristespha. “A fire bolt, direct cast, with runic optimization. Now show me your best version, Bach.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sotalia holds her hand out, concentrates, and quickly summons another fire bolt. She maintains a wary watch of Bach. He hovers his hand next the side of the fire bolt, ponders a

moment, and with a blue glow in eyes plucks the fire bolt off Sotalia's hand. He levitates the fire bolt between both his hands and hums while he analyzes it. Sotalia's jaw drops as she opens and closes her now empty hand. "The hell is this?!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bach bites his lip and warily nods. “Yes. When I was abducted and then released to my room here, I called my landlord to sell or keep whatever was left to pay this last month’s rent. It

wasn't bad dishware. Non-stick. Microwave safe. Looked pretty. Hate to say it, but I'm pretty sure my old landlord probably has already rented the place out again. Knowing her, she's probably advertised it as furnished now to scam a higher rent."

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

Aristespha sighs heavily, relaxes her posture, and halts in front of the sliding glass door. A thought crosses her mind and a recognition of opportunity is in her eyes. She lifts her head to face Bach with an unamused, but faintly forgiving expression. "I actually have many magical materials I've designed for medical use. I can create small batches, but they are prototypes. You help me create them, I'll start teaching you medical magic. You'll need to know it anyway to properly manufacture the materials."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bach picks up a sub-machine gun round on the table and picks up a shotgun shell in the other hand. “I might be able to do something the with these rounds. Your sub-machine gun is gas-operated, so I’ll have to work to emulate that, else it’ll stop after one shot. Shotgun shells I

can definitely work with. But, depending on what you want, we may need to treat the barrel with something.”

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

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

Flows of magical energy creep along his arm up onto and into the plasma pistol. Bach opens his bright blue eyes and trains them on the pistol. The pistol partially disassembles in specific places. For each part that moves, new components magically form and bind themselves to existing pieces. The top lifts up, the sides of the barrel housing expands outwards, and the muzzle shifts forward a few centimeters. The gaps between the outer casing fill with magical plating supporting the new and existing pieces. It’s a slow, methodical process, but within minutes the plasma pistol is now something a bit more powerful looking. A confident, roguish smile cracks from the corner of Bach’s mouth.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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 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. "Yes, 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 smiles 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 out 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 browns 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 settles back 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 failing 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 smile 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 demonstrating his 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 unto 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 upright, 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 a 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 what 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 normally 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 he 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 pulls back some doors below the counter top and retrieves multiple bottles of alcoholic beverages. She straightens up and wryly smiles 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 can mix a few good ones 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 are 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.”

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?”

Dretpi 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. Underneath the sun glasses, her eyes dart between the everyone's gazes 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 spirit 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 thinks a moment and pulls an evil grin across her face. "I don't know. Maybe we need to hear it again?"

Dretphi 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."

Dretphi 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 a 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, 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 steps 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 one 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!"

Drephi 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 an eye brow as the magic bolt starts to warp and change. His eyes glow with blue and mischievous intent. "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 and a branch drops from a tree. Someone hastily slides down the 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 gets 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 skirt, and holds position

behind her. The girl shrieks from surprise as she feels her skirt ruffle and grabs the it 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 winces, 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 open 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 you 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 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 atherphone 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 the 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 display fuels smiles of accomplishment on the faces of everyone else.

A bundle of blankets twists and turns on the couch. After a few more shifts, a blanket uncovers a mass of golden hair. A hand reaches out from underneath and pushes the hair back to reveal Valavera's sleep-dazed face. She works the drowsiness out of her eyes and carefully examines the living the room. The sunlight coming roughly overhead through the sliding glass door shows it is well past morning. Valavera lifts herself up to a seat on the couch and scans the room more intently. She abruptly stops her head when she catches sight of Aristespha in the kitchen putting a plate of breakfast food in the microwave. Aristespha presses a time into the microwave and taps the start button. "Good afternoon, sleep-deprived one."

Valavera snaps her head free to look out the sliding glass door and squints to comprehend the scene outside. She bites her lip in nervous anticipation and her voice shakes. "I- I didn't mean to sleep in so late. I just was so tired and well... I..."

Aristespha walks plainly into the living room, drops a mug of tea off on the table in between some papers, and stands in front of Valavera. "You were busy with your thoughts for most of the night. I heard."

Valavera sheepishly hangs her head low and sighs remorsefully. She sinks into a back cushion of the couch and continues to avert her eyes from Aristespha. Aristespha's expression softens, she gestures to Valavera. "Stand up."

Valavera pulls herself up off the couch and stands at attention to Aristespha. Aristespha looks at Valavera directly in the eyes with a soft smile and holds her arms out to the side. Valavera cringes with tears forming in her eyes and embraces Aristespha. She buries her face in Aristespha's shoulder and sniffles. "I'm so- sorry. I just got so- caught up in trying to make it work that- I didn't think about whether it could work... Or, even if I wanted it- to work."

Aristespha wraps her arms around Valavera and holds her motherly with light pats on the back. "It's okay. You have kicked yourself enough for now. There will be other times for that when you are older, and you need to save some for your mother in the near future. I'm just really happy we found you first. And, there's no harm done."

Valavera lifts her head up, takes a deep breath, and releases it with a tear choked shudder. "What did my mother tell you? She said she'd work out something with you. But, she didn't say anything more to me... Well, about THAT, at least."

Aristespha continues to rub Valavera gently on the back to soothe the child. "We talked, caught up, and hatched a plan. Your uncle Becker will pick you up later tonight. It works out. He just got done trading a few towns over and wants to acquire a few things to trade along the way back. And, we happen to have a variety of items we've collected that need to be sold to someone like him."

Valavera pulls herself back from Aristespha and wipes some of the tears from her eyes with a smile. "I haven't seen Uncle Becker in a year! I can't believe my mother would call upon him."

Aristespha shakes her head and sighs with grin. "Well, despite how far he stays away from the politics, he's the best bullshit artist I've ever known. He'll be able to weave a tale so thick no one is going to question where you've been for the last month or two."

Valavera rolls her eyes and smiles firmly. "After the first half hour, no one will want to ask anymore."

Aristespha tilts her head towards the dining table. "Take a seat. Let's catch up. I saved some breakfast for you."

Valavera nods and dries out the few remaining tears with the worn T-shirt on her. "That sounds good."

She takes a moment to search around and listen carefully with her long ears. "Where is everyone else?"

Aristespha pauses mid-way to the kitchen and points outside. "Outside. It's nice a day and they're getting ready for the mission tomorrow. They didn't want to wake you with the noise. They even have held off test firing their guns. So, I guess they are still checking armor and other gear."

Aristespha examines Valavera closely, looks her up and down, and smiles with a plotting confidence. "Speaking of which, we need to get some better clothing than that. I should have a few things that will fit you. And to fit with your cover story of self-discovery, we've got a plenty of old extra adventuring gear you can have your pick of."

Valavera rushes up and excitedly hugs Aristespha. "Thank you, so much!"

Aristespha pats Valavera on the back and then discreetly drags a tear off her face. "Consider it making it up to you for being so scarce for these past few years."

Valavera snuffles and squeezes Aristespha with a smile. "You saved me from a HUGE mistake and... You've been chasing and fighting Dark Lord Noxian... You were here when I needed you and that's all I care about."

Aristespha pulls in Valavera tight. The two hold each other for a minute. Valavera finally loosens her arms, pulls away, quirks a brow, and directs her eyes to Aristespha. "I really do appreciate everything. But, I have to ask... Was the shower with cold water really necessary?"

Aristespha perks a brow to match Valavera's. "If I told you another one of those experiences would be awaiting you if you EVER attempted a stunt like this again, would you think very carefully about committing another such stunt?"

Valavera slowly nods with wide eyes. "Yes."

Aristespha dons an evil smile. "Then, it was absolutely necessary."

Bach spins his helmet around and checks various parts of it. He places it down on top of the big wooden picnic table that he sits at. Sotalia watches across the table from Bach, with her head on top of her crossed arms on the table top. She looks at Bach and sighs with boredom in her face. She reaches her hand out and picks at a loose bit of wood on a tabletop plank with a finger nail. "So, what are you doing? The helmet looks fine to me. We should practice spells."

Bach scratches the back of his head and shrugs. "I'm going to try my hand at enchanting it. If I'm going to do anything with anyone's equipment, I should probably test it out on my own first."

Sotalia furrows brow and focuses her eyes on Bach with a curious expression on her face. "Wait, didn't you say that you enchanted the helmet for Sebastian?"

Bach blinks a few times, flips through recent memory, and then browses years past. A moment of realization dawns on him and he twists the corner of his mouth. "Well, I've never personally enchanted anything. I used a store bought kit on this helmet. So, unless you consider Elander's Econo Enchanting actual enchanting?"

Sotalia sneers, lifts her head up, and stretches back on the wooden bench seat. "Oh! Oh no. Not in a million years. You really used Elander Econo Enchanting?"

Bach rolls his eyes and briefly grits his teeth with a slight twist of the head. "Well... What else do you turn to when you are a nearly broke college student? And, it's actually held out decently enough."

Sotalia pokes the helmet and shakes her head in mild surprise. "Can't believe Elander's anything blocked the shots thrown at this."

Sotalia stops after a few pokes and then places her hand firmly on the helmet. She searches her mind and then turns her attentions to the helmet. "I'll be damned. That old spell is still there! How is that even possible? Those slow burner spells usually run out after a few years, at best."

A proud grin forms on Bach's face and he puffs up. "Well, I used to have some serious power to throw around. I remember dumping A LOT of energy into that kit. WAY MORE than they'd ever recommend."

Sotalia smiles slyly and props her head up with a hand. “Oh, really? You had power? How much?”

Bach looks up from the helmet and his eyes dart around the question. “Ah, um. A lot? I used to be able to cast a few good spells. Nothing too crazy.”

Sotalia narrows her eyes and maintains her smile. “How many cells were you rated at?”

Bach takes the helmet in hand, redirects all his attention and focus to it, and gestures dismissively at Sotalia. “It’s been so long, I’ve forgotten the exact number. I mean, it’s been over five years since I’ve even thought about it. And anyway, it really doesn’t matter what my numbers were at this point. I mean, do you remember your-”

Sotalia stares at Bach and concentrates on every move and sound he makes. “Eighty six, sixty nine. Slight bias towards elemental magic. First year of school.”

A blank expression clears out Bach’s face of anything previous. He feels Sotalia’s glare bearing down on him and desperately thinks of a plan to go with. He awkwardly grins and begins to raise his head up to meet her scrutinizing eyes.

An ethereal voice echoes out near Sotalia. “Ha! I can’t believe you forgot your score, Bach! After the scene you made at High Alton University’s Grading Chamber?”

Sotalia sprouts an ear-to-ear grin and spins her head to Sebastian. “Really? Tell me ALL about it.”

Sebastian floats down onto the picnic table top and recounts the tale. “Oh, man! I mean most people just throw a bunch of spells until they can’t anymore. But, we both got this idea of just venting magical energy out like characters from this animated show we were really into. So, Bach goes first. And wow! He goes all out and blasts energy throughout that huge chamber, I remember some of it leaking out the door seals. The graduate assistant freaks the fuck out and nearly yanks the emergency energy siphon and purge lever. They were SO pissed at us. But, they counted Bach’s score anyway, since they didn’t want to rescore him again... And, he did pass out.”

Sotalia’s eyes develop an eager glint and she dons her most charming posture and voice. “So, do YOU remember his score, Sebastian?”

Sebastian starts to open his mouth and notices Bach moving around erratically just out of Sotalia’s view. Sebastian’s eyes briefly witness Bach as he makes cutting motions with his hand across his neck and mouths out the words, “Don’t tell her.”

Sebastian smiles with confidence and speaks with bravado. “Why, of course! It is...”

He drifts off mid sentence, drops his head down in thought, and scratches his chin. He attempts to say something a few more times and then places his hands to his sides in frustration. “Well, shit. I’ve forgotten, too. It’s been awhile.”

Sotalia drops her head back onto her folded arms with a huff and groans in aggravation. “I can’t believe you two. Forgetting important things like this!”

Bach shrugs with a smile of relief at Sotalia and resumes working on the helmet. “It doesn’t matter. I’d probably be lucky to break a thousand these days. Hell, I haven’t been able to get all the spells I used to be able to cast working with how I have to do magic these days.”

Sotalia slowly turns her head towards Bach gives him an inquisitive gaze. “Which spells?”

Bach rubs his hands together before placing them around the sides of his helmet. “Well, a number of small ones that I just haven’t been focusing on. And well, the D-Ball spell.”

Sebastian frowns slightly and crosses his arms. “Aww, man. No D-Ball still?”

Bach shakes his head and continues to keep his eyes on the helmet as magic energy forms onto it. “Nope. Sorry. I still haven’t figured out how to optimize it enough to even get past the start-up phase. I think I could do everything else, but that initial setup is complex and power hungry.”

Sotalia moves her head back and forth between Sebastian and Bach, and holds both her hands up as a point of attention. “Okay, what’s the D-Ball spell you two keep talking about?”

As a coating of magical energy rests upon the helmet and solidifies, Bach takes moment to speak. “It’s a ball form of the disintegration beam spell. Something I managed to hack together third year and was banned from ever using on any official tests.”

Sebastian rolls his eyes and chuckles while shaking his head. “Ha! One of the many Warwick rules instituted because of us. That spell would have made those team assessment exams so much easier.”

Sotalia’s eyes slam wide open and her mouth hangs open in astonishment at the concept. Her devious grin reemerges in full force and she slyly watches Bach with a certain charm to her voice. “So, that means you know how to cast the spell like you used to, correct?”

The magical energy sinks into the material of the helmet and disappears. A few faint glimmers of light flicker and fade as Bach tweaks the magical energies involved. “Yes, of course. I used to direct cast it often enough to-”

His thought process hits the emergency stop and words cease to come from his mouth. He slowly lifts his head up from staring at the helmet and turns to meet the winning smile of Sotalia. She happily stands up from the picnic table and steps over the bench seat. She places her hands at her sides and tilts her hips with smug sense of victory. “Well, looks like I

have a spell to look forward learning from you. Don't forget it any time soon. Hopefully, we'll get back to training soon."

She pivots and strides off to house with an air of accomplishment radiating out. Sebastian returns from watching her and looks at Bach. "Sorry, bro. That was all your doing. I couldn't spare you there."

Bach sighs deeply and shakes his head. "Bah. It's okay. I'd rather her be obsessed with learning a spell than knowing my old magic statistics. She's already competitive enough, I don't need her to have numbers to justify it."

Sebastian circles a finger over the helmet with a smile. "So how's the old helmet coming along?"

The remaining bits of energy visibly fade and only the helmet itself remains visible. Bach picks up the helmet and stands up from the table. "Well, I meshed in a mix of some of the magical materials I've been working on and figured out some kind of energy storage system with an ambient energy recharging mechanism and- You stop listening after magical materials didn't you?"

Sebastian floats to stand next to the picnic table and confesses with a tinge of embarrassment. "Well, yes. You know I try to keep up, bro. But, I studied swords, armor, and psychology."

Bach draws his lips to a corner of his mouth and raises a brow to his brother. "You know, I always wondered why you went with psychology... But, I think I understand now. The strangest things that turn out to be useful, you know?"

Sebastian nods with a firm slight smile at Bach. "Oh. You don't know the half of it. I didn't realize how much I'd put those psychology classes to use."

He eyes the helmet and points at again. "So, how are you going to test that enchant? You going to shoot stuff at the helmet?"

Bach hoists up the helmet and shakes his head to Sebastian. "No. I kind of like this helmet and I'm not THAT confident about my abilities. The firing range that Cideeda and Dretphi set up over in the yard off to the side of house has a bunch of steel plates. Figured I could enchant those the same way I did this."

Sebastian rubs his chin and gives a nod of approval. "Sounds like a plan. If nothing else, maybe the metal plates will last a bit longer."

Bach walks up from the end of the field next to Cideeda and Sebastian. "Well, got the same type of enchantment on that first metal plate. So, um. Fire away?"

Cideeda squints down the improvised firing range and releases the locks on the laser pistol holsters on each hip. She draws a laser pistol out from a holster, activates the power switch, disengages the safety, and takes aim at the metal plate. The sights line up and she slips a finger in front of the trigger. With a slow squeeze, the trigger clicks, and a beam of light hits the surface of the metal plate. The beam diffuses off a golden, transparent magical barrier right before the surface of the metal plate. The laser pistol cuts the beam off and the barrier visibly fades away after a few seconds. Cideeda nods and glances at Bach out of the corner of her eye. "Not bad. Not bad at all."

A sense of pride wells up in Bach and a confident smile forms on his face. "Well. It's an initial draft, but it is similar to the barriers I put up when we encountered the cyber-"

Cideeda flashes a wicked grin and fast draws the other laser pistol from the other holster. "Let's see if it can handle two beams."

Both triggers engage and two rays of blue erupt from the ends of the laser pistols. Both accurately contact the barrier and splash their energy upon the area. Smaller threads of light reflect off the surface of the barrier as it becomes more opaque. Both laser pistols discharge the last bits of energy for the shots and shut off the emitters. Bach's eyes slowly guide the rest of his head to face Cideeda's expression of dark glee. She flits both her eyebrows at Bach and shines a toothy grin. "I approve. So far that is. We'll have to see what Dretphi brings out."

Sebastian hovers behind the two and glances around the corner of the house, biting his lip in a wary anticipation. "Well, she seemed really happy when you told her to hit it hard. I wonder what she's-"

Sebastian trails off mid sentence and his eyes stare off into the distance while the rest of his mind addresses an unexpected epiphany. He blinks and cranes his head towards Cideeda. "She just got that scope sighted on her rifle, didn't she?"

Cideeda winks at Sebastian with a smug smile. "Might as well throw a real test at it."

Bach catches the exchange between the two and quickly figures what rifle they are referring to, with his confidence withering. "Oh. OH-"

A loud, heavy mechanical sound echoes into the area as the large rifle bolt disengages. Dretphi strides around the with a hint of a skip in each step. She hoists the anti-material rifle up and pointing into the air with one arm. She reaches into a satchel hanging at her side, removes her hand, and playfully twirls a large rifle round in her fingers. Bach examines the long barrel of the rifle and feels his pride search for a place to hide as his mind calculates the physics. Dretphi stops in front of Bach and levels her eyes at him with a slight smile. "Doubting your abilities?"

Bach nods slowly with a bit of unease. "Yes. Oh yes. Especially with THAT much firepower."

Dretphi examines the first metal plate in the distance and glances back at Bach. "A little doubt is healthy. So, we test."

Bach crosses his arms and contorts his lips side to side with a grumble. "Yes. I know. I was hoping to enjoy a few smaller tests before shattering the thing."

Dretphi walks over to a mat and stack of sandbags on the ground. She kneels down, places the rifle on the ground, and slips the satchel off. She readies the rifle to fire, lays down next to it, and places the butt of the rifle to her shoulder. She turns her head to look over her shoulder at Bach, with a slightly warmer expression. "With what I have seen, I am not assuming the outcome. You should not either."

Bach meets Dretphi's glance. He puzzles a moment, eventually cracks a short smile, and relaxes his arms to his sides. "Well, okay. It could... Possibly... Withstand that. I ain't putting my money on it though."

Cideeda entertains a thought with her eyes for a moment and gets Sebastian's attention. "Sebastian? Could you warn everyone inside real quick?"

Sebastian flits his eyes wide for moment and flies off towards the wall of the house. "Good call, be right back."

A minute passes with the bright sun beaming down on the region and a gentle wind blowing through. Sebastian phases through the brick wall of the house and gives everyone a thumbs up. "They've been warned."

Dretphi returns her focus forward to the target. She squints down the way, dials in a distance to the scope on her rifle, and lines the crosshairs up on the first metal plate. She picks up the rifle round, places it into the chamber, and carefully closes and locks the bolt. She fetches a set of ear plugs from the satchel and puts them in. She holds her hand out from the grip and calls out. "Cover your ears!"

Cideeda presses her palms against the sides of her head and seals up her large fuzzy ears at their bases. Bach plugs a finger in each ear and watches Sebastian. Sebastian hovers with his arms crossed and catches Bach's glance. He raises a brow with an unamused expression on his face and gestures with his hands to his ethereal form. Bach drops his head momentarily with a bit of embarrassment and smiles awkwardly apologetic to his brother. Sebastian puts his hands up in air, and nonchalantly shrugs. "It's cool."

Dretphi wraps her fingers around the grip of the rifle, rests a finger on the trigger guard, and checks her shot one last time. She slides her finger on the trigger and squeezes down. A loud boom resonates throughout the area, vibrating any surface it washes over. A bright yellow flash shines out and soon a crash rings out. Glimmering speckles of bullet fragments and magical sparks scatter away from the target. Silence hangs over the region before normal background noises return in force. Dretphi pulls the bolt open and locks it back. Bach removes his fingers from his ears and notices Sebastian staring at the target. Sebastian

floats in place, crosses his arms, and holds his chin in puzzlement. “It was strange, bro. I think I heard... crackling? Almost like glass or something.”

Cideeda uncovers her ears and aims her eyes at the metal plate, unsure of what she sees. “The plate is still there, but the magical barrier is really easy to see. It looks cracked?”

