Author's Note: I went back and redid the chapel bits from last chapter, while adding a little more regarding the Mimics and what not. Means I had to move the sasha stuff to this chapter, but that let me add to it some more and flesh sasha out a little more. I do still feel he's a little lacking in character, but I went with surly and russian, so I dunno how to add to that without changing his whole thing. That's all for now, so hope you enjoy, and take care.

Between reconnecting with all the dearly departed and spending the better part of a week travelling with a dozen other people, my social tank is just about drained.

Which is an issue because Sasha has taken it upon himself to become my shadow, and while he's quiet and unassuming, I need my alone time, so I walk him back to the bunkhouse, then stop to wave him on ahead. "Time to call it for the night," I say, checking my watch to see that it's half-past 8. "Still don't got street lights here, so I doubt they take kindly to short, slim, and shady strangers like yourself lurking about after dark." Soon as I hear it, I supress the urge to wince, as I didn't mean for it to come out so harsh. Rather than apologize, I just cover up my awkward embarrassment by giving him a little instruction. "If you ain't ready to bunk down, maybe clean your guns or something. Been a quiet trip so far, but I expect that'll change soon enough."

Rather than acknowledge anything I've said, Sasha scowls, stares into the bunkhouse interior which is more than half full of strangers, then gives me a dark look and asks, "What of you?"

A valid question, since Aunty Ray and the girls will worry if they can't find me first thing in the morning. So rather than say something pithy and sarcastic, I gesture at the stable and tell him the truth. "I'mma bunk with the animals, make sure no one tries to steal Pebbles, Cowie, or Frowny." Which would be disastrous for the thief, but also for Cowie because he'd probably kill anyone trying to take him and get in trouble for it.

An answer which gets Sasha to sweating as he looks at me, then the bunkhouse like he's gauging his options. I pretend not to notice and turn to leave, then stifle a sigh when I hear his soft and almost silent footfalls follow after me. "I come with," he says, and I can't help but turn to face him again.

Only to see him jump back, like I done goosed him good. Stills my tongue to see it, which is probably a good thing seeing how my first instinct was to ask, "Who invited you?". Sasha's skittish reaction throws me for a loop though, and the fear in his eyes is all too genuine as he readies to run for his life. A sharp turn and a furrowed brow, that's all I've given him, but that's all it takes to scare him enough to drain the colour from his already pale face. Doesn't go for the gun on his hip, doesn't meet my eyes in

challenge, just readies to run as he glances left then right in search of escape without ever letting me out of sight.

Odd reaction for a kid who won't leave my side, but contrary to popular belief, I do sometimes stop and think before opening my mouth. Even though Sasha is clearly scared of me, he ain't all jumpy because of anything I did. No, he's worked up in a lather because he wasn't expecting he'd have to spend the night in a bunkhouse by himself, and is so scared of the prospect that he won't set a foot inside without me.

Because he looked inside and saw a whole bunch of strangers, and he don't feel comfortable sleeping if he don't got someone to watch his back. and no one he trusts to watch his back.

And just like that, all my dealings with Sasha over the last few weeks are coloured in a different light. Me, I didn't care much for the kid because he's a Scav, and only tolerated him because he somehow won Aunty Ray over while I was away. Now though? Now I ain't seeing a former scav who done robbed me of my catch. I'm seeing a kid who did what he had to do to survive out on the wild Frontier. While the Coral Desert ain't exactly no man's land, it's been lawless since my daddy stepped out the Gate a short trek away. Fact is, the strongest bastion of order that cropped up in the last 19 years was Pleasant Dunes, and I remember how bad it was there, so things were likely so much worse in the not so pleasant dunes around it.

Maybe even worse for Sasha, as it do take a certain type to make a life of Scaving. Not industrious enough to take up a trade, but not bloodthirsty enough to turn full raider, that's the sort of in-between where Scavs thrive. They'll kill if they have to, but they'd rather avoid the fight, not because they don't got the stomach for it, but because there won't be no one to scav from if they all dead and gone. Doesn't make them saints or law-abiding citizens, just more practical than your average thug or killer, and thems the sort that Sasha grew up with.

Kid might've been safe enough in the early years, as his daddy was a gunsmith after all. A damned good one from the looks of things, as he done did make my fiery Nanfoodle rifle, which even Mr. Kalthoff admits was some damn fine work. Sasha's daddy also taught Jacob Junior enough to Craft a decent variety of rifles, including those highly inaccurate but ultimately usable hand-cranked miniguns they had manning the walls of Pleasant Dunes. Also taught Sasha enough foundational knowledge to mark for a fairly decent mechanic, one that's progressing by leaps and bounds as an Artificer and Craftsman now that he got books to learn from. Even though he's still learning to Etch, his basics are solid as stone, and you can't chalk that up to talent. Takes hard work, dedication, and a fair bit of guidance to not only memorize the foundational knowledge of Artificing, but understand it well enough to put it into practice. It's one thing to follow a schematic to build an Artifact, and another altogether to look at a malfunctioning device and figure out how to fix it without knowing how to Etch yourself.

