

Harrowing as their trip up to the Deadlands might have been, Astrid ranked boredom as a far greater menace.

So sometimes she still had nightmares about Zombies, Ghouls, and Wights closing in on all sides, and she'd never trust a Sheriff or Deputy again for the rest of her life. Harold sometimes got that empty, far off look in his eyes, one that was different from his usual distracted expression because he was thinking about Dakota Slim and those other men he'd killed, while Astrid had no idea how Howie could keep doing what he did after taking a brutal beating and getting shot by that French *Capitaine* for just minding his own business. Even then, it was nothing compared to the boring, humdrum nothingness of Providence, where nothing ever happened and no one ever did anything besides go about their day.

Meaning the highlights of the last few months were few and far between. Like how Mr. Rowan got in an argument with a bapple bush and planted his roots outside of Miss Meredith's bakery for a full two weeks in a futile effort to deny the bush any and all sun and nutrients until she got sick of her customers complaining about his tall, treelike-face glaring down at them every time they came by for bread. Or when a pair of Artificers didn't like the fact that Mr. Thornwick kept saying the listed standards for their prototype engine didn't match what the materials could actually withstand in real world conditions, which was why it exploded upon testing. They were convinced they'd been sabotaged by a

competitor, so they got it into their heads that Mr. Thornwick had been bribed. Which was stupid because a second opinion was all it'd take to get his license revoked, but they were so up in arms about the whole thing that half the village had to step in before it got ugly.

For the two Artificers that is. There were just over a hundred-and-fifty people who called Providence home, with more than half being Innates who looked out for one another. They had to, because it wasn't like anyone was looking out for them.

That's why so many of them lived here in Providence. Because they had enough excitement and wanted a bit of the quiet life that comes from being normal like everyone else, instead of being treated like members of a freak show there to amuse everyone else. They loved boring, because boring meant peaceful, and peaceful meant no one was turning up with torches and pitchforks to run them out of town. A sentiment Astrid wholeheartedly agreed with, but there had to be some happy medium between terror and tedium, something along the lines of fun and exciting without having to fear for her life.

Not that anyone in Providence would know it, especially her own family. Daddy, Mama, and Harold were all workaholic hermits, all too happy to hide away in their labs day in and day out, leaving Astrid to man the store that only got customers once in a blue moon. Most their orders came by mail, so even then, it wasn't like she got to meet anyone interesting or exciting. All she really did

was pack up the finished products nice and safe before slapping a label on the box and hauling it over to the post office for the postman to pick up every other Tuesday. Left her plenty of time to mix her potions in her lab attached to the store, but unlike the rest of her family, Astrid wanted to do more with her life than just Alchemy.

Or Alchemy related topics like their new favourite obsession that was Geomantic Lattices. All of Harold's efforts to get them to call it Directed Thaumic Accretion fell through, but not because it was a bad name. It was a perfect name really, because it described the process exactly was is. You directed thaumaturgical energies to promote the growth of plants, but the problem was, most people didn't know what Thaumic or Accretion meant. Since most Federal suits weren't exactly technologically savvy, Geomantic Lattice was the better name, because even if they didn't know Geomantic from Geometric or Geographic, at least they could figure out what a lattice was once they brought out the diagrams.

This was but one of many arguments they had over the last few weeks, in between talking shop about the math and procedures required to create their own Geomantic Lattice. All while Howie went out and about on his adventures without so much as a batting an eye. He got stabbed in January, shot in March, and according to the rumours, beaten and almost sacrificed to Abby by a cartel full of cultists in June. There was some talk about him having a hand in the Mexican Governor's assassination too, but most papers were reporting that he was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. It helped that Howie had already saved the

Governor's life once before during a party he hosted for the gathered diplomats.

All of which would've probably been terrifying for a normal person, but just another day in the life of Howie. While Astrid wasn't looking for that level of intense insanity, she was almost ready to sign on for another trip with him just to keep herself from bouncing off of the walls. Luckily, they had a bit of a breakthrough in their studies and Harald was finally feeling confident enough to try out a test run to see if they were on the right track. Since they couldn't risk the Federal Government catching wind of their experiments and coming in to seize all their data, that meant making a trip up to Ming's Quay to speak with Howie.

And sad as it might sound, this trip to the Quay had more potential for excitement than anything Astrid had done since visiting the Deadlands. That's why she got up extra early on the morning of to dress up all nice and pretty, because if she was gonna be seen by people besides her neighbours, she wanted to look nice. She picked out a lovely cream-coloured blouse with sleeves that rolled up comfortably and paired it with a navy-blue walking skirt that went just past her knees. Add in a teal scarf for an extra splash of color and she was ready to set out in her dark leather boots that were much more comfortable than the pair she'd brought up to the Deadlands.

A lesson learned much too late, but better that than never. The trip taught her plenty more, like the importance of being prepared

at all times, which was why her next addition was a potion bandolier with easy access to her most useful potions, like Fog Cloud to lay down cover, Grease to accentuate her magical flames, Barkskin to protect herself, and a new addition to her arsenal, a Potion of Dragon's Breath to let her breathe flames and without having to Concentrate on the Spell. It left her feeling like she just dumped the contents of an ashtray into her mouth after drinking a bowlful of the spiciest soup imaginable, but it worked well enough that she was more than happy to keep it on hand if she should ever need it.