Dretphi engages the safety and leaves the barrel of the rifle pointing up and away from the first metal plate. She pushes herself off the ground and stands up with confusion on her face. “We need to get a closer look.”

Bach, Cideeda, Dretphi, and Sebastian walk as a group down the field to the metal target. As they close in on the destination, their curiosity only increases. They gather around the enchanted metal plate. The golden, magical barrier is almost fully opaque. From the point of impact, a meshing web of cracks spider out from the center. The severity and depth of the cracks wane the further from the center point they stretch. While the magical barrier resembles broken safety glass, the surface of the barrier remains smooth with no detectable gaps. Underneath, the metal plate survives without any new damage.

Bach drops down to a knee, lifts up the bottom edge of the hanging metal plate, and angles the plate for a better view. “Holy. Shit. I think it actually held. Looks like hell, though.”

Cideeda squats to the side of the target and cranes her head to peek behind the plate. “No signs of denting on the back side. Probably shook the plate around, but it seems just fine to me.”

She sits down on the grass and examines the front of the plate. Her eyes widen and she points out with a claw a disappearing fault line in the barrier. “Is it- Repairing itself?”

Bach scrutinizes the spot Cideeda points out and rocks his head side to side. “Well, sort of. Technically, it didn’t break enough to need big repairs. But, I did put in bits to recharge the barrier and maintain the internal alignment with any ambient energy. So, it must be using all the sunlight to recharge and realign itself.”

The cracks shrink slowly as the seconds pass on by. When the lines fully retreat and clear the edge of the barrier, the golden magical energy visibly fades towards full transparency. Dretphi kneels down and spots a few bullet fragments in the grass underneath the target. She pinches onto the largest and lifts it up for a better view. She examines it carefully as a grin attempts to sneak into her smile. Bach feels a strong hand grasp his shoulder and follows it back to face Dretphi. She cracks a slight grin. “When can this be put on my armor plates?”

Valavera timidly approaches the dining table where the team sits around eating. Everyone scoops and picks out their choices of food from the huge collection of large takeout cartons and aluminum trays laying out on the middle part of the tabletop. Valavera stands nearby and now wears a nicer outfit made out of Aristespha’s old clothes and left over adventuring gear.

She coughs a few times to garner everyone's attention and visibly tenses when she gets everyone's full focus quickly. "Um. Before I leave with my uncle, I just wanted to properly apologize to everyone. I made a huge mistake and I am forever thankful you stopped me before I did anything REALLY stupid. And, I am very sorry I called you such terrible terms and attacked you."

She holds her hands together low in front of her, bows forward gracefully, and remains in silence. Aristespha smiles gently at her and signals Sebastian in the seat next to her with her eyes. "That's a very nice gesture. But, sit down and eat. I am not sending you out hungry."

Sebastian floats up next to his seat, bows to Valavera with a gentleman's grace, and slowly gestures his arm in a repetitious pulling motion from the chair. He aims an attention getting hiss at Bach across the table from the chair. Bach brings his head up from enjoying a hot wing and searches for the source of the noise. He finds Sebastian's glare at him and finger point at the chair. Bach rolls his eyes, seeks out the chair seat with a foot, and sinks slightly under the table to push the chair out. Sebastian directs Valavera to her seat in between Aristespha and Dretphi. She gawks at Sebastian, blinks herself out of a trance, and quickly sits down. Aristespha places a translucent, dark green plate of stabilized magical energy in front Valavera. The strange plate immediately seizes Valavera's interest and she carefully examines it. Aristespha gently pats Valavera on the shoulder and whispers. "Eat first, child. I'll tell you all you want to know about it later."

Cideeda chuckles and looks at Valavera. "Ah, don't worry about it, girl. I've been called far worse with a lot more terrible intent behind it. Beast doesn't even register with me anymore."

Sotalia leans over the table, seeks out a target with a plastic fork, and stabs a large fried egg roll. As she returns to her seat, she cracks a grin at Valavera. "Don't worry, kid. We've all made mistakes. Big ones."

She takes a big bite out of the egg roll, roughly points the fork with the half eaten egg roll at Valavera, and flits her brow with a wry smile. "You try ending a contract with a group in a town full of backwater Emin purists as a second generation Half-Emin. Wow! I had heard stories of how bad some towns were, but I thought they were exaggerating the more extreme stories."

Sebastian eyes open up as he remembers and laughs. "Oh gods. That was such a fucked up place. I still remember going through the door of that dive bar. Everyone was mean mugging me, except you. The one half-emin woman in the place, sitting alone at the worst table, with a dirty glass of water, and literally pointing me to the chair in front of her."

Sotalia shakes her head, holds her free hand up, and bites her lip. "I know how cheesy and cliché this will sound... But, when I saw him come through that door, I thought... Oh thank the gods. A human. I might be able to work something out yet."

Cideeda sits back in her chair, holds her chin, and looks up in her mind. "Is this that town that wouldn't take your money?"

Sotalia energetically nods at Cideeda and then gazes at Valavera, punctuating with a wag of the forked egg roll. "YES! Oh gods. If someone warns you about the town a contract ends in, Take. Their. Advice. I didn't and nearly paid for it dearly. Here I was in this little shit hole of a town, paid in cash from a successful escort mission as an independent contractor, and I couldn't spend ANY of it!"

Valavera pauses in between shoveling rice into her mouth, blinks from confusion, and then draws her head back in shock. "They wouldn't take your money at all?"

Sotalia shakes her head wide-eyed and takes a deep breath in. "NO. These were racists with principles. Biggest storm to hit the area was a few hours out. Nightfall in an hour. All transit out of the place had already cleared out. And, I had only managed to find a single dive bar to sit at with a dirty glass of water... Which I'm sure they spat in... and they were closing early because of the storm."

Sebastian ethereally exhales in disbelief and rubs the back of his neck. "I had gotten a pretty shit welcome to that place, too. They'd at least take my money, even if they were gouging me. Long story short, I managed to get a room at this awful motel, sneaked her in during the start of the storm, and we basically laid low until the start of my contract."

Sotalia sighs, sinks into her chair, and lifts her head solemnly to Valavera. "Every time I think about those few days, I get chills. There were a few people looking for me. I was SO lucky. Turns out Sebastian's contract was the next part after my contract. After I explained everything to them, they were completely fine with me tagging along."

Sebastian grits his teeth briefly and sneers with a brow quirk. "Turns they didn't have the best time of with that town either, and wanted to leave for the next one with as much help as they could get."

Valavera loses herself in thought as she places herself in that situation and squirms a bit in her seat. "I just don't know what to think about all that."

Sotalia finishes the remaining egg roll off the fork, puts her hands up in the air, and shrugs with a grin. "It was an enhanced learning experience. You'll have plenty more of those, kid. You just hope the next one doesn't have as much to teach you as the last one."

Bach takes a break from his meal, his face explores an idea as it materializes in his mind, and he turns to face Sotalia. "Wait. So, you were the first one to team up with my brother?"

Sotalia loosely directs a plastic fork in her hand side to side, twists her mouth, and gradually nods. "Yes, I was. We were really limited with the jobs we could take."

Sebastian catches Bach's attention and holds a hand out towards Dretphi. "But, a few months later Dretphi joined up."

Dretphi smiles and idly stirs some noodles on her plate. "Was in a bad situation. They gave me a great chance to move on. No regrets."

Sebastian points both hands to Cideeda. “And after an awful run of contracted technical specialists, Cideeda got on board.”

Cideeda shakes her head and snorts. “I STILL can’t believe what passes for technical specialist these days. I was amazed they weren’t killed by those moronic fly-by-night contractors.”

Sebastian smiles lovingly to Aristespha and adopts a more proper tone. “And then the wonderful Lady Aristespha graced us a few months after that.”

Aristespha stirs a large spoon in a bowl of soup and tries to mute a humored smile. “Well, I blame the sword mostly for leading me to you. I still debate if following it was the best of ideas some days.”

Sebastian hovers next to Valavera, lowers his head near hers with a wry grin, and eyes Bach, giving him a wink. “All was well with our group, then misfortune happened a month ago. Hence, I am now a bit more transparent than previously. And two weeks ago, we picked up this scrub.”

Valavera stifles a snicker with her hand as she watches the exchange. Bach narrows his eyes at brother and perks a lone eye brow. “Scrub, eh? I think the word you are looking for is abducted, ghost man.”

Sebastian stands up straight, crosses his arms, and with a proud grin on his face. “Well, strong words from the intern.”

Valavera leans close to Aristespha and lowers her voice. “Is he really an intern?”

Aristespha rolls her eyes, sighs, and adopts a similar tone. “Technicalities. A long story. And, also why you should make sure you finish your schooling.”

Bach and Sebastian stare at each other for a few seconds before both break down into laughter. Bach shakes his head and resumes eating with an amused smirk on his face. “I don’t know how you all have dealt with this asshole for this long.”

Dretphi calmly and solidly responds in between bites of her food with a hint of a grin at the corner of her mouth. “The paycheck helps.”

A collection of snorts, chuckles, and snickers fill the air around the table. Sebastian gradually cranes his head towards Dretphi. “Ow. Good shot. And I thought Cideeda was the only one with claws around here.”

A large truck rolls down the road and arrives in front of the ranch style house. The six large wheels slow to a stop and the back cargo unit rocks slightly on the suspension system. Loud

mechanical noises clunk as the transmission disengages, the parking brake cranks into place, and the engine sputters to a stop. The driver's side door opens and a round figure steps out. Wearing a worn trench coat with multiple patches holding it together, the pot-bellied Evuukian struts off the road down the front lawn walkway. He reaches the doorway, moves his head to follow along the door frame, finds the doorbell, and presses it firmly. Seconds later, the front door unlocks and opens, revealing a smiling Aristespha. "Well, if it isn't Former Regent Becker!"

The Evuukian quickly holds up his hands, gestures them downwards, and respectfully shushes. "No titles here. But. I do appreciate that you still know them. Young Lady Aristespha."

Aristespha pulls a firm smile on her face and sighs. "Okay, Becker. Come on in."

Becker walks along side Aristespha, being roughly the same height, and gives a hearty laugh. "Strange times we live in. But, if I get see you and my niece, they are good times to me. I hope the little one has not been too much to handle. May there be habits she doesn't take from her mother."

As soon as Becker clears the archway into the living room, Valavera gleefully bolts from her chair at the table and throws her arms around Becker. "Uncle Becker!"

Becker gives Valavera a hug and says various things in a dialect of Evuukian in a warm and happy tone. He gently pushes her back and looks her up and down, taking careful notice of her garments. "You are dressed for the occasion! Very good! I am glad you took care of the clothes. Because..."

He pats his belly, shakes his head, and sighs. "... Your Uncle Becker has nothing of his that will fit you."

Valavera laughs and smiles at him. "I've got everything packed in this bag. I don't have much at the moment. Should I put it in your truck?"

Becker scratches his short golden hair, that almost matches Valavera's in color, and brushes back the stray locks over the one intact ear and attempts to do the same with the ear missing the upper half. "Not quite, yet. I have been informed that I may be able to acquire a few more things to trade along the way home."

Cideeda steps forward and extends her hand to shake Becker's. "So, I've heard you are broker of unique and interesting items."

Becker reaches out, shakes Cideeda's hand firmly, and draws a sly smile towards the corner of his mouth. "I often engage in such activities."

Cideeda focuses her eyes on Becker's face, raises a brow, and her expression shifts to stoic. "What do you define as unique and interesting?"

Becker grins with bravado, reaches his hand into the inside of his trench coat, pulls out curious looking artifacts, and places them on the nearby dining table. “Why I just got back from an interesting adventure to The Borderlands! And there, I met a strange character who claims to have lived near the heart of the Perimeter Weird Zone for untold years! He had an amazing collection of strange and wondrous artifacts... Many that should have never left so far from the zone. But. Here before you is just small sample of what I have.”

Sotalia’s pupils dilate as she watches Becker place the artifacts on the table and she subconsciously drifts closer to investigate them. Becker proudly grins as he effortlessly reads Sotalia’s extreme interest. He returns his gaze to Cideeda and his expression becomes as stoic as hers. “But, I have other definitions, too. What do you define as unique and interesting?”

Cideeda steps to the side, places a hand into a backpack resting on a chair next to her, slowly draws out a drained cybernetic soldier power cell, and firmly places it on the table next to Becker’s artifacts. She maintains eye contact with Becker and searches for his reaction. Becker remains silent and the neutral expression on his face shows no signs of wear. “Let us conduct some business.”

Cideeda calmly responds with a number. Becker counters with an opposing amount. The two engage in a struggle of value, each debating the validity of the other’s proposal with a new value. Everyone else stays back and witnesses the spirited financial sparring. At a key point, silence hangs over the two. Becker narrows his eyes and takes a deep breath in. “I do have buyers, but I would have far more eager buyers if... You had a fully charged cell.”

Cideeda cracks an evil grin, reaches into the backpack, procures a brightly lit, charged power cell, and gently places it next to the first power cell. Becker nods blankly and speaks a new number. This sparks another battle of economic prowess. Aristespha leans close to Valavera with a sly smile. “He certainly hasn’t lost his love of the haggle.”

Valavera shakes her head as she continues to pay attention with everyone else. A few moments of quiet rise from another lull from the bidding between Cideeda and Becker. Becker confidently puffs his chest out. “For what you are selling, the number you say you have to sell, you have to admit that’s the fairest price you’ll get anywhere, anytime soon. And, I’ve given you my exclusive friends and family bonus.”

Cideeda nods her head, aims her face down, and rests her lips on her fist in thought. Becker holds his hand out to shake Cideeda’s. “I think we have a wonderful deal.”

Cideeda lifts her head up and stares a toothy grin right at Becker. He pauses, turns his head, and perks an eye brow. She holds a finger up to Becker. “I’m curious how eager your buyers would be if they had something that USES those power cells.”

She moves her foot back underneath the table, places it on top of a rectangular case, and slides it forward in front of Becker. She taps it with her foot and gestures with a hand for him to open it. Becker carefully gets down on one knee, releases the locks, and lifts the case lid to reveal the cyber commando plasma rifle. Cideeda firmly and confidently quotes a number.

Becker examines the rifle in silence. He grumbles to himself as his mind calculates the margins and he eventually releases a long groan. Cideeda chuckles and shakes her head. “Oh, don’t act all pained. I know you have to pass near The Grand Library and the end of the budget year is just around the corner.”

Becker lifts his heavy self up, laughs happily with a smile, and points to the rifle. “It is not pain, but longing for a future session in which I get to surprise you with something as wonderful!”

Both Cideeda and Becker vigorously shake hands with satisfaction throughout their faces. Sotalia returns to ogling the artifacts on the table from Becker, pats for her wallet, and leaves quickly for her room. Becker bows slightly to Cideeda and resumes his normal posture. “Hopefully I don’t have to fight you for this, but... Where did you get THAT chair?!”

Bach halts mid-step and gradually pivots around in a circle until he notices Cideeda staring at him with a toothy grin and a clawed finger gesturing him over.

The digital display flickers numbers of increasing value on the fuel station pump. Cideeda wipes a few remaining bits of sleep from her eyes, while she leans against the side of the humvee and holds the fueling nozzle. The pump clicks off and the hose shakes a bit. Cideeda stares at the display and nods. She lifts up off the side of the vehicle to a stand and spins around. She removes the fueling nozzle, places it back in the matching holster, and watches the display show a series of status prompts. After a few moments, a receipt prints and rolls out from a slot. Cideeda finishes twisting the cap on one of the fueling ports, closes the outer cover door, and takes the receipt. She steps to the open driver's door, stretches her arms and arches her back one last time, and hops into the driver's seat. The humvee's driver side door shuts with a tug from Cideeda. She pushes herself up the back of her seat, extends an arm over the head rest, and waves a paper receipt near Aristespha. "Here's the receipt."

Aristespha blinks and slowly raises her eyes up from the tablet. Her gaze locks onto the receipt. She reaches out with a hand, calmly pinches it between her fingers, and pulls it from Cideeda's light grasp. "Thank you. What's the tank odometer say?"

Cideeda slides back down in her seat and hovers her hand in front of the display in the middle of the console. She presses a series of buttons on both sides of the display and eventually navigates the on-screen menus to a page with fuel tank information and usage statistics. "Nine eight zero kilometers using that tank and filled up about fifty liters of synth-diesel."

Bach's eyes process numbers around his head. The results garner his attention and interest. "About twenty kilometers per liter? That's pretty good for something this size. Strangely good, actually."

Cideeda continues to tap the buttons around the console screen and shows off some statistics to Bach as he watches. "Well, the turbine powerplant is nowhere near stock anymore. But, the electrical drive system is pretty close to original. Batteries had to get replaced when we first found it. And there's solar panels on top that I added to give us some other power options. For an ancient military vehicle, she's still doing good."

Bach pulls himself forward and to the side of the front passenger's seat and focuses on the console screen. "Any particular reason you use synth-diesel? That stuff is not cheap."

Cideeda sneers and rolls her eyes as previous experiences pop back in her mind. "Quality. We used to use bio-diesel, but it seems like every place has their own special blend that either runs okay or tries to jam up the powerplant in this thing. Synth-diesel consistently works thanks to The Grand Library keeping a tight grip on the production."

Aristespha positions the receipt in front of her tablet and taps an onscreen button with her thumb. An image of the receipt appears on the tablet's screen and status icons about the analysis flash up. After a few seconds, a final prompt with a confirming notification, along with

a numeric amount, shows up. Aristespha taps Bach on the shoulder with a sly smile on her face and reveals the front of the tablet to him. “Also, since I am a Master Sage under the employ of the The Grand Library and the group is presently on retainer to defeat Dark Lord Noxian, a healthy rebate is VERY easy to obtain.”

Bach reads the information off of Aristespha’s tablet and slowly nods in surprised approval. “Wow! That’s hell of a discount in the end. Do you have to provide justification or some proof to keep getting it?”

Aristespha rests back in her seat, sets the tablet down in her lap, and gestures with her hands to Bach. “Yes. But, they aren’t very strict given the nature of what we are presently doing. We came to this region since it’s around a number of places Noxian was known to be at. And, while it’s an educated guess, this may be a region he would fall back to.”

The ethereal voice of Sebastian emanates from the sword near Aristespha. “But, Noxian has been REALLY quiet lately. The sword used to detect traces of his presence all the time. Especially, when he used any Elder energy fueled power. Even from great distances. But lately, nothing. No disturbances at all. So, either he’s gotten really stealthy or he’s currently really weak.”

Aristespha crosses her arms with frown and sighs. “Or... He may have unfortunately decided to go somewhere else. Honestly, we theorized he would at least visit an old hideout or maybe something meaningful to him in the past before going too far. That may have changed.”

Cideeda catches sight of Sotalia exiting the doors of the fuel station’s convenience store with a cardboard drink carrier in one hand. Sotalia holds the door open for Dretphi as she carries a large tank of water over one shoulder and maintains a tight grip onto large bundle of bags in the opposite hand. Cideeda quickly cranes her head around to both Bach and Aristespha. “Before Sotalia gets back, I STILL think we need to find and check out Noxian’s old home when he wasn’t a crazed Dark Lord.”

Aristespha nods in agreement and takes a deep breath in. “I have to agree with you. It might take some time to search, but I doubt we are going to get lucky and find him anytime soon. Even if we do find signs of him, it going to be extremely difficult to track him down... Without the sword guiding us.”

Sebastian’s voice resonates with a solemn tone. “I’m certain he knows the sword can sense big releases of Elder energy. I’d wager he’s playing very safe and reserved until he feels he doesn’t need to anymore. So, we are just going to have to do some hard, tedious investigating in the near future and get some insight to what he may be doing. But, mission at hand first, we’ll debate it later.”

The back hatch door of the humvee opens up. Dretphi places the large water tank inside off her shoulder and hoists up the bags, too. Bach opens his door, hops out onto the pavement, and slides his seat forward. Dretphi walks around the side of the vehicle, nods at Bach with a smile, and lifts herself through the door to her seat in the back. Bach throws his seat back once Dretphi is clear, jumps onto his seat, and shuts his door. Sotalia finishes arranging

everything in the back, closes the back hatch, and strides quickly to the front passenger's side door. She opens the door, carefully steps up into her seat, and opens the drink carrier on her lap. "Okay everyone, I hope they got the orders right."

Sotalia picks up a covered cup and examines the writing on the side. "One fruit tea combo for Cideeda."

Cideeda directs a claw tip to an empty cup holder in between her and Sotalia. Sotalia gently inserts the drink cup into the holder. She looks at another covered cup and reads. "Black tea with a shot of thick coffee for Aristespha."

Aristespha extends a gloved hand out and Sotalia places the drink in her hand. Aristespha quickly drinks a long swig of her drink and exhales with satisfaction. Sotalia checks out the next drink. "Hot spiced milk tea for Bach."

She waves it around Bach's open hand with a playful grin and mischievously gazes at him. "What do you say?"

Bach narrows his eyes at Sotalia and a wry smile creeps onto his face. "How far forward do you want your seat?"

Sotalia rolls her eyes, pouts playfully, and releases the cup in Bach's hand. She checks the writing on one of the two remaining beverage containers. She reaches an arm far back around her seat and down the aisle. "A Grath Black for Dretphi."

