Author's Note: Lowered stakes a bit in last ch. It's now a personal beef Mikey has, because he was friends with Ron. No mob investment, so bosses aren't interested in Howie. They are interested in explosives though. Saw Ron surpassing them in output with a much smaller operation, and they wanted those profits. Otherwise more or less the same atm.

No one likes waking to an Alarm.

It's a jarring, unpleasant experience, going from deep sleep to wide awake in an instant. Best way to describe is like when you having a dream and you just walking somewhere, but you move your feet in real life and find no ground beneath you. So all of a sudden, your brain now thinks you're falling, and you jolt awake in a moment of panic while your body is flooded with adrenaline, all because your mind is playing tricks on you.

An Alarm is the same way with one major caveat: the danger is very real.

The response is automatic by now, drilled into me from years of training with my daddy. By the time my brain catches up to my

body, my feet are already in my boots and I'm bent over to lace them up, which is difficult to do with only one hand. The unexpected hitch in the familiar routine rips away the last vestiges of sleep as I take control of the situation and cast Mage Hand, a Cantrip which requires a little bit of extra attention to get right. Within my mind's eye, the Spell Structure surges forward in a flurry of motion, a motion I've recently come to associate with a grasping hand reach out into the cosmos, a radiant Astral Hand with palm facing down and fingers splayed like its about to pick something up off a desk.

It's the left hand, though I'm not sure if it's always been that way or if my real life circumstances caused me to perceive it as such, since perspective plays such a huge role in Spellslinging. Now's not the time for study though, so I intone, "*Per – Auxilium – Manus*", under my breath and flick my fingers twice like I'm gesturing for someone to come over. Fitting since the Latin means, 'a helping hand', but I gotta do a little more to make the Spell my own. In between the first and second flick, I envision the Spell Structure splitting into two, the hands moving out from underneath me until I'm standing upon the mirror line dividing the two. From there, the Spell Structure surges out of my mind and into reality, a pair of glowing blue spectral hands emerging from my mind's eye to a point my real eyes are focused upon.

Which in this case is right above my boots, so they can lace them up right quick. In the meantime, I give my gun case sitting on the bedside table some percussive maintenance. A light tap with the

base of my fist is all, and it opens up right quick with an audible knock that echoes out into the silent night. Grabbing my dubsies, I tuck them into my duster's side pockets, allowing me easy access to both guns without having to rely on my Mage Hands. Don't remember if put on the jacket or fell asleep in it, but I do rememeber my Rattlesnake was under my pillow while I slept. That's already holstered on my hip at nine, so I tuck the Model 10 into the eleven o clock holster just as my Mage Hands finish tying my laces. Economy of motion is the key to making the Mage Hands work quick, because they most certainly don't move with any haste, floating up from my shoes to latch onto the dubsies so they're available when needed.

All in all, the whole process from Spell to tied laces takes about five seconds at most, but it feels like a damn near eternity in an emergency. And this most certainly is an emergency, because the Alarm Ward what woke me with an alert for Abby is still making my stomach drop as more and more emerge from the water to step onto shore which sits less than two-hundred and fifty metres away.

There's no croaking, no barking, no flopping or splashing to be heard, which tells me they're still trying to be stealthy. That's the beauty of Alarm Wards though. Set them up right like I have, and intruders won't know one's been triggered. Not unless you want them to know, which you can finagle while setting it up, though an experienced and highly sensitive Spellslinger might sense it. I'm guessing there isn't one in this group of Abby, or if there is one,

it’s hanging back to let the others test the waters, so to speak. Since that’s the case, I allow myself a few more seconds to prepare as I head for the door, my Mage Hands hidden in my duster to keep the light from giving me away. Detect Aberration is the first port of call, which offers a chilling reminder of how I should never rely solely on the Spell, because it reads no Aberrations present even though the Alarm Spell has pinged more than a dozen times already. Sliding my Darkvision goggles on, the darkness fades into grayscale as I make my way towards the door. All the while, my phantom right hand moves through the motions of the Mage Armour Spell, one I channel through the Defensive Metamagic bead on my bracelet. Gives it a little bit of extra oomph, not a whole lot in the grand scheme of things, but still better than none. Hearing Protection comes next, and that’s really all the defensive magics I got, which is just sad really.