Growing up, Astrid always thought she'd be considered a heavy hitter in the world of Spellslingers. It made sense after all, as most Striker Spellcasters were Evokers or Conjurors, and her bloodline had an affinity for all things Evocation. Quick and dirty magic was how Evocation was best described, a School of Magic based on getting big damage out as fast as possible. Which could be pretty useful in Howie's line of work, except Astrid learned that most fights against Aberrations was less of a sprint and more of a marathon. Didn't matter if she could throw out a Searing Beam to scorch a dozen Zombies in one go; there was always going to be more than just a dozen lurking about.

Which was why Astrid looked into adding some sustainable damage into her arsenal, with Dragon's Breath being the low-hanging fruit she settled on. Flamethrower was a restricted Spell which she didn't have access to, so there was no way to study or improve upon it, and while Howie often talked about Captain Ava Jung's trick of throwing out 192 Bolts over the course

of a minute using Burst Bolt Upcasted at Third Order, learning that trick would take a whole lot more investment than Astrid was willing to put in. Better to stick with what she knew, and that's what she did, turning Dragon's Breath into a potion that was easy to find ingredients for and even easier to brew, allowing her to frontload her preparations and walk into a fight ready and armed for bear.

Not that she was expecting trouble. It was only a two-hour trek through the forest, less if you really hoofed it, but they were gonna be carrying a bunch of stuff on Floating Discs so they'd probably take it easy. Still, you never knew who you might run into out there, to say nothing of all the rumours about Howie having been marked for death by the cartels for his part in what happened down New Sonora's way. He was always up to something, and it was probably gonna get him killed one of these days, so Astrid reminded herself not to go all doe-eyed and weak in the knees when she saw him again.

She was dressing up for herself. That's what she told herself at least, as she looked over her figure in the mirror, one that was much too lean and wiry for her tastes. Mama called her slim and slender, said that other girls would kill for a waistline like hers, except she failed to mention that Astrid's waistline also matched her bustline, which was hardly ideal. Rather than focus on what she didn't have though, maybe she could accentuate what she did and put on some makeup to draw attention to her eyes. Not that she had any, or any idea how to apply it, but Mama said they didn't need makeup. They didn't make any concealer, foundation,

or blush suitable for red skin, and it'd only hide the 'lovely' golden glow of the magic running through their veins. Said they didn't need mascara either, because they had these dark lines around their eyes that did the job naturally, as well as silken black hair that looked great after running a brush through it a few thousand times every morning.

Least she didn't have to worry about hat hair, since she couldn't fit a hat over her dark and glossy horns. Not without poking holes through the hat and invalidating its purpose, or leaving holes for water to run through if it ever started to rain. Instead, Astrid put on a fitted visor to keep the sun out of her eyes, one that sat snugly around her horns and left her hair mostly intact.

Maybe she could put it up in a ponytail and change things up a bit... No, there wasn't enough time today. Next time maybe, just to try it out and see what Howie's... and everyone else's reactions were like. Earrings too. Not big hoops like Chrissy's Metamagic Foci, but something smaller and cute maybe. She'd have to ask Tina and see if she could go shopping for her, because it wasn't like Astrid could just walk into town for a casual day of shopping. Not without causing a big fuss from all the fundies who thought she was the devil incarnate. Even though Sheriff Patel was a fair man, he wouldn't be able to do anything unless things got violent, and there was a whole lot those fundies could do without stepping over the line.

Like line up with torches and pitchforks and glaring daggers at the whole family while chanting, “The Lord rebuke thee!” and other choice passages from the bible.

Just the mere thought of it sent shivers down Astrid’s spine. They’d wanted to do more to Mama the last time she went into town, talked about burning her at the stake because she happened to be there when a pregnant woman in labour showed at the hospital with signs of complications already apparent. Being a nurse, Mama stepped in to help Doc Art with the delivery, but they weren’t able to save the mother or the baby. Happened all the time, with the statistics being something like one out of every ten childbirths inside the hospital going wrong, and that was the best-case scenario. Not everyone had access to a bonafide doctor after all, or stuff like anti-biotics even, so if you had a hemorrhage or infection outside of town, then there wasn’t anything you could really do besides hope for the best.

Even without all the complications of childbirth, Astrid was pretty sure she was never gonna want to have any kids. Assuming all went well and they came out healthy and happy, they’d still be a red-skinned, black-horned Innate that looks awful lot like the Devil. Meaning their whole life, they’d have no choice but to hide who they were, or at best, hope Mama and Papa came up with an Elixir that would let them change their appearance so they could live a ‘normal’ life again. No thanks. Astrid loved the way she looked, loved her red skin and glowing golden veins, but she also understood why Mama wanted to go back to having blonde-hair, blue-eyes, and pale, freckled skin.

Not Astrid though. Why should she have to change everything about herself just so people wouldn't be scared? If they were afraid of the way she looked, then that was their problem, not hers, or at least that's how it'd be in a fair and just world. And if they made it her problem? Then she'd respond in a manner that left no room for criticism with regards to her Innate nature. That was the real problem, the fact that everyone thought all Innates were inborn killing machines. Which wasn't true, not even for Lord Edward Elton, the most feared Innate on the Frontier. Yes, he was a killer through and through, but he wasn't born that way. A lifetime of training and indoctrination made him into a killer, but all you needed to do was have one conversation with the man to see that he had the soul of a poet and the heart of an artist.