Dretphi shifts forward, extends her long arm out, and grasps the cup firmly. Sotalia turns her attention to the remaining container. She happily picks it up and cheerfully reads the long, complicated order. Everyone else pauses from enjoying their beverage of choice, as each individually attempts to process the convoluted creation in Sotalia's grasp. Sebastian's ethereal voice breaks the awkward silence. "So... There's coffee in it... Somewhere... Right? Or Tea? Maybe?"

Cideeda supports herself on the humvee door's window frame as she hangs out and watches the front tire roll on the edge of the overgrown path. Her hand cranks the steering wheel in sync with terrain and constantly adjusts to the contours of the narrow dirt trail. She focuses her stare and grits her teeth. "We might want to put a note in our report that vehicle access is QUESTIONABLE at best. I can't tell if the road is winding, or if it's just that overrun with the plants and dirt."

The humvee crawls on top the layers of dirt, gravel, chunks of ancient pavement, and other debris. Bach squints at small object in the underbrush of the forest bordering the rough driveway. He leans out his open window, points at the object, and turns his head briefly to face inside. "I think that's an old road marker over there. It just might be this overgrown. Anyone else seeing this?"

Sotalia swings herself from observing the front tire on her side and scans the area Bach points to. She slides her sunglasses down her nose and locks eyes on the same object. "That looks like a road marker to me, too. Seems like there was at least another full lane, this way."

Aristespha breaks from staring out her window, flips through her tablet, and zooms in on some text. "This was a major research base at one point. Old government records indicate it had a decent staffing. So, a two lane road would not be too surprising."

Bach sits back in his seat and quizzically eyes Aristespha with a tinge of hesitation. "What were they researching?"

Aristespha catches Bach's expression, draws a tight half-smile, and shows him the tablet. "Electromagnetic phenomena. Non-military. No cybernetics or genetics. I'm not going to say it'll be any better. But, hopefully some possible problems are not as likely to occur."

Bach's eyes follow the information on the tablet. Dretphi bends forward holding onto the backs of Aristespha's and Bach's seats and reads off the tablet. "Above ground. Wide open. A few small buildings. Multiple antenna arrays in cleared fields. Drastic change from the previous mission."

Bach shrugs with a faint bit of hope in his expression and then returns to searching the treeline. "I'm willing to give anything that's not a cybernetic horror filled dungeon a chance at this point."

Sotalia lifts her head back from staring down along the border of the path and the underbrush. "I'll second that. Never have been a fan of those underground bases. Too tight and cramped. And, they are really limiting on the spells I can use!"

Cideeda settles back into her seat as the overgrowth and treeline retreats away to reveal a far less constricting path. She adjusts her seat belt and accelerates the humvee. "I think we're good for now. Thanks for watching the road everyone."

She angles her head towards the group and directs her voice back. "And as much I don't want to run into a situation where I NEED them, I much prefer having the explosive option. So, I'm all for avoiding underground tunnels."

Dretphi nods in agreement and stretches her arms back onto the top of the bench seat with a sigh. "Dungeons are nostalgic. Today. I prefer to live in the present."

Sebastian's ethereal voice echoes from the sword near Aristespha with a tinge of sarcasm hinting through his voice. "Aww... Come on, you all! You got to love the classics! Dank, dark tunnels with enemies lurking around every corner. Traps everywhere you step and more where you don't."

Sotalia groans heavily as she dramatically rolls her eyes. “Oh yes. Please. Please, take me away to convoluted structural design that children would question. I don’t know why people just don’t fill all those tombs, dungeons, and tunnels with concrete once they clear them out.”

Aristespha laughs and shakes her head as her memory retrieves a choice moment. “Remember that one governor that pestered us non-stop to clear out that old mage tower?”

Sebastian’s voice emanates from the sword with an unamused tone. “Oh gods. That guy couldn’t take a hint. No, we won’t investigate the tower. No, we’re not interested in whatever you want to pay us. No, you ain’t going to arrest us with those bogus charges. No, begging is not going to help. No, we don’t care how many other adventures want this opportunity, too.”

Cideeda snorts and sighs as she easily navigates the less overgrown and now wider road. “That governor was so slimy. Can’t believe what he planned to do with that tower.”

Dretphi briefly winces and sneers with a slight grit of her teeth. “He would not stop staring at my chest. His eyes followed me everywhere.”

Sotalia twists in her seat and looks back at Dretphi. “Gods, I remember that. I think the only time he stopped staring at you was to leer at my ass.”

Bach furrows his brow as his mind searches through recent history. He opens his eyes up in recognition and swings his head to face the group. “Wait, was that the guy who tried to pull a Sundial Tower Scheme a few years back?!”

Aristespha nods and rests her cheek on her hand, lifting her brow in thought. “We didn’t know what he planned on doing. But nothing he proposed sounded good. It was so obviously bad. Especially when he tried to extort us with those ridiculous, made-up criminal charges. He was so desperate.”

Dretphi twists her mouth and slowly shakes her head as she takes in a deep breath with her hands on her knees. “I remember when the news showed his picture months later. Pointed at it. Yelled to everyone in the hotel bar.”

Sotalia frowns tightly in disgust and shudders. “I’m so glad we reported his sorry ass to the guild.”

Cideeda tilts her head to the side and winces with roll of the shoulders. “At least no one fell for that scheme. Even if the tower was actually empty for all purposes, apart from paltry security measures.”

Bach groans with annoyance and rubs the bridge of his nose. “See. That’s what I don’t get. Could have done it completely legit and had a perfectly fine tower, in the clear. Nope. Duped some investors. Decided to con as many adventurers as it took, to possibly their deaths, to clear the thing. Tried to destroy any known records of the tower. Forged the paperwork to

register it as a new construction. And was planning on getting shady contractors to revamp it as theme hotel for the rich.”

The sword sounds out Sebastian’s ethereal chuckle and a sarcastic drone follows. “You know. It never really occurred to me that the month we spent in adventuring history class talking about the Sundial Tower Scheme was actually an instructional piece to commit such a scheme... Good gods, what the fuck?”

Aristespha sits up in her seat, leans out into the aisle, and focuses to some distant structures through the front windshield. After a few seconds, she returns to her seat and flips through a few maps on her tablet. “I think we are getting close. A few of these landmarks are on the map we got from the guild. We will probably reach the main entry in the next half hour.”

Cideeda scans the horizon and watches the scenery go by as she drives. She wryly smiles as she adjusts the humvee’s course along the scattered bits of proper road. “You know if I didn’t know this road lead to yet another abandoned relic of the past, that probably contains some unmentionable horror, this would actually be a nice drive.”

Bach glances out his window and eventually nods at the observation. “If the road was a bit better, I’d take my bike out for a trip. Need to do that anyway, next break we take.”

Dretphi reaches down on the floorboard, hoists up a hard shoulder plate of her armor, and works on securing it to the under-armor suit she wears. “If the mission proves easy, we should enjoy the remaining day. If the mission permits us.”

Bach hears a combination of hook-loop pads and mechanical fasteners behind him. He turns around to see Dretphi locking in the shoulder plate. Bach then examines his own equipment and checks his plasma pistol in the holster. “So how much do we have to check and verify at this site?”

Aristespha flicks through various documents on the tablet and stops on one article. “Thankfully, most of the facility is explored and there’s a lot of notes about anything important to know. Only two buildings on site are still sealed, but they only require inspection to make sure they are still sealed. The only hard part will be comparing how the antenna arrays look with the pictures on file. We’ll probably have to take all new ones.”

An awkward silence looms inside the cab of the vehicle. Again, Sebastian breaks it. He grumbles momentarily and forms his ethereal visage in the aisle. “Okay. I’ll say it, so no one else has to... Sounds simple enough. “

A collection of eyes rolls, groans, and sighs fill the air in the cab. Sebastian drops his head and then lifts it up with a smile and emerging bravado. “But, we all know how that usually goes. So, let’s keep the group together when we get there. It’ll take longer to check everything out, but I think we’re okay with taking our time on it. Correct?”

Dretphi nods in agreement, leans forward, sweeps up another armor plate from the floor, and puts in in place. Aristespha gives a singular nod and continues to analyze the maps of the

site. Cideeda removes a hand from the steering wheel, gives a brief thumbs up, and returns her hand to the wheel. Sotalia nods and inspects her belt of pouches. Bach shrugs at Sebastian. “Sounds good enough to me, brother.”

Sebastian grins proudly and sets his sights ahead into the distance. “Good. Let’s what we got today.”

A strong wind blows through the decaying metal structures. The remaining runs of rusting cables and tethers sway slightly with the breeze. Many of the steel framework towers lie on the ground. The anchors in their concrete bases show where they should be. But, a significant number of the more unique designs still stoically rise above the tops of the trees nearby. Another gust rolls through the sparse stretches of thin, high grass rooted in between the cracks of the treeless asphalt lot. Six smaller buildings reside in three rows of opposing pairs with equal wide spacing. The collection leads up from the antenna array field to a large, single-story, bunker-like building. A paved courtyard joins all the structures and serves as a storage yard for concrete barriers, steel girders, and other construction fodder.

The party rounds the corner of a smaller building next to the large bunker. Sotalia throws her head back while plodding along and seeks something of interest in the clouds above. “I think I’m not going to mention this mission to my mother next time she calls.”

Cideeda stops investigating one of the small building windows, pivots, and faces Sotalia with a grin. “What? Don’t want mother to hear about all your exciting adventures in comparing pictures of metal heaps and debris piles in abandoned buildings?”

Sotalia shakes her head slowly and holds her hands up in the air. “I try to keep it interesting for her. Have to justify the years of magic courses and adventuring school somehow.”

Cideeda steps back over to group, shrugs slightly, and tilts her head at Sotalia with a smile. “Fair enough. Thankfully, my mom is happy to hear my voice... And getting any pictures of the random artifacts and trinkets I find. Dad just loves to hear about the deals I’ve worked out of people.”

Bach puzzles a moment and aims his gaze down to Cideeda. “What do your parents do for a living?”

Cideeda returns a nonchalant glance to Bach. “Mom’s a metal sculptor most of the time, but does contract specialty repair work for large machinery to pay the bills when no one is buying art. Dad is the owner of one of the larger scrapyards in that part of Nexus.”

Aristespha turns her head and voice back to Cideeda, taking a break from studying pictures on her tablet. “Has your mother put another batch of her Second Period styled statuettes?”

Cideeda scratches a long, furry ear, twists her mouth, and squints an eye as she recaps the last conversation she had with her mother. “I think so? I’ll have to double-check. She was

excited about a finishing up a few big projects last I talked to her, so she didn't spend a long time talking about what she had in stock. Why do you ask?"

Annoyance gently bubbles into Aristespha's face as she exhales reluctance and her eyes look above with a corner frown. "I have a cousin getting married. I am expected to send a gift in lieu of my absence. They fancy themselves art snobs, but I don't know when and where they got that idea into their heads."

Cideeda slinks up to Aristespha's side with a toothy grin and gives her sly wink. "If nothing else, I could get my dad to bolt some random junk, from the almost Second Era, onto a nice wooden stand. He'd even gift wrap it for you."

Aristespha bites her lower lip as her eyes search her mind in vain for a reason for this scheme to not work. "That is actually really tempting. I honestly doubt they would know the difference."

The group arrives in the middle of the courtyard in front of the large bunker building. Dretphi alternates her stare between the closed bunker and the remaining small, sealed building opposite the previous. "Two remain. Both should be sealed. Large or small?"

Sebastian hovers away from the group with casual stance and points a thumb over the shoulder to the small building. "I'll do a fly by of this one real quick. It looks locked up as it is. I'll make sure no one has tried to crack it open or cut a hole in the side."

Everyone else gives some form of agreement. Sebastian aims his ghostly self and holds a hand out with a finger up. "You all wait here for a minute, I'll be as fast as I can."

He flies off across the courtyard and floats down the space between the sealed small building and another small building. During his flight, he directs his gaze at the aging concrete wall. As he rounds the corner, he keeps a close eye for anything that looks unusual along the back side of the structure. He finally inspects the other side and drifts out towards the large front doors. Sebastian's head follows the outline of the huge doors and makes an entire circuit around. He looks briefly at the door's dead and lightless control panel. With a shrug, Sebastian spins to fly away, but halts abruptly as his eyes search himself.

Aristespha squints with her arms crossed. She quirks a brow when Sebastian reverses his course and puts his ethereal head through the large front doors. "What is he doing?"

Bach tilts his head to the side and focuses his sight towards his ghostly brother. "Maybe he heard something inside?"

Sebastian withdraws his head from the metal doors and coasts back a few meters. He holds his hands out and shakes his head with a defiant expression as he dramatically mouths "No". He glides back to the group and lands in a standing position. Sotalia crosses her arms and puzzles at Sebastian's actions with a nonplussed expression on her face. "So? What DID you find in there?"

He straightens his back and works a grimace off his face before speaking. “Well. I got this weird feeling and thought I should take a look inside. Good news. The building looks sealed up. Bad news. There’s two security bots in there of the three meter tall, armed and armored variety.”

Cideeda opens her eyes more and darts her head between staring at Sebastian and the small, hopefully sealed building behind him. “So, what’s the condition of the two bots?”

Sebastian bounces his head between shoulders with an uncertain expression emerging on of his face. “One looks like it was parted out a LONG time ago. So, that one is sitting in a pile of pieces. The other looks together, but I don’t know how functional it is. Don’t really want to find out today, if that’s okay with everyone.”

He shrugs as he glances over his shoulder at the small building. “But, I didn’t see anything online and active in there. It might be in a sleep mode, but I’m okay with leaving it alone for now.”

Aristespha pulls out her tablet, swipes to a note section of the report she is writing, and adds some new updated information to the document. She grits her teeth briefly and draws an uncomfortable breath in through her teeth. “Well, that’s good to know. I will add that in the report. They’ll probably get the military to try to secure and salvage that. But, I don’t think we should linger much longer here.”

Bach blinks blankly before his attention focuses at the large, closed doors of the small building. He snaps his head to Aristespha with a nervous frown and squirm in his posture. “Uh... I thought you said this was a non-military research base?”

Dretphi maintains a careful watch of the area as mild concern creeps into her voice. “Likely a third party defense company security robot. Possibly bought along with construction of the site. Surprised it is together now.”

Cideeda rests her hand underneath her chin, closes her eyes to contemplate, and nods slowly. “If they did part out one of them, it’s feasible that the other could be functional. And, it has been stored in a good shelter for all these years. I think this falls under stuff we can talk about on the drive home.”

Dretphi focuses a quizzical quirk of a brow to Sebastian and momentarily hums low in thought. “What weapons did you see?”

Sebastian closes his eyes and rubs the temples of his head as he contorts his mouth attempting to remember a clear picture. “It was dark and I only got a quick look. But... Uh... Two arms. One had a minigun on it. The other looked like a plasma particle cannon? It wasn’t a railgun, gauss rifle, or a laser. Big port, lots of venting.”

Sotalia sighs as she drops her shoulders in mild disappointment and groans as a sensible, conservative aspect of herself wins for now. “As much I would love the chance to test out

some spells... I'm perfectly fine with leaving that much opposing firepower alone. I'm okay with checking out this last building and going home for the day."

Aristespha closes her eyes, rubs the bridge of her nose, and nods in full agreement. "I will gladly second that."

Sebastian puts his hands on his sides and dons a slight smile for everyone as he lifts his head back towards the large bunker. "If no one else objects, let's head for the doors, check them out, do a quick look around, and double-time it home. Probably make it to town before all the nice restaurants close."

Bach chuckles with a sarcastic twist as a dry grin emerges on his face. "What? And not help to keep Pancake Shed in business as usual?"

Sotalia bites her lip and sways her hips as her face wrestles with temptation. "Damn it all. We did pass one on the way here."

Cideeda pats around her hip and finds one of the pockets in her body suit. She pushes her fingers inside, grips hold of something, and retrieves a stack of small rectangular cards. She flips through a number of them and stops on one, Pancake Shed branded. "I am one stamp away from a free Shed Stack."

Aristespha rolls her eyes with a reserved smile and directs everyone's attention to the large bunker. "Okay, everyone. We'll debate THAT after we take care of this last part of the mission."

The group reassembles behind Aristespha and Sebastian and the two lead towards the front sliding metal doors of the large bunker. Aristespha and Sebastian step onto the walkway directly in front of the bunker-

"HE. WAS. HERE."

Aristespha's tablet drops onto the pavement, bounces off the ground in its protective case, and settles a meter shy of the front sliding metal doors. Aristespha grips the sword at her side and stares forward in shock. The sword vibrates in its scabbard as an ambient background noise rises up to nearby ears.

"TRACES. FADING."

Bach, Cideeda, Dretphi, and Sotalia collectively skid and slide to a halt behind Aristespha and watch the sword with anticipation. Sebastian's ghostly visage warps and waves for a few seconds. His ethereal form stabilizes as the sword drifts off to silence along with the ambient background sounds. Aristespha cautiously removes her hand from the hilt of the sword. She kneels down, grabs onto her tablet, and stands back up to face everyone. Glances exchange and tensions rise between everyone in the group. Dretphi readies her sub-machine gun. Both of Cideeda's hands simultaneously hit the power buttons for both her holstered laser pistols. The fading high-pitched whine of Bach's charging plasma pistol joins the chorus of

Cideeda's charging laser pistols. Sotalia and Aristespha gradually shift their stances to textbook defensive magic casting positions. Sebastian scans around the immediate area for anything blatant and returns his eyes to the group. "Okay. Nothing obvious right now. Everyone, take a minute and scout it out. Call out anything."

As everyone seeks something out of the ordinary, Bach pauses. He stays still, closes his eyes, and waits. His cheek twitches and his head leads the rest of his body to rotate towards the metal doors. He opens his eyes and they work their way up from the ground to the top of the doors. His body tenses and his full attention focuses onto the top arch of the door frame. He frowns as his eyes glow blue and concentrates his stare. His pupils shrink, eyes open wide, and a grit yanks his frown down with a reflexive gasp. He blinks, shudders his head, and his eyes dart around to see what the others are doing. After watching Aristespha, Cideeda, Dretphi, Sotalia, and Sebastian continue their searches facing away from him, Bach's initial reaction remains unknown to anyone else. He takes a deep breath in, exhales out his tension, and slowly raises his arm to point at the top of the door frame with an inquisitive, uncertain tone. "I see something up there?"

The rest of the group notices Bach's arm extending and hand pointing to the top of the door frame. Both Aristespha and Sotalia catch glimpse of Bach's glowing eyes. Aristespha closes her eyes briefly, pauses to focus herself, and reopens her eyes with a violet light. Sotalia closes her eyes, too. She winces, cringes, and grits her teeth straining. Eventually, she opens her eyes and they emit a very dim golden glimmer. "This is REALLY hard to maintain."

Aristespha studies the top of the door frame and draws the corner of her mouth in into an understanding smirk. "It gets easier. Eventually. I think I see... Yes!"

Her hand whips up with a finger out and traces a path across the top. She takes a step closer and squints as bewilderment flushes to her face. "It is really faint, but this is definitely left over vapor from the use of Elder energy magic. It's really decayed, so it was some quick cast spell of sorts. Or just raw energy manipulation? But... What could he have done to the door, that would have it still be here?"

Cideeda nose twitches and she sniffs the air. She narrows her eyes, repeatedly sucks in more air through her nose, and her head drops down and forward. She steps next to Aristespha, squats down, and focuses on an odd patch of dirt at the bottom of the doors and on the concrete in front. Her claw tip lowers into dirt and she swirls the patch to reveal an oily, reddish-brown fluid hidden underneath. Cideeda lifts her head back, glances up at the top of the doors, spots the control panel in the wall at the side of the door, and cracks a cornered grin. "This is hydraulic fluid. Noxian must have forced the doors open and blown out the hoses. This pool is leaking from the other side of the door."

Sotalia blinks a few times as the golden light dims out completely and quizzically gestures at the closed doors. "If he forced them open, why are they closed now?"

Bach scratches his head, carefully walks up to the side of the doors, and cranes his head around to examine the area between where the top of the frame and the top of the doors

meet. “This doesn’t look like heavy, high-security doors. It’s probably spring loaded enough that without the hydraulics locking them in place, they moved back once the magic decayed.”

Dretphi moves her finger in the air up and down in front of her towards the door. She slightly twists her head to the side as her stare settles on the intersection between the two sliding doors. “An uneven junction. The gap is wide for this type of door. I could attempt to open it with my hands.”

Sebastian drifts to the doors in thought and nods. “Well, if it’s been opened, we need to investigate for the mission AND we need find out what is going on here. Let me check the other side and see if there’s anything waiting for us.”

Dretphi moves to the side of the doorway opposite to Bach. Sotalia and Aristespha get behind Bach and Cideeda hops over behind Dretphi. Sebastian gives a confirming thumbs up and floats through the doors. The group waits in silence for a few minutes. Sebastian pops his head out the doors and signals both groups in with a perplexed expression on his face. “It’s clear from what I can tell. But, gods damn. Some one turned this place upside down, so it’s a bit of mess in here.”

Dretphi positions herself in front of the doors, forces her gauntlet covered fingers in between the gap, and cracks the two doors apart. With modest effort, the doors slide apart. Air hissing and liquid sputtering echo from inside the bunker. Bach grabs hold of the edge of one door and pulls with his weight leaning back. Dretphi releases Bach’s door, puts both hands on hers, and shifts her mass to force the door further open. “Not hard. Not easy. We will have to coordinate going through ourselves.”

