

## Ain't A Hero – Episode 17

by Bryan Schuder

Dretphi reaches over, grasps onto the barrels of the minigun, and slowly torques the assembly. Cideeda holds a flashlight at an exposed section of the machine and concentrates on the function of the mechanisms inside. Seconds later, a cracking grin works onto her face and she nods with confidence. “Yes. I think we can do something with this.”

Dretphi stops rotating the barrels and glances towards Cideeda, running her hand over the weapon. “Can it be adapted to our use?”

Cideeda dons a full, toothy grin and pats the minigun. “I think so. They removed the delinker and added a return path for the spent casings. Finding an ammo belt with take some time, but it seems to take the classic rifle rounds.”

A sly smile creeps onto Dretphi’s face as she carefully examines the device upon the pads on the dining table. Cideeda briefly grits her teeth, sighs, and examines a note covered pad of paper. “But, then there’s rigging up an ammo backpack, reducing the weight, designing handles and safety features, and...”

Each of Cideeda’s bullet points chips away at Dretphi’s smile and reality looms over the project. Dretphi sighs and eyes over the minigun as she rests back into her chair. Cideeda continues with a wink to Dretphi. “We’ll have to figure out a rate of fire you can handle.”

The sly smile returns to Dretphi’s mouth and she nods with gaze at Cideeda. “That step will be fun.”

Cideeda chuckles and flips back the pages folded over on the notepad. “Yes it will. We’ll probably have to get Bach to help brace the thing for the test firing.”

Bach walks through the hallway archway and looks over to the dining table. “Why is name being mentioned this early on a Sunday?”

He stops as he recognizes the minigun on the table and quickly traces the path of the barrels. Noticing the firing line, he takes a swift step back. Cideeda laughs and shakes her head. “Don’t worry. The firing pins are in a bag and I’ve put safety plugs in the chambers. Plus after what did you to it, anyone will have a hard time doing anything accidental with it.”

Dretphi grips onto the barrels and manages a slow spin. Muscles in her arm flex into definition with each partial turn of the device. “Significant amount of force required. Repairable.”

Bach scratches his head of brown hair with a nod. His gaze drifts over to the nearby wall and he points a thumb over to the large plasma projectile cannon. “Any big plans for that thing?”

Cideeda turns in her chair, crosses her arms upon the top of the back, and rests her head down with disappointment pulling at her mouth. “Unless I somehow get a working micro-fusion power pack, probably nothing anytime soon.”

Her ears droop down and she releases a long sigh. “Anyway, if I somehow got my hands on a micro-fusion power pack, there’s a number of other things I’d use it for first. But, I can’t bring myself to just pawn that cannon off.”

Eyes wander toward Bach and he darts his head between the curious and expectant gazes of Cideeda and Dretphi. Cideeda props her arm up and rests her head on top with a toothy grin. “Do you have any plans for it? Could you have any plans for it?”

Bach eyes the cannon and returns a wary expression to Cideeda and Dretphi. “Uh... I won’t say no. But, I’ll be honest, I’m not quite there with my abilities, yet? And, I’m not really that keen on giving that thing life so soon after it almost annihilated me. Just saying.”

Dretphi’s eyes search her mind before she grants Bach an accepting nod. “Understandable. In the future. We will ask again.”

Cideeda settles back in her chair and cleans up the area. She turns her head slightly towards Bach with a devilish grin and a wink. “Just make sure you have a few plans when we ask.”

Bach lowers his eyelids and grumbles. “No pressure, I’m sure.”

Cideeda playfully puts her hands up in the air, shrugs, and clears the space beneath the minigun as Dretphi lifts the weapon off the table onto the floor. The sliding glass door opens up. Sotalia leans into view midway of the door’s height from a patio chair and scans the room. Her eyes lock onto Bach and a smile pulls onto her face. She shuffles the rest of her body around in the chair, raises an arm in front her face, and gestures a curling finger at Bach. “Bach, could you come out here? Aristespha and I were having an interesting discussion and since you’re awake...”

Bach groans as he cautiously pivots to meet Sotalia’s all-too-happy face. He lifts an eyebrow and points over his shoulder towards the refrigerator. “Before I play guinea pig, I’m getting a breakfast shake.”

Dretphi eyes over to Cideeda. Dretphi motions her head slightly towards the sliding glass door. Cideeda nods and leans closer to Dretphi over the table to whisper. “This could be fun to watch.”