Should really work on that, especially seeing how I done gave Tina my Shield Spell Core, but I’ve been more focused on making up for my missing hand than anything else. Well, Mental Fortress has been at the top of my list this last week for obvious reasons, but like I’ve said before, Abjuration is one of my weaker Schools of Magic and I prefer to focus on my strengths. I’ve got Protection From Aberration prepared though, and I take a split second to consider the pros and cons of casting it on myself before the fight. On the one hand, it’d make Abby reluctant to approach me and offer protection against certain Spells like Charm, Fear, or Bane. On the other hand, there are times when I **want** Abby to come after me instead of say the women and children taking shelter in the compound, not to mention how it’s requires Concentration

which I would much rather save for Warding Wind to actually protect me or Levitate to get me up and over the walls if needed.

To that end, I hold off on Protection From Aberration and prepare the materials I might need in a pinch. A blade of grass goes between my lips and a length of gold wire looped around my thumb as I take inventory of the rest of the Spells I got prepped so I don't have to think about it in the heat of the moment. Hunter's Mark and Conjure Weapon, won't be worth much, while Spiritual Weapon still feels like a massive waste in terms of effectiveness. Besides that, all I got is Misty Step to reposition quickly and the Spell I love so very much and prepped just before going to sleep, the highly effective and most certainly illegal Fireball.

Tempting as it is to ready a Maximized or Widened Fireball before I head out, I keep an old adage in mind. To a hammer, every problem looks like a nail, but thing is, I ain't no hammer. I don't got the right Spells prepped to deal with all my problems head on, nor the endurance to keep up against waves and waves of Abby. I'm no Evoker. I'm a Diviner, and my role is to scout, so I sneak out the door and head out into the forest to do just that. Soon as I'm out the door, the Detect Aberration Spell pings to alert me to the presence of Abby, but only a narrow band of eight positive contacts down by the new dock. Too far to say anymore, but I refrain from getting any closer because the Alarm Wards tell me there's many more spread out all along shore. Damn trees are an obstruction in more ways than one, same with the various

buildings scattered about, leaving me with a narrow cobblestone pathway as the only clear ground outside of Carter's compound.

Which sits strangely silent and unlit even thought Carter and a couple others are also synched to the Alarm Wards, so they should know about the impending attack. Could be they're still confused as to what's going on, because there was no way to do a test run without recalibrating the wards, and I didn't think it'd be necessary. Supposed I ought to rethink that moving forward, but if wishes were fishes, then we'd all be fed, now wouldn't we? Walls won't do much to stop ranakin from hopping right over without defenders standing up top of them, which tells me everything I need to know about what I gotta do.

First, I need to create a commotion loud enough to wake everyone in the compound. Then, I'll have to buy time for them to get up and at 'em. Lastly, it would be really nice if I survived through to the end without losing any body parts. All while fighting off a sizable horde of at least three dozen Abby by now, with more coming out the water with each passing moment, in heavily forested terrain that makes for less-than-ideal circumstances for gunfighting or Spellslinging.

Should be a walk in the park. One packed with pitfalls and hazards as far as the eye can see, but still a park nonetheless.

Slowly and silently weaving through the trees and shrubbery, I make my way down to the docks for a better look at what I'm up against. Ain't a huge risk, as mudkippers are damn near blind, and while merhounds and ranakin have great eyesight, they don't have Darkvision because that would up the cost of production for minimal returns. Truth is, the local Abby don't got great senses when they out of water, whether it be sight, smell, or hearing. In water, they can feel the churning of a swimmer from 500 metres away and sense blood in the water from at least twice that distance. That's how they found those bodies so quickly after all, though they likely sensed it within the first minute and spent the next fourteen making sure it wasn't a trap.

We ain't in the water though, so I make it close enough to see some fifty odd merhounds and maybe a dozen ranakin hang out around the docks, while a horde of mudskippers flop about all around them. They're rallying here rather than further inland because mudkippers and ranakin ain't exactly stealthy when they bound around. Merhounds are capable of moving quietly, but not as quietly as the tuskwulves they're sorta modelled after, nor are they anywhere near as fast. Clever though, so I keep an eye on my surroundings so I'm not caught unawares by the scouts they've sent ranging out. Merhound sentries checking out the lay of the land, finding the best routes through the forest to encircle their target, the compound sitting a quarter kilometre away from the shoreline.

Could be Abby is here because of all the work we've been doing on the dock. Eying the strung-up bells I set up over head, ones attached to woven nets out in the shallows, I notice not a one of them is jingle jangling despite the near constat pings from the Alarm Wards notifying me of more and more Abby making their way onto shore. Means they spotted those traps and are carefully moving past them underwater, so there's been some thought put into this attack. It's a little odd though, considering they sent seven ranakin here some five or six weeks back and lost more than half. That's not a small hunting party, and this one is several times larger, a combined arms attack against a minor settlement that quite honestly doesn't offer them much.

