

Stepping out onto the sunlit porch, I'm greeted not with raised guns and loosed Bolts, but with the sight of Cowie's furry white torso laid out flat across the porch.

With his hornless head nestled in one lovely gal's lap while several others crowd around him. There he is, getting all the pats and smooches a beast could ever ask for and looking real smug about it. He much more sociable than I am. Probably paid better attention to Aunty Ray's lessons.

"So why do you call him Cowie?" One of the gals asks, a fair-skinned Euro type talking with that low-high-low-high pitching that some of them do. "This one is clearly bull."

"That he is," I say, fighting against the urge to make the obvious joke while studying my new shadow. Standing by the door is a hulking man who might well be Jumbo's Hispanic twin, only a bit smaller, all natural, and a whole lot uglier. Not his fault really, more the fault of whoever gave him all those scars, not to mention the fellas who broke his nose so many times. Much like Jumbo, his South American counterpart has got a button up with the sleeves torn off, but rather than leaving it fully unbuttoned, Gigante here only has his collar button done up while leaving the rest to flap in the breeze. Shows off how nicely he tucked his cotton undershirt in, and the big honking knife strapped to his gunbelt too, but I can't say I'm a fan of the fashion. Then again, fashion do be a mighty mercurial thing, so who am I to judge appearances?

Giving the nice Euro gal and her friends my full attention, I explain, "See, it's a bit complicated, but it all comes down to a language barrier. My daddy, he didn't speak no English before he passed through the Gate, so in those early years, he would teach me Qin and we would learn English together. Now, in the Qin language, they don't got words for bull, cow, and calf. They just got one word for the animal, Niu, and add qualifiers to it. So male niu, female niu, baby niu, and whatnot. So when my daddy pointed at some milk cows and asked what animal it was, my Uncle Raleigh told him, 'that there's a cow', and my daddy locked that word up tight. Didn't think to ask about bulls and calves, because why would he?"

With a helpless shrug and little laugh aimed at myself, I take a knee to pat Cowie's hindquarters and say, "Couple years pass and it never comes up, until I found this little guy in a clearing a fair shake north from New Hope. There he was, only a few days old and crying over his dead

momma, with no one to look after him but me. I lost my momma young too, so I ran right on over and told him he was gonna be okay, and we been together ever since.” Giving a sheepish look as the gals coo, I wrap up the story best I can. “When it came to picking a name, I figured he was a cow, and I would call him Cowie because it rhymed with Howie. Wasn’t ‘til we got home that someone pointed out the mistake, and by then he wouldn’t respond to any other name.” The gals give a little laugh, not because it’s a great story, but because my embarrassment makes it so. Mostly because I was twelve at the time, which is old enough to know about birds and the bees, but there I was not knowing about cows and bulls.

Still, even though it’s a silly name, that don’t make Cowie any less important to me, or me any less important to him. We a team, Howie and Cowie, and together we gonna conquer the Frontier.

“You here to work or flirt, Qino?” Hand on the hilt of his big honking knife, one that’s almost half a sword, Gigante looms over with a ferocious scowl, but I ain’t much impressed with choice of threat. Again, he got a revolver right there next to the knife, so why don’t he hold that instead? Who even needs a knife that big? He ain’t chopping his way through no tangled growth. What’s he gonna do, run in and stab Abby? Sure, there are Spells designed for use with melee weapons, even got a trio of crazy Brits back in New Hope who specialize in it, but even they smart enough to use spears instead of knives. Gigante’s pig-sticker might work well enough against goblins, assuming them crafty pee-wee greenies don’t overwhelm you with numbers, but you try going toe to toe with an orc and he’ll rip the flesh right off your bones with his bare hands. They ain’t the biggest bunch around, as orcs average about five-five and maybe two-hundred pounds, but they a real dense and compact Abby that punch way above their weight class.