Unless you were a duck. Or some sort of waterfowl that resembled one. Then you were in big trouble, but otherwise, Lord Edward was a perfectly functional, albeit highly quirky individual wholly capable of living his life without supervision.

Didn't seem fair that Innates had to prove they weren't going to snap and go on a killing spree, as opposed to that being the default position like it was for everyone else. That's how it was though, so Innates had to be extra careful when defending themselves with lethal force. Another lesson learned from their trip upriver, because Harald would've gotten in less trouble if he'd killed Dakota Slim and his men with a gun instead of a Spell. That's why Astrid wanted a Potion, because then if the local

Sheriff or AICC wanted to come down hard on her for 'abusing' her Spells, a simple blood test would provide her with irrevocable proof that she didn't have Dragon's Breath Prepared.

Didn't make any sense. Why was it such a big deal if Innates learned Spells naturally without having to do much of anything about it? Who cares. It wasn't any different from an Orthodox Magus walking around with those same Spells, so why were Innates so closely regulated while Magi were free to go about as they pleased so long as they weren't Prepping any Restricted Spells without a license?

Either way, Astrid couldn't afford to leave her safety in the hands of the law or the government. That was the most important lesson of all, one learned sitting in a jail cell while some Deputy leered at her and Elodie and said things no man had any right to be saying. Then there was the fact that Howie got shot by a French Capitaine and all they did was pay his hospital bills, bills that wouldn't have been all that high to begin with seeing how he was covered by government subsidized British healthcare. Add in the fact that her family was about to break ground on a project that might well change the world as they knew it, one that would be highly coveted by businesses and governments all across the Frontier, and Astrid figured it was best to start figuring out how to keep her family safe without running afoul of the law.

Howie would probably have a lot to say on the subject, which was a big part of why she was so excited to get going. It was also why

she just spent the last ten minutes staring at herself in the mirror and trying different poses, hand positions, and angles to tilt her head to best hide her massive forehead. It wasn't that big, not really. That's where her horns came from, and that made it look bigger than it actually was since the protruding base of her horns jutted out over her eyes far enough to keep water from ever dripping down into them.

Meaning that if she ever kissed a boy, she'd have to be real careful not to headbutt him into oblivion on her way in...

Stifling a sigh, Astrid looked up from her preening just in time to catch Daddy's look of concern melt away into a big, beaming smile. Lot of people talked about how he looked like a hobo or a slob, and truth be told, he could use a makeover in a lot of ways. If it were up to her, she'd start by shaving off all his hair. Leaving the sides and back long wasn't doing anything to make him look less bald, and he didn't use any products to keep it from looking stringy and greasy. She'd also get him a whole new wardrobe, nothing fancy, but something that wasn't covered in Alchemical stains that ate away at the fabric and left it looking ratty and worn. Mama had long since given up on keeping him in decent clothes, because he always forgot to change out of them before heading down into his lab, and the best parts about Daddy were more than skin deep.

Didn't mean he couldn't look good on the outside while also being good on the inside. Wasn't a big deal, but Astrid was a little

embarrassed on his behalf when he went out and about dressed like he did. He didn't even have a proper belt, just a length of rope that he cinched together because tying an actual knot was too much effort. That's why he had to keep adjusting it, like he did now as he stood from his seat at the table while Mama cleared away the plates and mugs. "No need to primp and preen, Astrid," he said, pulling his rope belt tight before shuffling over for a big hug. "You're beautiful no matter what. Too beautiful in fact, so how about we throw a burlap sack over your head and save me the trouble of having to beat back all the feral young boys in Ming's Quay with a stick?"

Astrid rolled her eyes while hugging her daddy, but she didn't say anything else. Mostly because she was nervous that it might come to that. Not that she was arrogant enough to think her looks were good enough to cause a stampede of young men coming their way. No, it was because there'd been a whole lot of new people moving into the Quay and they had yet to meet any one of them. They only learned about the new neighbours from the folks up at Carter's compound after Howie dropped them off at their docks and went on his merry way. It was a shorter trek after all, and if they'd gone back to the Quay with Howie, then they probably would've had to stay the night since Aunty Ray would've insisted on cooking them dinner, helping with all their laundry, and probably a half-dozen other things that she'd say was 'no trouble at all'.

So now they were about to meet a whole bunch of people for the very first time, and even though Aunty Ray said they were all

good people, you never knew how some folks might react to seeing an Innate like Astrid. Much less a whole family of them, as Harald and Mama were both coming along too. The former so he could run his tests himself and rule out any possible error, while Mama just wanted to chat with her best friend Aunty Ray in person for once. Neither one liked to travel all that much, but they wrote often enough to wear out the nibs of their pens going back and forth all the time, so it was nice to give them an opportunity to meet and chat in person.

So long as things didn't turn ugly. Aunty Ray was good people, but she was also gorgeous with an Innate Brand that didn't detract from her beauty, but rather enhanced it. Same went for Tina, and while Chrissy's appearance was a little more out there, she looked like a picture-perfect princess from a fairy tale. She had those long, shimmering silver locks and a far-away look in her pale, violet eyes that paired so well with her milky white complexion that never seemed to tan no matter how much time she spent outdoors. Life for Innates who looked like the Walker-Bradshaws was nothing like life for the Askefjords, and Astrid didn't even think their family had the worst of it.