There's what? Ten men, twelve women, and nine children in the compound, Elodie included. Not a whole lot of biomass to bring back, not compared to the hundred or so houses just a little north of here at Mueller's Quay. Especially considering how Carter's people ain't big on farming, possessing only a single plot of crops smaller than what most single households got up at the Quay. Don't gotta farm when you can Wildshape into a critter to hunt and forage all winter long.

All told, it don't make sense for Abby to attack this place in strength, not when they stand to benefit so much more by attacking a much larger settlement so close by. And make no mistake, they got the numbers to take Mueller's Quay. The minutes pass in tense silence as I sort out what signals I can while taking in everything I see, and the number of merhounds alone is enough to give the Quay a good run for their money.

Seventy plus and counting, with more than twice that in mudkippers and twenty big froggies to top it all off, this here is a proper Abby warband you hardly ever see around these parts. To top it all off, there's a couple big boys who got that evolved look about them, the hobbs to them gobs as it were. I count five hulking hounds with extra thick torsos waddling about, their fishy forms at least half again the size of their counterparts. Each one is bulging at the seams from too much muscle packed onto their frames, and they got a couple extra long hooked spines sticking out from their cranial fins. As for the ranakin, there are three who tower head and shoulders over all the rest, who already stand tall at 7 feet easy, but they ain't the ones I'm concerned with. No, it's the smallest, leanest, rangiest, ranakin that got me sweating, a stick-thin, dark-green noodle of a froggie that puts me more in mind of a slimy lizard with bulging eyes and runty, withered hooks for arms.

Abby are a simple lot, and Ferals simpler still. The bigger they be, they dumber they usually are, so when a big ranakin evolves in the opposite direction and slims down a fair bit, then you can bet your bottom dollar that you up against one smart cookie. Odds are it's running this show too, which means priority number one is to take it out of the fight. Clever thing that it is, it ain't standing on the shoreline proper with the rest of its kin. Instead, it has its hooks stuck fast to the cofferdam while most of its body is still in the water. There it floats, studying the lay of the land and ready to submerge and swim away at a moment's notice if things should go wrong.

Now don’t get it twisted. Smaller doesn’t necessarily mean weaker, as there’s a good chance that rangy ranakin is still physically stronger and tougher than its normal sized kin, though most likely outstripped by its larger peers. It a difference in future paths of progression. Given time, those bigger ranakin will turn into Behemoths, massive Ferals who can grow ten, fifteen, twenty feet tall even, though that’s in the old world which has a much higher Aetheric concentration. Pound for pound, Behemoths are physically the strongest Abby around, and tend to be tough as nails too, with most requiring air support in the form of air to ground missiles in order to bring one down. As for the leaner ranakin, it’ll eschew its Feral traits in favour of becoming humanoid features and intelligence, gaining the ability to use tools, higher-level thinking, and natural Spellslinging at the expense of raw physical attributes. Both types are dangerous for different reasons, but me, I’d much rather fight brawns than brains any day of the week.

Mostly because I don’t got much in the way of brains myself, and my pride couldn’t take it if I got outsmarted by an Abby.

So the short, skinny ranakin has gotta go. Problem is, I’m a little lacking in the tools to do it. My pistols have an effective range of 40m, but I rarely shoot at anything over 25m because the accuracy and precision ain’t there. Not because I can’t shoot, as I’m a better than average shot if I do say so myself. No, the problem is in the design of the pistol itself. Can’t brace it easily, the iron sights ain’t zeroed for range, you only got a short distance

between front and rear sights, a two-hand grip don't offer that much more stability, the list goes on. Most importantly of all though, the Etched barrel of the pistol is too short for the Distant and Extend Duration Metamagics to have much effect on the Spell, so even though it's there, the Bolt itself won't be as stable and unwavering as a Bolt that's been through a 20' barrel. That's the big reason why a Bolt from a rifle can travel farther than one from a pistol, though not the only reason.

The other option? Hit the slim-jim froggie with a Distant Fireball. Would give me double the regular range of 50m, plus the radius of the Fireball itself, but given how it's hanging out in the water so far away from its kin, it'd meaning wasting a Third Order Spell on one singular target, or 16 out of 56 total Aether I can spend. Keep in mind, that's assuming I got a full eight hours of sleep, which may not be true. On the flip side, there's a good chance my limits have increased in recent weeks, seeing how I've been going hard in the paint since losing my hand, but I'll count on what I know and anything extra can be a pleasant surprise.

So get in far closer than I'd like to a massive horde of Abby, or waste a little less than one-third of my effective Spellslinging abilities killing a single evolved ranakin? Neither option seems all that appealing, so I go with option C.