As for Bugbears? No idea why they called that, since they don’t look like no bugs or bears I ever seen, but they about six foot tall and three-hundred pounds of mean and green that can dig tunnels through a mountain with their claws. Take on one of those with a knife, even a big one like Gigante’s? Ha. My daddy didn’t raise no coward, but he didn’t raise no fool neither.

Course, fool is relative, which is why I open my big mouth to say, “Hey there, Gee-Gan-Tei,” giving the word that ol’ Spanish flair as payback for his ‘Qino’. “I always wanted to ask: when you go bald, do the carpet get going along with the drapes?”

Now, a smarter man would have stood before insulting the hulking Hispanic fondling his knife. An even smarter man wouldn't have insulted him in the first place. So it stands to reason I'm deserving of the knee Gigante delivers to my face, but like I said, me and Cowie are a team. While I'm reeling from the hit, the gals get to screaming and Cowie gets to bellowing as he surges up on all fours in a fury. Then things turn a bit messy as close to two tons of bull gets right up into Gigante's face, then continues right on past it. By the time I find my bearings and get back on my feet, Gigante is laid out flat with Cowie's head pressed right up against him, huffing and growling as only a beast his size can, and a right frightful sound it is.

"Careful now," I say, as Gigante fumbles for his knife, which again ain't the best choice. To be fair, he's looking a bit dazed and concussed, but meeting Cowie head on tends to have that effect. "You hurt my driver there, and things are gonna get real ugly, real fast. Not for you, because you'll be dead and sitting pretty, but I'mma hafta get my hands dirty stitching up his little cut and cleaning bits of you out his hooves and fur." Gigante gets the hint, removing his hand from his knife and stretching both arms out to side. Only then do I wipe the blood from my lip and give Cowie a big ol' pat on the neck. "Alright there partner. You made your point. The little guy ain't gonna pick on your buddy no more. Ease up."

Too smart to give a potential threat his belly, Cowie blows out a snort and backs off, his big, storm grey eyes fixated on Gigante even well after he clear. Don't make no sense why people ain't afraid of no bulls, even ones which ain't sporting horns like Cowie. Sure, they real sweet and gentle, until they ain't. Showing he smarter than he looks, Gigante stays where he is, or maybe he just too dizzy to stand. Taking a knee by his head, I give him the once over before offering him a hand up and ask, "So seriously... about them carpets and drapes? Just dying to know."

For a second, Gigante acts like he don't know what I'm talking about, but then he laughs and takes my hand. "You fucking loco Qino!" Once he's back on his feet, he thumps me hard on the shoulder, sporting a grin to match mine because this time the inflection ain't ugly. "Tiene unos huevotes!" Seeing I don't understand, he holds his hands out like he's cupping two melons while his eyes go wide and wild. "Giant balls!" Shaking his head in pure disbelief, he pats his cheeks in chest as if to make sure everything is still there, his eyes fixated on Cowie who still watching him real close. "Thought I was finished, but seems Sante Muerta has more for me yet."

"Yea, Cowie knows how to play nice." Aunty Ray had to teach him, on account of him playing not so nice a few too many times. Patting Gigante on the chest, I guide him over to the bench which the gals just vacated and help him take a seat. "Still, he don't always know his own strength, and you took a bit of a spill, so how bout you sit here while I get to work?"

Gigante's got a good laugh, one that come right from the belly, and he holds both hands up in mock surrender. "Hey, hey, whatever you doin', you doin' by choice, hey?"

"That I am. Name's Howie." I stick out my hand for a shake.

"Vicente."

His big hand engulfs mine, but unlike with Ron, Vicente doesn't crush it, just takes a firm hold. "Pleasure to meet you, Vicente."

"For you. For me, maybe not so much, hey?" That gets a laugh out of both of us, and I can tell the ladies are confused. See, that's the thing about men. We can butt heads and then make friends. Don't take much really. Course, miss Laura gives me a strange look when she sees me bring in the first two cases of mead, but I just flash my pearly whites and ask where she want them. They go behind the bar, and the last case joins it soon after before I head back out for a bit of chit-chat with Vicente, who's made fast friends with Cowie in my absence. Aunty Ray's prize student there; knock a man flat on his ass only to turn around and have your head on his lap for scratches.