And that's what Sasha did while I was away. Fixed up a fair few doodads and doohickies using spare parts and crude welds, a skill which likely kept him alive after his daddy was poached by Ronald Jackson. I'm guessing the Scav leader Gunin hung onto Sasha to motivate his daddy to come back soon, but from the sound of things, he didn't make it for some reason or another. There be a millions different ways to die on the Frontier, even for a valuable gunsmith like Sasha's daddy, and I can't imagine Sasha was high on Gunin's list of priorities when he heard the kid's daddy wasn't coming back.

And yet Sasha is still alive and kicking, long after I done put a Bolt through the back of his head while he was off shooting at shadows and Illusions.

Kid's a survivor. Knew that the moment I laid eyes on him up at the quay, but I seen it even earlier than that. I remember spotting him out in the desert alongside them other Scavs, all hard at work plundering my catch. Kid worked twice as hard as anyone in that crew, and I remember seeing his slim, runty, long-haired profile and figuring he was either a kid or a woman with something to prove. Scavs are all about contributing to the cause, and those who can't provide value in labour or skills will do so in other, far less pleasant ways.

Ways Sasha is all too familiar with, judging by how scared he is to sleep alone in a room full of strangers. Terrified even, and I can't help but sympathize, so I stifle a sigh and say, "Well, come on then. Let's go get settled in."

I don't look back as I walk away, but I keep an ear out for his soft steps. Takes a couple seconds because he follows after, no doubt concerned I'm like all the other men he's known, but I ain't that desperate for human contact. I don't say nothing to reassure him, because that'd be awkward and even worse if it turns out I'm reading this wrong and the kid's just trying to watch my back or whatever. That said, I do what I can to cut him some slack and pay him no mind as I greet the animals in the stable. They're all mighty pleased to see me, but they're also equally thrilled to see Sasha, which I don't much care for. He don't smile or coo at the animals, and neither do I because I don't do that in front of witnesses. Maybe he's the same way when they're alone, though I can't even imagine the surly Soviet cracking a smile much less snuggling with soft kiccaw in his arms.

But he probably does, because there ain't no other reason why the kiccaws and cattle would all flock in around him for attention when he don't ever feed them. Even the horses stretch out to give him a nuzzle when he's close, and he stops to acknowledge their affection with a pat or scritch. He don't seem all that affectionate, but maybe the animals can sense something I don't see. Only upside he's got is that he's a quick study, as even though it's only been a few days of lessons, he's already picked up on how to

handle the horses without any Spells or Cantrips whatsoever. Then there's Pebbles, whose pretty much in love with the kid as she circles his legs in ardent demand for affection.

While ignoring me no less, though probably because I got a guarded Cowie who's doing the same while also keeping a wary eye on his daughter. Can't have her usurping his human after all, which is a kick in the teeth seeing how adorable baby Pebbles be. She in that in between, where she a little too chonky to be called a calf, but nowhere near big enough to be considered adolescent, and I love her to bits. Can only cuddle her when Cowie's distracted though, and I think she's getting skittish because of how he sometimes charges over all upset and jealous that I'm playing with calf that ain't him.

We'll work on that, but to keep my partner from having a conniption, I get to ferrying animals up into the loft with Sasha's help. Another good thing about the kid is that he ain't a talker and takes instruction well, as once we all done and settled in amidst the hay, he cozy's up with Pebbles across the way and gets to cleaning his guns by Dancing Light. There's a calm confidence about him as he handles his Aetherarms, starting with the Shortsword I done recently given up along with the Ranger Repeater which he treats with the utmost respect. Takes them apart with one hand almost and gets to cleaning without needing to focus too much on the task, as he's done it so often in the short time he's had them he had to have been practicing out of sight.

Yeah, the kid loves his Aetherarms and knows how to handle them well. Even though I've yet to see him in action outside of a shooting range, something tells me that stoic Soviet Sasha ain't one to panic in a pinch.

Then comes time to clean the pistol he showed up with, a janky revolver with 7 chambers in the cylinder. Not 6 or 8 like most revolvers, but 7, which is already enough for me to not like it. 7 chambers means it uses custom sized cartridges, which is always a pain to manage. Fact is, there are hundreds of different bullet calibers out there, but here on the Frontier, we've tried our best to limit ourselves to as few options as possible per category of Aetherarm. The Federation loves its .22 and .44s, then moves on up to NATO sizing with 556x45mm and 7.62x51mm. Most Euro countries follow suit, though there are standouts on both sides in the 9mm and .45 range, like the Mabber from the Deadlands or my own Naga's and Tina's 1911's.

Being the biggest dogs around, most nations on the Frontier have followed suit, but you still get a whole lot of variety in ammo sizes. The Soviets set the trend for a whole lot of countries to boot, as they favour 5.45x39mm and 7.62x39mm for their AK variants, which get picked up by a whole lot of manufacturers because they tend to be cheap, easy to produce, and reliable as all heck. The Ogre's Bane is one such variant, and the Dragunov's are another,

with both using 7.62x39mm which is fairly easy to source even deep in Federal Territory.