Bach nods and strains as his door moves slowly to inside of the frame. “Agreed. Okay, watch the hydraulic fluid. I think more got pumped out.”

Cideeda draws both her laser pistols, aims them down the dark hallway leading deeper into the bunker, and hops into the bunker over the oozing pool of hydraulic fluid. Sotalia braces her self on Bach’s shoulder as she awkwardly steps over the muck. Aristespha gracefully leaps over the obstacle and lands solidly inside. Bach looks at Dretphi and sways his head towards the inside. “After you.”

Dretphi flashes a smile at Bach. She orbits around her half of the door frame, keeps pressure on the door, and shifts position inside. Bach attempts to mimic Dretphi, slides a bit on the hydraulic fluid when the force of the door nearly gets the best of him, but manages to recover to get inside. The two simultaneously release their respective doors and the doors quickly slide shut with another chorus of hisses and sputters from the broken hoses.

The courtyard remains silent. A breeze washes across the pavement and stirs up bits of dirt. Clouds above move slowly across the sky and project flowing shadows onto the earth below. No signs of life. Then, a previously lightless console returns to light.

Rows of computers fill the huge space. Various images and text display on the screens. At the front of the large room, huge flat monitors occasionally scroll with new lines of text or update an image. An omnipresent sound of idle computation equipment lingers. A glowing orb of light drifts up into the air, touches the ceiling, and sticks. Another similar light orb lands on the ceiling a few meters away. Bach readies another light orb and stops when he notices that the light levels are enough. "This must be the nerve center for the operation."

Aristespha holds her hand up and projects a bright light across the banks of computers. "It is. There are station labels on these machines. The language isn't that old."

Sebastian floats over to a station and surprises himself. "Wow! It's something I can read. The spelling is a bit weird, but it must be before phonetic spelling got popular. Looks these are the utility control and monitoring. Not much going on here."

Sotalia shines her variation of a light spell over the nearby row of computers, perks a brow, piques her interest. "Ooo! Security monitoring station. Looks like some camera controls and other neat stuff."

She taps the thin monitor, drags the system's mouse across the desk, and finally presses the space bar on the keyboard. No response. She grumbles in frustration and continues investigate the system before stopping. She sighs, rolls her eyes, and clicks the power button on the monitor. The monitor lights up the area around her and she groans with an annoyed droop of the shoulders. "Of course, they logged out. Figures. Maybe they wrote it down somewhere."

Dretphi scans the room while walking to Sotalia and spots an active station on the front row. "Front right station. It looks logged in."

Cideeda rushes over to the station, inspects the office chair, and carefully sits down. She squints at the screen and examines the current state of the computer. "It looks like a data visualization station? Wait! I recognize this operating system? It seems like an ancient ancestor of a few of the older ones today. Hey, Bach, could you come over here? Maybe you can help narrow it down."

Bach navigates through the strewn papers, stacks of extra computers, and layers of cabling littering the floor. He rolls a nearby office chair over next to Cideeda, eyes the seat of it, shrugs, and carefully rests his butt in the chair. "Well, they spent good money on the furniture at least."

He watches the monitor and analyzes the interface's layout and design. "It's definitely ancient, but I'm sure some of the old core commands haven't changed that much. See if the command log function works the same."

Cideeda rests her fingers on the keyboard and clacks in a command to the terminal prompt on the screen. Another window appears and shows a list of commands and times. Cideeda's eyes flit open and her jaw drops as she places a finger on the screen next to her recent

command's date and the date of the last entered command. "Oh my gods... That command was entered TWO WEEKS AGO!"

Sebastian rockets over the computer banks and stops right over Cideeda and Bach. "WHAT?! Holy shit, he was here!"

Aristespha runs over, leaps over debris, and squeezes in behind Bach and Cideeda, excitement overflowing. "What was he doing here?! He was looking for something. He picked through everything in this place, logged into this station, and did something?! What was it?!"

Dretphi finishes checking a file cabinet with her flashlight and shakes her head. "Nothing."

Sotalia growls and firmly crosses her arms, unamused. "Dammit! We can't find an username and password for this fucking thing! I so wanted to get that bastard on video!"

Bach glances over his shoulder to Sotalia in the back and gestures a flipping motion with both hands over his head. "Have checked under the keyboard?"

Sotalia lowers her eyes down at the keyboard, lifts it up from the front, and lowers her head to the side to get a look. She grins ear to ear and carefully removes a laminated sheet with an username and password. "Good call! Now that's the security I've come to know and love."

Sotalia types in the information, the system unlocks, and number of monitors light up. Dretphi wipes dust away from the screens and watches the video feeds. She recognizes most of the camera locations, except one... An open exterior doorway. Inside is a robotic figure missing parts and an empty robotic dock for another. Dretphi slams her eyes wide open, immediately stands up straight, and yells out. "WE. HAVE. A. PROBLEM!"

Bach stares at the end of a magical energy cord and concentrates his mind on the end point. Holding the cable in one hand, he hovers his other hand open near the end. Strands of individually colored energies solidify in a set arrangement. A form materializes around and fills in the gaps. Bach examines the new plug and compares it to port on the computer workstation. "I've only done this a few times this small, but it should be electrically sound."

Cideeda gestures on holographic screen projecting from the holoplayer. She squints and hems as she checks the messages on the screen. "Well, it should be this connection standard with this plug and use this protocol. So... Plug it in."

Bach guides the plug into the port, stops when it refuses to go in, rotates the plug over, and slides it into place. He pulls himself into a rolling chair and rolls near Cideeda. The two alternate between the holoplayer output and workstation display. Cideeda rubs her hands in anticipation and she grits her teeth as her eyes dart between. "System detected the device. It's querying it. Holoplayer confirms the proper protocol and is emulating a data storage device. And... YES!!"

In her excitement, she wraps her arms around Bach's arm and squeezes it quickly, before letting go to present a high five to Bach. Bach dons a grin, happily returns the high five, and points to the screen. "Nice! That holoplayer has got the largest data drive I could manage on it. Should be plenty for this system."

Cideeda eagerly types up commands in the onscreen terminal prompt and bites her lip as she focuses. "I'll repeat whatever commands Noxian did and dump the output to files. Then-"

Bach's eyes flit wide as an idea jumps forward in his mind and gestures over the entire system. "Do a direct dump of the system drives! Maybe you have the permissions to grab other stuff on connected machines."

Cideeda snaps her fingers, points at Bach, and nods in total agreement. "Yes! That will take a while. But, anything might help make sense of this all stuff Noxian pulled off. Right now, it's just random numbers and graphs."

Bach scratches his chin, glances over his shoulder to the others at the back security console, and sighs as he gazes back at the screen. "I get the feeling we'll probably have some time here. I don't think we're in a rush to go outside. Anyway, once we do, I doubt we're going to get a chance to grab data like this."

Cideeda frowns slightly to Bach, with hints of concern "I know. I'll get the transfers started. Go see what they've found out. I'll be over in a bit."

Bach stands up and navigates his way to the main central walkway. He steps over the junk equipment littering the area and arrives next to his brother. He scans over security area where Aristespha, Dretphi, and Sotalia are inspecting screens of images and video feeds. Sebastian wears a contemplative expression and tilts his head towards Bach. "Any good news on your end, bro?"

Bach nods slowly as he shifts attention between security displays. "Yep. Conjured up a data cable and we got the holoplayer working with the system. Cideeda is recreating the commands Noxian used, saving the output, and then setting the thing to mass dump everything else on the system."

Bach shrugs plainly at Sebastian. "Maybe there's some other useful information. If nothing else, there should be some hint as to whatever the hell this data is. There's a method to the madness, but damned if I know what it is at the moment."

Aristespha rolls away from the console and leans into the back rest of the chair. She rubs her eyes and cups her hands over her mouth and nose. She sighs deeply and rests her hands at her thighs. "Well, that's good to hear. I actually have some friends in the computer science department that might be able to help us."

Bach gawks at the video of a large, armored robot. "OH. GODS. Is that it?!"

Sebastian nods slowly and groans with an ethereal echo as he sternly stares at the monitor. "Yes. And it's not getting any better the more we look at it."

Dretphi taps the monitor. "Heavy armor. Fluid movement. Autonomous AI. Short barrel minigun. Plasma Projectile Cannon. It is DANGEROUS."

Bach scratches his head and looks around for an explanation. "How did it reactivate? It was quiet and behind the doors before."

Sotalia snorts out annoyance, grabs the monitor's bezel, and turns it to Bach. "You can thank good old Dark Douche Noxian for that."

She crosses arms and rocks her chair's back rest with frustration radiating. "From the logs and the crappy time lapse video I found, whenever he forced open the doors, he triggered an alarm. The system woke up, started to wake the bot, and Noxian did... Something. Fuck! I can't tell! Every time he does anything magical, the camera loses its shit."

Bach rubs his eyes into a pinch of his nose's bridge and groans as the pieces fall into place in his head. "Dammit. That makes sense. The magic on the entry door had decayed. It would only make sense the magic to stop the bot, cast at roughly the same time, would have decayed, too."

Cideeda slinks next to Bach, assesses the monitors, and bites on a claw tip, thinking. "Are there any remote controls for it tied into the system? Maybe a remote shutdown or an alert cancel?"

Aristespha shakes her head as she gestures to a screen with a graphical menu. The menu shows two pictograms of the robots with status messages and color coding. Aristespha takes in a deep breath and rests her cheek in the palm of her hand. "I checked. There are all kinds of remote control features. But, the one robot that is still in contact with the system, happens to be the useless pile of gutted parts. The system has a few books worth of error messages trying to contact the working bot."

Bach finds a nearby chair, pulls it over to him, and sits with a firm frown. "Bastard probably fried or corrupted something, now this thing is either stuck in alert mode or worse."

He pulls out his aetherphone, clicks the power button, and sharpens his frown as the "No Relay Found" flashes in the status bar. Sebastian eyes Bach's phone and shakes his head. "I know. We're too far out to easily call for help. We think we can radio for help if we get of the bunker and-"

Cideeda raises her hands abruptly and waves them in alarm. "Whoa! We might not want to do that this close to it!"

Everyone pays attention to Cideeda and dons a mix of quizzical expressions. Cideeda moves closer to a screen with a video feed of the robot walking outside. She taps a button on the console, freezes the video feed, and circles a claw tip over the head and shoulder section of the robot. "This thing looks to me like some kind of government hand-me-down and this here looks like some kind of antenna array. If we key up the radios on our phones, there's a good chance it might home in on the source expecting a fight."

Bach narrows his eyes, leans forward, and spins a dial on the console to zoom in on the freeze frame. He drops his head in begrudging realization and looks back up groaning. "Shit. That looks like serious sensor equipment in the head and chest, too."

Drephi nods in agreement and crosses her arms, the hard plates of her armor clack as they contact each other. "Yes. Possibly can see into multiple bands. Maybe radar. Probably thermal and ultrasound."

Sotalia curls a lip in a sneer and huffs, shaking her head with an eye roll. "Figures. No amount of invisibility magic is going to obscure anyone that good from that thing."

Sebastian floats above the group and coughs ethereally to attention. "Okay, everyone. Calm down. We can do this. Here's an idea. From what I've watched, this thing has a rough patrol pattern. If we can plot it out and time it, there might be a few windows of opportunity we can use to get out of this bunker, move through the courtyard, and then clear the outside antenna array."

Bach's nod builds up momentum as the concept dwells in his mind more and more. "That could work. These buildings are concrete. We could keep out of its line of sight and probably not show up on any kind of radar, so long as we keep in the shadow. Don't know about sound, though."

Dretphi presses buttons on the security console to iterate through a number of external cameras. “Windy outside. Storm could be nearby. It would be difficult to pick out footsteps with this noise.”

Sebastian begins to crack a proud grin on his mouth and he looks to everyone. “Exactly! Ideally, we would get to the humvee, drive off, and put as much distance between us and this place as possible. Get to an aethernet relay, call the guild, and let the military have fun with his thing.”

Aristespha narrows her eyes, pushes back in her chair, and analyzes the plan in her mind. “The open antenna array will be difficult, but... If even if we are seen, the distance would hopefully buy us time to counterattack.”

Sotalia rubs her hands together and an evil grin emerges on her face. “Hopefully plenty of time for some powerful spells.”

Sebastian drifts back to stand on the floor and directs everyone’s attention to the security console. “Okay! It’s a plan. So, let’s get to studying this metal monster and figure out our escape.”

A harsh gust of wind blows ferociously through the courtyard. Distant rustles of leaves chorus the air with a wavering drone. The white fluffy clouds of before jet across the sky in long, thin trails. Constant, rhythmic thumping steps out from behind the corner of a small building near the bunker. The metal behemoth rotates its upper body, aims two weaponized arms down the path to the courtyard, and adjusts its walk to a strafe. Each step executes with a strange grace as the rest of the thickly armored body moves with exact coordination. The head of the security robot briefly turns, scans the area, and returns to facing its previous course. The body smoothly aligns with the head as it passes by. The robot continues along the side of the bunker, moving away from the courtyard area.

As the last glimpses of the huge backpack unit and whip antennas leave sight around the corner of the bunker, Sebastian eases his face through the doors. His head emerges and he glances to corner. He waits, listens, and ventures the rest of his ethereal form through the doors. Cautiously, he floats up to the bunker’s roof, crests his head above eye level, and watches the security robot continue its patrol. After a minute, he quickly zips down, shoves his head through the doors, pauses, pulls his head back, and flies back up to the roof line. The bunker doors slide open with a sputter. Bach and Dretphi swing outside to each side of the doorway while maintaining their grips on the doors. Cideeda leaps out onto the concrete walkway and swivels her head around while her ears hunt the area. Sebastian holds his arm out, points out a direction opposite of the security robot, and aims his voice down. “It’s still on course. Clear to move.”

Aristespha and Sotalia rush out from the bunker and assume defensive casting stances near Cideeda. Bach and Dretphi simultaneously release the bunker doors to a final hiss that

mutes when the bunker seals. Both swiftly walk up near the group. They all form a loose line as they sweep carefully across the courtyard, paying attention Sebastian's guiding arm. Over the minutes, the group navigates the debris littered courtyard and stay within the sensor shadow cast by the bunker. Sebastian judges the path of the security robot. He drifts away from the roof and keeping level. He glances over to the group with a reserved grin, gives a thumbs up, and quietly voices to himself. "Keep it up. You're all doing good. Just a little while longer to the array."

Something catches Sebastian's eye, and he rotates to the tree line. He puzzles at strange wave of swaying treetops. A massive gale forms a wall of air and draws up debris from the bent over trees. A few treetops drop below the green canopy and roots momentarily flip into view. Sebastian waves an alarm and points. Cideeda's ears find the oncoming roar and she alerts the rest of the group. "A huge gust of wind is coming. Get behind the concrete barriers."

The group gathers down low behind a chain of concrete construction barriers in the middle of the courtyard just as the wind speeds up through the alleyways of the buildings. The wall of wind blasts through, sending dirt and sticks from the nearby forest soaring through the area. A strange, loud noise grinds into the air, slicing through the drowning din of the gale gust. Rust chunks crumble off a tall antenna tower assembly. The clangor of their impact to ground gets the attention of Cideeda as she gawks wide-eyed at the tower. "Oh gods. No..."

An explosive snap of a support cable thunders out. The heavy steel line yanks the tower as the wind carries it out. Everyone witnesses the last support cable go limp, as the tower tilts too far and flings the last support anchor with its broken off concrete base into the sky. The massive structure of steel flexes as the bottom half catches up with the free-falling of the top half. The tower smashes into the ground and erupts into a cacophony of metal screeching and crushing upon the surface of the earth. The gust passes through and leaves an eerie silence... That a repetitious thumping replaces, increasing in volume with each passing second. Sebastian spins around to face the source, his eyes slam right open with narrowing pupils, and he bellows out an ethereal scream. "HIDE! IT'S COMING!"

With a powerful sprinting run, the robot clears swathes of ground with each thunderous bound. Every impact presses into the dirt and leaves deep indents behind. It powers along the other side of the bunker and rockets around the corner. In fractions of second, the head of the robotic monster scans the area and all targets. Cideeda sprints behind a barrier in front a tall pile of steel beams. Dretphi forcefully ushers Sotalia and Aristespha around to the back of a collection concrete barriers behind a pile of gravel. Bach's eyes glow as he flees to another barrier at great speed. Sebastian hovers in the air, assessing the dramatically changing situation. The robot settles its focus on Sebastian as it slides to a bracing stance and spins up the barrels of the minigun. Sebastian hears the spin up and glares down at the robot. He charges, flaring up his ethereal form. "FUCK YOU, SHIT HEAP! TRY TO SHOOT ME!"

With blinding speed and absolute precision, the minigun erupts fire and mass at Sebastian. The rounds zip through Sebastian's form and he dramatically dissipates. Seconds later, he

reforms behind Aristespha, Dretphi, and Sotalia with an anxious demeanor. “Okay! Um! Ah... Ideas?!”

The robot positions itself equally distant from each hiding spot, both weapons seeking a new target. The minigun barrel winds down and the robot waits. Aetherphones chirp. Aristespha retrieve hers and puts it on speakerphone. Sotalia reaches into the collar of her cloak and slips a compact headset over an ear. Dretphi taps the underside of her helmet. Cideeda’s voice crackles through the speakerphone. “Well, it knows we are here. So, we might as well use the radio. I think it’s trying to jam us, but we’re too close for that to work. Is everyone okay?”

Aristespha sighs with relief at hearing Cideeda’s voice and lifts her phone close to her mouth. “Dretphi, Sotalia, and I are okay. Sebastian is with us here. Bach, where are you?”

Bach’s voice briefly distorts over the speaker, but recovers to sound out his excited, worried tone. “I’m okay. I’m down from you all and opposite from where I think Cideeda went. Concrete barrier closest to the middle building. Any ideas so far?”

Sotalia pulls a menacing grin across her mouth and flexes her hands. “How about a good hard hitting spell?”

Sebastian shakes his head with a grimace at Sotalia. “No. Sorry. I’m going to have to veto that. Your hard hitters take time and positioning to cast. It’s not going to give you that chance.”

Sotalia sneers in frustration at Sebastian, takes deep breath, and releases it with an accepting nod. “Dammit! You’re right. It took no time to target you and fire at you.”

Cideeda presses her back against the middle of the concrete barrier, puts her atherphone in a front upper chest pocket near her neck, closes her eyes, and lets her ears search the air. She opens eyes after a few passes and bites her lip. “This thing isn’t using servos or hydraulics. I can’t hear them. It has to be polymer muscles. So, it’s got a ridiculous reaction time.”

Dretphi growls and clenches a fist tightly as the material strains audibly. “The right rifle for this is in the humvee. Too far. Too fast.”

Cideeda searches through her gear and eventually retrieves a rectangular bundle of a yellow clay substance. A devious grin cracks from the corner her mouth as she finds a few other items. “Well, I remembered to bring my block of breaching explosives. Got a mounting magnet and remote detonator with controller, too.”

Cideeda listens to the silence on the radio and focuses on attaching the remote detonator and mounting magnet on the small brick of explosives. She tilts her head close to the phone and speaks in a lower, determined tone. “Permission to proceed?”

Sebastian responds over the radio with an eager hint in his voice. “Permission granted. Let’s see if it’ll fall for me again. Let me know when you are ready and I’ll make a run at it.”

Cideeda shakes out a plastic mesh bag from a small pocket and tosses the explosive assembly inside, giving a light test swing. "I doubt I'll be able to stick it, but if it lands close enough I'll trigger it. Hopefully, the concussion will knock it down and give us a chance to get further away. I'm about ready."

Sebastian prepares himself and watches Aristespha as she holds her phone. Cideeda's voice hisses over the phone. "Ready!"

Aristespha keeps her eyes on Sebastian and speaks into the phone. "Okay. Sebastian is going to draw its attention. He'll yell out if it is distracted. Then, you toss the explosives. When they detonate and the robot is down, everyone is to regroup and head straight into the woods to the west. Confirm Bach, Cideeda."

Bach voice distorts again over the phone as the interference strains the signal. "Sounds good to me. That bulky bastard should have some trouble getting us in there."

Cideeda chirps excitedly over the static hiss. "Let's do this!"

Sebastian gives a thumbs to Aristespha, Dretphi and Sotalia as he lunges out from cover. He waves his hands in the air, flames up his ethereal form, and screams. "I'M BACK FOR YOU FUCKER! YOU CAN'T HIT ME! OOGITY BOOGITY!"

The robot's head tracks Sebastian and both arms immediately align. The minigun's barrels spin up. Sebastian, mid-stride with a wild look in his eyes, yells out. "IT'S WATCHING ME! NOW!"

Cideeda stands up and vigorously swings the plastic mesh bag around with her arm in a large vertical circle. When it gets to the right speed, she holds her free arm out to aim and launches the package in a lofty arc. The bag soars through the air, reaches the apex of its trajectory, and flies downwards at the robot. The robot breaks lock on Sebastian and its head snaps upwards. It pauses. Without any warning, it crashes down to a squat and springs back into the air. It lands securely with a loud earth-shaking whump over ten meters away, while the head tracks the bag. Cideeda's jaw slams to the ground in shock and she cowers behind cover. "FUCK! ABORT! Stay in cover! It jumped out of the way!"