Seeing how there some folk already waiting for their mail, I head over to the wagon to get to work. With Cowie all cuddled up with Vicente, I activate a pair of Spell Cores on the wagon. Floating Disc Spell Cores to be exact, which conjures up an invisible floating disc for carrying all manner of things. Does what it says on the tin, but little lacking in flair for my tastes. Either way, the Spell Cores lighten the wagon enough for me to roll it around without help, which the crowd finds mighty impressive. All for the low, low price of 50mg of iron shavings and 10 Grain of Aether. Not exactly expensive, as a bullet cost about as much if you factor in the brass, yet they all act like I'm tossing Aether to the wind.

Once I got the wagon where I want it, I take out the Spell Formula I wrote down while eating and lay it flat on the porch. Taking a casual glance around, I don't see any obvious threats, but I'm still not pleased to have to dismiss my big Spell. I'd have to do it eventually, since I gotta cast Spells to check papers, much like Carl did over mine, but it's still hard to let go. Doubly so

considering I probably won't be able to cast it again before I leave. The big Spell ain't called a big Spell for no reason, and I can only cast it so many times before needing to lay my head down to rest. I'm not just talking about a quick break neither. Spellcasting is mentally taxing, and a full night of rest is necessary to get you back in prime casting condition. Something about how the human brain removes waste byproducts while you sleeping, though I never could quite understand the exact details. Either way, three big Spells a day is pretty much my limit, and that's assuming I don't cast anything besides Cantrips.

Good thing most daily use Spells are Cantrips, like the Photograph Cantrip I'm about to use to take an image of my writing. Palming a piece of green jadeite in my left hand, I use my thumbs and index fingers from both hands to form a rectangle which becomes the frame of the image I'd like to imprint in memory. In this case, it would be my written note, an image which I then store a second rainbow tourmaline on the left side of my wagon. From there, it only takes a scant bit of Aether to activate the Silent Image Spell Core the crystal is attached to and display the stored image of the Water Sphere Spell Formula for all to see. Already, there are some scrambling to copy it down, while more run off for paper and pen, but I assure everyone that I will leave it up for as long as I am delivering mail, and encourage them to share it with any who might miss out.

I been told this sort imaging tech was common place back in the old world, and they even had crystal screens dedicated for watching live or prerecorded plays and events from across the world. Television, they call it, though I don't know why they'd mix Greek and Latin to come up with a word for it. Wouldn't know it was old hat from the way the people be acting though, especially the children. Breaks my heart to see so many denied the basic conveniences of arcana-tech, so I put on some music too. Nothing fancy, just a couple pre-recorded songs from Chrissy which I made to listen while on the road. That's Aunty Ray's other daughter, Tina's twin in fact. They got the same face, but while Tina take after her mama in colouring, with the same blonde hair and blue eyes, Chrissy favours Uncle Raleigh with silver hair and violet eyes, so pale and rich at the same time. There's a lot to get into about her, but the girl can play, and the townies all let out a big cheer as Chrissy's acoustic rendition of '[Don't Stop Believing](#)' comes on.

Don't matter that Chrissy don't sing. Even though it's been seventeen years since they last heard it, most of the older townies still know all the words by heart.

There's magic in music, and don't let no one tell you different. A different kind of magic from slinging Spells, sure, but magic all the same, an undeniable force of human emotion that few can resist. When I rode into town just over an hour ago, I found a miserable, cheerless place chock full of downtrodden folk. Turn on a bit of music, and suddenly those same people are all laughing, dancing, and singing in the streets like they ain't got a care in the world. Even miss

Laura comes out to join the fun, a radiant smile taking the place of those perpetually pursed lips, and it's a fine sight indeed. That there is a dark southern belle who loves her town as much as I love mine, and I hope this helps her see just how much Ron been keeping from them in the name of profit.

