

Now, most of my magic, I learned from Marshal Ellis, but my daddy was the one who taught me how to survive.

He was real good at it too. Says a lot about a man when he can run point through a maze of narrow Abby tunnels without getting got, especially if he keep doing it for fourteen years. Finest Scout the Rangers ever had, that's my daddy, and I been learning at his side since I was seven. He never took me through no Abby burrow, but he made sure I knew how to approach any potentially dangerous situation.

First step, is preparation, and I already handled that.

Second step: threat assessment.

Most would see Carl's three friends and focus on Jumbo. It's natural instinct. Size is strength, and strength is feared or respected, as is the case with our tall, dark, brawny, bald, and bearded friend. Don't matter that he likely forty, seeing how the youngest non-Qin settlers were twenty at the Advent and that was almost eighteen years ago. Jumbo is a hulking menace of muscle and he know it. That's why he tore off the sleeves from his nice cotton collared button-up, to better show off his beefy arms crossed over his barrel chest. Really working it too, flexing and straining while pretending he ain't, which only make it clear that them bulky biceps ain't home-grown. They got that lumpy, irregular look about them, the one that screams Transmutation magic. Maybe False Brawn, which is a First Order Spell that only make him thick with Ecto without bestowing any actual strength. Then again, maybe he got some real skills and cast himself a Second-Order Enhance Physique. Bull's Strength, if we going by the old vernacular, though ain't no way Jumbo ever gonna be a match for Cowie, pound for pound. Sure could rip me in half though. Pluck my arms right out them sockets if he really mean to, and I bet that'd be his first instinct instead of reaching for whatever gun he got hidden behind the bar.

See, we ain't barbarians bashing each other over the head no more. We civilized folk, ones who've elevated violence into a refined, genteel pastime in which we shoot each other with Bolts instead. Jumbo ain't got that memo yet, thinks we still in the stone age and his bulging thews give him the advantage. That's why if it comes down to a fight, I'll beat him on the draw, and his

muscles, magic or otherwise, won't do nothing to stop me from putting a Bolt through his chest or head.

The next obvious choice to focus on is lean and lanky on the right. Reminds me of a hobgoblin, all rangy and angular, with the addition of greasy unkempt hair and a face full of stubble. His too large and too long t-shirt don't help his appearance none, not with the dark fabric showing sweat stains that tell me he usually wear a vest ovetop it all. Hobb's is the only one on my side of the bar, leaning back on one elbow while his other hand flicks his butterfly knife around. It sure do look impressive, but looks is all it is. Anyone who ever held one them knives knows it don't take much skill to do them showy spins, just gotta wave it about and let the knife do the rest. Hobb's is more casual about it that Jumbo, but he also trying to intimidate and done missed the mark. Sure, knives can be dangerous, but guns are more dangerous, and he got two of 'em on his belt which he can't use on account of the knife in one hand and his weight on the other. If it comes to a fight, he'll stick me with his knife while I pump him full of Bolts, and I'll take them odds any day of the week.

Nah, the most dangerous of the bunch is the most unassuming of them all. The man behind the bar, though Jumbo back there too. While the latter postures and flexes, the bossman stands slouched and leaning with arms folded over the bar. No mistaking him for anything else, as his ain't a tired or lazy lean. It's a looming lean, a predatory lean, like a man up high looking down on his kingdom, wondering who he gonna kill for a snack. This his turf we in. The bossman knows it, I know it, everyone else knows it too, and he drinks in that knowledge in like a fine wine. This a man who's in control and likes it that way, as one can tell by his handsome, well-groomed appearance. Got strong features and piercing blue eyes under his long blonde locks, all pulled back into a neat and tidy ponytail. Supporting all that is a trimmed and brushed beard that come to a rounded point which don't quite reach his chest, the hair so straight and fine I'm of a mind to ask him what product he use.

Not cause I got a need for it myself; my black hair is naturally straight, as is with most from the Qin Republic. Ain't got no facial hair to care for neither, least none worth mentioning. Nah, what I need hair product for is Cowie's curlycues. His shaggy white coat got a real tousled look that no amount of brushing can fix. It's cute and all, but he a grown bull now, so it's time he updated his look.

As for the bossman, his neat appearance is only accentuated by the simplicity of his clothes. A dark, navy blue shirt with crisp pearl buttons done up all the way to his starched collar, and shirttails tucked in tight. Even the man's cuffs are buttoned up, with little silver links to boot, which I only ever seen on Marshal Ellis' Sunday best. Ain't nothing fancy, but the King wear

them with a regal pride, one accentuated by his regal gun belt and pricey weapons. Can't say the exact model names, seeing as both his pistols still in their holsters, but the boxy, rectangular shape tells me that they expensive semi-automatics that most folk ain't got the means or money to acquire.