Moving about the forest, I find myself a good vantage point with decent line of sight and multiple escape routes within range of the

shore. Most of the merhounds are staying close to shore, letting mudkippers latch onto their flesh so they can carry them off into the forest, while the ranakin split into three groups led by one hulking froggie each. Glancing back at the compound, I still see no sign of activity from Carter's people, but it's now or never. I gotta hit Abby while the bulk of them are still in front of me, because if I leave it too long and they spread out into the forest, I might get surrounded without even noticing. To that end, I hunker down onto one knee in a cluster of purple loomshrubs, wrap a length of rope around my right arm, then use the stump to brace my left arm as I settle in to take aim at the closest big froggie I see.

Thirty-six metres, according to Rangefinder. Not ideal. With a Model 10, that's a three-inch Bolt drop. Seven and a half centimetres, a full finger-length almost. Gotta aim a little high to hit the headshot and guarantee a kill. Windage is minimal in the forest, but the froggie bobs side to side even when standing still, and up and down when it breathes. I take all this in and more as I line up my shot unassisted, and only when I've picked my mark do I breathe in and activate the True Strike Cantrip. Only requires a Somatic component, which I trained long and hard to be the subtle movement of my thumb working the hammer of a gun. Doesn't have to actually cock it, just go through the motions while focused on the Spell Structure in my mind. My perspective narrows on my target and nothing else, my gun shifting almost imperceptibly to a more optimal position to land a hit. Exhaling slowly, I wait until the air is all but emptied out of my lungs, and in

that brief moment between breaths, when my body is as still as a rock, I gently squeeze the trigger and fire off a shot.

The big froggie don't know what hit him, but I'm already up and moving away by the time the Bolt hits. My Model 10 got a big bark to match its bite, and the sound echoes out into the night as I activate the Longstrider Spell stored in my right boot, a must have for when the going gets good. My legs don't grow longer like the name implies, nor do they move any faster, but each stride eats up more ground than it did before as I dash through the trees and across the cobbled path while whooping all the way. The froggies issue a bellowing croak while the merhounds join their voices in a gurgling warcry that sounds more like gargling than anything else, only louder and more forceful than I could ever manage.

And so the game begins as I take off into the trees while the Abby horde gives chase, my boots pounding in the dirt and heart pounding in my chest as the merhounds gain ground right quick. I spot their forms flashing through the trees, but I hold my fire and Spells both, because no point wasting them just yet. I just keep running and whooping to lead them on and get them focused on the chase. This here is what my daddy called the run around, which has become something of a specialty of mine in recent years, as it's real effective when you riding solo since you don't gotta worry about silly things like lanes of fire or collateral damage.

Which are something of a concern in the here and now, but that's why I'm running off into the trees. There a small clearing around a giant whitewood tree only a short ways away from the compound, far enough from the buildings and shore both to make for a great battlegrounds tonight. Dipping between trees and leaping over hedges, I hurtle headlong towards my destination as quick as I can, my teeth clenched around a blade of grass as I huff and puff away. The slap of merhound flippers on dirt and twigs sounds out from all too many directions, many of which seem much too close for comfort, but I keep my eyes forward and my body in motion because that's the only way I'll make it out of this alive.

The towering whitewood tree comes into sight as I burst into the clearing, one littered with shrubs, bushes, and wild grasses a plenty, but no trees within six or seven metres of the thick, gnarled trunk. Putting on one last burst of speed, I make ready to sling my Spell only for my heart to freeze in my chest as I spot a massive merhound barrelling towards me from the left. The chonky fishdog's eyes light-up in delight, because it sees where I'm going and knows it can cut me off. It's right too, but I'm fully committed to the plan, because there are more merhounds behind me that I can't shake off. With nothing else for it, I push my mind and body to its limits as I Intone, "*Gravitas – Cessat*." Halfway through the chant, I raise my Model Ten and squeeze off a shot at the oncoming merhound, hitting its shoulder which barely inconveniences it. I keep pulling the trigger though, while finishing the chant, all the while moving my phantom fingers through the Somatic Component of the Spell. "*Surgo – Sine – Pondere*!"

The fact that it works is almost a miracle considering how divided my focus is. Less miraculous is how my second, third, and fourth shots all prove ineffective against the thick fishdoggy's scaled hide. The beast lunges at me from several meters away, with power, speed, and momentum enough to pulp me on contact. Leaving it all up to fate, I jump too, squeezing off my last and final shot as I do, and the Bolt hammers home into the merhound's fanged, unhinged jaw, one moments away from tearing me to shreds.