A song recorded with a Second Order Spell and played on arcana-tech speakers. Only cost to the Spell is opportunity and time, while the speakers are maybe fifty American in work and materials. As for Chrissy, her efforts in learning and playing can't exactly be quantified, but once the recording is made and stored, it can be played as often as you like so long as the crystal don't break. That's all it takes to move these downtrodden folk to high spirits, a cost I would call minor to cast a magic more powerful than any Spell I know.

While the greatest hits of the 80's play out, I set out a bowl of starmelon hard candies for me and the kids, then get to checking papers and delivering mail with two sets of hands. I ain't given up on finding my outlaws just yet, but I also ain't planning to look too hard. My rustling jimmies still telling me Ronald Jackson ain't a man to push too hard, and I already done bumped him to the limit for a lifetime. Besides, no sense in going full Scout with Vicente set to babysit. It'd look mighty suspicious if I started slinging Spells to check for magical disguises or asking strange questions while listening to people's heartbeats. As for marking targets to follow around and maybe spy on, well that's completely out of the question, so ain't much I can do about it really. Unless one of them outlaws comes asking for the fake letter I'm supposedly holding under their real names, all I can really do is keep an eye out for their faces.

Five faces, and five names. Ain't much to go on, but if that's all I need to find these outlaws, then they're asking to get got.

Picking a new name is easy enough, and changing faces only a little harder. Not everyone can run a First-Order Disguise Self Spell 24/7, and not all those who can are able to put on the same face every time they cast it. Takes some real skill and a lot of practice to cast Illusion magic well, and even more skills and technical know-how to use it through a Spell Core. That being said, Alter Appearance is a basic Cantrip, one I bet every last gal working at the saloon uses before showing up for work. Most men read the label and write it off as useless. Hide wrinkles, scars, and markings, add foundation, blush, eyeliner, and contour lines. Don't sound like much, but Aunty Ray showed me the truth. A practiced Spellcaster can change their whole face with that Cantrip, make their head look an entirely different shape with a few subtle changes. Can even turn your eyes and skin a different colour if you mean to. Won't take you from pasty white to deep black, but it'll bring you from either end to somewhere close to the middle, and the other way round too. Course, the bigger the change, the easier it is to spot the

Cantrip at work, but the amount you can get away with before making it noticeable is much higher than you'd think. Fact is, that sort of everyday magic almost feels downright deceptive, as it turns out most girls ain't out and about wearing their own natural faces.

Still better than those who ain't showing their real faces at all using the Enhance Allure Cantrip, which is some mind magic that make you think you looking at a more idealized version of the Spellcaster. Don't change anything physical, just your perception of the caster, which make it mighty insidious indeed.

When it come right down to it, if a man or woman has a pressing need to look different from how they do, it's only a Cantrip away. There also plenty other Spells that can make for a disguise, to say nothing of mundane props and whatnot, which is another reason why asking for papers is such a smart move. Not only does the face gotta match the picture, it gives me an excuse to take a close look at everyone who come my way and see if they face really theirs. That said, after looping around to Toto's [Africa](#) for the third time and hearing the townies mangle them high notes again, the idea of being a postman full-time is starting to lose it's shine. I mean sure, I like bringing smiles to faces and making a difference in people's lives, but the tedium of the actual job gets real tiresome real fast.

Ask for a name, look at a picture, study a face, and find the mail, with small talk and corny jokes thrown in between each step. Don't even get me started on having to answer the same questions over and over again. No I don't have mail for anyone not on the list. No, I ain't gonna double check. No you can't collect your buddy's letter for him. Nor your husband's, unless your papers up to date and got him listed as spouse. Don't when your letter got to wherever it was going, or when the reply coming back, and how am I supposed to know what it gonna say?

Rather face down a horde of Abby with only a pocket knife than go through this every few days. Least I can run away from Abby.