Bach empties the last bit of the breakfast shake from the plastic container and rests it on the patio table. He rubs his eyes with both hands and drags them down underneath his jaw to scratch his shadow of a beard. “Okay. What experiment am I going to be a part of today?”

Aristespha settles into her patio chair, sips from a mug, and sighs with a roll of her eyes. “No experiments. Just questions.”

A low grumble sounds out from Bach as he glances over to Aristespha. "That's how it starts."

Sotalia crosses her arms and postures confidently. "Can you do a flight spell right now?"

After few tugs at the corners of his mouth, Bach takes a deep breath in and shrugs with a long exhale. "No, haven't managed that."

Sotalia blinks to a blank face and her jaw drifts open while her mind reprocesses a theory. "You don't have a flight spell?"

Her eyes search her mind. She briefly bites her lip and eventually draws a scheming grin across her face. Aristespha smiles and holds her mug with both hands near her face as few strands of silvery blue hair blow free. "If I may guess, sustained generation of force to counter gravity, pushing against wind resistance, and creating acceleration is a bit much right now?"

Bach nods in agreement, scratches the back of his neck, and aims his sight upwards. "Yes. I haven't figured out the optimal means of doing all that. And well..."

He turns to face the group of Aristespha, Sotalia, Dretphi, Cideeda, and Sebastian. "It's also REALLY dangerous to experiment with flight without safety equipment, an open area, and someone to spot you. There's a good reason those normal flight spells take so much. A LOT of safety features woven in there."

Sotalia pulls a hand free from her arms and points quizzically at Bach with an honest question on her face. "Then how did you clear that courtyard so quickly when running from the security bot?"

Dretphi pivots in place gradually and perks a brow at Bach. "You outran me when we pursued you."

Cideeda places her hands on her hips and gazes with a playful sneer. "And, you dodged that net shell from my shotgun. That was an expensive shell you completely avoided... magically."

Bach closes his eyes momentarily and reopens them with a slight blue glow. He drifts centimeters off the ground and hovers in place. Parts of his body shift in very small motions as he drifts off center. As his stance shakes more and more, Dretphi positions her hands near Bach while Cideeda does the same on the other side. Bach gradually lowers back down to the solid brick of the patio and his eyes dim back to normal. "That's about all I got when it comes to hovering. Now, I'm able to generate force and use it to move parts of my body. It works, but it's limited by physics and biology."

Sebastian shakes his head and floats closer to Bach. "Damn. Well, we'll have to work on that. Not to put any pressure on you, bro. But, it would be really nice to have someone else who can do some flight spells."

Bach lifts an eye brow and stares at his brother with a smirk. "I know. But, that might take a while."

He feels long-nailed fingers slip in between the back of his neck and the collar of his t-shirt. The front of the t-shirt collar tightens against Bach's throat as someone pulls. Bach contorts in his own shirt and spins around. Sotalia grins wide and focuses her gaze right at Bach with an oddly calm, cheery tone. "What are you waiting for?"

Bach's confusion surfaces immediately and he squints his attention directly at Sotalia. "Um, well. An explanation?!"

Sotalia places her free hand on her chest. "Well, you see. I can spot you during your training..."

She waves her free hand in a long span out towards the open field of the backyard. "We have a very open area for you to do your training in..."

She snaps a point to Cideeda with a sly smile. "And, we have safety equipment?"

Cideeda's eye dart around in response but eventually her mind focuses to a nod with an equally sly smile rising to the surface. "Yes, we do! We still have those climbing harnesses from that one mission in the mountains."

Dretphi tilts her head down to Cideeda. "Mine will fit."

Bach shifts his desperate gaze to Aristespha. Her hands wrap around the mug on the patio table. She slides the chair back and stands up from the patio table. "I think I'll need another cup for this. Anyone else?"

Cideeda and Dretphi follow Aristespha inside. Both quickly move to the hallway, while Aristespha nonchalantly picks up a few more mugs and packets of tea. Bach rests his attention with Sebastian. "Brother? Come on. It's too early for this."

Sebastian hovers up to Bach and releases an ethereal sigh as he looks right into Bach's eyes. "Bro, you in are in capable hands. We have the means. We got a lot of ground to cover before we go up against Noxian. And really, bro... I can only make strong suggestions to everyone else at this point given my lack of a solid body."