Sasha's revolver though? I'm pretty sure it uses some even weirder caliber of ammunition, and he catches me staring one too many times while cleaning my own guns. Can't really pretend like I ain't looking without making things awkward, and he's looking a little too twitchy from all the attention. "Never seen a pistol quite like that," I say, opening up a dialogue to clarify my interests, as I ain't looking to get shot in my sleep.

That's all the prompting Sasha needs, as he loves his guns same as me. "Is Nagash, Eighteen-Ninety-Five," he says, putting it back together and slowly turning the cylinder to make sure it's seated correctly before putting it through its paces. Twirls it around his spindly index finger quick as a blink, forwards, then backwards, and horizontal, and each time he pauses, he got his grip held firm and finger next to the trigger, but not inside the guard in a show of discipline that'd put Errol to shame. In a rare show of trust, Sasha flips the gun around and holds it out butt first for me to take, except as I reach out to grab it, he flips it around and back into his grip with the barrel pointed in my general direction without actually pointing at me. Fancy bit of work that, and I smile to match the smile in his eyes, as I seen there ain't no cartridge in the chamber making this about as safe as it gets.

Besides, I'm trying to get Sasha to relax and open up, so no sense lecturing on gun safety when I seen that he knows his stuff. Again, if it was Errol, I'd be sweating bullets as I'd be wondering if he was fool enough to play around with a loaded gun even if I was the one who handed an empty over to him. Gotta earn the right to goof off and cut corners, because there are rules, and then there are times when the rules don't matter, but you can't know that unless you know why the rules matter to begin with.

Having shown his skills, Sasha is content to flip his revolver around again and let me take it off his hands, and I give it a once over to feel how it handles in hand. Flipping the cylinder out, I frown as I give it a look inside and see that this particular got a cylinder that looks a little loose. "Huh," I say, trying to figure out why that might be while dryfiring the weapon to see how the mechanisms move, and the answer becomes apparent. "Gas-seal system same as the Whumper, reducing recoil and blowback. Single action trigger, which ain't ideal, but do keep it simple and sturdy. Don't love how you gotta load and eject one cartridge at a time through the loading gate, but it do encourage you to make your shots count. I see Maximized for sure, and pretty sure that's Intensify there, but do my eyes deceive me, or is this beauty Empowered too?"

"Da," Sasha replies, sounding proud as all heck, and he should, because being able to Etch the full trio of hard-hitting Metamagics onto an Aetherarm is the mark of a true-blue gunsmith. Suppose it'd be dyed red instead seeing how his daddy was Soviet, but I

can tell Sasha loved his daddy as much as I loved mine and is proud as a peacock to show off his work. “Besides Distant and Extend, last two Grainage is for *oo-dar-nay*, how you say… Concussive.”

“No Silence?” I ask, giving the Nagash another appreciative look, as this here is a gun meant for real business. If you don’t kill what you shooting at, it’ll disorient them enough to maybe drop Concentration and leave them wondering what just happened, giving you time to cock the hammer and try again. A simple weapon from simpler times, with a design that predates the 1911 by a good 16 years it seems. Was probably the pinnacle of technology when it debuted, but things were moving fast even back then and 16 years later, the Ranger 1911 came out, a single-action, recoil-operated, semi-automatic, magazine loaded pistol that’s has since become the icon for pistols worldwide.

Course, I got me a soft spot for revolvers, so I take my time admiring the Nagash 1895 before handing it back over to Sasha. Rather than caution him about firing an unsilenced weapon on the road, I give him the benefit of a doubt and ask, “Wasn’t is risky using a loud gun like that out in the desert? Even Silenced weapons can bring a horde of gobbos down on you, and I’m guessin’ that beast of gun got a bark to match its bite.”

Seems the way to break past Sasha’s shell is to compliment his daddy, and he beams with pride to hear it. “Gas-seal is for more

than recoil and blowback," he says, reaching into his jacket that Aunty Ray done made for him, a light, tan, doe hide cattleman that looks a little snug considering he's still sixteen with room to grow, but I ain't one to question her choice of cut. Don't do nothing for his twiggy figure, but I suppose it do keep him from looking like he's wearing his daddy's jacket, even though he most certainly is wearing his daddy's oversized hat.

When his spindly fingers emerge from his jacket, they're holding a mechanical suppressor similar to the one I had on the 3-Line, and he deftly screws it onto the Nagash with the barest hint of a smile. "Seal directs all gas into barrel," he says by way of explanation, and that's all I really need. You can't silence most revolvers because even if you put a suppressor on the barrel, there's plenty of room for gas to escape out the other end and make the big boom. With that moving mechanism to press the cylinder to the barrel and form a seal though, that eliminates the blowback forcing all the gas out through the suppressor which does the job fairly well. Won't be whisper quiet like most performers and playwrights seem to think, but it'll be quiet enough to match a Silence Metamagic and keep the noise from travelling 20 klicks at the speed of sound. Instead, it'll be more like 2 or 3, or even less depending on terrain, which ain't perfect but is good enough for travelling in Abby country.