Knowing what I know only makes it harder to keep my smile bright and beaming. These townies live hard lives, but they content with their lot mostly. Sure some of that stems from fear of Ron and his thugs, but they also grateful for what they got because they still remember how hard they came by it. For them, the wild, lawless Frontier is still fresh in memory, not something they overcame a decade ago, so they don't take their safety and well-being for granted. Takes a lot of willpower to stop myself from warning folk to get out of dodge while they can. Progenitors ain't exactly made for walking, being all tendrils and mouths like they are, so they don't do

nothing fast besides spawning Abby. That don't change the fact that one is slowly but surely making its way towards town with an army at its back. If it was just over the horizon, I doubt Ron would bother asking random federal employees about big guns, which mean they still got some time before it arrives. Means these folk still got time to get going while the going is good. Ron won't let them go though, and even if did, these people would never make it out of the desert alive, not without an armed escort to guard them, one I know Ron ain't gonna provide. Warning them ain't gonna do nothing except scare them, so I keep my mouth shut. Don't mean I ain't fixing to do something else about their problems, but I can't do it alone, and I certainly can't do nothing if Ron has me killed for running my mouth.

With that thought firmly in mind, I continue doling out the mail until there ain't no one lining up no more. Though there's still a fair bit of mail undelivered, likely for the miners currently working a shift, I decide it's high time I listened to my rustling jimmies and got going while the going still good. The townies are understandably disappointed when I turn off the music, but they take it in stride as I announce my intentions to leave what's left of the mail with the Sheriff. Lot of folk come by to shake my hand, or wish me farewell and good luck with getting hired on full-time. Don't do much to change my mind about never delivering mail every again, but it does bolster my determination to help see the good folk of Pleasant Dunes safely through the Abby attack coming their way.

So with that in mind, I fire up the Floating Discs and lug the wagon on down over to the Sherrif's office with Vicente and Cowie trotting along beside me. As we roll up, a girl hustles on out of the Sherrif's office and scurries by without even a glance. Being the first person over ten and under thirty I've seen in Pleasant Dunes, she certainly catches my eye, but it ain't her age or her looks which earns her my attention. Sure, she a pretty enough in a youthful way, maybe fifteen with caramel skin and hazel eyes that make her stand out in a crowd, but her unbraided pigtails make her look too young even for me. Got pretty hair, wavy and dark with a luxurious shine, which would look better let down, I reckon, and her clothes stand out too, though not in quality. It's the exact same sort of outfit the saloon gals wearing, short shorts and a small shirt, one so out of place on her coltish, adolescent frame.

None of that is why I give her a good long look. It's her expression that does it, one I know all too well, the haunted, far-off look of someone who just come back from the edge. Seen that face a thousand times on a thousand different faces, and I know there usually only two reasons to wear it. Either she just fought like hell against Abby and narrowly escaped with her life, or there someone in this town who more monstrous than any Aberration can ever be.

Pushing down the cold rage burning in my belly, I don't let it show through my toothy smile as I turn back towards the office. To Vicente and anyone else watching, all they see is a young man turning to admire a pretty young thing, a quick glance no one would think twice of. Except now, I got my mind working at all the angles. The outlaws I'm hunting are the type to favour a young girl like that, seeing how it fit their modus operandi as such. Then again, this sort of thing is more common than anyone care to admit out loud. Young girls and old men is the way it usually goes, but I seen every combination of age and gender out there. Don't make it right, but most figure it ain't hurting no one so long as no one fighting it, without paying no mind to the real facts behind such a relationship, which with the power dynamics being what they are. Course, it could also be that the girl thinks she wants such a relationship, and the only way to know for sure is to hear it straight from her mouth, but I don't see how I can make that happen. Could maybe push my luck and spend the night in town, like I told Ron I would. See if I can't find the girl in the crowd and track her to where she spends her nights, or better yet, ask miss Laura about it. Would be risky in more ways than one, but I get the feeling she ain't the type to overlook this sort of abuse, considering how much pride she took in knowing none of the saloon gals were working under duress.