The robot redirects its attention at Cideeda's area. The minigun spins down and a new low rumble resonates. Cideeda's ears twitch and she nervously grits her teeth. "What is that noise? That sounds like an energy charge up of some kind."

Cideeda sneaks a peek out the side of her barrier and yanks back in fright. "Shit! It's charging up the plasma cannon! It's aiming at my position, but I can't see exactly where!"

Bach flips the visor of his helmet down and rises just over the top of his barrier. He studies the angle of the cannon arm and his mind screams forth in panic as the calculations finish. His eyes fly open and he screams as loud as he can. "IT'S AIMING BEHIND YOU!"

Cideeda glances at the tall stack of steel beams behind her. She pales with mouth agape and her ears perk at a loud release. A twenty centimeter diameter ball of blue-white plasma blasts from the barrel of the cannon and blazes across the courtyard at the stack of beams. Cideeda dives out from behind the concrete barrier as the plasma ball explodes a concussive wave of plasma that fills the space behind the barrier and tumbles beams down. She darts her eyes around. The barrel of the minigun spins back up. Cideeda spots small pile of concrete parking stops. The claws on her hands and feet dig into the ground and she panic scrambles to the pile. She desperately flattens herself against the pile and covers her head. A torrent of fast mass rains upon her position. Chunks of the dirt and concrete from the stops cascade down upon her back. The pile shrinks fast as the barrage continues. Cideeda feels the bullets ring pass her and flecks of ricochets impact near her. A hot searing pain cuts across the middle crest of both butt cheeks. Before she can manage to react, another spattering of pain dots across her shoulder blades. She reflexively cries out fright and pain. "HELP!"

Sebastian's form blows out in a flaming aura and launches right at the robot. "FUCK OFF! JUST FUCK OFF WILL YOU!"

The robot briefly stops, aims at Sebastian. Bach pops out above his concrete barrier, points his plasma pistol at the robot, and quickly launches a series of plasma bolts. The bolts impact and lightly rattle the bot. It pivots and swings its aim at Bach. Bach plummets behind the barrier before the loud rumble of minigun fire speckles the area. Cideeda regains her senses, grits her teeth, and attempts to flex the muscles in her back and butt. There is pain, but she feels she can move, somewhat. She reaches an arm back and checks the extent of the injuries. She bites her lip, winces, but sighs in annoyed relief to find only grazes. Footsteps rush along the ground and close in on her with a familiar clank of armor. A shadow crouches over Cideeda and with a firm, strong hand lightly pats the top of her shoulder. "Can you move?"

Cideeda smiles through winces and cringes. She lifts herself up, crawls around to the back of Dretphi, and forces her self up into a crouch. Cideeda taps Dretphi's back. Dretphi nods her helmeted, visor protected head and lifts her energy shield up. The two carefully move across the courtyard to an awaiting Sotalia and Aristespha. Bach stops hearing the impacts of bullets and radios through the headset in his helmet. "Look out! It stopped shooting at me!"

Dretphi watches as the robot's head trains upon her, its arms following. She holds her energy shield up and braces her shield gauntlet with her other arm. The minigun releases a spray of metal that bounces off the energy shield. Dretphi concentrates every bit of herself and keeps the shield in place as impacts rattle her. Stray shots from the spray force Aristespha and Sotalia into cover, as Dretphi and Cideeda edge closer. Sparks erupt from the shield gauntlet and the energy field wavers. Dretphi pulls in her arms, plants her feet, solemnly speaks. "Whatever happens. Stay behind me."

The shield disappears. Bullet slice through the air at Dretphi and they impact... a golden magical barrier. Metal careens at the plates of Dretphi's armor and bounce off barriers. Dretphi tenses herself and strains to slide her feet closer towards cover. Each hit shakes and rocks her. The barriers grow more visible and cracks form. Rounds contact Dretphi's helmet

and throw her off balance. Cracks spider over most the plates. The bullets stop. Bach's voice booms out into the courtyard. "EAT PLASMA SHIT! MOTHERFUCKING GOVERNMENT SURPLUS!"

Bach stands out from cover, eyes brilliantly glowing blue under his visor. His voice blares from the magical energy covering his respirator. His magically modified plasma pistol overflows with energy as he levels it at a specific spot on the robot. A powerful ball of concentrated energy awaits inside the device. Bach pulls the trigger. The blazing white bolt screams out at the robot. The recoil forces Bach's arms up in the air and Bach stumbles back. The robot curls the cannon arm up to shield itself, but the bolt drops low and then rockets up to the minigun. For a brief moment at impact, a faint line of magical thread from the bolt to the pistol flickers. The explosive of heat and energy flings the minigun arm back and pulls the robot off balance. The minigun screeches to a halt. The minigun motor strains in vain. Sebastian sets down next to Dretphi. "It's distracted! I'll keep an eye on it for you. Run for it!"

Dretphi summons all her willpower, launches herself up, sweeps Cideeda into her arms, and sprints over to Aristespha and Sotalia. Sebastian hovers behind and keeps sight on the robot. Bach ejects the smoking magazine from his pistol, reaches into his duster for another, all the while grinning manically. "Thought you were a badass, huh!"

The robot stabilizes itself. The minigun drive motor struggles and groans, but the barrels do not move. Bach finds and retrieves another magazine. "Don't worry, fucker. I got seconds for you-"

A familiar low rumbling resonates. Bach's wide eyes are visible through his visor and hint to the hidden shock. The robot levels its cannon and a plasma ball flares out at Bach. Bach drops everything, extends his arms out, and braces himself. A network of magical energy spreads out in front of him and solidifies with a golden fill. Before the energy field contacts the ground, the plasma ball crashes into the shield, and smashes the shield into Bach. Bach's feet slide across the ground as the plasma ball explodes. The golden energy field crackles to full opacity. Plasma leaks blast through the cracks. A loud shatter rings out as the magical barrier fragments into hundreds of shards and a concussive wave of blue-white plasma washes over Bach. The plasma violently launches Bach backwards into the concrete wall of the small building behind him with a solid, dull thud. He slides into a limp heap on the pavement below, smoke rising from his armor and clothing. Sebastian pupils shrink to mere dots as horror drenches his face. "Bach? Bach! BACH! OH GODS! BACH! NO!"

Sebastian tries fly over and Aristespha seizes him with a hand as her eyes glow violet. "What?! I gotta get over there and check on him!"

Aristespha fiercely glares at Sebastian and growls intensely. "It. Still. Targets. You. It may fire at you and near Bach! Calm down and THINK!"

Sotalia crests her eyes over the top of cover, glowers at the robot, and starts moving her hands to cast. Aristespha's other hand snatches Sotalia by the collar of her cloak and yanks her back down. "Don't you fucking dare! I know it's hard, but we need to lay low long enough to figure a way to get to him."

Sotalia grabs hold of Aristespha arm. She glares back at Aristespha and slowly breathes. With each breath, her grip loosens until she lowers her head and wipes her eyes. "Dammit. Okay."

Sebastian slowly lifts his head above the barrier and watches the robot. It waits with the cannon arm pointing at Bach. Sebastian sighs with an ethereal echo. "It still is targeting me. I don't think it has figured out that bullets don't work on me. I'll distract it. Get it to aim somewhere else. And, Sotalia, you go and at least drag Bach to cover."

Sotalia nods firmly and readies herself near the edge of the barrier. "Sounds good, let me know when to run for it."

Sebastian darts out in a run to another pile of debris. The robot's head swings in his direction and the body follows. Sebastian peers over the top of the pile and mumbles to himself. "Good. Pay attention to me you bastard. Just long enough so we can get over to Bach-

He squints over to a now empty spot. Sotalia peeks over to see Sebastian gawking in utter confusion to the building wall that- Bach ISN'T at. A voice distorts over the phones. "OWWWW! Gods dammit, that hurt. I'm sorry. I didn't want to do anything when it was aiming right at me. Oww. Shit."

Sotalia ducks behind the protective barrier with a firm smile. "Damn you, asshole! You had us scared."

Aristespha lifts up her phone and speaks with a happier tone. "It's okay. Good call. I've got to treat the grazes on Cideeda so she can move enough. Stay there for now."

Sebastian reforms next to Aristespha with sheer joy in his face. "Man, I know I'm some kind of ghost, but my heart really didn't need that. Apart from pain anything else wrong?"

Bach pats another smoldering spot on his duster and winces when he slides up on the concrete barrier. "Not really. Well, some burns, sore back and ass, and another shirt ruined."

Cideeda vocally eye rolls over the radio. "Oh? Sore back and ass?"

Bach sighs sarcastically. "Sorry. Forgot about that with all the plasma in my face."

The robot reaches over with its other arm, grips the barrel assembly with a hand, and torques hard and suddenly. Sotalia slides her head from the side of the barrier, squints, and raises an eye brow at the robot's actions. "What is it doing?"

Cideeda crawls out enough to peer around the other side, Aristespha scoots along with her and continues treating her injuries. Cideeda's ear flick and she frowns. "Shit. It's trying to unjam that minigun."

Sebastian rubs his temples and grumbles as he thinks. "Okay. Let's all hit it hard at once. Hopefully, that will occupy it long enough, so we can get to the woods. I'll see how long I can distract it."

A sharp, metallic crack resounds. An electrical groan of a motor follows and an ominous cyclic scrape of steel shrieks, growing faster with each second. Bach's voice comes in through the radio. "Dammit! It broke the heat weld that plasma hit did. It's- WALKING RIGHT TOWARDS YOU ALL!"

The robot marches forward. Each step thumps solidly. Both arms aim forward. The minigun fights friction spin, but maintains a threatening speed. A glow lights the inside barrel of the cannon. Sebastian pops his head over the top of cover and drops back down. He solemnly exchanges glances with everyone and desperately searches himself for a plan, a route, or a solution. Cideeda winces and covers her ears. "The hell is that noise?!"

Sotalia blinks blankly and snaps her head with her eyes full confusion to Aristespha. "Do you feel that?"

Drephi feels the ground, waits for something, and puzzles. "It stopped walking."

The crackling white noise launches out from the background and drastically pitches to a high piercing shrill. Sebastian flashes a manic grin with his eyes fully open. "HE. CASTED. IT!"

Heads peek out from the barrier. Bach stands behind his barrier. He struggles to maintain both his arms out and his hands together as a half meter spherical maelstrom of visual white noise swirls chaotically in front of his palms. Wind vortexes around the orb as countless streams of magical energy pour into it. Bach's eyes spotlight blue through his visor and veins of magic flow brilliantly in and around. The robot slowly turns its head at Bach, then focuses on the orb. Bach finally tenses his body and the orb jets at the robot, leaving streams of magical energy. The robot leans away from the attack and raises its cannon arm to block. The orb adjusts course and contacts the upper arm. An explosive burst of fine powder and vapor billow out into a particle cloud around where the upper arm WAS. The fore arm with cannon crashes out of the mist. The orb leaves the cloud, smaller the before, and it sharply turns straight into the robot's chest. A plume of particulate mass blasts out as the orb burrows. A heavy fog of vaporized material fills the air as it violently ejects out the gaping hole in the chest of the robot. Seconds later, the courtyard silences and the robot remains still. A small pin point of daylight pierces out the center of the deep conical void inside the robot. Bach's eyes dim and he catches himself along the top of the barrier. He whispers to himself. "Please be dead."

Sotalia gapes at the scene before her. Aristespha slowly rotates her head to Sebastian and stares thoughtfully at him. "I can see why that spell was prohibited."

Sebastian beams with pride and casually shrugs. Cideeda drops her smile. “I hear something! It’s not done yet!”

Everyone drops back to hiding. Bach slides down the back of the barrier. “Gods dammit! I’m sorry. I thought that’d get it.”

Cideeda curls a lip as her mind processes the numerous noises coming from the robot now. “Don’t be sorry, that hurt it A LOT. It’s not doing well.”

The robot struggles with its footing. The minigun spins up and the arm sweeps repeatedly for a target. Smoke wisps out from the massive hole in the chest of the machine. Each struggling, sluggish action fans the haze out. Sebastian nods as he watches the monstrosity barely stand. “It’s still a threat, but not by much now.”

Dretphi studies the robot, squints her eyes, and growls in thought. “It is compensating. Better with each second. It will get better.”

Sebastian sighs. “Damn. We’ve already risked too much. I want to put this thing down hard with as little risk to us. That minigun may still be functional.”

Cideeda edges around the side of the barrier and spots the plastic mesh bag. She reaches into a pocket and retrieves the remote control. She flips a guarded switch and a green light blinks on the device. A second later, the light stops blinking and stays a solid green. A sly, toothy smile pulls across her mouth and she hoists the remote control to Sebastian. “The explosives are still alive and there’s a big gaping hole to put them in.”

Sebastian points to Cideeda as his mind begins to piece everything together. “Okay. We need to get it there.”

Dretphi holds her hand up. “I can run it. Unfortunately. Bach’s barriers are worn. A few hits is all I can take.”

Sebastian nods and takes a deep breath in. “Okay. I don’t know if it will fall for me again and that will only work for so long. Dear, can you immobilize it with your magic?”

Aristespha contorts her face as she considers thought. “Maybe for a few seconds? That spell was never meant to restrain machinery and even damaged, it can still easily overpower me eventually.”

Bach listens to the discussion over radio. He strains to lift himself up, but manages to place his back against the cold concrete of the barrier. His subconscious flings a recent memory straight to the front his mind. Bach’s eyes slam open and he calls out on the radio. “Polymer muscles! You said polymer muscles!?! Right, Cideeda!?”

Cideeda’s voice crackles on the radio. “Yes? It does have them, I saw a few strands hanging out of the cut forearm. Why?”

Bach cracks devious smile. "They have a freezing point right?"

Cideeda directs a toothy grin to Sotalia. "Sotalia, how cold can your freeze spell get?"

Sotalia thinks a moment and laughs darkly. Cideeda chuckles back. "We'll probably have a minute before it turns on the defrost, but it should work."

Sebastian nods slowly as the plan comes together in his head. "I'll distract. Aristespha will hold it down long enough for Sotalia to freeze it. Dretphi runs, snatches the bomb, and plants in inside. Cideeda triggers it. Bro, just sit back for now."

Bach's voice disorts over the radio. "Will do. I hope this works. I really don't want to look that far up my sleeve for cards at this point."

The robot sweeps its minigun arm left and right, seeking a target. The weapon arm steadies more with each pass. The head scans, shuddering. A few sparks roll out of the hole. Sebastian runs out from cover. The robot's head tracks, the minigun swings out, and a roar of fire spews forth. Mass peppers the area around Sebastian. He runs, dramatically dodging out of the way. "Oh no! I'm all in the open! What will I do!"

Aristespha rises up, her eyes glaring violet at the robot. She precisely motions her arms and perfectly calls out her incantations, ending with wide swing forward of both arms. A massive wave of energy speeds to the robot. The wave impacts and surrounds the robot. Movement slows as it strains against the energy enveloping it. Aristespha's body shakes as she concentrates everything in the spell. "Now!"

Sotalia hops out the barrier and flings her cloak to the side. She plants her feet, gestures her arms quickly in front of her, and yells out incantations at a feverish pace. Her eyes flash golden as magical energy flows around her to a point in front of her hands. The runic markings on her arms flare out and dissipate off into the air. Wind gusts into the emerging clear liquid orb in front of her and waves of heat thrust behind her. The whites of her eyes blacken. With a powerful shove forward, a guiding stream of energy spirals out to the robot and a torrent of liquid deluges the machine. Clear liquid dryly steams and boils off upon contact with the metal beast, but more remains with each passing moment. Sotalia grins ear to ear as she directs the stream to each part of the machine's body. Seconds later, the stream cuts off, leaving a frost and iced coated robot unable to move. Sotalia stumbles to a knee and rolls back behind the barrier while Aristespha relaxes her hold on the bot. Dretphi tears out running straight for the plastic mesh bag. She coasts across the surface of the terrain, guides herself near the bag, and snatches it cleanly from the ground. She powers on at full speed at the robot, springs up to a jump, and climbs onto the chest of the metal beast. The robots head turns to meet the visor-covered face of Dretphi. She bares her teeth in a menacing grin as her glare drills into the optics of the robot. She maintains eye contact for a few seconds, then rams the bag upside the robot, shaking it violently from the force. Dretphi kicks off with both feet, sticks the landing, and sprints to safety. The robot topples over onto the pavement of the courtyard. Dretphi slides around the side and swings herself behind the

barrier as Aristespha drops down. Cideeda disengages the main safety of the remote control and yells out. "ONE!"

The frost begins to fade from the robot with an electric hum. Cideeda clicks the trigger and a yellow light illuminates. "TWO!"

The robot slowly elevates its upper body up to a sitting position. Cideeda clicks the trigger again and a red light flickers to life. "THREE!"

The head of the robot cranes over to examine what fills the hole in its chest. It pauses briefly, lifts its head back up, and long beeps once. Cideeda clicks the trigger. A loud kaboom rocks the area, as the chest of the robot shatters and blows out. Thousands of small cracks ring out as ammunition riddles the backpack unit full of holes, exploding in large series. A loud piercing snap echoes in the area as jets of plasma erupt from a power core. A shockwave blasts across the ground and a massive bubble of plasma savagely vents up into the air, fading into the windy sky above. A strange silence looms over the courtyard. A small crater now marks the landscape. Larger bits of the robot are in new, interesting locations. No windows remain intact nearby. The silence breaks with a strange whistle that gets louder and louder. The head of the robot collides with the pavement and bounces poorly to a roll.

Sebastian floats up above and surveys the area. He hovers up higher and scans the greater courtyard area and releases an ethereal sigh of relief. "I think it's fucking dead this time!"

Through a golden, crackled haze coated helmet visor, Bach gazes up into the fast moving clouds above. The sun nears the horizon a bit more every minute. Bach takes a long breath in through his helmet's respirator and exhales slowly. He lays behind the concrete barrier on his back, hands resting on his stomach. A gust of wind blows through and sways the tears and char spots in his clothing. A few flakes of ashen cloth drift with the flow of air and away into the distance. Bach sees Sebastian fly overhead, scouting the area. He floats down closer to Bach and waves at him. "Hey! Bro! You alive?"

Bach gradually rolls a hand into a thumbs up and calls out through his respirator. "Yah. Wiped out. But. Alive, man. Some-fucking-how."

Sebastian smiles proudly, returns a thumbs up to Bach, and points around to the surrounding area. "Cool, bro. I'm going to look around and check the area again. Make sure nothing else is aiming to join in the clusterfuck of our day. You... You rest."

Bach sighs and looks side to side as his head gradually follows behind. "Not going to be a problem."

Sebastian flies up and off over the top of a small building near Bach. Aristespha rolls out a pack of medical supplies and directs Cideeda to lay back down on her stomach next to her. "Let me to work on those injuries more and heal them properly."

Sotalia flips open a pouch on her belt, pulls out a vial, and hands it to Dretphi. Dretphi narrows her eyes behind her helmet visor and sneers at the vial as she holds it away from her. Sotalia stands up with her hands on her hips and quirks her brow at Dretphi. "Oh, don't be that way. It's cherry flavored. Drink up. It'll cut the swelling down."

Dretphi groans with heavy hesitation, lifts her visor, pops the cork off, and slams the liquid back. Her face contorts and she mutters a number of Grath curses under her breath. Sotalia rolls her eyes and shakes head with a smirk. Aristespha takes a moment from tending Cideeda, makes eye contact with Sotalia, and points over towards Bach's location. "Could you check on Bach and make sure there isn't anything that needs my immediate attention?"

Sotalia glances over towards the concrete barrier near Bach. "Of course. It'll give me a chance to survey the damage."

Cideeda winces with an excited, toothy grin as she maneuvers her arms out of the top of her body suit with the help of Aristespha. "Keep an eye out for any big parts from that robot. I want its head!"

Dretphi pops the locks underneath her helmet and pulls it off, letting her platinum to dirty blonde hair air out in the breeze. "I call the armaments on the arms. If salvageable."

Sotalia nods with a confirming gesture of the hand and walks confidently over towards Bach. She moves carefully through the courtyard, casually eyeing bits of robot in new and interesting locations. She stops in front of the barrier and notices a number of golden stabilized magical energy shards on the ground. With a quick check side to side, she kneels down, picks up a few handfuls, and places them in her pocket. Her head stops upon Bach's plasma pistol. The plasma pistol remains with its magical modifications on the ground. Sotalia reaches out, picks it up, and gawks at it. After a few moments, she blinks back to her senses, snatches up the two power magazines into another pocket, and stands back up. She rounds the corner of the barrier and finds Bach laying down, looking up into the sky. His eyes shift under the visor and meet her face, as she raises an eyebrow. She places her hands to her hips and smiles out of the corner of her mouth. "Cloud watching?"

Bach's eyes search around. But, he resigns himself with a droop of his eyelids and speaks through the respirator. "Kinda."

Sotalia shakes her head, gestures with a free hand for Bach to get up, and begins to turn around. "Come on. Let's get back to everyone else. Aristespha needs to give you at least a once over."

Bach sheepishly mumbles as his eyes wander around. "You go ahead. I'll be right over. I'm going to need a few minutes."

Sotalia halts and tilts her head to the side as her curiosity overrides. She slowly pivots back around and lowers her intrigued gaze at Bach. He watches her step to his side and sit down right next to him. Sotalia gently places Bach's plasma pistol off to the side and focuses her attention at Bach. She reaches out to Bach's helmet, flips the visor up and detaches the respirator off to the side. She then cranes her head over and hovers her face right above his, with a devilish grin. "Let me guess. You tapped yourself out and your limbs are worthlessly weak right now."