Bach merely stares with eyelids at half mast towards Sebastian, sounding a low, defeated growl.

Sebastian shrugs with his hands to his sides. "Personally, I'd really like see that Air Catapult spell of yours again."

Sotalia leans to the side of Bach and makes eye contact with Sebastian. "Ooo! What's that one?"

The sun attempts to shine high above through the overcast sky and cloudy shadows project upon the land below. A gentle breeze drifts through the fields and the front lawn's tall grass. Aristespha stands on the front door landing and pans her sight from one distant end of the

roadway. She looks down at the overgrown lawn for a number of seconds before squinting off towards the other distant end of the roadway. “We really need to mow the lawn.”

Sebastain’s ethereal voice emanates from the sword at Aristespha’s side. “We? Dear, that’s what neighborhood kids are for. There’s got to be one around here somewhere that would do it for some random trinket we found adventuring.”

Cideeda steps out from the open garage door, stretches both her arms above her head, and glances over to Aristespha. “I’ll send an aethermail to Steve and see if knows of anyone. Most did seem really into the few things I brought. I wonder if any of them collect coins. Still have all those penny coins from that one empire that no one seems to want.”

Bristles brush repeatedly against concrete and sweep up a cloud of dust and debris. Bach moves a pile with a push broom out from the garage floor into the driveway. He places the broom up inside the garage near the door and spots something in the pile. He kneels down, flicks a few bits of futz away, and retrieves a few centimeter wide dragon scale. He stands up, walks over to the other side of the garage door, and holds the scale up in front of Cideeda. “You think you can get one to work for a dragon scale?”

Cideeda’s eyes immediately catch the black-blue glint of the scale as a beam of light grazes it. She carefully pinches onto the scale and nods towards Bach with a scheming smile. “I might be able to work something out.”

Bach looks to Aristespha, traces out her stare towards the road, and returns to her with a quizzical expression. “So, what time did you all agree upon meeting up?”

Aristespha blinks, glances over to Bach, and then retrieves her aetherphone from a pant pocket. She taps a screen and the clock appears. “Today, Monday at noon. When I called him this morning, he said his schedule was clear today. He still has a few more minutes.”

The front door open inwards and Sotalia steps out onto front door landing next to Aristespha. She flicks a few stray hairs over her horns with her hands and leans over to look at the clock on Aristespha’s phone. She places her hands on hips, arches her back into a stretch, and scans the roadway. “Well, I hope this doesn’t take too long. I really could go for more flying lessons today.”

A loud single laugh erupts from Bach and he shakes his head while contorting his lips. “Not today! Already booked!”

Sotalia snaps her attention right at Bach and narrows a glare. “What?!”

Aristespha puts her aetherphone away, draws a long breath, and sighs with an eye roll. “Yes. He’s helping me with research and materials manufacture.”

Sotalia shifts her stare at Aristespha’s face with a quirk of a brow. “Can’t that wait? I finally get a chance to do some flight magic for honest work reasons...”

Aristespha tilts her head towards Sotalia and speaks in a quieter tone. “After being swung into a tree by tether from a hover disc, I believed he needed a break.”

Sotalia crosses her arms, pivots away to face towards the road, and bites her lip in embarrassment. "I'm sorry. I forgot how easy hover discs drift laterally. It's been a few years since I tutored in that type of magic."

The inside door leading from the kitchen into the garage opens up to Dretphi. She steps down the few stairs, walks behind Bach and Cideeda, and squints at a distant military truck moving up the road. "I see a vehicle. Maybe theirs."

A blinking yellow turn signal illuminates as the truck approaches the mouth of the driveway. It slows to a turn and pulls up just behind the group's humvee. The driver's side door swings out and a human woman hops out of the truck with a skip to her step. She quickly readjusts her green military uniform on her slender frame and finishes with a corrective tilt of her hat upon her short, light brown hair. After a few steps to the front of the truck, she stops and waits patiently. The passenger's side door closes solidly and a tall, thin man moves out from between the front of the truck and the back of the humvee. As he turns to approach the front steps, the woman immediately joins his side with a very proper, official stance that contrasts the more relaxed posture of the man. When the man reaches the first step of the front stairs, he stops, lowers into a slight bow, and extends his hand to shake Aristespha's with an almost undetectable smile near the graying corners of his mustache. "I am Captain Hackle of the Greater Azure Alliance. Am I safe to assume you are Lady Aristespha?"