Then, once I find that piece of human garbage, I put a Bolt through his head and anyone who comes out to defend him, then maybe fire to Ron's town for allowing someone so vile and –

Deep breath in. Deep breath out.

Ain't got no proof besides a girl in scandalous clothes with a far-off look in her eyes. I'm jumping to a lot of conclusions from just a glance. Maybe she dress that way because she likes it. Lord knows Aunty Ray has to step in to stop Tina from making similar fashion decisions least once every other week. As for the expression, could be the girl just got some bad news, like an accident at the mines, or she shook from some unwanted attention and talked to the Sherrif about it. Who knows? Could be I'm seeing signs that ain't really there and nothing's going on.

Or maybe my suspicions were right and the Stagecoach killers are here in town, having secured work under Ron's employ. Maybe that girl is part of their wages, a sacrificial lamb to appease this band of thieving, murdering rapists wanted for no less than eighteen counts of murder in the first degree. Men, women, and children among them, all of whom died because they placed their trust in the wrong people. See, Gilbert Haywards and his cutthroats posed as a stagecoach service. That was their game, taking payment to escort travellers safely to their destinations, only to become the very danger they was supposed be protecting against. Were at it for years as far as anyone knows, and if not for the harrowing testimony of a single survivor, the world might never have learned about their crimes. A ten-year-old girl, that survivor, crawled out of a

shallow grave and dragged herself to the roadside where another group of travellers came across her. They got her to town where she told her story, and then took her own life two weeks later.

For some men, dying to a Bolt is far too merciful an end, but I'll deliver that death with a smile and never lose sleep over it.

It ain't a long walk from the saloon to the Sherrif's office, which is a big, blocky stone affair just like every other building on the street. The only difference aside from the Sheriff star overhead is that this one got bars over the windows and a wood door reinforced with steel in a criss-cross diamond pattern. Sturdy and pretty, but I'm more concerned with coming up with a way to naturally bring up the girl in conversation with the Sherrif than appreciating the workmanship. Leaving Cowie to watch the wagon, I grab what's left of the mail and the documents which need signing before heading up the porch stairs with Vicente hot on my heels. Once through the heavy door, I pause for a gander to see what I'm walking into, as part of proper threat assessment is to always be assessing, because the one threat most likely to kill you is the one you miss.

Inside the building is a dimly lit mess not much different from the saloon. The floor is covered in bottles, cigarette butts, loose papers, and other garbage strewn about. Two rectangular desks sit on each side of the room, forward facing so the men sitting behind them have a clear view of the door. Rather than ink and paper for office work, an assortment of firearms sit atop them, the surfaces scarred with burns and marked with filth, but otherwise suspiciously empty. The deputies are equally gnarled and disfigured as their furniture, one sitting at each desk with an Aetherarm in hand, as if all the pistols, rifles, and Blastguns lying about ain't enough to keep them feeling safe. They ain't cleaning their guns, as I don't see no rags, tools, or oil about, they just sitting in their chairs to fondle their weapons while working real hard at looking innocuous.

My first thought is that these are Ron's hitters, and that he'd planned for his pet Sherrif to do me in here, but then I recognize a face. A face I been looking for all afternoon, one belonging to none other than the infamous Gilbert Haywards. There he sits, behind a lone desk at the back with a Sherrif's badge pinned to his chest, a fierce, impatient scowl stretched across his lips, and not even a hint of a disguise. All of a sudden, my plan to ferret him out don't seem so clever anymore as he sits there bold as can be, and I realize it's only a moment before he sees the recognition in my eyes.