Not even close. No, the ones who had it the worst were those Innates who didn't look human anymore. Like poor Mr. Rowan who looked like a tree-man, or Miss Meredith with her mouth-full of shark teeth and gills on the side of her neck to go along with her striped and scaled appearance, to say nothing about how she could only eat raw meat since anything cooked made her throw up while vegetables made her deathly ill. Mr. Thornwick probably

had it even worse, because even though 95% of him looked like a regular, everyday person, his bug-like eyes made most people recoil in terror. Especially when he put on the glasses he used for work, glasses that made his compound eyes look even larger than they already were, and it was this appearance which led to him being kept in captivity for so many years without any of his captors even trying to keep it secret.

Make no mistake. Slavery was alive and well on the Frontier. Astrid wasn't talking about 'modern' slavery either, though that was an issue, because what sort of justice could they have when the Federal Justice System was incentivized to dole out maximum sentences to first time offenders so privatized prison work camps would remain productive and profitable? Disgusting as that was, at least they cared enough to dress it up, whereas there were plenty of places east of the Divide where whole villages were at the mercy of their employers. Given what she'd heard, Pleasant Dunes had been one such place, while the refugees freed by Howie and his people had also been enslaved by the cartel, and Astrid couldn't understand how anyone could treat another living human being like that.

And yet it was a threat she lived with each and every day, the fact that if someone caught wind of their skill in Alchemy, then came and took them prisoner, then there was little to nothing the Federal Government would do about it. Not unless they were incentivized to, which was why Daddy insisted on having standing contracts with the Feds to supply them with Impact Oil among other things. Being an American citizen wasn't enough. No, you

had to show that you had value too, enough to make it worth their while to come riding to the rescue. That's why Providence was so close to New Hope after all, because even though Daddy knew they might well have to abandon their village and move further away after the population boomed in the wake of the Watershed, he didn't dare try and make a home for himself any further away.

In hindsight? Astrid should've had Daddy talk to Howie about moving Providence up to the Quay. There'd be plenty more strangers moving through their streets, but the tradeoff was having Howie there to keep the law. Even when he wasn't around, people would know good and well to toe the line, because now they had three big examples of people who pissed him off and weren't around anymore. Pleasant Dunes, the Puglianos, and now *La Sangre Bendita*, Howie was making quite the big name for himself and not necessarily in a good way.

Didn't come easy though, as Astrid saw firsthand, both up in the Deadlands and again here today. Their trek through the forest came and went without event, save for having to step aside for Old Tux and his herd of horses to go thundering down the trails. The old stallion stopped to say hi while the other horses stayed back, all of which were young and definitely horses as opposed to Wildshaped people from Carter's tribe. Animals tended to get nervous around the Askefjords, or at least Mama, Astrid, and Harold. Something about the way they smelled made them skittish and wary, but Old Tux was made of sterner stuff and recognized her from way back when Uncle Ming used to give her rides around Providence.

The big horse was sweet enough to give her a quick nuzzle, but not so sweet as to offer her and her family a ride as they ran off towards the quay. Wasn't a big deal, because Astrid was having fun on their stroll while also dreading the reception they might find at the Quay. She wasn't the only one either, as Daddy brought them out to Carter's to say hi before heading up to the Quay, just so they'd have a chance at running into Howie while he worked on his new house which was ten minutes south of the Quay proper.

And it worked, though he wasn't working on his house when they got there. Instead, he was stood out in the water of the picturesque inlet that led out into the lake proper, but provided a nice and calm area of water for him to deploy his boat from. He wasn't standing on top of the water, but rather atop a wooden log and across from a gorgeous, blue-haired Qinese girl with the body Astrid dreamed of having and a glare that could freeze molten lava. They were both dressed for swimming, him in a pair of linen trunks that were probably a bit too small for him to be fashionable, while she was wearing an athletic swimsuit that had built in shorts like something Astrid would pick out for herself, if only to protect her modesty.

This must be Hú Dié, who Mama said was a former Vanguard who risked her life to take out an Elder who wanted to arrange for Howie's death. It was the stuff of romance novels, a girl falling head over heels in love with a man and risking it all for him. They

didn't look like they were in love though, not with how heated and violent they were being out over the waters, trading blows back and forth with padded sticks that were meant to represent polearms. Hú Dié had a spear, or rather a stick with a padded ball on the end, while Howie had a longer portion of his stick wrapped to simulate some sort of glaive or something.

And they were going at it with no holds barred, thwacking their sticks loud enough to be heard from fifteen minutes away. Clack-clack-clack-clack, there was little to no delay between each exchange as they went back and forth along one of three logs floating out and about the inlet. It looked like something out of an Illusion, with Hú Dié largely on the offensive as she thrust and slashed away at Howie's head, neck, and legs, while he danced atop the rolling logs like they were solid ground while whirling away with his stick. Every now and then, he went on the offensive with a big swing, strike, or thrust, but more often than not, Hú Dié would simply leap away and move out of his optimal range where she could still poke and thrust with her spear.

So of course Howie did what anyone would do. He dropped one foot down to brace the log beneath his feet and used his weight to pivot it up and around like a weapon.

A crazy move that no one could've seen coming, but somehow, Hú Dié was ready and waiting with a response that was equally crazy. Bracing the tip of her padded spear against her own log, she used her weapon to pole vault up and over the swinging log

Howie sent her way, going up feet first and coming back down to land neatly on the very same log that she just jumped over to avoid. Didn't matter that it was still bobbing in the water after a violent upheaval; her feet came down on the log like she had glue on her soles, only to go charging down the log to catch Howie unawares with a thrust to the gut.