Ain't a fan of semi-automatics. Sure they can fire off Bolts lickety split and have magazines to hold more ammunition, but they prone to jamming and cracking, on account of all them moving bits. Now, a revolver will never let you down on either count, and a good revolver will hit harder to boot. No need for them fancy Metamagics to increase rate of fire, not when each cylinder go its own individual Bolt Core.

Composed. Methodical. Domineering. That's the bossman in a nutshell, and those traits mark him as a dangerous fellow, more so than the impression of impending violence he exudes so casually while watching my approach. Jumbo and Hobb lost interest the moment they laid eyes on me, because all they see is a skinny kid. A well-armed kid, but a kid nonetheless, wearing a goofy smile, his daddy's oversized coat, and a cowboy hat like I'm dressed up for a costume party. That's why they'll die third and second. The disdain stings the pride a bit, but I get it, so I'll overlook it. Prefer it even, compared to the bossman's studied interest. He sees something that holds his eye, but I can't quite tell what it is or how that make him feel, nor can I say what it means. Nonetheless, I keep my pearly whites on full display as I mosey on over to the bar and stick my hand for a shake. "Howdy folks. Name's Howie Zhu. Good to meet you."

Neither Jumbo nor Hobb makes a move to reciprocate, because my hand shake is for the bossman. The other two just furniture, which the bossman notes with a smirk, looking me up and down as you do. Then he gives a dry chuckle, just a little huh, before slapping his hand into mine and clamping down tight. "Ron Jackson." The bossman's grip is crushing, his voice deep and gravelly, accent crisp and neat, while his blue eyes are full of cheerless mirth. "President and C.E.O of Vanguard National."

Already figured they'd be company men, seeing how this a company saloon and they all sporting V.N embroidered on their dark coloured shirts. Didn't figure on meeting the head honcho himself though, which could be bad or good. Either way, one thing's for sure: if all hell breaks loose, then I'mma shoot Ron first.

Nothing to do but play along with his game. He expecting least a wince before he intends to let go, and there's no need to put on an act. I ain't the smallest feller around, but he got at least

twenty years and a hundred pounds on me. No need to fret, as I ain't done growing just yet. "Good to meetcha Mr. Jackson," I reply, still smiling after he loose my hand and I give it a good flapping to make sure it still work. Little joke there, which Ron appreciate, and he gestures for me to take a seat at the bar. One at the end that puts Jumbo to my right and Hobb to my left, but a corner to back myself into if a fight break out. Not the worst place to die, so I hop up onto the stool, give a wince as the sharp corners dig into my jean wranglers, then settle down with both hands flat atop the bar once we ready to get underway.

Ron's eyes flick to my hands and he offer me a little nod, a thank you for my polite notice of a lack of intent to draw guns or waggle fingers. A proper professional then, unlike Carl and his boys. Speaking of Carl, he gives me a nod and a smile after knuckling his head for the bossman, and I nod back wondering how he can be so ignorant of what's in front of him. He just plain don't sense the tension and thinks everything hunky dory as he leaves to go about his day. Well, better than him thinking he walked me into a shoot-out and feeling mighty fine about it. Not a half-bad sort, Carl, but greener than green and dumb as a bag of bricks. Them's townies for you though, too scared of the bad to set out and see all the good that the Frontier has to offer.

More bad than good these days, feels like, but I ain't gonna complain.

Ron on the other hand, well, he been around the block and knows more than a little bit, still wearing his little smirk as he bobs his head up and down, not quite nodding but giving the impression of approval while he looks me over. "Firm grip. A good start, boy." Hate it when people call me boy, but at least he don't got that sharp inflection towards the end that turn it ugly. "You brought me a fine bottle of mead, so I say it's only fair I treat you to a drink as well."

Out comes the glasses and bottle with a clunk, but it ain't Ron who doing the clunking. No, that's Jumbo, and his clumsy efforts make me think bartending ain't his real job. The smell hits me before the drink even hit the glass, sharp and pungent as can be. "That's some strong shine." Can't fathom how anyone can enjoy drinking it, but then again, I ain't one for alcohol or any drugs in general. Seen what it can do to a man and don't much care for it. "Thank you kindly, but 'fraid I'll have to take a rain check on the drink, least for a hot minute. Need a clear head for work if I'm fixing to keep the job, and I am."