The dead Abby misses me by mere inches as I launch myself through the air, pulling my knees up to my chest to get over the beast before slamming them down again in mid-air. Both boots catches the torso as it passes and pushes me even further up into the air, a double jump unlike made possible by the Levitation Spell. Does what the Chant says, namely, "Gravity ceases, I rise without weight", boosting me higher than I've ever jumped before. My forward momentum brings me crashing into the tree trunk, my arms and legs aching after absorbing the force, but there's no time to rest just yet with the Abby horde behind me. Handing my empty Model 10 over to my Mage Hands for reloading, I grab my belt knife and stab it lightly into the tree, pulling myself up along with the Spell for an extra little burst of speed. Doesn't take more than a few seconds to reach the Spell's height limit of 6 metres, which ain't hardly enough to keep me safe, so I use the knife to climb further and further until the weight of gravity is too much to keep going any further.

Which puts me at 10 metres, give or take, which hopefully puts me out of range of any froggie leaps, though I dare say some of them look like they getting close. Hanging off the side of the tree with my knife jammed into the bark, I allow myself a brief moment of regret as I stare down at the Abby horde gathering around the base of the tree, a seething mass of fangs, fins, and fury. Too late to change my mind now, so I hop to getting myself out of this pinch, moving my phantom fingers like I'm working a whip and muttering the chant that goes along with the Living Whip Cantrip. Not 'wah pah', making stupid whip sounds like Errol do, but, "*Vide – Vivam", or* 'look lively'.

The rope wrapped around my arm jumps into motion, shooting out and up a good five metres in height before latching onto the side of the trunk. Doesn't wrap all the way around it, but sticks tightly to the bark instead, which gives me enough tension to pull my knife out of the tree and pull myself up another foot higher. Soon as I can, I cast Living Whip again, and send the rope higher up and further around the tree trunk, gaining myself a bit more height as I do. In between casts, I scoot around the tree looking to break line of sight on any Abby readying to shoot Bolts or other Spells. Aren't many of those though, because unlike with greenies, Ferals have a shockingly low number of natural Spellslingers. Too stupid to figure it out, which makes them heavily reliant on Spell Cores, and the local Proggie is too cheap to shell out on something simple like Bolt, not when it's more focused on the survival of its progeny more than anything else.

My hunch proves true as the merhounds gargle and froggies croak below me, but I pay them no mind and continue my upwards ascent. Right up until my rope makes it all the way around the thick tree trunk, which is no less than 10m in diametre, if not more. Looping the rope around my right arm so I can brace myself against the tree and free my left hand, I glance down at the frenzied mass of merhounds scrambling about the base of the tree, a good 25, maybe 30 metres away. They'd love nothing more than to topple this big old whitewood, but it'll take some doing at least. Showing they a smarter bunch though, the ranakin have backed off, while the skinny froggie is nowhere to be found, possibly still hiding in the water at the dock or maybe even gone home in defeat already, because while there are old Abby and there are bold Abby, there are no old, bold Abby lingering round these parts.

So with nothing more to it, I raise my left hand like I'm reaching for the stars, grab me a fistful of air and light before bringing it back down, and point centre mass at the thickest pack of merhounds I see while chanting, "*Incendo – Magna – Invoko*!"

The forest floor lights up in a blinding glare as I shut my eyes behind my Darkvision goggles, and open them again to find a carpet of charred corpses strewn about the base of the tree. There are a lucky few who only got clipped and are high-tailing it away with burns and injuries, while still more were out of the blast area entirely and spreading out right quick. Yea, Ferals are a dumb bunch, but they still got that animal cunning, enough to

know they shouldn't clump up in the presence of a Spellslinger with Fireball. "WHOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" Comes the yell, a spirited cheer of jubilation that slips out from between my lips as I bask in the glory of the most iconic Third Order Spell there is. "That's what you get, little doggies! You want a piece of me, then you best be prepared to bleed!"

The Model 10 comes out again, all loaded and ready, so I squeeze off a couple shots in celebration, tagging four hounds and dropping two more as I stand perched in perfect safety. "Y'all wait right there," I shout as my Mage Hands get to reloading again. "I'll get to every last one of you eventually. Don't you worry _ "

It strikes like lightning, a sudden flash of agony tearing through my mind. The pain radiates from within and instantly spreads throughout my head and body both. Everything turns on its head and I can't tell up from down, left from right, darkness from light, because even when I close my eyes, all I see is suffering. My suffering, my pain, my personal torment taking place within the confines of my own mind. An inhuman presence fixes its attention upon me, shrieking incomprehensible noises that I read well enough as the alien mind unleashes a torrent of anguish and suffering upon me in a fit of unchecked rage. I killed its children, ruined its plans, denied its desire and more, so for this, I will suffer unlike any have suffered before.