One he almost avoided by slipping aside, but set him toppling off his log all the same. Didn't lose grip of his polearm though, and came back up a couple seconds later with a big grin on his face. He said something to Hú Dié that saw her puff up with pride and let her guard down, a ploy Astrid saw coming from a mile away. She might not be able to go toe to toe with Howie like that, but she knew him well enough to know he had a mischievous streak a mile long and twice as wide. That's why it came as no surprise when instead of pulling himself up onto the log, he rolled it out from under Hú Dié who went straight down like a pencil dive. Howie went under after her right away and Astrid's cheeks burned hot when she thought she was gonna get to see a steamy, underwater make out session, but instead, all she got to see was Hú Dié come back up out of the water sputtering something fierce as Howie pretty much sat her on his hip as he swam back for shore.

At which point the blue-haired Innate really laid into him. She was speaking Qinese, but you didn't have to know the language to know she was ticked off. "I know you can't swim," he said with a grin, holding up both arms in feigned surrender while shying back like he was afraid to get hit. "You gonna hafta learn eventually,

and it'll go faster if you ain't terrified of the water like ye are. Didn't think you'd sink so quick is all, but I got you up and out, didn't I?"

Looking past Hú Dié to give Astrid a wink and a smile, he leaned in to say something to the other girl before giving her cheek a light pinch. Same as what he'd do to Tina or Chrissy really, which showed that he treated Hú Dié like family, even going so far as to hand her a towel first before drying himself off. Then again, he reached out to pinch Astrid's cheek too, and flicked water at her when she dodged aside while greeting Daddy, Mama, and Harald. "Lemme give you the tour," he said once all the niceties were over and done with and he finished hauling in the logs by the lines they were attached to. Gesturing over at his massive framework of a house, he said, "Casa Howie don't look like much just yet, but I got plans. Basement cellar and panic room, first floor with a full kitchen, dining room, living room, guest room, and sitting room with a fireplace, while up top we got two bathrooms and four bedrooms up top a flight of central stairs overlooking the front foyer."

Likely so he could post up on the second floor and shoot down at anyone who come barging in. The aesthetics were secondary for Howie, who spent most his years living in a stone shack of a house with his daddy. Building a house so big was actually surprising, unless he was planning on selling the big house he was currently living in and needed the extra rooms for Chrissy, Tina, and Aunty Ray when they came to visit. Astrid was almost certain that was the case when Howie started talking about having a balcony and veranda both, as those were things you

added onto a house when you **wanted** neighbours to drop in for a chat and a drink. Hardly Howie's style considering he felt the need to build his house so far from his closest neighbour, but didn't no one call him out on it as his plans did sound pretty fey.

"Boathouse there, workshop there, and maybe a swing over the water where its deepest," Howie said, finally running out of steam with regards to his new digs. "You know. So I can swing out and jump into the water without riskin' my fool neck. Might have to build something that goes right out over the water, but I'm game for it."

"Sounds like the start of a beautiful home," Mama said, reaching out to stroke his cheek which Astrid always loved to see. Mostly because Howie tried to act cool, only to all but melt in Mama's hand, because at the heart of it all, he was just a big kid who worked hard to impress the adults. Astrid never would've believed it, not before she spent so many days watching him train under Lord Edward's watch, with Howie asking so many questions that he sounded greener than green even though he looked like an old pro after only a few days of practice. He'd improved even more since then, as gone were the stiff and stilted swings of yesterday, and in their place was a fighter and brawler who looked like he could hack and slash his way through a whole network of Abby tunnels to get at the Proggie hiding under dark without so much as a single gun.

Not that he stopped carrying them. He had his gun belt nearby in fact, with his fancy new rectangular revolver alongside the familiar Model 10 and brace of Judges. Wrapped his towel around his swim trunks and wore the guns over top, because if there came a time when he might need them, he didn't want to be caught fumbling with the weapons and belts in hand.

Always ready for violence. That was Howie in a nutshell, and Astrid could stand to learn from him. She wasn't all about the rough and tumble life, but if they got their Geomantic Lattices up and running, then the rough and tumble life might come looking for them. The profits alone would be staggering to behold, to say nothing of the military potential, so much so that in all likelihood, they would eventually have to sell their methods to the Federal Government just to keep other governments from coming in and kidnapping them in the dead of night.

Course, there were other benefits to watching Howie aside from learning. Fully dressed, he looked gaunt and skinny, but part of it was because his shoulders were so broad it made his chest look almost concave under his shirt. Topless, he was better described as fit and compact, with lean muscle and taut skin as far as the eye could see. Scars too, so very many scars, the worst of which were three impact sites surrounded by a spiderweb of cracks all across his upper back. That's where he'd been shot while fighting the Puglianos, and the only reason he was still alive was because he had Barkskin to save his hide. The scars were frightening to behold, but now he had another three ugly scars on his upper right thigh. She hadn't caught more than a glimpse of it, as it

would be rude to stare, especially when Howie went to such great lengths never to stare at any Innates. Sure, he might blink once or twice and let his gaze linger on some of the stranger ones, but he never once treated anyone poorly based on appearance alone.