A long sigh of embarrassment comes from Bach and he stops averting his eyes from Sotalia's. "Yes."

Sotalia lifts her head back and covers a giggle with her hand. "Wow! Throwing all that caution to the wind in a time of crisis. You ARE certainly Sebastian's brother."

She mockingly holds her arms out in a shooting pose and imitates Bach's voice badly. "Eat plasma shit! Motherfucking government surplus! Really? A bold leap from cover AND a one liner? We should put you on the Next Adventurers of Nexus if you keep that up."

Bach rolls his head away with a grumble as he feels his pride search for an escape route from him. Sotalia pats Bach on shoulder and he turns his head back to face her. She looks upon him kindly. "All that aside. You did good getting the heat off Cideeda and Dretphi. So... Thank you. But, next time you piss off a battle bot, head for cover afterwards, will you?"

Bach weakly nods and then focuses his eyes on Sotalia's. "Um..."

Sotalia notices Bach's strange stare and puzzles at this odd attention. "Yes?"

Bach twists his mouth with a bit of uncertainty in his expression. "You know your eyes are gold on black at the moment, right?"

Sotalia momentarily frowns and groans with heavy annoyance as she looks away. "I do now. But, I'm not surprised."

She waves a dismissive hand around and drones on technical. "It's a Magically Reactive Biological Trait that is common with those of Emin lineage. Thankfully, it only happens when I dump a lot of magic out."

A pouch snap clicks off as Sotalia pulls the top flap open. She feels around inside and withdraws a vial with a label that she reads. She sets it to the side. Bach feels Sotalia's hand under his neck as she works his helmet off. She removes the helmet of the side and carefully lifts Bach's head up. "Let's get this down you, it'll help get the magical flow going and electrolyte balance right."

Bach barely manages a shrug and opens his mouth. Sotalia retrieves the vial, pops the cork off, and pours the contents into his mouth. Bach almost closes one eye in a wince and strains a swallow down. Sotalia immediately reads Bach's reaction, curls a lip, and sniffs the vial. "I thought I did okay with flavoring with this batch. I followed the instructions exactly as Aristespha wrote them. It even smells right."

Bach glances over at Sotalia. "What flavor is it suppose to be?"

Sotalia's eyes drop down to Bach and she dons a very unamused expression. "Cherry."

Bach's eyes drift away from Sotalia's developing glare and he twists his mouth. "How do you define... Cherry?"

Sotalia lowers Bach's head back down and crosses her arms with a pout on her face. "Dump all this magic into these potions and you are telling me the flavoring is off?"

Bach squints into his mind briefly and perks a brow of curiosity at Sotalia. "Speaking of dumping magic... You managed to freeze the air down and pipe liquid nitrogen at that robot. Correct?"

Sotalia sits up straighter with pride and beams at Bach. "Yes. That is correct. It's a composite spell I weaved a while back. Unfortunately, it takes a while and a lot of energy. But, I believe you can't argue with the results."

Bach nods with a bit more strength. "I certainly can't. Completely devastated that bot. Pretty sure Dretphi could have punched it to pieces with how brittle it was."

He returns his sights to the passing clouds overhead, and curls a lip with disappointment bubbling to his face. “Damn, I really thought D-Ball would take it out. But, I’m still not there yet.”

Sotalia shakes her head, snorts, and aims Bach’s head at her. “Bach. Take it from someone who always wanted to be THE one that saves the day... But learned otherwise. It’s not important to land the final shot. It’s important to make that final shot even possible.”

Bach maintains eye contact with Sotalia. After a few seconds, she reaches out, puts her hand on top his long hair, and ruffles it with a warm smile. Her eyes catch something along his collar line. She runs a finger underneath his shirt collar and lifts it away. “Looks like you got some burns there. I’m going to go check to see how far along Aristespha is in patching up Cideeda’s ass. I’ll get some burn cream for you at least.”

Sotalia gets her feet underneath herself and pushes up. Midway through her transit to stand, her legs wobble. Her arms spread out and she braces herself against the concrete barrier. She glances around, shifts her weight against the barrier, and gently eases herself back on to the ground. Bach turns his head with a smug smile at her. “There’s no rush. Sit down. Watch the clouds for awhile.”

Grumbling to herself, she fetches a vial from her belt. With quick motion, she tosses back the liquid down her throat, contorts her face, and coughs. “Oh gods! Wow! I owe Dretphi an apology. This tastes awful!”

Bach stares unamused at Sotalia. She glances over Bach and swallows her pride. “And, sorry to you, too. I had no idea.”

Sotalia scoots over and places her back up against the concrete barrier and looks up into the sky. Bach returns his eyes back to the sky also. “Next time we train, could you do that spell again? I’d actually like to examine one that up close.”

Sotalia dons a wicked smile and provocatively eyes Bach. “I’ll show you mine, if you show me yours.”

Bach closes his eyes hard and opens with an awkward uncertainty. He lifts his head up to meet Sotalia’s face, but she quickly turns her face away to a passing cloud. Bach lowers his head back down and meekly responds. “Sure.”

Sotalia simply nods, hiding her sheer amusement from Bach.

Through the waving sheets of rain, the Pancake Shed sign faintly illuminates the lone highway intersection. At this time just after midnight, the traffic lights simply blink red and swing along with the storm. Lights inside the Pancake Shed restaurant shine in stark contrast to the night and cast a glow upon the parking lot surrounding the building. An older Grath woman with gray-streaked black hair scrapes the grill top effortlessly and guides the refuse

into a hole off the side. A middle-aged human woman plays with her curly hazel hair as her eyes trace various figures on a clipboard. “Well, Triti, I think this is it until Havok’s bar closes at three. This storm is something else.”

Triti nods as she finishes cleaning off the last bit from the grill top. “Big storm. Happens rarely.”

The human woman taps menu buttons on her aetherphone and a radar weather map cycles through an animation. She shakes head and gazes out the window store front. Flashes of light erupt in the distance and spider across the sky. Her eyes drift back to the clipboard full of sales figures and supply notes. “The storm probably picked up something when it passed over that damn weird zone. Oh well. It’ll be a nice break after dealing with those adventurers with the camera crew.”

A long growling groan fills the air near Triti and she stabs the scraper tool corner first into a wooden knife block... but not in any slot for a knife. She steps to the side to a sink, turns on the water, and washes her hands. She faintly mutters a variety of curses under her breath. The human woman spins around and narrows her eyes Triti. “Hey! I thought we agreed. If you are going to say something bad about a customer...”

The woman picks up her clipboard and slides next to Triti with a devious glint in her eye. “Say it so I can hear it.”

Triti cracks the start of a smile from the corner of her mouth and speaks her mind a little above a whisper. “They were not natural.”

The other woman laughs and lifts the clipboard up a bit higher to hide sight of her mouth. “Oh, they HAD to be magically enhanced. With the way she was flaunting them? I’ve paraded around dresses I got on sale less shamelessly than her.”

A pair of headlights shine down the highway and through the rain. A yellow light blinks out of the front corner of the shadowy, rain-breaking mass. It turns into the lot, pulls into a spot close to the entry, and releases a fading whine as the powerplant spins down. The rear driver’s side door cracks open, a gloved finger pokes out, and a thin sheet of magical energy expands outwards. In a few seconds, a floating rain barrier stretches over the humvee with a path to the front door.

The human woman giggles and snickers. “I almost wish that Rekeeka worked today. She would have flipped seeing how that Fvalian girl was dressed up.”

An electronic door chime rings out from a box above the entrance doors. Both human woman and Triti shift their attention to towards the entry. Aristespha, Bach, Cideeda, Dretphi, and Sotalia stand in the small entryway as the door closes with another chime. Aristespha takes her gloves off and tucks them away in a pocket. She attempts to in vain to straighten up her attire and then just accepts the state of her clothing. Bach rubs the bandage around the base of his neck and pulls a worn t-shirt away. He brushes some dirt off his pants, but stops when flakes of charred cloth break off along with dirt. Dretphi stretches her arms and back out in

small motions with a wince. She pulls on her long sleeve shirt and looks underneath with a slight frown. Sotalia slouches forward as she covers a yawn with her hand. She blinks repeatedly and drowsily scans around the area, fighting off the urge for another yawn. In shorts and a tank top, Cideeda holds on to Pancake Shed card as she tucks a pillow underneath her shoulder. The human woman and Triti exchange glances with sparks of recognition. The woman walks to the front register, places her clipboard down, and gazes at the group. "I say this not just out of Pancake Shed policy, but you all can take whatever seats you want. I'll be right with you."

The group moves towards to the largest table. Bach slowly eases himself into a seat, and cringes when his back settles against the chair. Dretphi slowly works her way to the seat and briefly grits her teeth as a few movements irritate her. Aristeshpa slides out the chair and sits down. Sotalia lazily drags out the chair and slumps down, placing arms on the tabletop and resting her head down upon them. Cideeda turns her chair around ninety degrees, places her pillow on the chair, and carefully lowers herself. She leans her side on the chair back and throws an arm over the top, her tail waving slowly. The woman arrives with menus in hand and looks the group over. "Welcome to Pancake Shed, I'm Clara. I'll be your server this fine early morning. Is some coffee in order or anything else to start with?"

Sotalia lifts her head up and yawns. "Coffee. Please."

A unanimous agreement chains around the table to everyone else in the group. Clara nods with knowing smile. "I'll bring a few pots just for you all with all the fixings."

Cideeda hoists up her Pancake Shed card near Clara. Clara plucks it out of Cideeda's hand, perks a brow, and smiles. "Shed Stack for you. Anything else before I get the coffee?"

Dretphi raises her hand up and gets Clara's attention. "May I ask your cook a question?"

Clara shrugs and waves at Triti. "Hey, Triti, the lady has a question for you."

Triti slowly turns her head to Dretphi. Dretphi bows slightly and speaks a long elaborate sentence her native language. Triti thinks and her eyes search her mind. With a single nod and a grin she responds back. A smile sneaks onto Dretphi's face and she gives another slight bow. Aristespha glances over at Dretphi with curiosity. "What did she say?"

Dretphi smiles in full now. "It is not a stone top. It should still get honorably close."

Clara steps away from the table and walks straight to the coffee machines. The group rests at the table in silence. Everyone individually drifts in their own minds about the events of the day and mindlessly drift eyes upon the menus. Clara and Triti chat briefly and the two look over a few times. Clara returns to the table with two pots of coffee, mugs, and extras. She spreads them out to everyone at the table. Clara examines the group, sighs, and address them. "Okay. It's none of my business, but I got to know what you all did today. If nothing else, the coffee is on the house. You all seem to need it more than it needs to sit in the brewing tank."

Sotalia draws a slow grin as she perks up. “Eat plasma shit. Motherfucking government surplus.”

Bach sinks into his chair and groans as the laughter erupts from the rest of the table, even a quiet ethereal chuckle from the sword at Aristespha side. “I’m never going to live that down. Am I?”

Clara takes orders in between hearing the different perspectives of the latest mission with Triti listening nearby.

“A near maelstrom stage storm passed over the town of Amaranth Valley from the borderlands. Local authorities report that no casualties or injuries. The mayor of Amaranth Valley went on to praise the efforts public services and the Greater Azure Alliance specialists that have been serving in the area lately to assist in the local guild office efforts to manage nearby ruins. Authorities still warn citizens to be on alert for flooding and to avoid travel in flooded or flood prone areas for the next few days until the water table settles-”

Cideeda lays belly down on a pile of pillows upon half the couch. Her ears flick a few times and sighs. “Okay. I can’t stand hearing the same news stories over again. Could someone next to the remote change it? I think the Research Channel is doing a marathon of Tech of the Ruins.”

Dretphi eyes the remote on the coffee table from her seat on the couch. She stares at the remote and sighs. Her tank top and shorts cover barely any of the various bruises and welts across her body. She grimaces and readies herself to lean forward. Just as she starts to get up, Bach pulls himself out of his chair, plucks the remote off the coffee table, and aims it at the television. “What channel is it again?”

Dretphi settles back down into the couch and exhales in relief. Cideeda rolls her eyes around the top of her head and thinks. “Four dash two nine? I know it’s around there.”

Bach presses a few buttons on the remote and rubs his back with his free hand. After a drifting between a few channels, the Research Channel title pops on the screen. Bach reaches over the coffee table and hands the remote to Cideeda. “I’ll let you handle this. Anyone need anything while I’m up? Wanted to grab a drink anyway.”

Dretphi retrieves a cold pack from behind her back, unwraps one from around her shoulder, and strains to pull one off her leg. She holds the bundle of cold packs in the air and looks at Bach. Cideeda slips a hand behind her shirt, unstraps a pack, and hoists it up in the air, too. Bach grabs all the packs in his hands and glances over at Sotalia. “You need anything, Sotalia? ... Sotalia?”

Sotalia snores loudly, startles briefly, and then rolls over in the couch chair. Her subconscious mind directs her hands to pull the blanket back securely over herself. Bach quirks a brow and looks between Cideeda and Dretphi. “Wow. She is out for the count.”

Cideeda crosses her arms on the pillows and underneath her head with an eye roll. “She’ll be fine around dinner. This only happens when she really goes all out and drains her reserves.”

Dretphi chuckles quietly, shakes her head, and flashes a smile at Bach. “She was given an opportunity. She wanted to show off.”

Bach shrugs and pivots around to walk towards the kitchen. He opens the refrigerator, tosses the warm cold packs in, and digs around for fresh ones. He quickly puts a hand on his lower back when he leans forward a bit too far and slowly straightens back up with a cringe. “Not that I don’t appreciate the wonders of magical medicine, but damn I wish there was something for the aches.”

Dretphi nods slowly and lifts her feet up on the coffee table. Cideeda tucks the remote between two pillows under her and carefully stretches her arms out. “You and me both. But, sparing use of the powerful pain management magic is the best practice. I knew a guy who got addicted to healing potions.”

Bach hands Dretphi two cold packs and slowly leans over to place a third on her leg. “Really?! That’s a pretty expensive addiction. I bet that didn’t win him any friends.”

Cideeda shakes her head wide-eyed as she remembers. “Well, he was fine... Until he started stealing from party members.”

Bach secures the wrap around Dretphi’s leg and hands the last fresh cold pack to an awaiting Cideeda. “What happened to him? I don’t think any good can happen if you are doing crazy shit like that.”

Cideeda secures the new cold pack under her shirt and wraps her arms around the piles of pillows. “Ah, he eventually got help. Had to go through some pain tolerance reconditioning for the withdrawal hyper-sensitivity. From what I heard, it’s usually a one time thing for most people. Most don’t go for a second time.”

Bach blinks a few times and eases back into his chair. He stares at the television screen.

“On this episode of Tech of the Ruins, we take an in depth look at security robots, drones, androids, and cyborgs. How were they created and what were they used fo-”

The channel on the television changes mid sentence and flips to another show. Cideeda slowly brings her arm back and returns the remote between the pillows, while the twitch in her eye fades. “We’ll try that marathon later.”

The front door opens and Aristespha strolls in gripping a large sack in each hand. She presses a foot on the door and closes it. She quickly walks into the dining area, hoists the two sacks on the tabletop, and takes her hat off. “Took three times and a manager to the get the order right, but we have the finest greasy burgers this town can offer.”

Cideeda cranes her head around to Aristespha with a toothy grin. “Any new dents on the humvee?”

Aristespha places her hands on her sides, sways her hips, and bites her lip as her eyes wander. “No. But. I may have cut off one of Next Adventurers of Nexus vans. I may have also used choice language and gestures, too.”

The ethereal voice of Sebastian echoes, as his visage materializes. “To which I fully approved of. You did signal anyway.”

Aristespha removes various bags, cartons, and containers from the two large sacks. She spins around, steps over to Bach, and hooks a finger around the collar of his shirt. She examines around his neck and nods. “Looks like most of the burn has healed. Back and chest feeling any better?”

Bach shrugs and waves a finger behind him. “Much better. Still sore when I move certain ways.”

Aristespha releases Bach’s shirt with a smile. “It should be safe for you take a few aspirin. We’ll have to wait and see to see if there’s a muscle group that needs more attention.”

She directs her attention at Dretphi and sighs. “Looks another dose of the anti-contusion and anti-swelling mix for you.”

Dretphi curls a lip and sneers as she grumbles away from Aristespha. Aristespha crosses her arms and shakes her head. “Now. Now. My potions have the proper amounts of flavoring. You’ll feel and look a lot better. I promise. You can also mix it with your drink.”

Aristespha gracefully steps around to Cideeda, slowly flips the back of her shirt up, and then lifts the waistband of her shorts up. She quickly assesses and returns the garments to their original positions. “Probably another day and the swelling should go down. Still touchy on the upper back?”

Cideeda slowly nods and sighs. “Yes, doctor. Trying to keep it elevated. It seems to help a bit.”

Aristespha nods and eyes Sotalia with a wry smirk. “Has she moved from that spot since this morning?”

Bach, Cideeda, and Dretphi shake their heads. Aristespha moves over to the dining table, picks up a carton, and returns to a spot next to Sotalia. She cracks open the box and gently fans the scent of food towards Sotalia. A second after the smell enters her nose, she sniffles loudly and stirs in the chair. She sits up and squirms around as sleep releases her to consciousness. Her hands drift to her face and she rubs the sleep out. Her eyes flutter open and she lethargically gazes at everyone. “Hey.”

Aristespha covers her mouth with her free hand and stifles a giggle. Cideeda presses her jaw down past her crossed arms into the pillow. Dretphi tightens her lips as her eyes search the other reactions. Bach and Sebastian exchange looks, and Sebastian ethereally snorts while Bach laughs. Sotalia awakens fully and glares for clues. "What?! Are my scleras still black?"

Sotalia fishes her phone out of her robe pocket, presses a camera app open, and stares at the screen. "What is so funny- OH GODS DAMMIT!"

She narrows her eyes at the screen as she sees herself. One eye has a black sclera. The other has a white sclera. She puts her phone away and crosses arms with a pout. "Always! Can't fade to shades of gray. Or change back in sync. Nope! Has to be one before the other."

Bach stares at the pile of cartons in front of Sotalia and wanders his gaze at the pile in front of Dretphi. The two piles share a similar height upon the dining table top. The objectively curious part of Bach's mind raises a good question and seeks the vocal centers to relay this thought to the outside world. Common sense and self-preservation cross tackle curiosity and remind it that some questions are best left alone. Aristespha retrieves her aetherphone from her pants pocket and places it upon the table with a sly grin. "Since everyone is here, I wanted to share this interesting voice mail I got from Captain Hackle of the Greater Azure Alliance Specialist Squad."

Everyone exchanges looks at the table as Aristespha taps the play button on the phone's menu.

"Hello. This Captain Hackle of the Greater Azure Alliance. I apologize if this is not the correct means of contacting your group, but it was the only means granted to me by the local guild office. First, I would like to congratulate you on a... Successful operation in handling the rogue security robot. We are currently securing the site and surrounding areas as indicated by the guild's request for containment assistance. This brings me to the reason for this call. While we have collected most of the security robot, we are missing some components. Namely, the head and both arm mounted weapon systems."

Cideeda and Dretphi glance at each other and then to the wall behind them. A security robot head lays on its side with a plasma projectile cannon and minigun propped upon it. Dretphi pulls smug smile. Cideeda returns with a wide, toothy grin and whispers loudly. "They may be looking for a while."

"As per local, state, and other such laws, you are not under any obligation to assist any further than the initial requirement of your contract with the guild. However, I would recommend that you consider providing assistance as a professional courtesy that I would happily repay when the time comes."

Another irritated voice rises up from the background noise of the recording.

“Wait a minute... Are these same assholes from that cyborg den?! ... What the fuck did they do to this thing?! Plasma burns, part of it is... Disintegrated?! Holy shit! They froze this thing and blew it up! Motherfucker. And thought the dick who put that barrier around that base entry was troublesome enough. Where are they finding these people?!”

Captain Hackle grumbles over the sounds of a microphone readjusting.

“As I’ve been... Informed... by Specialist Theyal... You are the same group that rescued the... Unfortunately titled adventurers. Again, I would strongly recommend at least a meeting between my group and yours at your earliest convenience. I strongly believe that we may be able to assist each other in future endeavors. Please contact me at the number and aethermail I have attached to this voice mail. Thank you and have a nice day.”

The phone silences and returns to another menu prompt. Sotalia muffles a burp and barely contains her sheer prideful amusement. “Wow. We’re making friends in all kinds of places.”

Bach warily eyes Aristespha’s phone and tilts his head away. “Uh, I think friend is a strong word. Maybe, associate? I suggest if we do meet them, we do it somewhere public?”

Aristespha shakes her head and rolls her eyes as she brushes back her long hair. “It’ll be fine. They’re a very decorated, but very offbeat group. They’re just adventurers under the military umbrella for all purposes. I’m curious if they have some information we don’t have.”

Sebastian hovers over Aristespha’s shoulder and gazes at her phone as she flips through messages. “Dear, speaking of information, any word from your friend Nash over at the Grand Library?”

Aristespha lifts up the phone stares the screen and quirks an eye brow. “Nothing new since last night when he responded to my initial message. But, he’s probably just waking up. I’ll send him an aethermail to call me.”