Aristespha returns the gradual bow, reaches out, and firmly shakes Captain Hackle's hand. "Yes, you are."

Captain Hackle straightens his posture and allows his smile to grow a tiny bit more. "Excellent. I am happy you returned my call and offered to meet me. There's a number of recent events I would like to discuss and a few bits of information I would like to relay. But, first... Let me introduce two members of my unit."

He sidesteps and pivots with a gesture towards the woman at his side. "This is Sergeant Violet, an expert on information acquisition and analysis."

Sergeant Violet bows and holds out her hand to shake. "Pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Aristespha returns the gesture and shakes her hand. Sotalia quirks an eye brow, stares at Sergeant Violet, and curls a lip into a smirk. "Information specialist?"

Sergeant Violet rotates herself to meet Sotalia's gaze, proudly smiles back, and straightens her posture with arms behind her back. "Yes! I assist by gathering data about the where, when, why, who, and how of any assignment we are given. Then, I find relevant information to relay to others in my unit."

Sotalia twists her mouth, gently narrows her eyes at Sergeant Violet, and speaks with sprinkles of condescension. "Okay, give me an example of this relevant information."

The corner's of Sergeant Violet's smile sharpen to make way for a confident grin and she focuses her full attention to Sotalia. "Well, Sotalia Aurica Feratosia, I know you are second

generation half-emin, scored eight thousand six hundred sixty nine cells when you tested at the small magic university near your home town, your current age is-

Sotalia's eyes flit wide open as surprise completely flushes her expression and she interrupts with a very respectful tone. "Let's keep it civil! Um... I can see why your skills... Would be very useful."

Captain Hackle sways his sight to Sergeant Violet, presents a purposeful small cough, and pulls a corner of his mouth. "Now, now. We are here as guests. Could you please assist Specialist Thayal with removing their property out of the truck?"

Sergeant Violet sends off a smug glance to Sotalia before exactly pivoting to face Captain Hackle into a salute. "Yes, Captain!"

She departs straight to the military truck with a stiff march. Sotalia settles back against the door frame with squirm of her crossed arms. Bach, Cideeda, and Dretphi exchange tight lipped expressions as they try and fail at suppressing their smiles of satisfaction. A brief snort from Bach prompts an equally brief glare from Sotalia. Sergeant Violet halts near the bed of the truck, draws a deep breath in, and shouts out in a shrill bellow. "SPECIALIST THAYAL! Get your butt into gear and get the other end of this artifact! If I for a moment do not feel you are putting your effort into carrying it, you will be on double PT until I believe you are contributing your fair share!"

Wide eyes immediately find the source and witness the spectacle. Sounds of panic scurry around the bed, until a lanky half-emin man shoots up from the bed. "Good fucking gods almighty... Yes, ma'am!"

Specialist Thayal places a hand quickly to the side of his head in a salute, pushing away long black hair underneath a horn roughly broken short in comparison to the other. He reaches down to lift up the end of a roughly-edged, golden sheet of transparent stabilized magical energy. Sergeant Violet lowers the tailgate, grabs hold of the other end of the sheet, and narrows her eyes at Specialist Thayal. "Ma'am?! I work for a living! You will address me as Sergeant until I deem so otherwise! Do you understand me!?"

Specialist Thayal snaps his posture rigid and straight, assists in carrying out the golden sheet out of the bed of the truck, and grits his teeth with a sneer. "Yes. Sergeant."

Captain Hackle returns his head from observing behind and pans a face between everyone else with a long sigh. "If you could please excuse Sergeant Violet, she recently made the rank and is establishing herself to the rest of the unit. In particular... Specialist Thayal has gone to great lengths in the past to... Earn... the particular attention he is getting."

He glances back over his shoulder as Specialist Thayal and Sergeant Violet move the golden sheet up towards the front door. He speaks with a calm tone and pauses to punctuate the moments he spends finding the right words. "As a point of order, I wanted to return this strange bit of magic we had to... Separate from the entryway into the ruins you successfully sealed. If you would not mind, Specialist Thayal has some questions to ask."

Both Specialist Thayal and Sergeant Violet place the golden sheet on the grass in the front lawn. Bach squints his eyes at the golden sheet and recognizes it. Specialist Thayal steps up next to Captain Hackle, examines everyone present, and points to the golden sheet. "Okay, first off... Who the fuck made that?!"