That's why Astrid always had a bit of a crush on him, not just because he was the only available option. He had a good heart too, not to mention his roguish good looks, rugged charm, and winning smile to boot.

Astrid didn't realize she was making moon eyes at Howie until she caught sight of Hú Dié's frosty scowl. The gorgeous woman clocked her as a possible rival and wasn't none too pleased to see it, and knowing she was no match for the spear-wielding Qin, Astrid was quick to capitulate and change the topic. "So why are you learning how to fight with a polearm?" she asked, mostly just so she had an excuse to walk alongside Howie and use him to block Hú Dié's glare. "Some might say a man that keeps switching to bigger and bigger weapons is overcompensating for something, but I'm sure that's not you."

Howie laughed, and Astrid blushed to see it, even as she ignored Daddy's scowl that joined Hú Dié's. He liked Howie, but he didn't like Astrid having a crush on him, which to be fair was probably how all dads would feel with regards to their daughters pining over a gunfighting madman who'd had more brushes with death this year than most had since coming to the Frontier. "Ain't like that, I swear," Howie said, gesturing at the practice polearm

resting over his shoulder. “I came across a fancy polearm down New Sonora’s way, and brung it back home since the previous owner didn’t have no use for it no more. It’s an Augmented piece I been meaning to bring in for Mr. Thornwick to have a look-see so he can tell me what it’s magicked with. Ain’t many buyers for a piece like that, so I figured I might as well keep it and learn to use it too.”

“And you gotta train out on the water while standing on logs to do that?” Astrid asked, risking a glance over at Hú Dié who was still glaring and glowering for all she was worth. Somehow still looked gorgeous while doing it, especially with those piercing, pastel-blue eyes that almost crackled with light. “Or is that some Ancient Qinese training technique that she brought out?”

“Nah,” Howie replied with a shrug. “It was my idea. Mostly because it hinders her more than it does me, and evens the playing field between us.” Glancing over at the other girl, he reached over to knuckle her shoulder and said, “On firm, flat ground, she’d beat me six ways from Sunday and I’ve no desire to go to sleep bruised and beaten each and every night.”

Obviously pleased to hear it, Hú Dié said something in Qinese, and Howie replied, “Ain’t far from it. Maybe talk with Arcane Sign Language though. We got company and you could use the practice. Or better yet, try out your English. I keep tellin’ ye, your accent can’t be much worse than mine, and I been speakin’ the language fer all my years.”

Hú Dié's scowl deepened, but she still brought one hand up to go through the motions and sign, *"Hello Astrid. I am glad to make your acquaintance. I hope that we can become fast friends without conflict between us so that the unit might remain harmonious."*

There was probably still something getting lost in translation, because Astrid didn't understand that bit about the unit. Friend group maybe? Either way, it was nice to know that the scowling blue-haired girl didn't actually want to tear Astrid apart like her expression might otherwise convey. *"It's nice to meet you too Hú Dié,"* Astrid signed back, making sure to match Hú Dié's speed of signing. *"I would love to be friends. I don't have many my age. Were you born in 1990 like Howie and Harald, or are you younger like me?"*

It turned out that Hú Dié was among the oldest Frontier born, with her birthday being January 2nd, 1990. That made her only three days younger than Howie, which was crazy, because that meant her mother either turned Innate just before getting pregnant, or worse, was Branded during her first trimester. Any later was guaranteed to result in a miscarriage, and even then, it usually ended that way all the same, which might well explain why Harald was so Aether-Touched compared to Astrid. Mama would've only been a Innate for a few weeks or months before becoming pregnant with him, and her body had a full two years to adjust to the Innate changes before Astrid came along. Then again, that

might have nothing to do with anything at all, and it was all just a big coincidence.

Didn't change the facts though. None of the Qin from the First Wave had been Innates, meaning Hú Dié's mother must've taken in a Spell Core almost immediately after the Advent and gotten pregnant in that same time frame. A risky proposition for more reasons than one, as Howie himself could attest to, but that's how a lot of the Qin were. At least it worked out for Hú Dié, though it was much too early in their relationship for Astrid to be asking if the other girl's mother died in childbirth same as Howie's.

They made a bit of small talk, with Astrid mostly asking questions about Hú Dié and the other girl replying. Right up until they were almost at the big house, at which point she broke ranks to sign, *"Be careful. Chrissy has been most displeased of late, and though I do not know your place in the unit, I wager she stands above us all."*

Which was odd, but Astrid simply smiled and nodded along while trying to make heads or tails of what the other girl was saying. She did wonder why Chrissy wasn't there with Howie and Hú Dié at the inlet, as usually she was inseparable from Howie. Not today though, as they filed into the big house to find Chrissy sat by the window with arms crossed in the library. "Heya Princess," Howie said, only for the silver-haired girl to pointed look **away**, which was a first as far as Astrid knew. "We're back! And look who's here with us. It's Astrid and her whole family. You remember

Harald and Mr. Askefjord right? And you definitely remember Miss Alice.”

At the mention of Mama’s name, Chrissy’s head whipped around to reveal a pout, one that melted away into her customary neutral expression as she came to her feet and wrapped Mama in a hug. “Hi Auntie Alice,” she said, heaving a big sigh like she was all sorts of aggrieved before adding, “Hú Dié bullying Howie.”