A second. Maybe two. In retrospect, that's all the time it takes to go through this ordeal, one that has me dizzy, nauseous, and blinking in confusion as I try to make sense of what I'm seeing. It's the tree trunk, pressed too close and too hard against my face, and the rest of my body too. Got the taste of blood in my mouth, and it hurts to even try and lift my head, but through the haze of excruciating agony within my mind, I become all too aware of more suffering outside it as my right arm threatens to pop out of its shoulder if I don't do something about all this weight. My weight, all of which is back in full force after I lost Concentration and dropped the Levitation Spell and hanging off of a handless arm. Ordinarily, the Spell would've gently lowered me back down to the ground, or slowed my falling for about a minute before gravity re-exerts itself upon me, but the rope wrapped around the tree had too much tension to let me fall, not while it was wrapped around my arm too.

Blinking the lights out of my eyes, I reach up, grab the rope with my hand and hoist myself up just a bit, enough to get my feet under me and against the tree trunk proper. With so many points of contact, my weight is more evenly distributed, putting less strain on my arm and giving me room enough to glance around. A quick look down sends me into a panic as I spot eight merhounds gamely climbing their way up the tree trunk, digging their webbed claws into the bark and hoisting themselves up ever so slowly. "Hold up," I slur, sounding like a man who's had five too many drinks. "That ain't fair."

Feels like I'm wearing too thick gloves as I fumble for my Model 10, but as my fingers close around the grip, my grit and resolve come flooding back. The loud bark of the gun is music to my ears as I pop all six shots right quick, knocking killing four merhounds and knocking two more off of the tree trunk. All six bodies go crashing back down to the dirt, knocking even more merhounds out as they go. While my Mage Hands reload, I use the rope to climb higher and circle around the trunk to make sure none of them doggies catch me unaware. Shoot and scoot, a tried-and-true tactic, albeit under very difference circumstances from normal, but the name of the game ain't changed one bit. The best part is, them merhounds are terrible climbers, so even if I didn't do nothing but sit here and wait, the chances of them getting close enough to grab me are slim to none, which is what I like in a good fight. Forget fighting fair. The best time to hit your opponent is when they got no chance of hitting back, and ain't nothing anyone can say to change my mind.

Sixteen merhounds. That's how many I shoot down before they give up the ghost, slinking away into the forest to make for the shoreline. Never one to take anything for granted, I cast Levitate on myself again and launch myself from the whitewood in the direction of the compound. Coiling the rope as I leap from tree to tree, I arrive at the closing scene of a slaughter and need a moment to take it all in. The grounds out front of the compound are covered in the corpses of merhounds and mudkippers, several of which have arrows embedded in their pristine Abby flesh to show that their shots were the killing blow. Most of the others were not so lucky, their bodies torn, pierced, and shredded

apart in all too many different ways by the various beasts roaming about the battlefield.

There's a massive bear, all dark brown and bellowing in fury as it brings a big paw down on a ranakin mid-jump, pulping it through sheer force of the blow before the body even hits the ground. Another creature moves too quickly to be seen, running headfirst down a tree to pounce on a ranakin before darting away in the blink of an eye, leaving nothing but an Abby corpse behind. At least six Tuskwulves are roaming about the forest, working in groups to encircle and kill merhounds one by one as they spread out to flee. The cohesion of a true wulf pack proving superior to the makeshift instincts bestowed upon Abby by their Proggie, as expected from the silent, ferocious predators who can bring down prey more than thrice their size.

Most of Carter's people stand in human form, maintaining Concentration on two patches of Entangling Growth holding Abby in place for the scintillating Flaming Cloud that's roaming the battlefield and igniting everything that draws near. Carter himself is one of those who haven't Wildshaped, but not from the safety of the walls. No, he's out on the battlefield proper in nothing but a tunic and loose pants with a giant glowing staff in hand, one that looks like a still living tree you could plant into the dirt and pick fruit from after a few years of growth. Which seems crazy to me, except the man makes it work, taking long, bounding leaps as he moves to and fro while sweeping away any and all Abby that draw near with powerful, domineering blows. One smack sends a

merhound flying through the air, the next pulps a ranakin lunging at him from the side as he twirls his weapon all about without pause, his hands and feet moving round and round as his staff spins from end over end while he leaps all across the battlefield until its impossible to tell where one attack ends and the next begins.