"Well ain't that somethin'," I say, repeating what I thought earlier about it being the pinnacle of 1895 technology out loud. Kid beams some more to hear it, but don't feel the need to keep up

the conversation as he puts the suppressor and gun away to move onto something else. As for me, I'm more than happy to go back to cleaning my own guns, of which I have many, as I'm carrying 6 on me with three more locked away in the wagon that I should probably give a clean too.

Seeing me go grab the rifles clues Sasha in to how serious I was about possible action on the horizon, and credit where credit is due, he knows enough to know he don't know enough to move forward safely. Even better, he asks me outright about the dangers ahead, and I'm more than happy to tell him about the different varieties of Abby plaguing the Federation's efforts to build three new fortress towns just south of here. None of which will be as grand and stately as New Hope and Redeemer's Keep, but the Feds are hoping to make up for that lacking quality with sheer quantity. Rather than spacing the forts out every 100 klicks, they're spaced every 50, meaning it's a full day's ride from one location to the next. As such, if you leave for patrol from any one location, you're at most a half day's ride away from the next, and in good position to support other patrols and even help defend the other locations if they come under attack.

Course that's assuming you staff each new town with enough Rangers and guards to keep things safe and sound. Hear tell from Tina that the Marshal reckoned that number to bottom out at about 60 Rangers, with a preferred garrison of 120 or 2 Companies per site. Thing is, the Marshal got enough on his plate at it is, what with defending the entire Eastern Front by his

lonesome. At full strength, a Marshal commands a full thousand Rangers, which might well be enough, but between attrition and a distinct lack of new Recruits for the last 18 years, he's only got about 600 Rangers to call on, most of whom are already overworked as it is defending the 6 Federal towns along the Blue Bulwark. That's 100 Rangers per town, which ain't a small number, but it ain't like they all sitting pretty behind the walls just waiting on Abby to show up.

No, most are out and about ranging far and wide to carry out their duties. Patrolling the Badlands, manning watchtowers, hunting Abby, identifying their patterns and weaknesses, searching for their lairs, and more, it's all part and parcel of the Ranger life. They're also units that do mapmaking and pathfinding for logistical purposes, or ones tasked with maintaining dynamos, radio towers, and other crucial infrastructure we can't keep behind town walls. Then you got the ones who're busy training and mentoring the first generation of Frontier born, or overseeing militia training in homesteads outside of town walls, to say nothing of the extreme Specialists who're overworked in their niche fields, whether it be Warding, Imbuements, Artificing, or general troubleshooting of the bloody variety.

All of which means the Marshal's already stretched his people thin covering what needs to be covered, and he couldn't spare a full fifth of his command to sit pretty south of Redeemer's Keep. Heard he put in a request to Ranger High Command which got rejected outright, which is stupid because the Marshal had been

planning to concentrate his forces on the towns that were already in place, and leave that border of the Badlands relatively unsecured since Bugs rarely get out this far and the local Proggies round these parts ain't united under one banner. They fight each more than they fight the Rangers, or at least they did until some Federal bigwigs demanded Uncle Teddy secure their borders to keep other nations from slipping in and staking a claim on these grounds.

Makes no god-damned sense if you ask me. Word is most Feds have all but given up on the Eastern Front, but they still expect Uncle Teddy to secure the imaginary lines they've drawn in the dirt because they believe that means it belongs to them. Stupid is what that is. If some other nation wants the stretch of land between Redeemer's Keep and New Sonora, then I say let them have it, because it won't be easy to take or hold and the Feds could use the assist.

That ain't how politicos thing though, so they made their demands clear and expected Uncle Teddy to follow orders. He did what he had to and scraped the bottom of the barrel to find enough bodies to guard these three new towns going up. Just enough Rangers and recruits to mount an effective defense, but nowhere near enough to do what Rangers do best. Namely go on the offense and hunt down every Proggie within 25 klicks and keeping them from mounting hit and run attacks on the build sites almost every other night.

To make matters worse, even though the Qin have stopped sending raids, there are plenty of other fools out there who're willing to try their luck. They saw the Qin come out ahead with their raids and thought, "Why not us?", a question asked and answered several times over the last few weeks as the Rangers repelled over a dozen attempted raids and captured close to a hundred odd bandits to be tried and put to work building the very towns they tried to plunder.

Which is another issue to contend with, the high percentage of violent criminals that make up for the population round these parts, as they make up most of the workforce. For the next three days, we'll be camping well away from the build sites, because I'd rather contend with Abby attacks than deal with the possibility of escaped convicts wandering in with a sob story that Aunty Ray will likely eat right up and get in hot water for it.

All of which I share with Sasha who doesn't say a word throughout it all, just listens and nods along while taking notes in his book. You'd think that'd be extra points in his favour, but honestly, the more I hang out with him, the less I like him. Ain't his fault, not really, but my problem is that it turns out he's a lot like me in more than a few ways, and I don't much care for my own company. It is what it is though, as I got too much on my plate to give in to self loathing. Too many people counting on me to keep them safe to afford any distractions, so I put aside my personal

feelings and coach the kid as best I can. Don't got high hopes as he strikes me as the type to get gone when the going gets tough. Might be wrong, and if I am, I'll be pleasantly surprised, but I ain't counting on the likes of Sasha to keep me and mine safe.