Eyes concentrate on Bach and he eventually raises his hand weakly after feeling the peer pressure.

Captain Hackle gently lifts the cup to his lips, carefully tilts the tea into his mouth, and almost silently places cup back onto the dining table. "You are an interesting group, which I appreciate. I must say for your short time here, you have shown your capabilities amazingly."

Sebastian rests in a chair next to Aristespha and across Captain Hackle with a proud smile. "Well, we try to do the jobs right. Despite what some of them turn into."

Captain Hackle nods, briefly gazes outside through the sliding glass door, before returning to face Aristespha and Sebastian. "Hopefully, Sergeant Violet and Specialist Thayal aren't being too nosy, but I do appreciate all of you humoring our questions."

Aristespha nods gracefully and gradually lifts an eyebrow with a smile. "It's only fair since you've given us some interesting information about the area and rumors about odd events."

Captain Hackle draws a slow grin and nods a tiny bit. "Yes. Rumors, simply. Nothing more. No official backing... officially... of course."

Sebastian mimics a similar nod. "Of course."

Captain Hackle takes hold of his hat, bows forward in his chair before rising. "Unfortunately, I must attend to other affairs today. I would actually prefer to stay longer, given my... Next stop."

Sebastian quirks a brow as he floats up to a stand and tilts his head to side looking at Captain Hackle. "What would that be, sir?"

Captain Hackle places his hat upon his graying, short curly hair and sighs as he straightens his uniform. "Your neighbors."

A small twitch pulls at Aristespha's cheek underneath her eye. She stands up out of her chair upright, and calmly exhales. "I can understand your trepidation."

With a nod, Captain Hackle walks towards the sliding glass door and halts before he opens it. He turns back toward Sebastian and Aristespha with a smile. "Yes. A requirement of my job. Speaking of jobs. I actually have an assignment I would like to send to your group through the guild system."

Aristespha crosses arms with an interested smile and perk of the brow. "We may be interested."



Captain Hackle nods and looks outside to Sergeant Violet and Specialist Thayal. “A number of days ago, a farmer provided my group shelter during one of the strong storms. In return, I gave him my contact information and if he needed help, I would try to provide. He called me this weekend. He has an interesting problem with a pack of large bird-like creatures that now prevent him from getting to certain parts of his farm safely. Unfortunately, they seem to be a protected species and a straight elimination isn’t allowed. The local government will be happy to relocate them, but will not do the initial capture. My group isn’t particularly geared for this type of task, but I feel your group would be... Much more appropriate for the task at hand.”

He pivots his head just over his shoulder with a calm demeanor. “Would you be interested... Or should I forward the task to your... Neighbors?”

Sebastian begins to open his mouth with a quizzical expression on his face. Aristespha speaks up strongly and clearly with a tooth revealing, gritting grin. “We shall take it.”

The humvee bounces along the narrow dirt access road, kicking up dust and the occasional rock. As it closes in on a gate within the fence row, it slows to a stop with hint of squeal from the brakes. The powerplant inside spins down, all the doors open, and everyone works their way out of the vehicle. Cideeda steps up to the fence upon the crest of a hill and surveys the huge, wide-open grassy field opening up down from the fence. “This actually really pretty. Not a bad day for another nature hike.”

Aristespha walks up next to Cideeda and scans the horizon, checking on her tablet in between sweeps. “Hopefully, nothing too demanding, so we can enjoy the rest of it.”

She bites her lip and sighs with a glance behind her to the rest of the group. “Again, I wanted to apologize for signing us up for the mission without consulting everyone else, first. I wasn’t exactly thinking clearly at that moment.”

Sotalia stretches her arms over head, rests her hands on her hips, and assumes a confidence stance as she gazes into the green field with a sly grin. “As IF we’d let THEM have anything after us.”

With a long yawn Bach, ambles up to the gathering at the fence row and clears the sleep from his eyes. “Well, it’s not a cyber-zombie den, an abandoned park, or a ruin. So, it’s already got a lot going for it.”

Dretphi stares off in her own thoughts, her focus elsewhere in her mind, and she slowly pronounces a long scientific sounding name to herself. “I should know that name. Familiar.”

Sotalia glances over to Dretphi, shrugs, and crosses her arms with a puzzled expression. “Well, I tried searching all night. I only got a few bits of info about the creatures. They sound like big angry chickens.”