Thankfully, Vicente steps inside and saves my hide. “What’s all this,” he says, scowling at all the guns and the men holding them. “Senor Jackson don’t want no one making trouble –”

“Don’t be telling me my business, Spic.” Spitting on the floor as if to rid himself of the taste, Haywards beckons me over in a hurry. “What the hell you gawkin’ at Qink?” Haywards’ voice is raspy and strained, the mark of a heavy, lifelong smoker, and his vile gaze matches the ugliness with which he delivers the slur. “Get in here and hand over the mail, before I carve ye a new face, ye fuckin’ slant-eyed, ching-chong half-wit.”

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He wants the mail he thinks I got for him. Saw his name on my list, but didn’t suspect that I put it there. Now that’s what I call a close shave.

Coughing beneath the haze of smoke, I hurry over with a smile. “Sorry about that,” I say, giving the deputies a quick nod as I pass by. Andrej Mandic and Tony Murphy to my left. Marcel Leroux and Terrance Taylor on the right. A multicultural bunch, these Stagecoach Killers, all present and accounted for, drawn together by their dark desires and a propensity for violence. Seeing their names on my mail list has got them spooked, which is why they all posted up in here and armed to the teeth. Bold to go around without a disguise, but I suppose they been feeling mighty safe under Ron’s employ for who knows how long. It’s been two years since their death warrants were signed, a long time for such heinous crimes to go unpunished, a miscarriage of justice I’m fixing to set right.

“Howdy, Sherrif.” Playing the part of scared kid, I hand him the documents and hold onto the mail. “Just need your signature there saying you –”

“Don’t give two shits what you need, Qink.” Making a grasping motion with his outstretched hand, Haywards fixes me with a furious glare. “Hand over the mail and fuck off before you really piss me off.”

Which of course gives me all the excuse I need to fumble the pass. “Oh geez,” I say, bending over to pick up the letters I dropped beside the Sherrif’s desk. “Me and my butterfingers.” While

Haywards goes off on a litany of racially charged insults, I sneakily draw my revolver and pull both Doorbells free of their holsters. Then I circle around the desk to look Haywards in the eye, who pauses his stream of profanity as he spies the promise of death in my gaze, my grin, and my gun, a promise I deliver with a single pull of the trigger.

Now, I love my dubsie Doorknockers, but the Ranger Rattlesnake will always be my pride and joy. A compact, six-chamber, double action revolver, the gun don't look like much compared to some real hand cannons like the Ranger Arbiter, the Sturm and Kitiara Knight, or the Szass and Tam 460. Put em' side by side and you'll see that the Rattlesnake barely half their size, but don't let that fool you. This baby will shoot as fast as you can pull the trigger and blow the head clean off an orc with one hit. It can do this thanks to the lethal combination of Intensify, Empower, and Maximize Metamagics etched into the four and quarter inch barrel, with Toppling as the cherry on top to add a bit of extra oomph on impact. It's reliable too. Shoot all day and night without risk of overheating, jamming, or cracking even if you dragged it through mud, silt, and sand. The gun is almost as old as I am, and its never let me or my daddy down.

That's not why I love it though. See, most guns light things up with a deafening bang, like a crash of thunder coming out the barrel, the Bolt breaking the speed of sound. Need a Cantrip to protect your hearing to use those guns, but not the Rattlesnake. No, my baby comes standard with Silence Metamagic, a necessity if you wanna be shooting outside of towns without ringing the dinner bell for every Abby within fifty miles. That don't make it shoot whisper quiet, but it dials down the volume a fair bit, as most standard Silenced guns will make a loud snap, like breaking glass. There're also mechanical silencers which screw onto the ends of some barrels, and those give off a muffled bang that still kinda loud, but the Rattlesnake?

Ain't no gun sound like the Rattlesnake when it shoots, a mean, keen hiss that just cut off and fade away. It's a sharp, distinctive 'tsst' that cuts you to the quick, a piercing sound which can catch you off guard the first time you hear it. Even more so when you empty all six chambers right quick, spitting out that 'tsst-tsst-tsst' which makes that unmistakable rattle for which the gun is named.

Music to my ears, that sound is, a lullaby for Abby and outlaws both.