Doesn't stop me from telling him how it is and what plans I've got for dealing with whatever may come, as it's good review and keep things at the forefront of my mind.

By the time I'm done talking, we've both had our fill of social pleasantries for the night, so we do our own thing until bedtime. For him, it's reviewing his notes and drawing schematics for whatever project he's got going in the works, while I break out my Spellbook for another read. Much as I'd love to earn my Diviner's pin, a crystal orb on a stand that represents everything wrong with what non-Diviners know about Diviners, I'm not working on another Big Spell. I got enough on my plate as is, and not enough Aether in the tank to practice the fundamentals for Fly **and** another Third Order Spell. Instead, I'm reviewing my mama's brother's notes regarding the Divination Spells that are included in the twelve visible Spell Formulas of the Arcane Grimoire, all copied down in my mundane Spellbook while the possibly mythic Artifact sits in the bank vaults way back in New Hope.

I get the feeling my mama's brother expected my education to be much further along than it is, because he makes a fair few interesting statements without ever expanding on them like it's

common knowledge. Most interesting to me is his comment about Hunter's Mark, and how it, along with True Strike, Mass True Strike, and Arcane Sight make up the foundation for a standard Ranger Scout. He goes on to talk about how Qin Scouts prefer basing their skillsets around the Detect Line, which offers far more utility in terms of scouting at the cost of hobbling their offensive and defensive options. Claims it's the superior option, but it's a load of bull because Ranger Scouts focus on those Spells too, they just typically branch out into Hunter's Mark because it's an easy way to dip your toe in another role while still fulfilling the original.

Thing is, I already know about the Detection Spells and how they all come together, except I always thought Arcane Sight was the Third Order contribution to that line, not Detect Tracks. I mean, Detect Tracks makes a whole lot more sense, seeing how it's another Detect Spell in a line of Detect Spells. Arcane Sight on the other hand has always been described as Detect Magic on steroids, so I figured it fit in there somewhere. It's the go-to Spell for Diviners when they need to understand any and all things that have to do with Magic, allowing you to view the Metaphysical structure of any Spell anchored to a target. I'm talking active Spell effects on a person, or Augments and Imbuements baked into an object, or even the Spell Structures taking shape in the material world as a Spellslinger casts a Spell. There's a lot more to it, but that's the gist of the Spell, one that's able to pick up and sort through Aetheric Flows that might be lingering in any odd area. Traces of Low Order Spells can fade in a matter of minutes, or could last for up to a week, while some Higher Order Spells can

leave an indelible mark on the metaphysical landscape that endures for months or even years after the fact. Hear tell you can still see the traces of Magic used in the construction of the Pyramids and Stonehenge, as well as a few other man-made wonders of the ages.

Would love to see that for myself some day, though I doubt it'll ever happen. While the coming Watershed will most certainly allow the Second Wave of settlers to pass through the Gate and onto the Frontier, we'd have to build a gate of our own out here in order to go back, and there ain't a man or woman out here that knows how to do that. They might well have figured it out in the old world, but we don't got a Gate to study and have more pressing matters than academic puzzles to solve.

Long story short, Arcane Sight is a tool every Diviner needs in their toolbox, one I thought I was well prepared to pick up. Now though? Now I'm realizing I've got a lot of catching up to do, as I barely understand how to use any of the preceding Spells. It's not like you **have** to know all the Spells that build up to the Third Order ones. You could pick any Third Order Spell you like and try your hand at learning it. If you want anything better than the base effects though, learning the preceding Spells helps a whole lot, so I best get to practicing True Strike and Hunter's Mark right quick. For Hunter's Mark, I only gotta cast it the once on Cowie, who don't appreciate the Magical Mark, but from there, practice is easy enough as I move the Mark from animal to animal and get a sense for where they are through the Spell and nothing else. They

don’t love the sensation of being Marked, as it’s a little like having an invisible stranger pop out of nowhere and start breathing heavily on the back of your neck, but I do what I can to assuage the offended parties with plenty of snuggles, scritches, and snacks thrown right into their waiting mouths with help from a True Strike Cantrip.

Makes for good fun and good practice, except I don’t really know what I’m working towards. While my mama’s brother was more than happy to expound on the upsides of the Qin school of thought, one I already know myself because my daddy taught it to me, the blowhard of a General don’t mention nothing about how True Strike and Hunter’s Mark tie in to Arcane Sight. Seeing how I don’t actually know the Spell, I got no basis to compare them, which is tempting me to just learn Arcane Sight and move on from there. Problem is, I’m juggling too many plates as it is, and I can’t just drop some to focus on a Third Order Spell that requires Concentration and has no real place in my every day Spell list.

Unlike Fireball, which is useful everywhere. Hordes of Abby? Fireball. Gangs of Outlaws? Fireball. Uppity politicians giving me lip? Fireball. Fireball. Fireball.