Blowing out a mouthful of flames, Cowie trots about the field immolating whole swathes of mudkippers as they flop and flail about in a futile effort to escape, while Elodie in her baby diamondclaw form tears apart any Abby that get too close. Watching over her is an even large diamondclaw, a full-sized, majestic creature that towers over Cowie as it faces off against a merhound that's only half its size, an evolved Aberration that used Gigantify and still can't measure up. A single swipe of the mama diamondclaw's arm takes the Aberration's front legs off, and she brings the claw around and down to punch clean through its thick head. The corpse shrinks in death back to its normal size, the Spell effects fading now that its dead, and the diamondclaw moves on without having so much as breaking a sweat.

I pop off a few more shots at the fleeing Abby, but the battle was won before I got here. As the action winds down, I push my way over towards Cowie with my Levitation Spell still going, mostly because I want Amelie to see me so she doesn't accidentally slash me apart with a claw. She does, her big green eyes tracking me the moment I'm in sight and warily watching my approach. Elodie sees me soon after, abandon the Abby corpse she was

rending apart with her claws to come bounding over in glee, her mouth opened wide as she stands so adorably beneath me while politely tucking her claws in front of her chest. It's uncanny is what it is, because everything she does looks so natural and animal-like, while the others exhibit at least some human characteristics. The bear is treading lightly, looking all squeamish as it avoids stepping on Abby, while the tuskwulves are panting hard through clenched teeth, presumably to keep their tongues from lolling out. As for Elodie's mama, she got a very human expression of disapproval pasted across her diamondclaw face as she watches her daughter hop about on her hind legs in an adorable display of animal curiosity, something I've seen in marties when they chase butterflies of bits of ribbon dangling from strings.

And seeing how I'm about the perfect size for a snack and hovering at mouth height, I would very much like it if miss Amelie wasn't upset at me. "Elodie," I say, and she tilts her head at the sound of her name. "I'd like to come down now, so I would appreciate it if you gave me some room." Dropping down to all fours, Elodie circles around and away while I drop the Levitation Spell and float back down, but soon as my feet hit the dirt, she charges forward to smother me in animal affection. "Okay now," I say, unsure how to proceed as she latches her arms around my waist and rubs her face in my chest. Patting her head ever so gingerly while doing my darndest not to look up at her mama, I say, "Watch the claws." Head still pressed against my chest, Elodie gives me a big, teary-eyed look and lets out a soft, mournful little squeak, one that breaks my heart to hear and see.

“Okay girlie,” I say, unable to resist giving her chin a little rub, because the fur down there is all short, soft, and bristly. “I get it. Nothin’ to worry about though. I’m fine. Tried to lure most of the warband away, but I don’t think it worked all that well.” Got maybe a third of the merhounds dead around the tree, including the ones I shot down, so it was a bit lacklustre of a Fireball. Then again, we can’t compare against perfect conditions, so getting fifteen to twenty Ferals in a single go ain’t half bad.

Unhappy over being ignored, Cowie trots on over to give a headbutt and a nuzzle too. Rubbing his cheek with a grin, I say, “I know, I know. You weren’t worried, because you know better, right?” He doesn’t answer, because he a bull and can’t talk, but Elodie lets out another soft squeak that melts my heart.

Before I give into temptation and sit down for a cuddle, Carter arrives to sort us out. Chest heaving with exertion, he looks otherwise none the worse for wear besides the Abby gore splattered all about his clothes. “Hey,” I say, pointing at his now normal looking quarterstaff. “Your stick shrunk.” Grinning, I add, “Must be the cold.”

“Give us some space Elodie,” Carter says, ignoring my hilarious joke. Turning to me, he says, “I’m going to take off your goggles.” He fends off my attempts to do it myself and ever so gently removes them, but even then I feel a bit of a pinch as they come free. I wince, but he doesn’t let me pull away. A Dancing Light

springs forth into existence as he studies my face, and I've no idea what it is he's looking for. "How were you hurt?"

"Uhh…?" Takes some thinking, because aside from being a little sore and the Mindspire pounding at the back of my head, there ain't much to complain about. "Guess I might've bit my tongue a bit? I got blood on my face or something?"

Carter blinks. That's all it is, but I can see how taken aback he is. "Howie," he says, studying me closely like one studies a madmen to try and guess what he gonna do next. "You're bleeding out of your eyes, ears, and nose. Mouth too it seems, if you say you bit your tongue."