Cideeda lifts up a pair of binoculars, aims them into the distant parts of the field, and slowly pivots herself in a sweep of the horizon. Aristespha taps on her tablet a few times and

furrows her brow as different results pour onto the display. “Unfortunately, it seems that the species name applies to a number of different breeds of all shapes and sizes. Natural, genetically modified, and even magically modified.”

Sebastian’s transparent visage materializes behind the group and chuckles to himself. “Yet another wonderful thing our ancestors left for us to deal with.”

Cideeda halts her pivot, leans forward with the binoculars, and pulls her brow over the eyepieces in surprise. “Holy shit. Are those...”

Dretphi quickly strides next to Cideeda, taps her on the shoulder, and holds her hand out. Cideeda lowers the binoculars, blinks, and places them in Dretphi’s awaiting hand. Dretphi lifts the binoculars up to her eyes, briefly searches the area, and then stares... silently for a minute. Eventually, she removes the binoculars from her eyes, twists her mouth, and simply says. “Oh.”

The moments of full attention from everyone else in the group prompts Dretphi to continue with a further explanation. “I know what these are. Their name in my language translates roughly. Thudkicker.”

From the treeline surrounding the field, four tall, large bird-like creatures casually hop over the fence. Each creature walks upon two long, thick legs, with three sharply clawed toes each, and investigates patches of grass in the field with long feathered necks. Their feather covered oval bodies only show the faintest hints signs of small wings tucked away. At the front crest of their heads, each has a large bony crown encircling a head dress of colorful feathers. The tallest of the group stands close to two meters tall, with the rest not much shorter. Dretphi passes the binoculars to Aristespha. Sotalia casts a quick incantation, places her fingertips together, and squints through the space between. Aristespha lowers the binoculars from her blank face and hands them to Bach. As the situation dawns upon all members of the group, expressions grow uncertain and mix with heavily with unease. Sebastian watches the change in his team, puffs up her chest, and addresses them with hearty bravado. “Alright everyone! Team planning on the hood, let’s get a plan together.”

The pack of thudkickers wander the large, open field as the wind gently blows towards the awaiting group, hiding the forestline. Sebastian hovers briefly out from behind a tree, checks the current position of the pack, and returns to gaze at the group. “Okay. Final review of the plan. Aristespha and Sotalia will go invisible and move to the middle of the field. That’ll give me enough range from the sword to fly around and get the leader’s attention. When the leader charges after me, the rest will join up with the leader to assist.”

Sebastian points the Sotalia. “Sotalia should have plenty of room to levitate and isolate one from the pack. Which given how notoriously single-minded they get when defending their territory, they won’t immediately realize they are missing someone. Correct?”

He shifts his attention to Dretphi. She nods. “Yes. Notoriously single-minded. All will focus on the leader’s target until the leader decides.”

Sebastian directs his focus to Aristespha. "Aristespha will sedate them with a spell. Sotalia will drop them off near Dretphi and Cideeda, who will tie them up and drag them off into the woods. Bach you keep lookout in the treeline near the middle of the field and be ready to come up with a distraction in case we need one."

Dretphi takes in a breath and speaks calmly with hints of concern. "Thudkickers have good vision, good senses of smell. Keep hidden when possible. Watch for wind changes. They are NOT stupid. This breed often lives in weird zones."

Sebastian nods and checks with everyone. "Everyone. If they don't take the bait or it becomes too dangerous, everyone scatter and regroup at the humvee. We'll figure something else out from there. Ready?"

Nods and affirmative expressions appear all around.

A gentle breeze blows in waves across the field. Two faintly distorted, transparent figures crouch down in the middle of the field. Sotalia's voice crackles over the radio. "We're in position and ready."

Cideeda's sounds out over the airwaves. "Ready here."

Bach secures his helmet and gives a thumbs up to Sebastian next to him behind some underbrush. "They're all in position. Ready when you are."

Sebastian nods, quickly zips off to the open, and flies towards the pack diving low into the taller grasses. Bach calls out over the radio. "Sebastian is going in."