Today is Spell practice, but I’ve also gotta work on Scripting new Invocations to make my prosthetic hand even more useful, to the point where maybe I could use it to play the guitar instead of using my slow Mage Hands. Need to workshop some Etch

schematics to figure out what sort of add-ons I want to install on a future iteration of my prosthetic, as well as on the second wagon while leaving room for expansion later on when I got more time, materials, and ideas. Gotta familiarize myself with my new guns a bit more, as I got a new sidearm and rifle I ain't all that used to handling just yet. I want to put more time into my Conjuration Spells, as that makes for a far more viable secondary School of Magic compared to Evocation, as Bolt and Fireball aside, I don't have all that much experience with Evocation. Could always use more practice with Conjure Axe-Whip, but Conjure Armour could stand a bit of TLC to really figure out the best trappings to outfit myself in. I'd love to take apart my wristwatch and find out what makes it tick, and I'm still workshopping that second Big Stick to go on the back up wagon, to say nothing of how far behind I am in bonding with Pebbles and prepping her for a life on the road with me and her daddy.

And that's just the most important things I want to study and learn. There's plenty more I'd like to pick up, but there just ain't enough hours in the day, so I focus on one thing every night and spread myself thin. Should really pick one and bear down on it, but after one night of study, I always feel ready for a change, meaning there may be something to Aunty Ray's claim about me having the ADHD. Still stay focused long enough to burn through two whole instances of Hunter's Mark which got an hour-long duration at base. I can't push it more than a minute or three longer, but I'll get the hang of it eventually. Not tonight though, as the hour has grown late and I want us out the gates as soon as they open, so I

call it then and there, idly noting how Sasha is struggling to keep his eyes open but refuses to fall asleep before I do.

Guess our little chat didn't put him at ease, but to be fair, I don't much like falling asleep first either. I got Cowie with me though, so I snuggle in with him, Frowny, Stella, and a whole bunch of other kiccaws before falling asleep. I dream of something, but what, I can't tell, only that it leaves me with a burning rage in my belly and a hollow ache in my chest. Probably a remix of losing Josie again, or maybe it was Marcus' death instead. Could even be losing my hand, seeing Mia run away scot free, or one of a hundred other dreams that've plagued me this last year, with little Dick and Papa Aultman being the latest bunch added to the list. I don't pay it no mind though, and I rub my eyes awake while trying my best to extricate myself from a pile of sleeping kiccaws and Cowie so I can hit the head. The animals ain't none too pleased to be disturbed, but I'm soft-footed enough to get out without waking Sasha, though I do admit I was mighty tempted to draw something silly on his stupid, slack face.

Would've probably set us back a fair bit in the trust department though, and while I couldn't care less, I know Aunty Ray won't be none too pleased to hear of it. Silly that, as I'm a grown man of 18 still scared of upsetting the woman who done raised me, but I don't suppose that'll ever change as I'm still ashamed of what my daddy might think. I only hope Aunty Ray sticks around for a good few decades more, because I don't need to add another name to the list of folks I pray to once or twice a year. That's why I'm on

full alert as we head out of Redeemer's Keep and move south along the Highway, into what was once no man's land between Federal and Mexican territory.

Clayton and the Rangers were all ready and waiting at the gates to catch us before we left, while Raja, Bodvar, and Nhiall rejoin us about a half-hour away from the fortress. I catch a few questioning glances from Clayton and Sergeant Lee who clock something weird about the three Wildshapers, but I ain't about to spill their secrets and they all just smile and nod to any and all questions or statements like they don't understand a word of English. I almost wish I could pull that off, but the Qin never believe I don't understand Qinese while I'm dressed far too American to act like I don't speak English. Them's the breaks though, so I keep on keeping on chatting with Aunty Ray while Chrissy tries to teach Sasha ASL and the kid, bless his heart, does his best to learn.

Suppose he ain't all that bad, but if he starts making heart eyes at Chrissy, then me and him are gonna have a long conversation about that. Man to man, far away from Aunty Ray and civilization in general so won't no one hear him scream…

The morning is pretty uneventful after we outpace the merchant caravans heading down south, and after two hours of riding, there ain't no one to be seen ahead or behind. Mostly because the Highway is slightly serpentine around these parts, as the hills be

older and rockier around these parts, which makes me more than a little paranoid regarding our surroundings. Even with a focused beam of Detect Abby, I can just barely push it out to 750 meters, which is less than a minute of warning time should they come running in at a dead sprint.

To say nothing of the bandits that could be hiding up in them there hills, but just as I finish saddling Old Tux for a ride, I get a ping off my Detection that sets off alarm bells. “Abby incoming,” I say as I mount on up, and everyone looks lively to hear it. Turning to Rowan who’s got her eyes narrowed in the telltale sign of a directed Detection Spell, I say, “They’re coming in from behind at a fair clip, but not right at us. I don’t think they know we’re here, but they will soon as they scent, spot us, or hear us. You get everyone away while I distract and draw them away. I’ll catch up to you soon enough, so just keep going until…”

I stop talking, because it’s clear the Staff Sergeant ain’t paying me no mind. “Rangers, form up around the civilians. Catfish and Icebreak up front, Haze with me at the back.” Shooting me a look, Rowan speaks to Tina while making sure I’m picking up what she’s putting down. “Songbird, make sure the civilians stay out of our way.”