Sebastian scratches the back of his head and puzzles at Aristespha. “Why not just call him?”

Aristespha taps the last few characters of the message and sends it out. She places the phone back on the tabletop. “Won’t work. Being a head of a department his official phone gets constantly rung by everyone. So, it’s usually on silent. He has a personal phone he only lets family know of. For everyone else, the best route is an aethermail.”

The phone plays a new chime and vibrates on the table. She grins deviously as she answers and places the phone up to her ear. “Let me guess, passed out in front of the console after watching videos waiting for something to process?”

A long silence follows before the speaker on the phone sounds out a response. Aristespha maintains her grin and takes the phone away from her ear, pressing a button on screen. “Well, wake up, you’re on speakerphone.”

Nash's voice resonates out Aristespha's aetherphone. "Damn, woman. Wake me up and already put me out in front of an audience. Slave driver. So, who's all there?"

Aristespha rotates a point to everyone at the table and each says their name. Nash yawns loudly and grumbles to a more aware state. "Okay! Suppose you all want my expert analysis of the bits and pieces you sent over? I mean, I got some really good soup and hot sauce recipes I'm willing to share, too."

Aristespha eye rolls and sighs. "Your culinary wisdom will have to wait. What have you found out?"

Nash dramatically sighs back over the speakerphone. "Fine. Some day, though. Well, when it comes to the tidbits you sent. All I can figure after looking it over... It's GOT to be some mapping data. The formatting and patterns just scream it. Unfortunately, I don't got much more past that. Have to figure out the exact time period, which government had their hand in it, and all the other factors. Then, there's this whole thing with all these extra vectors and dimensions it's tracking."

Cideeda leans forward and directs her voice to the phone with a bit of curiosity in her expression. "Could it be just part of the data set or maybe an index?"

Nash responds with an equally intrigued tone. "You know I thought that too, but the formatting isn't right. It's strictly header then data, repeating. So... What is it indexing? But, anyway. I'll see what I can do. I think we might have a system that might be a close match, given we get the rest of the system dumps?"

Aristespha nods, placing her head on her intertwined fingers. "I think we can do that. Send me the transfer account and link?"

Sounds of keys clack in the background while Nash hems. "Yep, I'll get that to you right about now. I keep a few anonymous accounts for such reasons. I'll see if I can sneak you all some Finder's Reward from the department acquisitions account. Might take a while..."

Aristespha lowers her head closer to the phone and speaks in a lower tone. "What did you DO this time?"

A long pause hovers in the air around the phone, before a long drawn out groan echoes through from Nash. "You know. I make strides in nurturing inter-department cooperation and worked with the materials science guys to buy a mass document incinerator since they were a bit short at the end of the budget year."

Aristespha maintains her tone and questions again. "What was it REALLY?"

Nash takes a long breath and exhales equally long before slipping a response at the very end. "... a military surplus flamethrower..."

Cideeda snorts and breaks out laughing. Dretphi's eyes open fully as she stares at the phone. Bach and Sebastian nod at each other with a mixture of amazement and respect to such a feat. Sotalia glares at Aristespha and mouths, "Who the fuck is this guy?!"

Aristespha sits back and simply shakes her head with a chuckle. "Did the deans ever stop being mad at you for smuggling those kegs of beer through the department purchasing system for the graduation party?"

Nash laughs and chuckles for a few seconds. "Mad? Well, officially they do not condone such misuse. Unofficially, they've been using that same trick with that same local brewery. That place has the craziest beer names now on their roster. It's made them pretty popular."

Aristespha bites her lip with a sly smile as her eyes look up into her memory. "That was a really good party, though."

An office chair squeaks over the speaker and Nash gives a few last chuckles. "I know. Well, I won't pester you all any further. I'm going to hunt down a few graduate assistants and press-gang them into actually doing some work. I'll message you with the progress and call you if I get any breakthroughs. Don't know how long it's going to be. I'll hopefully know more later."

Aristespha nods. "That will work. You take care."

Nash's voice comes over the speaker phone one last time. "Will do. You all do the same."

The phone switches back to the menu screen and Aristespha tucks the phone away in a pant pocket. "So, that's Nash for you."

Sebastian crosses his arms and shrugs. "Seems like an interesting fellow."

Bach lifts the remote at the television and flips through a few more channels. "There nothing on. I forgot how bad mid-week, mid-day television is."

Cideeda squirms into her pile of pillows behind her back and underneath her as she sits on the couch. "I know. But, until the holoplayer is done uploading everything into to that account Nash sent us, I don't want to bother it. Connection speed is slow enough as it as, I don't want to have to restart it."

Dretphi stretches her neck side to side and glances over to Cideeda. "Should we try the marathon again?"

Cideeda lowers her ears and groans with a frown. "Not yet. I looked up the schedule and the whole bots and cyborgs thing is a few episodes. Out of all the things to make a multi-part series."

Sotalia walks in through the hallway, no longer wearing a her house robe but a simple shirt and short combination. She gazes over at the group, the sclera in both her eyes now a typical white. "I've had enough robot and cyborgs to last me a while."

She glances over to her side and scrutinizes the robot head near the dining table. "I can guess the plans for the two big guns, but why did you take the head of that bot?"

Cideeda slowly puts her arms behind her head and pulls a toothy grin. "Mostly as a trophy. And, judging by how quick it was to target us, I bet there's some choice parts in there."

Sotalia shakes her head with a smile and slowly plods over to the sliding glass window. She looks out onto the backyard with the afternoon sun overhead. She squints her eyes, puts her hands on her hips, sways, and pulls her mouth to a corner. "Huh. Sebastian is rushing back here awfully quick."

Sebastian phases through the sliding glass window and flies through the room, down the hallway. He jets straight to Aristespha's room. "Dear, I need you to get the sword and follow me! There's something I think we all need to get a better look at. I can't get close enough to get a clear look."

A minute later with some awkward glances between Bach, Cideeda, Dretphi, and Sotalia, Sebastian glides out of the hallway in the living room and gestures everyone to follow him. "Follow me. I really hope I'm wrong about this."

Aristespha moves out from the hallway, holding the sword in scabbard. The group falls in behind Sebastian and they trudge across the large backyard. Eventually, they find themselves at the corner of the property lot. Sebastian points over to the lot diagonal and gestures over at the house. "You know that house I mentioned that had someone going through it?"

Aristespha crosses arms and squints her eyes to the distant house. "Yes? The one I said someone was probably getting ready to rent out?"

Sebastian groans reluctantly and snaps a point to one of the vehicles near the house. "Well, looks like they're moving in."

Cideeda steps forward, puts a hand above her eyes, and focuses on the distant target. Her eye twitches and she grits her teeth. "No. No way. How?!"

Dretphi quirks an eye brow at Cideeda and directs her attention in the same direction. She spots a tall, unfortunately familiar figure carrying adventuring equipment from a vehicle. She growls to herself and places her face well into the palm of her hand. "Of all things..."

Sotalia moves her hands in exacting motions and chants a quick incantation. She holds her hands in front with finger tips touching and stares through. Mere moments later she grimaces and grabs her horns swearing a few different languages. She steps angrily away and

grumbles to herself. Bach eyes Sebastian and slowly sighs with a wary frown. "I can't exactly make it out, but I think the mass of people with recording equipment gives it away."

Sebastian nods as his ethereal form pinches the bridge of his nose. "Yes. It was exactly what I thought. Well, at least we know where they're at. Great. Well, let's head back before anyone notices us. Dear?"

Sebastian hovers to side of Aristespha and drifts cautiously in front of her. "Hey. Dear? Let's go back to the house. And..."

Aristespha's facial skin tone reddens from its normally pale color and her grip shakes around the sword. Her head tilts to one shoulder with a crack and then tilts to other with another similar crack. She grits her teeth, hisses as air draws through, and screams out. "FUCK!"

Next to the house in the middle of the crews and adventurers, Samantha snaps her head to the direction of the angry voice with a smug smile. She waves with her free hand at the group in the distance and she holds her aetherphone close to her head. "Good news, Howie! Looks like the locals have just found about their new neighbors."

A dark, ominous laugh bellows forth from the speaker of the phone, growing in volume with each passing second. Eventually, it rests and Howards voice speaks. "Good. Very good."

# -More Info-

## Story Timeline

<b>Week 1</b>						
Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Episode 1						
	Episode 2					
				Episode 3		Episode 4
<b>Week 2</b>						
Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Episode 4						
Episode 5						
	Episode 6					
	Episode 7					
			Episode 8			Episode 9
<b>Week 3</b>						
Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Episode 10						
	Episode 11					
	Episode 12					
	Episode 13					

## Excerpt from the diary of Deedri Preetta...

Dear diary,

Today we moved into our new home! It's actually a really nice house and I get my own room! It's certainly a nice step up from the... Really terrible motel room I had to share with Tassilda. I don't like to wish bad things, but if the Fates see fit to burn a building down they couldn't pick a better place. I imagine the neighbors would mind the fire, but doubt any one would deny the property value increase.

My room is just right for me! I have plenty of space to setup all my medical equipment and it came with a big bed. It is the smallest room in comparison to the others, but I'm happy with it. And given the hour long argument between Chad, Tassilda, and Trakenthin about who should get the bigger room, I'm happy to have it. Mordoran moved all his stuff into the bedroom next to mine while everyone else was arguing. He said that he'd prefer to have me on the other side of wall rather than risk getting stuck between Chad and Trakenthin. We helped each other move our stuff in our rooms. You could not believe how nice it was to not have a camera crew following you around.

And the amazing thing is that we have neighbors! They're the same people who saved the camera crew that got trapped down in the military research base during our first mission! Chad got some information files about them from Samantha. I don't know where she got them, but I get the feeling it's not the type of information you are normally suppose to have. The camera crew wasn't around when we got to see the files. It felt a little weird looking at it all, but I couldn't help myself! Really! The group is really accomplished and really diverse. And, they were the group that confronted Lord Noxian!

I'll hopefully get a better look at them in the future, so I can draw them here, but I'll just describe them for now. I know I already said this, but I'm really excited! It so amazing to see so many other races. I mean, all the humans back with mom and dad are still interesting and unique, but all this is so new to me! Okay, let me describe them.

There's Aristespha Selena Tarikira Orienden. The name alone is Evuukian all the way. She's 31 years old and the file says she's 182cm tall. But, I think the boots she was wearing when I last saw her added a few more and her hair... She has really lovely hair. It's very long and wavy with a silvery blue color that almost shines in the sun. She keeps it tied back when working, but I caught glimpse of her when I was moving some supplies out of a van and it just flowed in the wind. And like most Evuukians, she has really long slender pointed ears that extend behind her head. I think she has violet eyes and her skin is pale with gray or blue hints to it. I have to admit, I really hope adventuring and being a medical mage gets me her figure. Many Evuukians are thin, but she's got a nice athletic build that must come from her job. Note to self: I really need to get on an exercise routine. I hope she's still not mad at me for taking so long at the pharmacy... Because I REALLY want to ask her where she gets her outfits! They are SO PRETTY and functional, too!

Bach Nikola Warwick. He's new to the team. From the file, he just got registered a week or so ago. There's not much about him, but he is Sebastian's brother. He's listed as an intern and hasn't graduated from school yet. I really looked over the info Samantha brought us and I honestly have more questions now. He went to school with his brother, dropped out, and

now after so many years is back? Honestly, he doesn't look like the adventuring type. He's 30 years old, pretty tall at 193cm, but really... Stocky? I don't want to be mean, but he could really lose 5, 10... or more kilograms? Well, maybe now that he's with the group he'll get some exercise and maybe get outside more. He's got light skin that's tanning in some places. Strangely, he's got a few gray hairs showing in his long brown hair and this really cool white streak in front. And blue eyes, in fact, I remember seeing them glow blue too when he put up that barrier at the military lab to keep all those horrible cybernetic things contained. That reminds me, how does a drop out manage a barrier that strong?! I don't know. There's more going on here, but I'll just have to find out later. Oddly, Chad took a REALLY long time with Bach's file, almost as long as he took look through Sebastian's file.

Sebastian Bartolome Warwick is an interesting case. He's bound body and soul to an ancient sword. Now he seems to materialize himself as some kind of projection? I still don't know the details. I've never really dug into that avenue of magic. But looking over his file, he's quite the heroic type. Despite being a bit ghostly, he still has his heroically good looks! 192 cm tall, that muscular body that tight t-shirt would really compliment, and a nice tan. I have to admit, I REALLY love the classic hero loose pompadour. And brown hair with a cute little white streak... I can see why he's the leader. I don't know if it's his ghostly form or if it's just a reflection of what he was when he was living, but his blue eyes are piercing and a really nice smile. His smile actually seems really genuine, unlike Chad's which between you and me kind of gives me the creeps. Also, I have to say he's looking really good for being 30. And undead, technically. From what I've seen so far, he's usually near Aristespha and often next to her. I'm guessing that's because she often has the sword, but... I don't know.

I really excited about Cideeda Garadra-Deeseeni! She's another Fvalian! After mom moved away from the village, I never got to be around other Fvalians that often. Only when visiting family. So, I hope I get to talk to her and maybe even do some activities together! She's 28 years old and it says she's about 155 cm, so I'm actually a little taller for once. Her short cut hair has this really neat mix of brown, white, tan, orange, and black colors. She has the really big ears that point to the sides and have the fur on the inside. I really wish mine had the furry tufts inside, it must keep so much of the dirt out. But, I like the tufts on my ear tips, so I wouldn't give them up. I've only seen them from a distance, but the her file says she has green eyes. And that they are. Almost an emerald green and they seem to reflect light back, so I bet she's like me and can see in the dark. She really must take care to maintain her figure. I'm a bit jealous. I've been trying to keep my curves under control, but she's got this amazing lithe, fit build. It makes total sense since she's the technical specialist. Mordoran is really careful with what he eats, so he can keep slim for sneaking around. I need to ask her what her secret is! She has got light brown skin and some really neat markings from what I've seen. Both our tails are similar types, long and with medium length fur. Her tufts out at the end while mine tapers with longer hairs. And as usual with all of us Fvalians, she's got claws on her fingers and toes, and the classic pronounced canines. I have to find out where she buys those toed shoes with the holes for toe claws.

Dretphi Prakkenten Reti Veranattin. That house name sounds familiar. I think my mom once told me a few stories about a General Veranattin who lead Grath military reserves in defense against an onslaught of bandits headed towards border towns. I wonder if she's related to him? Dretphi is certainly a Grath. Big, tall, and strong. She seems very reserved? Then again, it might just be Grath traditional stoicism to other races playing out. It says she's 195 cm tall and I believe she's every centimeter and probably more. She's actually the youngest

of the group at 26. She has a lighter tan, bronze skin color. I can't remember what exact region that's common in. She has faint gray stripe markings along her body. That's actually a common characteristic of another region. I really would like to know where her parents were born. Also her hair is really interesting! She has that rare temperature sensitive protein in her hair. I remember reading up about it in a number of my physiology courses. Over time the protein actually changes in response to temperature, lightening the hair color with warmer temperatures and darkening the hair with colder temperatures. So her hair starts out platinum blonde and ends up dirty blonde at the very ends. Really neat, especially with how she braids her bangs away to the sides. Her eyes are have a very steely gray color. I think that's another rare coloration, too. And she's pretty muscular and thick in her build, but very shapely. No wonder Trakenthin gawks at her for so long when he's gotten the chance. She's probably just as strong as him given Grath biology. Maybe with her around, Trakenthin will shower more often. I'm so glad I'm not roomed next to him. I feel so bad for Tassilda and Chad.

Finally, there's Sotalia Aurica Feratosia. From what I can gather, she's a Half-Emin and I believe a proper 2nd generation Half-Emin! It's becoming more common outside of the old Emin territories to see Part-Emin and Half-Emin, but second generation Half-Emins are very uncommon. It's fascinating to see what traits were passed down and expressed. She's 35 years old, the oldest of the group, and 183 cm tall. I would have only guessed she was in her late 20's with that hourglass figure of hers. I guess that's probably the Emin coming through. But, I do remember a number of humans growing up that did not look anywhere near their age. She has this dark red, moderate length straight hair. I know Emin hair colors can be any color, but I don't remember ever seeing this particular shade of red before. It might be some quirk of the 2nd generation... Or it could be she dyes it? Her skin is a mixing of a human light tan and a dark gray Emin coloration that flow together with the dark gray on the backs of her arms and neck. Possibly on her back and sides of her legs, too? I remember that being a common pattern, but I haven't seen it myself. She has the Emin shiny, golden iris color, but white human scleras. She has very developed horns. They start just above her temples to the front, sweep back, and curl down behind her pointed ears. They have this black coloration, that I don't think is natural. Tassilda uses a polish on hers, so I'm guessing Sotalia does, too. It seems to be a common thing since they naturally can crack and discolor. And she has the long, thick black nails. I haven't gotten a good look, but I don't think she sharpens them like Tassilda does. Which reminds me, I need to see if I can borrow a file from Tassilda. I haven't been able to find my claw file since we moved. Anyway, it's a bit weird having the Tassilda the full Emin and Sotalia the Half-Emin around. The few times they've met, I've sensed some hostility between them. Mordoran told me it's due to some old racist ideals of intermarriage in older Emin society. But, it's no where near as bad as Evuukian taboos from what he said. I wouldn't be surprised if they share more in common than they'd like to admit.

Well, that's all I got for now diary. It's been a really exciting few weeks now! I just hope we go on a few quests and work as a team. It's been a rough start, but I'm ever hopeful! And I really wish we get to meet the other group and we do stuff together. I get the feeling that might not be the case with how Samantha was talking. Well, I'll be as nice as possible and hopefully they will too! But, I don't know if the rest of the group will be so... welcoming. Maybe I can do something when the cameras aren't watching... Write to you later, diary.

## Guild Registered Group #7704: Quick Physical Identification Guide

**Aristespha Selena Tarikira Orienden**, 31 year old female Evuukian. 182cm, Athletic thin  
Pale ivory skin with gray/blue hints. Very long silvery blue wavy hair. Violet eyes.  
Very long, pointed ears that extend behind the head.

**Bach Nikola Warwick**, 30 year old male Human, 193cm, Stocky

Fair skin with farmer's tan. Long brown hair with gray hairs and a notable gray/white streak in front. Blue eyes.

**Sebastian Bartolome Warwick**, 30 year old male human soul bound to sword, 192cm, muscular

Tan skin. Short brown hair arranged in a loose pompadour with a white streak. Blue eyes.  
Presently in ethereal and ghostly form.

**Cideeda Garadra-Deeseeni**, 28 year old female Fvalian, 155cm, Lithe, fit

Light Brown skin with various markings and variations with thin hair covering that grows thick in some areas. Short, multi-color hair: A mix of brown, white, tan, orange, and black. Green eyes.

Long furry, hair filled ears that articulate and droop to the sides. Claws on fingers and toes. Sharp pronounced canines. Long tail with medium length fur, tufts out at end.

**Dretphi Prakkenten Reti Veranattin**, 26 year old female Grath, 195cm, Thick, muscular

Tan skin tone with faint, grayish stripe markings along body. Long hair in multiple braids that starts out platinum blonde and darkens to dirty blonde at the tips, darkens with long term colder temperatures. Steely gray eyes.

**Sotalia Aurica Feratosia**, 35 year old female 2nd Generation Half-Emin, 183cm, Hourglass

Half light tan and dark gray skin. Moderate length straight, dark red hair. Golden eyes.

Short swept-back black, ridged horns that start above temples, towards the front of the head, and curl down behind the ears. Short pointy ears. Naturally long, thick black nails.

## Transcript from “Histories of the Evuukian House of Assembly” Episode 89

Mr. Meriten: “First, I would like to thank you for coming in for an interview Former Prime Minister Ottocasion.”

FPM Ottocasion: “Oh, the pleasure is all mine, Mr. Meriten. When I got the invite and saw the particular subject, I knew I HAD to come on your outstanding show.”

Mr. Meriten: “I figured as much. So, shall we go straight to the topic at hand?”

FPM Ottocasion: “Yes. Oh yes, please! Don’t make me wait!”

Mr. Meriten: “Former Regent Beckerin Alva Niko Verherin-”

FPM Ottocasion: “Ancestors help me! The stories I could tell about that man!”

Mr. Meriten: “And stories that will be told. But, first things first. How did Former Regent Beckerin, as we know he preferred, ever become a Regent?”

FPM Ottocasion: “Desperation! And desperation of it’s purest form! You have to understand, back then the House Of Assembly had more in common with a tavern full of angry drunks and a fighting ring than it did with a proper form of governance.”

Mr. Meriten: “I distinctly remember those times. I must say, we common folk were quite worried if we were going to have any form of government the next day given some of the nightly broadcasts of Assembly.”

FPM Ottocasion: “Oh. If the cameras could only show half the events going on. As troubling as those times were, some good came of it. We saw a dramatic increase of youthful assembly members.”

Mr. Meriten: “Yes, and the decor of the House of Assembly changed around that time.”

FPM Ottocasion: “Well, truth be told, we ran out of matching spare chairs and desks. As thrilled as we were to have such youthful participation, it really did a number to the furniture. But, that’s what you got when houses started to bring in their strong sons and spry daughters to the meetings.”

Mr. Meriten: “Indeed. Which is why the fact that after an entire year of deliberation, all the houses had finally agreed to elect Berotan Elro Wreto Arreshin was quite the astounding achievement!”