Sebastian rises out of the grasses right next to the pack and lets out a loud, annoying, ethereal cough. The largest thudkicker immediately snaps to attention and focuses an angry glare right at Sebastian. Feathers ruffle up, stance shifts aggressively, and a low, powerful honk echoes into vicinity. The other thudkickers halt and gather in a rough V-formation behind the leader. Sebastian takes a few steps back. The pack takes a few steps forward. Sebastian hovers back at a constant pace, which the pack matches to maintain their distance. Sebastian darts out ahead and the pack charges out in a full sprint after him. Bach keeps his eyes on the progression of events and uses the radio. "They took they bait! Sebastian is moving them to staging area, get ready."

The Sebastian flies in circular path around the field with the pack in feverish pursuit. As the last of the pack passes between pairings of Sotalia and Aristespha in the middle of the field, and Cideeda and Dretphi hiding just beyond the brushline, the transparent distortion around Sotalia fades and she expediently runs through a series of incantations. As she finishes, the trailing thudkicker not only falls behind the pack, but speeds opposite from the pack despite how fast its legs kick against the air below. It hovers against its understanding towards the center of the field and halts. A similar distorted transparency disappears around Aristespha. She points with glowing violet eyes at the confusion upon the thudkicker's face and releases a directed wave of energy. Its eyes close and body goes limp. The snoring beast drifts away towards the edge of the field and lands gently on the grass. Dretphi jumps out from the

brush, snatches up the legs of the creature, and points them upwards to put the thudkicker on its back. Cideeda rushes out with thick rope and quickly wraps coils around the legs and secures the bindings. Dretphi directs Cideeda to the head. "Secure the beak. Tie the neck to the legs."

Bach alternates his attention between Sebastian's progress around the field and the rest of the team. Sotalia and Aristespha grow transparent and resettle into their mid-field hiding spot. Cideeda finishes her knots and Dretphi drags the huge bird off the field into hiding. Sebastian glances over mid-flight and sees the staging area clear again with everyone back in hiding. He curls his path around and lines it up for another pass into the area. Bach radios an update. "He's coming in for another pass."

Sebastian blazes through with the pack in tow. Sotalia becomes visible again and rapidly works the motions and flows for another casting of a spell. A trailing thudkicker separates from the other two and drifts towards the center of the field. Midway towards the center, the bird sporadically bobs down, returns to previous height, then bobs back down again. Sotalia mutters a series of curses in a few choice languages and grumbles to herself. "The FUCK are you doing?! Stop doing that!"

Aristespha's voice comes from a faintly distorted transparent figure next to Sotalia. "What's going on?"

Sotalia grimaces and growls as she readjusts her gestures and concentration to a challenge of her power. "I think the bird is actually trying to counter my spell! And, it's doing too good of a job of it!"

The cloak of invisibility falls down from Aristespha and she focuses her glowing violet eyes at the erratically hovering thudkicker. "By the gods, it is! It's actually consciously directing magical flow against yours! It's really crude, but..."

Sotalia snaps a worried glare to Aristespha with a grit of her teeth. "Crude and effective! Can you knock it out?! I'm wasting a lot of time and energy fighting it!"

Sebastian checks over towards the middle of the field and flashes concern over his face as he continues to jet over the grass. He slows down when he glances behind him to see the pack drop to a slow walk. The lead thudkicker sways his head side to side and carefully examines Sebastian in front of him. It lowers its head to sniff the ground behind Sebastian and comes to a complete stop. Sebastian eyes over to the middle of the field as Aristespha throws a more powerful wave of energy to finally sedate the hovering thudkicker. His eyes shift over to the treeline. Bach meets Sebastian's eyes and he radios out. "Problem! I think the leader has figured out Sebastian. They're not chasing him anymore. I'm going to try to distract them."

Bach lifts his hand up as a glowing ball forms and he flicks it off. The ball flies out in a guided path right in front of the leader. It flits and flutters around the leader's head, but the creature disregards the ball and continues to sniff the air. Sebastian calls out to Bach and catches sight of Dretphi just now tying up the sedated thudkicker. "Bro! I don't think it's falling for that shit anymore! I think it knows something is up!"

Bach's eye dart around and his mind races through all the pieces of the situation. Dretphi and Cideeda try to wrap up the thudkicker on other side of the field. Aristespha and Sotalia begin to focus magical energies for invisibility. Bach grits his teeth, secures his helmet on his head, and rushes out to Sebastian. He searches the ground, spots something, and cracks a devious grin across his mouth. As the pack leader begins to turn its head away from Sebastian, a loud shout from Bach seizes its attention. Upon facing Bach, a large, old cow pie impacts and crumbles across the face and beak of the pack leader. It sniffs the air and draws in the unmistakable scent of old cow manure. The odor whips through the nasal passages and the brain full halts on all thought processes, letting pride take over completely. The leader's eyes glow dimly red as every feather ruffles and it bellows out an enraged honk that resonates throughout the region. Sebastian's jaw drops. "Wow."