Much as I want to argue, them Abby be much too close to be quibbling over command, and personal failings aside, I gotta assume Rowan knows what she’s doing seeing how she’s been a

Ranger on the Frontier for as long as she has. Rather than make things difficult for Tina, I follow her lead and fall in behind the wagons while keeping to the pace set by Catfish Kairi and the reckless Zeke ‘Icebreak’ Fowler. Don’t know about Kairi, but Zeke’s major failing is a reckless streak that’s earned him a reputation for diving deep into enemy lines without a care in the world, which ain’t how a Vanguard is supposed to behave. They’re there on the front lines to take pressure of the rest of the group, not add to it as they get themselves in a pinch and need to be saved from themselves. By putting him at the front, Rowan ensures Zeke can’t get into no trouble charging at Abby coming at us from behind, meaning we won’t have to risk our necks to save him.

Don’t know what Rowan brings to the table aside from Scouting and command, but she’s got Armando with her, who’s callsign ‘Haze’ is obviously in reference to his love of the wacky tobaccky. Even though he’s three sheets to the wind and stoned out of his gourd, the big man makes up for it with his big gun, the Blackstaff Assault Rifle that can be belt fed, but in this case got a sixty or sixty-five round magazine.

That ought to mow down Abby well enough, but I ain’t convinced that’s all we’ll need and don’t see Rowan making any other preparations. I’m so distracted by my lack of control over all this, I only now notice Sasha riding the champagne Sunshine right next to me and Tina. “Ride on over to the wagon and square up next to Chrissy,” I say. “You ain’t a good enough rider to scoot and shoot

on horseback, so plant your bony butt in that driver seat before Sunshine steps on the gas and throws you off her back."

Sasha gives me a dark scowl, but I can't tell if it's because I'm giving orders, calling him out on his lacking riding skills, or referring to his bony butt. Don't make a difference to me though, as I match his energy and say, "Anything goes wrong, you look after Chrissy. Understood?"

The kid blinks. That's it, but it conveys enough to read his surprise and his pride as he nods and sets forth to do just that, because he knows good and well how protective I am of Chrissy. As for Tina, I give her a smile and say, "You stick with me. This is silly, taking a fight we've no need to, not like this." And for what? Pride? Rowan didn't like being outdone, as she's clearly the Scout of this Strike Team and I noticed the pack of Abby first. They're still not entirely aware of our presence, just meandering along at a decent speed, but far from fast enough to catch up lickety split.

"Ain't like that Howie," Tina replies, her rifle locked, loaded, and ready for bear, a standard issue El-Minister chambered in 44-40. "The Abby around these parts be tricksy, so if they're this close behind us, then chances are – "

Tina cuts herself off mid-sentence, because I done already caught on and found the trap waiting to spring, a second group of Abby

lying in wait further down the road. “Second contact, twelve-o-clock,” I say, diverting my attention back behind us just in time to catch them Abby break into a dead sprint. Same goes for those up ahead, and I got no real time to organize my people except to say, “Get in between the wagons. Clayton, Aunty Ray, be ready to distract as best you can, but don’t bite off more than you can chew.”

“Weapons free,” Rowan calls, saying we can shoot as soon as we got a shot, and I ready my new rifle for the job, feeling nervous and excited at the same time. On one hand, I get to test out my new toys for the first time in a real fight, and on the other, I got a whole lot on the line with only an understrength Strike Team of Ranger rejects to count on. Clayton and Aunty Ray can handle themselves pretty well, and I ain’t all that worried about the trio of Wildshapers in a stand-up fight, but I don’t much care for our odds. We’ll come out ahead, I know that much, but we still stand a chance of losing people, animals, or wagons, none of which is acceptable. Ain’t nothing for it though, as the time for fretting is long past, and now it’s time for action as I make the tough decision to trust Sergeant Rowan seeing how she made the right call.

Knew there could well be an ambush waiting up ahead, one they would’ve run headlong into if they followed my plan, so I leave her to guard our back while I ride forward to help Kairi and Zeke punch through the Abby up ahead, as that looks like the only option we got left to us. Soon as I get in close though, Kairi picks

up the pace and growls, “Stand down.” Turning her glare to Tina, the squat, dumpy woman says, “Keep him contained.”

“Yes ma’am,” Tina replies, looking stern and stoic right up until she hits me with her big blues, all wide and pleading as she silently begs me not to get her in any hot water. That ain’t what I’m trying to do, but I hate not being in the loop. Ain’t no time for twenty questions though, as we follow Kairi until we’re almost at a gallop when the frontrunners of the Abby Ferals burst out of the trees and let loose with a chorus of battle-crazed bleats.

Yeah, that’s right. Bleats. Don’t sound all that scary, but them Cliffstriders make up for their lacking battlecries by drowning them out in the sound of thundering hooves as they bear down on you in a rage-fuelled frenzy. From dead silent to an all-out gallop, they crash down in a deluge of deafening hoofbeats that sets my heart to pounding. While old worlders call them goat-like, they also universally agree that Cliffstriders ain’t much like goats at all, aside from the hooves and general shape of their torsos that is. Goats don’t got hides tough enough to block Bolts, or long, muscular legs that carry them from zero to sixty in a few seconds flat. They most certainly don’t got any sharp, dagger-like fangs jutting out from their small, pointed mouths, with a chin that tapers off into an almost point to form a wedge-shaped skull that they lower to channel all their speed and momentum into the two spear-like horns atop of their heads.