FPM Ottocasion: “Oh yes. I still remember the dead silence after the final vote was revealed. Everyone was speechless. After failed vote after failed vote, we were just anticipating another round of voting. But... No. We had FINALLY picked someone to serve as Prime Minister! We were elated! It was the first time in so long we were all genuinely happy.”

Mr. Meriten: “Unfortunately, that had to end? Didn’t it.”

FPM Ottocasion: “Yes. Yes, unfortunately. Damned Murphy didn’t waste any time either.”

Mr. Meriten: “If I remember my history correctly, Prime Minister Arreshin... Dropped dead?”

FPM Ottocasion: “Ancestors as my witness, yes. He dropped stone cold dead in the middle the first trade referendums. Just dead. In was sheer chaos for a solid week afterwards.”

Mr. Meriten: “The news outlets certainly had a time of it.”

FPM Ottocasion: “Tell me about it. Every theory in the known world was flying around the media. Poisons, magical hexes, and all sorts of foul play. It was far less dastardly. Turns it out it was an unknown severe allergy to a very straight forward medication coupled with a weak heart. Truthfully, at the time, I really wished it was some form of foul play.”

Mr. Meriten: “Did you really?”

FPM Ottocasion: “Yes, absolutely! It would have given the whole lot of us FAR more time to come up with a damn solution to the problem of no longer having a Prime Minister. You had NEVER seen so many house members in a near panic until then. Not only were the people of the nation sick of the whole state of affairs, every province was threatening to pull their representative houses back for re-election and some were facing possible disbandment.”

Mr. Meriten: “I believe this leads to where Beckerin comes into the picture.”

FPM Ottocasion: “Indeed. As the famous saying goes, quick solutions are the bastards of desperation. We needed a solution quick and the most obvious solution, electing another Prime Minister wasn’t going to happen. Despite all of our collective hides being at risk, the houses would fight and squabble with any candidate now. Many of the craftier houses would certainly find a way to spin the delays in the new election process to their advantage. And no house was going to give any other a chance to get a step above them. After much searching, we found a strange quirk of the laws constructed during our transitions from a monarchy to a republic. While the positions of king, queen, prince, and princess had been abolished and any power removed from anyone appointed by any monarchy member... There was one position that had never been touched.”

Mr. Meriten: “The Regent.”

FPM Ottocasion: “Yes. Exactly! Because of how limited the Regent was in power in comparison to a King and how rarely those laws were used, it had been completely ignored in the Articles of Transition! It took some trickery with how the old monarchy positions were translated to republic positions via the Articles, but we came up with a route to enact the Regent position.”

Mr. Meriten: “It still is fascinating to this day that oversight had never been found until that point. But, I guess no one was honestly looking until that point.”

FPM Ottocasion: “And we probably would have been still looking if it hadn’t been a random comment from an elder member of one of the houses. He rambled on about how back in the monarchy days they would have just installed a Regent. So, with some excessive legal translation, the House of Assembly could install a Regent to serve in the event of the death of the Prime Minister. But... despite that amazing work, we still had a problem.”

Mr. Meriten: “Which was?”

FPM Ottocasion: “Finding someone! There was no way any house member with influence could be installed. The other houses would riot. We could not afford another deadlock. In the heat of a full blown spat between houses, the name was yelled: Beckerin. The entire House of Assembly grew silent. A few hundred plotting minds concentrated one person. Beckerin. Mr. Beckerin Alva Niko Verherin! A first born of the Verherin house, a moderate house, that had renounced his claim to the house and completely removed himself from any

political influences for the past decade. Not only was he truly a neutral party that had could no longer serve normally, he was actually qualified from years of personal training at the hand of his father, mother, uncles, and aunts. Beckerin had more time in a house seat by the time of his twentieth birthday than a good fifth of the Assembly! He was our man!"

Mr. Meriten: "And the other houses had no objections?"

FPM Ottocasion: "Oh, there were plenty... Right up until the first of wave of messages from the provinces started to pour in with deadlines and threats. The House of Assembly collectively reached a unanimous decision to install Beckerin as the first Regent in over two hundred years. And, we had bought the stay of execution we all were so desperate for."

Mr. Meriten: "How did Beckerin react to this?"

FPM Ottocasion: "Well, when government agents eventually found him in a border region town, I believe he originally thought it was a very elaborate practical joke. When he saw the official paperwork, he excused himself to gather his belongings. And promptly attempted escape out his bedroom window."

Mr. Meriten: "Oh my! Was there an epic chase?"

FPM Ottocasion: "Oh no. I made sure to recommend an expert with previous experience in capturing bail jumpers. Beckerin was cornered immediately upon climbing down and escorted directly back the capital."

Mr. Meriten: "And so the reign the Beckerin began?"

FPM Ottocasion: "OH YES! Was it ever the most refreshing experience! I'll never forget the first few sessions. Beckerin was very compliant, initially. But, I could sense that something was churning in his mind. After all the initial ceremonies and press, we all convened for winter holidays. And our dear Beckerin got to work. You have to understand that upon his renouncement of his claim to the house, he was for the most part exiled from his family. Now, his brothers and sisters did of course visit tastefully in secret, but he spent a majority of the winter holidays alone in the House of Assembly in the old royal quarters. They were granted to him by his position. Unfortunately, the support staff wasn't. So he was all alone to entertain himself with nothing but the resources the legal core of our empire at his disposal."

Mr. Meriten: "I'm sure at the time that didn't seem too threatening. But, I must say with hindsight, that was not the wisest move the Assembly had ever done."

FPM Ottocasion: "Debatable. Maybe not the wisest at the time, but it served a greater purpose that no one could have ever imagined. When all the houses reconvened, we were happily greeted by Beckerin with the biggest smile. The perceptive house members were very disturbed by this alone. We had no idea what was coming next. We were so blind in jumping out of the way of a falling candle, we jumped in to the fireplace."

Mr. Meriten: "This has been debated and argued by many historians, but... Who was the first to get hosed down that fateful day?"

FPM Ottocasion: "HA HA HA! Yes! I've heard the debates and I'll settle this once and for all."

Mr. Meriten: "So?"

FPM Ottocasion: "It was Baccel Meriton Avel Fettela."

Mr. Meriten: "Oh my! Really? Everyone says it was Reletal Oboren Selet Paccellin!"

FPM Ottocasion: "Well, he was a fast second to receive the hose. When two decided to get into a heated argument over a trade policy, Beckerin calmly raised a garden hose with a sprayer he had run to his podium and proceeded to douse Fettela and then immediately afterwards, Paccellin. Which immediately stunned them into silence with the rest of us."

Mr. Meriten: "And thus the fateful moment titled by scholars, the Beckerin Reveal."

FPM Ottocasion: "HA HA HA! Yes! I will never forget the horror in so many of the faces of the Assembly. I must admit I, too, was shocked, but I was left in awe quickly. Beckerin revealed three key points of power the Regent had and still had at the time. One, the Regent had full and final say in all major policies that required government involvement to enforce presented in the Assembly. Two, the Regent had command over all civil services. Three, the Regent had the power to command the military in defense of the empire from direct threats to the stability of the empire."

Mr. Meriten: "I would guess the house members were not exactly happy by this reveal?"

FPM Ottocasion: "Of course not. In fact, we were all fairly livid at this point. But, any temptation of revolt faded quickly when the police rushed in, secured the exits, and remained in the room as a very vigilant guard over us. Then, the Lord High Knight and Prime Arch Mage from the military walked into the room and stood at either side of Beckerin. As it turns out, attempting any kind of aggressive action upon the Regent was considered a threat to the stability of the empire."

Mr. Meriten: "Many have recounted that they thought they were about to be in the middle of a coup, but... Beckerin continued normal Assembly business. Well, minus the hours long arguments and break out of fighting."

FPM Ottocasion: "And the back room plotting that happened after that first day. The first week after that spectacle, I was brought into SO many secret little meetings about what to do about Beckerin. But, Beckerin was charismatic and quite capable of gaining the trust of the all the staff and administrators for all the houses. He knew all that was going on. He even revealed every single plan hatched by everyone in an amazing presentation. Normally, given his Regent powers this all would be grounds for being put on trial for betraying the empire. But, Beckerin gave us a deal, that at the time, we could not refuse. If we elected a new Prime Minister, the position of the Regent would no longer be in effect. So all we had to do is to just get together and eventually vote for a new Prime Minister."

Mr. Meriten: "I remember this. Beckerin has gone on record stating that he had hoped to only need to serve as Regent for a couple of weeks. But, he served for over A YEAR. What happened from your perspective?"

FPM Ottocasion: "Oh, he was simply too good at the job!"

Mr. Meriten: "But everyone initially wanted him gone?"

FPM Ottocasion: "Of course. But, initial slights aside... After a month, no one could deny the results! Policies stymied for years went through with newly revised fair terms in days. The number of violent incidents in the House of Assembly plummeted. Many houses were actually on decent speaking terms for the first time in YEARS. Public approval was sky-rocketing. After a few months, there was no need for the police and military presence

anymore. It was strange. It was like for the first time house members got an honest taste of what a functional form of a government was... and liked it! Of course, the whole turn around was driving poor Beckerin insane.”

Mr. Meriten: “He was really hoping for a quick vote on the new Prime Minister.”

FPM Ottocasion: “Yes. Let it be said, that because you are great at something does not mean you can stand to do it. He eventually got tired of all of our delay tactics and finally put a deadline for electing a new Prime Minister. And, we eventually did so. We were all a little sad to have to do it. But as just and fair as Beckerin was being, most of us agreed that we really didn’t want to push him to the point of wanting to abuse his power upon us. I’ll still always remember watching him give his last use of his Regent position. He declared that he would be strictly excluded from future Regent candidacy, right before he declared the new Prime Minister.”

Mr. Meriten: “And thus, he immediately left the House of Assembly and disappeared for a number of weeks afterwards.”

FPM Ottocasion: “As much as we would have liked for him to attend his going away party, none of us could blame him for leaving the area as quickly as possible. We thoroughly enjoyed ourselves regardless. It was such a lovely party, really. So many of us woke up in the strangest of locations in the old royal quarters.”

Mr. Meriten: “I’ve both heard and read up about many, many stories of the behind the scenes antics of Beckerin and his unorthodox methods in sorting out all kinds of issues between houses. Do you have any favorites?”

FPM Ottocasion: “Oh, plenty! And a few that have NEVER been spoken... I don’t know how long we have left for this interview.”

Mr. Meriten: “I am NEVER above a good multi-part series of episodes for a good interview.”

FPM Ottocasion: “Well, if that’s the case... Where. Do. I. Start?”

## Excerpt from the book “The Cataclysmic History of Nexus”

In our world of Nexus, recent history has been punctuated by three major Cataclysms, each with a major Period associated afterwards.

Before the first cataclysm, there was the Pre-Cataclysmic Period. This period is most notable by the complete lack of any verifiable magic. Many theorists and historians debate to this day if magic was completely absent, dormant, or inaccessible by normal means. But, no signs of any use of magic has ever been found. Despite the outstandingly advanced technology of this time, most records were stored in formats that turned out to be very susceptible to magic. Thankfully, reconstructive efforts and untouched records are found everyday, enriching our knowledge of this time period. Many of the most advanced technologies of the current era are those originally created during this period and redesigned to function properly in our magical world. Furthermore, Pre-Cataclysm technology has served as the inspiration and platforms for the latest technological magical hybridization.

The First Cataclysm is also known as the Magical Emergence. There are presently no known records to properly document the exact nature of how magic emerged in our world. But, it is a commonly held belief that those who did were probably the very first victims of the First Cataclysm. The world itself, along with all flora and fauna had to quickly adapt to magic as it integrated into the core of the mechanics of reality itself. It is only now that modern sciences have explored the nature of this integration enough to provide reproducible models and updated laws and theories to account for magic. Reality itself is said to have changed due to the emergence of magic. But, there are theories that reality did not change itself, but merely the representation of itself. This is still a topic of fierce debate.

The First Period symbolized a drastic upset overall. Many previous advanced technologies were unpredictable, unusable, or unavailable. With sociopolitical collapse happening throughout the world, the infrastructure required for mainstay technologies of Pre-Cataclysm no longer existed. The global community fragmented and isolated out of necessity for survival against a world growing more unfamiliar by the day. It was a number of decades before the first organizations that stretched beyond the boundaries of small communities formed. The first Mages appeared, learning to harness the difficult and dangerous rawest magical energy, now known as Elder Magic. The first Mages were rare, feared, and revered. Most often went into positions of power and control.

A grand experiment to test the very structure of magic sparked the Second Cataclysm, the Equalization. The experiment caused one critical side effect, magical energy reacted to all beings with a will of mind. Magical power once limited to a rare, elite few was now available to all with the dedication to harness it. Many unfavorable mage kings and queens were overthrown by commoner mages. Old sociopolitical structures toppled overnight and made way for new ones, but this led to a period of great instability.

The Second Period showcased the troubles with great power and newfound responsibility. While magical use was now widespread among the population, the dangers associated with such use led many to turn towards technologies of the past and practical solutions towards more common problems. This allowed for both magical and technological development to continue at equal levels, with most of the world involving a mixture of both in everyday life. Unfortunately, Elder magic was, and still is, quite dangerous. Numerous magical disasters plagued the era. The potency and unrestricted capacity of Elder magic drew the malicious

interest of a group of mages. They attempted a grand project similar to the experiment that sparked the Second Cataclysm with the intent to restrict Elder magic access to themselves exclusively. They almost succeeded.

The Third Cataclysm, the Acceptance, marked the point when the world accepted the great need to take the initiative to own the responsibility of magic. Almost a thousand of the greatest mages in every discipline and style of magic worked together to create the Abstract Prism. Effectively, the Abstract Prism is a magical extra-dimensional structure of immeasurable power that provides the framework and structure needed to stabilize magic for the masses, protect against damage of the core of magic, and manage threatening anomalies. This change effectively halted all new flows of Elder energy into the world and protective governors encapsulated existing streams. The raw elder magical energy from the theorized source of magic feeds through the Abstract Prism. And from the Abstract Prism, new specialized, filtered, and stabilized forms of magical energy stream forth to every being of willful mind. To facilitate access to magic of all shapes and varieties, Foundation Constructs bound themselves to the Abstract Prism. To this day, these still provide relatively easier and safer routes to magic than ever before. Much of the greatest powers of Elder magic were sacrificed, but the gains far outweighed the losses. Though, many unanticipated side effects are still being discovered.

The Third Period, the current period, has seen untold development and success in all areas. Magic and technology now finally work together in many new and amazing seamless fashions. Both magic and technology are equally common to everyone and provide tools that one can use. While there is still plenty of chaos and instability of the world, the structures of magic are protected and functional. Technology is fast approaching Pre-Cataclysm levels. This is an era of progress.

## Quick Reference Guide from “Paranormal Entities and You!”

In your adventures of the world, you will eventually run into at least one paranormal entity. Usually, it is a fairly mundane affair that is a harmless distraction. But even in the developed world of today, there is still a chance even the most careful person can encounter a dangerous entity. We HIGHLY recommend you take time to read and enjoy the full text of “Paranormal Entities and You!”, but recognize the need for quick and easy reference to aid your survival of an encounter with a paranormal entity! Hence, before you is most immediately important details to know during your encounter.

**Elder Geist** – Visible. Extremely tall and broad. Bipedal. White smooth looking energy shell. Shows signs of intelligence. Can speak many languages. Calm demeanor.

Extremely rare of the Geist family. Elder Geists are ancient magical creations made with extraordinary amounts of care and design. They were strictly crafted to be guardians and defenders. By their very nature, they are immune to almost all magic.

Approach with respect and care. Most are reported to be harmless and never aggressive. While extremely powerful, they were all originally peacekeepers. They also cannot be harmed by most forms of magic today and are immune to regular weaponry. Keep calm, be nice, and you may have a new friend.

**Energy Geist** – Visible to transparent, depending on energy. Shape varies. A variety of possible colors. May show signs of basic intelligence.

Energy Geists are recent attempts to recreate Elder Geists in some new fashion. Most are very simplistic creatures and do not perform much outside their original programming. It is advisable to maintain distance and avoid. Even if programming indicates it should not be a threat, many are unstable creations.

**Nightmare Geist** – Visible unless in darkness. Extremely tall and broad. Bipedal. Black billowing flame-like energy radiating from form. Shows signs of extreme aggressive. Only known to release horrific roar.

IF YOU CAN SEE OR HEAR IT, YOU ARE TOO CLOSE! Please! Stop reading this and sneak away quietly and quickly in the opposite direction of where it is or is going! DO NOT STOP UNTIL YOU REACH CONTACT OF MILITARY, POLICE, or SPECIALISTS! INFORM THEM OF WHERE YOU LAST SAW OR HEARD THIS BEING! Then, LEAVE THE AREA IMMEDIATELY BY THE FASTEST MEANS POSSIBLE.

ONLY If you are sufficiently away from the threat, you may continue reading.

Nightmare Geists are horrific magical creations designed with one sole purpose: To DESTROY. Specifically, to destroy Elder Geists. By some forgotten design property, they are able to counteract the normally invulnerable nature of the Elder Geist by physical contact. When parts of an Elder and Nightmare Geist contact, both parts destabilize and violently release their magical energies. While Elder Geists are invulnerable to most magic, Nightmare Geist are greatly affected by it. Unfortunately, Elder magic has been the only recorded method for taking out a Nightmare Geist. Even the best modern broad spectrum magical energy attempts can only temporarily stun a Nightmare Geist. It has been theorized that old Elder energy imbued artifacts MAY be effective. It is not recommended for ANYONE to

attempt any kind of experimentation of this nature.

**Sprite** – Sometimes visible often invisible. Small in size. Take on a variety of shapes and colors. Typical not aggressive, but can be harmful. Simple creatures.

Sprites are from the spirit family. They are typically small, simple creatures that interact in the world in specific ways. They are natural spiritual, magical beings that exist much in the same way typical physical flora and fauna do. Often they do so in parallel to physical world counterparts.

While often hard to observe, sprites are often very powerful in focused abilities and can be fascinating to watch. Unless directed to do so, most sprites will continue their activities uninterrupted from physical world influence. Sit back, mind yourself, observe peacefully, and keep a moderate distance.

**Daemon** – Sometimes visible often invisible. Medium to large in size. Take on a variety of shapes and colors, but will often adopt a form of a natural or magically enhanced creature. Intelligent creatures that have their own agenda and thoughts. Some can talk roughly, but only if effort has been taken to learn a language.

Daemons are part of the spirit family. They are intelligent entities and should be observed from a safe distance first before ever approaching. While most are not aggressive, this is typically due to their ability to get away from any physical threats with ease. But, daemons often take roles as defenders of the area they live in and will organize and command sprites and other daemons. It is very wise to be respectful and mindful when in the presence of a daemon. If they show any signs of aggression, LEAVE IMMEDIATELY. They command potentially powerful magic and some of the more powerful variety have been known to influence fundamental aspects of reality in their immediate area.

The most powerful Daemons have been revered as gods by many local religions and cults. It is very advisable to avoid these but in a respectful manner. This level of daemon typically are prone to egotism and pettiness. They can also be ruthless with the methods they acquire more power.

**Ghost** – Semi-visible, transparent. Typically medium size. Often they are in the form of a previously living being. Intelligent typically, but psychological states vary.

Ghosts are the previously living still projecting themselves onto this plane of existence. The exact nature of this is not fully understood. Most commonly held theory is that the soul is still on this plane of existence for one reason or another and the soul is projecting a visage via magic or other means. Unfortunately, most ghosts are not psychologically stable often due to the circumstance that rendered them a ghost. Thankfully, most ghosts are harmless and are only able to project themselves visually and audibly. This can NOT be said about any ghost with a magically enhanced area or a weird zone. Ghosts in these areas are best avoided since the nature of these places often grant them dangerous abilities and exacerbate any psychological issues further.

**Anima** – Semi-visible, transparent, flashy. Variety of sizes and forms. Mechanical in nature.

Ghosts of the machine. It is not understood what these are exactly, but it is theorized to be the “souls” of advanced machines that are very similar to ghosts. Why they still exist is a mystery. But they can be a wealth of knowledge and function given the right circumstances.

Some of these Anima seem extremely intelligent and even sentient. Approach with caution.

**Echo** – Semi-visible, transparent. Variety of sizes and forms. Repetitious in nature.

Echoes are strange renditions of repeating sequences of visual and audio phenomena. These often occur in areas know to have been exposed to massive amounts of magical energy. Echoes are completely harmless, but can often dictate very tragic and disastrous events.

**Doppel** – Can be visible or invisible upon choice. Variety of size and forms, but often a form of a previously living being. Commonly intelligent depending on the being.

Doppels are a very strange case. Despite taking on behavior similar to a Ghost or even an Anima, they actually Spirits, specifically Daemons. By some fluke often associated with magical destruction in an area with Daemons, magical energies impress the aspects of a living being upon a Daemon. For all practical purposes, the Daemon now thinks itself as a previously living being including memories and mannerisms. They are to be treated with great caution as they may have some of the same issues as a ghost, but with the magical power of a daemon. There have been reports of Doppels being worked with and reasoned with into realizing what they actually are. This has helped many be freed from the previous identity to form their own. But, it is recommended to not attempt this yourself.