No wonder Chrissy wasn’t allowed to watch them spar. She thought the blue-haired Innate was beating Howie too harshly, and Astrid shuddered to think what Chrissy might do to someone she thought was hurting Howie. You wouldn’t know it to look at her, but the silver-haired Princess was a powerful Spellcaster, more powerful than anyone their age and probably more powerful than most old timers to boot. She was also deathly protective of Howie, ready to walk right into Fairhaven and kill anyone who got in between her and Howie as soon as she heard he was in trouble, so of course she wouldn’t be happy to see Hú Dié beating Howie in a spar.

“Oh sweetie,” Mama said, cooing as she hugged Chrissy tight and kissed her temple. “Not at all. I know it looks rough, but they’re just training. Promise. Saw it myself, and if anything, Howie’s almost getting good enough to bully Hú Dié.”

That cheered Chrissy up some, though she still let her eyes linger on Hú Dié for just a bit before moving over to Astrid. Pointed taking her arm in her own, Chrissy pulled her away and into the kitchen without so much as sparing Howie a glance. Poor guy must be miserable to have Chrissy so mad at him, but Astrid loved to see him take a loss for once, even if it was in a small way. To make things even better, Chrissy went a step further and introduced Astrid to Sasha, the resident tomboy masquerading as an actual boy, even though Howie was the only one in the household who didn't see through her disguise.

How that was possible, Astrid could not say, because Sasha had a set of long, dark locks and legs that just would not quit. She even had an apron on while puttering around in the kitchen, working hard to learn how to cook pancakes one stack at a time. While there might be some confusion from the waist up, everything below Sasha's hips were decidedly feminine as can be, and it was wonder anyone could ever mistake her for anything besides a gorgeous Soviet girl. One who seemed plenty happy to serve Astrid a plate of her deliciously fluffy pancakes, and she wasn't shy about saying as much.

"He can do more than just cook," Howie interjected, paying no mind to the very feminine smile on Sasha's face while giving Harald a poke in the shoulder to get him to look up from his book. "Sasha here is a fine Artificer. Not as good as Danny, but he's workin' his way up there. If you need any tech made for this project, he's our guy, mostly because he works for cheap and owes me big." The last was said with a grin and a wink to show he

didn't mean it, and judging by Sasha's silent eye roll and casual disregard, it was a common enough jab to take away any actual sting. "I brung him into the project already, let him see all the notes from the book, and he's got a whole host of technical questions I couldn't answer, so you two ought to sit down and have yourselves a chat."

Astrid frowned to hear it, and so did Daddy, as neither one of them were all that happy to hear Howie bringing in fresh blood so early into the game. Harald didn't mind though, mostly because he didn't expect much of anything from Sasha, not until her first question almost left him stumped. "How is possible to manage Thaumatic load? No tool to measure Charge Gradient at local level, but we must know to keep Resonance in check. Too high, and Aether will bloom. Too low, and Infusion will no take."

Astrid had no idea what most of those terms meant, but it took Harald all of five seconds to come up with an answer, one that did little to illuminate the darkness of her mind. The two of them got along splendidly after that as they had their two-person discussion while eating pancakes, leaving everyone else to relax and catch up. At least Sasha was competent and would prove useful in their efforts to create a working Geomantic Lattice, unlike the next two groups of people Howie introduced them to, who's skills wouldn't come in handy until they had a whole process in place and product to ship.

“This here is Taye Bakari, and his boys Tariq and Kiano.” They were Innates, but like the Walker-Bradshaw’s, the Bakari’s Brand was almost nonexistent, just a couple petal-looking scales on the back of their calves that were all too easily hidden away. That and their pale green eyes, but the colour was so faint they could easily be mistaken for grey or blue in the right light. Howie didn’t say anything about them being Innates, just that they were some of the best porters around who worked with Yussef, Thomas, and Einar, whoever they were. Merchants and guards from the sound of it, but the latter three were off in town looking for new goods to ship and sell. “The three of them can carry more product than three whole wagons,” Howie was saying, clapping the younger brother, Kiano on the shoulder. Couldn’t be more than fourteen at the most, while the older brother Tariq had a glassy-eyed look as he stared at Astrid, who paid him no mind even though he was pretty cute.

Not as handsome as Howie, or well built. That much she could tell, even though Howie had put his shirt back on before eating and Tariq was fully dressed in clothes that were at least three sizes too big. Probably hand-me-downs from his father, but his shoes were in pristine condition, albeit with a well-worn look to them.

The idea was that Howie figured the Bakari’s could handle freight for the finished product, bringing it into New Hope once they had product to ship. That wouldn’t be for some time though, but the strange thing was that Howie mentioned Thomas and Einar handling security instead of saying he’d do it himself. Which was

odd, because even if Howie wasn't planning on being around the Quay all the livelong day, he was the kind of guy who liked to handle things himself. Even if he wasn't there, he'd want to oversee the process, but now he was talking like he planned on being completely hands off.

Doubly so when he introduced the next group, a mother and daughter duo named Fiona and Elsinor Torvales. "They been helping out with the wallies, kiccaws, and horses," he said, patting Old Tux on the neck as the big stallion stole his hat and pranced about in glee. "But their real skills lie in helping plants grow. Figure that'll come in handy soon enough, and after talking it out, I read them in on the whole project just in case they got some personal insights on the matter."