Cliffstriders do though, and at this range and speed, there ain't nothing I can do to keep them from crashing into our ranks. It's my first time seeing them, so I couldn't tell what they were using Detect Abby, else I would've told everyone to get off the road and into the trees where them goats didn't have a clear lane to charge down. The moment that thick herd of horn and muscle revealed itself, my heart skipped a beat, because there's far too many even for Armando's BAR with the 60 or 65 round magazine to mow down before they reach us, not that he's in any position to help out. Never one to panic, I ready a Maximized Fireball and look for the best place to plop it down without spooking the horses, but Tina grabs a hold of my elbow as I bring it back to cock and lock the Spell in. A lesser Spellslinger might well have failed the cast then and there, but I've practiced Fireball tens of thousands of times in my head and Ready the Spell all the same, but I do spare her a glance to see what she's on about.

"Hold it," she says, so earnest and trusting she gets to shooting into her herd with her El-minister right quick, without even considering I might not listen. She don't seem all that concerned though, so I hold onto the Spell and raise my rifle to shoot, only to blink as Kairi finishes a chant and unleashes her Spell into the charging herd at almost point-blank range without slowing down for a single beat.

There's no flash of light or explosion of heat, no spray of Acid or Electric beam. Nothing shoots out of her hands or materializes out in front of us, and no Illusion of death and destruction either. Fact

is, it almost looks like she didn't do nothing at all, except them horned goat things get to screaming as their charge collapses in on itself. I'm not saying that something hits them; quite the opposite in fact, as they crash into each other in what appears to be a panicked effort to turn tail and run.

Now, as someone who grew up around all manner of hooved animals, I know good and well how fast they can get, especially when they got so much muscle behind them. A horse can gallop at a fair rate of knots, and Cowie can get a decent trundle going too. As for these Cliffstriders? I've already covered how quick they can run, but them muscular legs don't got muscle enough to let them corner all that quick. Not when they moving at top speeds, but they still try all the same, and a fair few break their legs in the attempt while others turn their heads while their legs keep carrying them forward and crash head over hooves into the ground.

A few of the more agile ones manage to stop in their tracks, and might even have managed to turn themselves around if they had more room to breathe. They don't though, as they came at us in tight ranks to try and sweep the Highway clean of our presence, so they just get mowed down by the Cliffstriders behind them. What started off as a valiant and terrifying charge devolves into bone-crunching crush of Abby goat-flesh as they scream and fight to get away, but only manage to get in the way of their fellow goat-things charging in after them.

Takes a second to process it all and realize that Catfish Kairi done cast Fear on them all, single-handedly turning the tides in our favour. Which is crazy, because there ain't no guarantee that a Fear Spell will land. I've shaken it off plenty of times, like back in the Coral Desert when that Hobgoblin Illusionist hit me with it, but it ain't just about the Spell. It's knowing when to use it, like against a tightly packed crowd of charging Ferals who don't got nothing but bloodshed on the brain. Cliffstriders were built to climb cliffs and get into places where they shouldn't be before wreaking havoc with a glorious group charge. Thing is, even if only half or a quarter of targets hit by Fear react, that throws the whole group out of wack as they crash and stumble over one another in a confused panic, slowing their momentum just enough for Zeke to follow up in this one-two punch.

Whooping and hollering all the while, the hot-headed Ranger unleashes a Spell that ain't nowhere near as showy as an Ice Nova or Fireball, but is still a sight to behold. With a wave of his hand, the whole herd of Cliffstriders is punted aside, corpses, broken bodies, and still living Abby all. Ain't Telekinesis, as that's a Fourth Order Conjuration Spell, but rather Banishing Wave, the same Spell that the Big Stick up top of my Wagon uses, only dialed up to eleven through Metamagics and familiarity. Don't matter that each Cliffstrider has got to weigh three-quarters of a tonne at the very least, or that there's more than thirty of them all bunched up together; the Evoker sweeps them all aside with a single gesture and charges headlong into the spray of blood and viscera that has yet to clear out, all the while grinning like a

madman and cheering to all unholy hell as he emerges covered in gore like a demon out of hell.

Behind us, the deafening **rat-tat-tat** of Armando's BAR sounds out, interspersed with shots from Rowan's El-Minister and Sasha's Ranger Repeater as he plinks away at the pursuing herd from the roof of his wagon. We're all moving at full speed now as we thunder down the highway with Abby hot on our heels, but while Cliffstriders got the speed, they're sorely lacking in endurance, meaning they can't keep this up for long. Not to count my kiccaws before they've hatched, but this here is a textbook victory, except I'm stuck here with my dick in my hand and Fireball at the ready, with no good target to unleash it on.

My fault that, as I'd gotten so used to treating these Rangers as the worst of the worst, forgetting that even a bad Ranger is still better than the best merc almost any day of the week.