Haywards dies with eyes wide open, his snarl twisting into a panicked shout which comes out as a wet gurgle when his corpse hits the floor. As I turn to face the door, I pop Tony where he sits, then get Andrej in the belly as he jumps to his feet. The momentum takes him to the ground as I

hunker down too, activating the Spell Core embedded in my bracer. The Aegis takes shape, a shimmering shield of blue-white light meant to block Bolts, blades, or claws alike, only to turn opaque as the first Bolt from Marcel or Terrance pierces clean right through it.

There you have it folks, the armour Penetrating Tec-LS in action, the standard sidearm here in Pleasant Dunes.

After going through the desk, the Aegis and my duster, the Bolt only leaves only a flesh wound on my left shoulder, but more Bolts are flying now and I've no desire to get hit twice. Thankfully, the Tec-LS is single action, meaning that even if they both carrying one in each hand, the shots come at a sedate and steady pace. Even better, both of them can't shoot worth a damn and hit everything around me instead. That's still more than enough to keep me from peeking out, which means I can't see my Mage Hands to aim my Doorknockers, nor am I willing to fire blind for fear of hitting Vicente. With no other choice left to me, I yell, "Don't kill Vicente!"

For some strange reason, Marcel and Terrance both stop shooting, and one replies, "Why would we kill –"

And that's all he has time to utter before Cowie comes crashing through the door. The reinforced steel does nothing to stop him as he surges into the room, and I risk a glance just in time to catch his horns materializing atop his head. A rumbling bellow of bovine fury erupts from his chest as he barrels straight through the desk to catch Andrej with a swing of his head, one that cracks bone and sends the man crashing into the wall. Then Cowie impales Tony with both magically conjured weapons in a head on strike, and my grin widens to see it happen. The desk, chairs, and the Aetherarms atop them are rendered into kindling and scrap iron as Cowie stomps and kicks about, making sure both men are completely dead before his rage subsides to a simmer. Blowing out a series of snorts, he looks about the room for any other threats before setting his gaze on the shocked, dazed, and uninjured Vicente, which I take as my cue to stand up.

"Sorry about all this, Vicente," I say, gesturing from Cowie to hold while keeping my pistol low, but ready just in case. "But I'm gonna have to ask you to keep your hands clear and away from your weapons."

The big guy just sits there in a complete and absolute daze, struggling to process the storm of violence and gunfire which just barely passed him by. "Why?" he asks, looking so hurt and betrayed that it almost breaks my heart. "Now Senor Jackson is going to kill you. Send you straight to Santa Muerte."

"Oh, I doubt that." Sounding much more confident than I feel, I reach for the stack of warrants stuffed in my inner right jacket pocket. "Not after he learns that I've rid him of five wanted murderers hiding within these walls." Holding out the warrant which reads 'Wanted: Dead or Alive' at the top, I show Vicente the picture of Haywards printed on it, while cautiously moving towards Tony's corpse still sitting in his chair and using the intact desk as cover. Peering between the chair and desk, I find the still-breathing Andrej laid out flat with both hands over his belly. A futile attempt to stem the bleeding, but even if he were treated right quick, my shot likely blew out his liver, which mean he's bound for a slow and very agonizing death.

So even though he don't deserve it, I stretch my arm over the desk and shoot him once in the chest, ending his laboured whimpers with a nice, neat, 'tsst'.

Turning back to Vicente, I find his pale, bloodless expression staring at me with that familiar, far-off stare, the same look I just saw in that girl outside. It'll pass soon enough, as he strikes me as the sort whose gotten his hands bloodied more than once, so I take cover behind Tony's desk to wait and reload my revolver while my Mage Hands cover the door.

Five dead bandits. Four worth \$1500 each, while Haywards himself is worth five. \$11,000 American in my pocket for the low, low price of four bullets, not a bad day's work.

Assuming I make it out of Pleasant Dunes to collect my paycheck, but I'll burn that bridge soon as I get to it.