Fool that I am, I gotta check to make sure he's right, and my hand comes away sticky with blood. "Oh shoot," I say, blinking repeatedly and feeling my eyelids stick as I Conjure up a Water Sphere to wash the blood off. "That ain't good." Then it hits me. "Oh. I know. Must've been whatever hit me while I was up in the tree." I give him a brief overview of the fight, and how I almost got knocked out of my first Levitation Spell, though I leave out the bit about my Fireball. They probably saw the flare of fire and light, but how many people can recognize a Fireball? Not that many, so here's hoping they missed it. "Mind Spike maybe? Or Mind Whip might fit more, the Enchantment version of the Spell which is supposed to really take you out of it, though I ain't ever felt that

one first hand. Hits a lot harder than Mind Whip though, I'll say that much."

Was nothing like what the Hobgoblin Illusionist hit me with out in the Coral Desert. That was like a pat on the cheek, while what I felt today was more like a punch to the jaw, one that left me seeing stars for a good little bit. Carter nods along with my explanation and says, "We thought the worst when we saw the Fireball go off." Damn, so he actually knows what he saw. "Wanted to fight our way over towards you, since the Abby warband looked ready to retreat, but they pivoted on us as soon as we came out."

"You came out to help me? You shouldn't have." Carter doesn't respond, so I double down and say, "Seriously. You shouldn't have. You should've stayed safe in your compound and weathered it out. If anyone gets hit by a Fireball, chances of them making it out alive are slim to none, so no sense risking it all to save someone who likely already dead."

"Did you get a good look at the Evolved Aberrations?" Wholly ignoring my advice, Carter says, "Best if you did to get descriptions to the Rangers. A possible Illusionist is bad enough, but an Evoker too? One with Fireball…"

Oh right. Most people **would** assume it was Abby slinging Third Order Spells, not the seventeen-year-old kid. “Uh,” I begin, not sure how to go about reassuring him. “I wouldn’t worry too much about it.” Which is just a terrible response, but I can’t think of anything better.

“Did you kill it?”

“Sure?” No, terrible lie for so many reasons. “Well no, but uhh… consider it good as dead.” Doing my best to change the subject, I say, “So… who’re the tuskwulves? So I know to step lightly around them.”

“They were Conjured Summons.” Giving me a measured look, Carter asks, “Howie, what am I going to find when I go down to the docks?”

“Bunch of dead Abby.” Pausing to dab my wet face with a sleeve, I grimace and say, “Some shot, most burnt.”

“I see.” He pieces it together and doesn’t recoil away as most would, since it’s unnerving standing so close to a man who’s prepped Fireball. Glancing around at the battlefield, he says, “We’ll clean things up quickly. Shouldn’t be anyone coming by, but you never know.” There it is again, Carter’s big heart showing

itself, as he concerned about keeping my secret even though I never asked. “Also, if anyone asks, we’ll say you worked late and never left,” he continues, though it takes me a moment to figure out why. So we can blame Joey’s death on the Abby attack, or at least feign ignorance and leave room for doubt. “Come. I will bring you inside so Ines can take a look at you.”

“No need,” I say, though my feet stay planted where they are. “I still got plenty of Aether in the tank. Plus, I wanna ride up to Mueller’s Quay and a couple other settlements round here, see if they were attacked too.” Still don’t understand why Carter’s place was attacked, by such a large force of Abby no less. Like I said before, this ain’t the Coral deserts, which is the hunting grounds of multiple Proggies working in concert. Had to be a hundred plus merhounds and ranakin all told, and at least twice that in mudkippers, which is a significant investment for a lone Proggie. There’s gotta be something –

My feet give out from under me as I try to step away, but Carter catches me before I go far. “Howie,” he says, once he’s got my full attention. “You’re bleeding out of your ears, eyes, nose, and mouth, which is never a good sign. I don’t think you’ve got brain damage, but you should still let Ines look you over. Even if she gives you a clean bill of health, you’re not going anywhere on your own.”

He ain’t making a suggestion. It’s a statement, one I can hardly argue against now that I can barely keep my head up straight. “Well, on the bright side,” I say, leaning heavily against him as he leads me away with Cowie, Elodie, and her giant diamondclaw of a mama Amelie trailing behind us. “If it turns out I do got brain damage, then ain’t no one hardly gonna notice.”

Finally, I get a laugh out of the man. Not a chuckle, chortle, snort, or snicker, but a flown blown belly laugh from the taciturn man, a feat I can be proud of.

Author’s Note: Don’t worry about the brain damage bit. Howie’s noggin is fine. I might change it, just make him bleed from the nose and maybe stumble a bit at the end, because brain damage do be serious. Im just too brain damaged myself to want to change it here and now. Hope you all enjoy, and take care!