Again, Astrid frowned to hear it, but Howie kept right on talking about how he'd given them a part of his shares to bring them in as full-on partners. He was planning to do the same for the Bakarlis and guards too, which was uncharacteristically generous of him, but it also made perfect sense. The biggest threat to them in the present was word getting out, so giving everyone who was read in a share of the eventual profits was a great way to keep them incentivized to stay silent. Their payouts depended on selling the product and technology for a premium after all, one they would never see hide nor hair of if the Government came in and seized everything away.

And more to the point, Fiona and Elsinor were obvious Innates. Not that it should matter, but somehow it did, but not because Astrid didn't trust non-Innates. She just trusted Innates more because they had a shared experience to fall back on, and it most certainly wasn't anything to do with prejudice. Miss Fiona was probably beautiful once, but her ashy grey complexion and wispy, plant-like hair made her look more alien than her mostly normal features might appear. Sure, her eyes were a little bigger and rounder than normal, and her yellowed teeth weren't helping, but it wasn't the yellow of plague and neglect. It was more of an earth tone than anything else, like her teeth were stained with dirt even though that sounded crazy. How much dirt would one have to eat to get stains like that? No, more likely than not, that was also a part of her Innate Brand, one shared by her unfortunate daughter who stood with a hunched back because she was too scared to look anyone in the eyes.

They both showed their worth soon enough however, as Harald showed them both the diagrams he'd drawn up of how their initial testing plant beds should be shaped. Mother and daughter both took a look at the diagram, asked a couple questions to clarify his desires, then sat down and hammered out nine 1 cubic metre plots all in a neat little square. Didn't take them more than a few minutes, which didn't impress Harald one bit considering all the emphasis he put into the specifics of how each plot had to perfectly align with the cardinal directions, only for his frown to melt away once he took some measurements and found everything in perfect order.

The frown reappeared soon after though, as Miss Fiona said, “Doesn’t matter much though, as this won’t work. Not with the seeds you’ve got in that baggie of yours.”

“Why not?” Harald asked, skipping over the obvious question of how Miss Fiona knew what seeds he’d brought seeing how the seeds had yet to leave his pouch.

“They’re all rootstock,” she replied. “Caddish, potates, sunspine tubers and the like. The Lattice in the book? That was fer some type of fern if I’m not mistaken. Mostly fronds and rhizomes, with little in the way of roots, unlike the seeds you’ve got there. That Lattice directs the magic upwards, whereas with rootstock, you’re gonna need to direct it down and up at the same time.” Shrugging, Miss Fiona added, “Least that’s what me girl Elsinor says, and she’s rarely wrong about this sort of thing.”

Everyone present glanced over at the girl, who shrank back at all the attention and hid behind her mother who turned to pat the girl on the back and soothe her nerves. As one, they all turned away to give Elsinor time to recover, but also so they could trade glances to share how impressed they were without giving Howie a big head. Not that it would stop him, as he was grinning ear to ear with Chrissy on his arm after winning her over again. Didn’t take much, just a promise to take her up into the skies with Fly once they were done out here, and Astrid almost wanted to make doe eyes at him and ask to bring her along too.

Daddy would never allow it though, not if he knew in advance, so Astrid set to prepping each plot alongside him, Elsinor, and Miss Fiona while Harald sat down to do some math with help from Howie and Sasha.

They made a good team. A bigger team than expected, but for once, Howie was being more forward thinking about the future and making plans for when he inevitably flaked out to go on a hunting trip or something. That was pretty good progress, and uncharacteristically smart of him, so much so Astrid even mentioned it out loud expecting to get a chuckle out of him.

Instead, she barely got a smile while his eyes dimmed just a bit, only for him to rally back with fake cheer and escape into the skies with Chrissy thanks to a Twinned Fly Spell. It looked like so much fun, and Astrid hoped it would come to her Innately, because Second Order Spells were already complicated enough to Prepare, and she didn't really want to put in all the work to learn a Third Order Spell the traditional way. Still, there was something weird about Howie's reaction, something Astrid couldn't quite put her finger on, and she remained in the dark right up until Howie returned with Chrissy and said, "Trouble at the docks. Sasha, look sharp and stay with Chrissy while I handle this."

"You need backup?" Astrid asked, following behind him and glancing at Hú Dié before adding, "Er... more backup, I mean."

“Nah, that’s my bad,” Howie replied, waving her offer aside. “When I say trouble, I mean of the... social kind. See, I invited a few friends I met down south to come live up here, and it seems like they went out of their way to charter a boat to bring them up north, which was not what I was expectin’.” Heaving a sigh, he forced a smile and said, “So yeah. It’s not trouble with a capital T. Just a bother since now I gotta get all these people settled and fed and all that.” Straightening up, he frowned and said, “Actually, you know what? Maybe you should come along just to check on your mama. I know how she gets around strangers, and these bunch do be the religious type, so better safe than sorry. Don’t worry. I’m sure all is well and Aunty Ray can handle the crowd better than I ever could.”

Even though he sounded calm and casual as can be, Astrid noticed that he picked up the pace and all but ran for the docks, so she followed hot on his heels while running one hand over her potion bandolier to familiarize herself with which potion was where. She wasn’t expecting a fight, or even hoping for one, but if there was one, then she wasn’t going to balk or hesitate. That’s how it had to be from here on out, because as Howie just reminded them all, he wasn’t gonna be around all the time to handle their troubles, so it was best they all learn to handle things themselves.

A lesson Astrid took to heart, because if anyone dared to harm her mama, she’d be sure to make them regret it for the rest of their days.