He stares at Bach for moment before yelling out. "RUN, BRO!"

Bach whips his jaw shut, his eyes illuminate a bright blue, and he tears off at speeds beyond expectation. The leader races off in a psychotic rage, red flows of magical energy course around its body and savage honks shred the air. Bach screams out into the field and over the radio. "NEW PLAN! IT'S AFTER ME!"

Bach blazes down the field, a faint hint of blue energy vapor behind him. Long, fast strides keep his speed up and the distance between him the enraged thudkicker. Aristespha's voice comes over the radio. "We're ready, get over here!"

He streaks towards the staging area and nearly flies through it with the leader right behind him. The other thudkicker crosses into the zone much later. It seizes still, floats up stiffly, and receives a powerful energy wave blast. Sotalia deposits the creature for Cideeda and Dretphi, releases the spell, and pants. "No more chancing. Let's skip the cloak and use the energy for the big one!"

Aristespha nods and concentrates her energy. Dretphi and Cideeda rapidly bind up and drag the creature off to the others hidden in the forest. Sotalia yells over the radio. "Bring the big one in Bach!"

Bach pace continues to gradually slow, the distance between him and the leader closing, and his breath grows shorter with each second. He banks around the edge of the field and lines up for the approach. The enraged leader narrows the gap. Bach bolts through the trap, Sotalia activates her spell, and the thudkicker lifts off the ground. Aristespha takes aim. A loud honk bellows out, a flow of red energy pulses across the thudkicker's body, and his feet touch ground again a wavering field of energy fades off. Sotalia struggles to perform the incantations for another attempt. Bach slows down to a stumbling run. Aristespha sends a wave of energy at the leader. It pauses for a moment. It blinks and stumbles forward. But, it releases another loud honk and launches into run. Bach spins around to see the creature charge down at him and his mind panics for a solution as he lowers his head in exhaustion. He lifts his head up and calls out on the radio. "Dretphi! How do these things challenge each other?!"

Dretphi halts in shock at the question, her eyes speed through her mind, and she commands out. "Stare! Honk loud! Kick up the dirt! Flare out your plumage!"

Bach grits his teeth, locks eyes with the charging thudkicker, screams out a strained honk, repeatedly kicks up the dirt behind him, and flares out his duster. The creature drastically slow down, stops a few meters short of Bach, and curiously glares. After a few seconds, it returns a different tone of honk, scratches at the dirt beneath it, and flares out its feathers. Bach keeps his eyes on the creature and carefully speaks into the radio. "Okay. What now?"

Dretphi watches the scene and continues to instruct Bach. "Circle with it. Keep eye contact. Watch its head."

Aristespha and Sotalia rush across the field down to the distant face-off between Bach and thudkicker. Magical energies gather for spells as they move. Cideeda runs with shotgun ready and Dretphi not far behind. Bach and the thudkicker circle around, each matching mannerisms. Bach notices flows of magic creeping up the neck of the creature, muscles tensing, and balance shifting. "Uh, what's next after the circling?"

Dretphi voice sounds out over the radio. "A headbutt."

Bach's eye flit open and he watches the head of the thudkicker rear back, more magical energy flowing up to it. His lip curls to a sneer, and he narrows his eyes with a grit. A brilliant blue glow flashes out from Bach's eyes and streams of magical energy spiral up his body to his head. Bach rears back his head with sheer determination raging upon his face. Bach and the thudkicker lunge heads first at each other and collide in a thunderous, solid thud that bounces off the nearby mountains and back into the field. A bright flash fades from the contact point and the two remain in contact with each other for a moment. The thudkicker staggers back, dizzily stumbles over itself into heap, and releases a loud grunt before a series of snores. Bach straightens up with a triumphant ear to ear grin, cracks spidering out from a central point on his helmet's magical, golden barrier. "Fuck you. Chicken."

His expression drastically changes as pain receptors finally inform him of his sheer stupidity. "Oh gods, why did I do that... OWWW!"