"No need to worry son." Ron leans in close with a twinkle in his eye, like we friends whispering over secrets. Picked up on how I didn't like being called boy too. Sharp man. "You're only

seventeen, and it's illegal to serve drinks to minors. That glass could get me in some real hot water, but if you don't tell, and I don't tell, then why should either of us have to worry?"

Bet he's a real charmer, and I ain't just talking about with the ladies. There something about Ron that make a man want to befriend him, impress him, be useful to him. Ain't magic, far as I can tell, just natural charisma, him knowing how to talk to a stranger and make you feel like best friends. "Truer words ain't never been spoken. I'll drink to that." Acting all eager like I was just waiting for the excuse, I hoist my glass and clink it against his before we both take a pull. Mine's not too big, because a full glass of this shine might well have me slipping off my seat, but enough to make it look like I'm an excited, stupid kid who don't know how deep he dug in. "Woow!" I exclaim, coughing and patting my chest. "That'll get your Cores primed."

"Got a bite which takes some getting used to, I cannot deny." Holding up the half-empty bottle of mead I asked Carl to bring in, Ron gives it a good, appreciative look as he continues, "Not like the mead you brought me. A smooth, light, and dry drink. Good flavour too. How long you let it sit?"

"Six weeks to ferment, six months to settle. Got my daddy's special blend of herbs to go along with it, give it that nice smoky aftertaste."

Ron nods along then frowns and shakes his head. "A steal at \$2 a bottle, son. I don't feel right paying that. I'll give you \$240 for the sixty bottles you got, and the same price if you bring me more." This is not how I expected this meeting to go, so I'm a little caught off guard by the generous offer. Not because of the amount, just having trouble keeping up. Good thing Ron reads my confusion as shock, or maybe he thinks I'm tipsy. "It's worth every dollar, but we'll settle up after you have a bite to eat. Laura sweetheart?" The last is directed to the waitress, a lovely and over-painted dark-skinned belle who looks done with all this, dressed the part in her knee-high skirts and tight, strapless top, but lacking all the social graces that one might expect from someone in hospitality services. Very fetching, and not even the fact that she at least than twice my age gonna stop me from appreciating the view once or twice. "Fetch our friend here a plate of steak and potatoes."

"That sounds mighty fine, thank you." Still don't understand what's happening, but I could eat, and it's hard not to stare at miss Laura as she struts away through the heavy kitchen doors, all the way over at the other end of the bar. Because I'm hungry. And maybe other reasons too, but not ones I mean to act on. "Rangers do a lot of things well, but making travel rations ain't one."

That earns me another dry chuckle, all too brief again. "Some things never change. Army chow is not made for the taste."

"Made to get you where you're going." Something Marshal Ellis always says, meaning Ron's got some army training in him. They the same age? Hard to tell with white folk sometimes. I seen fifteen-year-olds who look thirty-five, and forty-year-olds who look twenty. Ron here is the latter. "You serve?"

"Signed up and did four years in Lebanon up until '84. A real Charlie Foxtrot." Another term I've heard from the Marshal, but he won't tell me what it means. Ron just assumes I know, so I nod sagely along despite never having heard of Lebanon or about what happened in '84 neither. "After we pulled out, I signed on for the Frontier. Figured I survived that hellhole, so how much worse could it get?" Shaking his head with a sigh, Ron adds, "Turns out, much worse. At least we had equipment in Lebanon."

And just like that, the pieces fall into place. How disappointing, so disappointing I can't help but sigh and slump down. I blame the shine, because otherwise, I would've hid it better and played along, but it's too late now. Ron gives me a questioning look, and there's no sense trying to get back into the game, nor have I any desire to. "Yea, sorry." Scratching my head for the best way to frame my words, I settle on being frank and forthright. "It ain't nothin' you said or did, see? I was just mistaken regardin' the intentions behind this meetin', and the penny just dropped. Hence my disappointment. Not aimed at you, but me, for not seein' it sooner."

The wheels are turning, but Ron still don't get it, but only because he don't got all the piece in play. Not his fault, really, plus the drink making me really lean into my accent. "And what did you think this meeting was about? A few cases of mead?" Ron's decided friendly is no longer working, so now he trying derision, like I'm gonna fall over myself to win his approval.

Won't work though. I got more than my fair share of approval growing up from men much better than him. "Nah. Honestly?" With a shrug and a smile, I figure I might as well tell the truth, because I ain't got any other reasonable excuse. "I thought y'all was fixin' to rob an' kill me. Was hopin' for it real-ly." Course, now Ron's really confused, but I don't wanna get into it. Ain't nothing to be gained from saying I thought he might be a thieving, murdering rapist, or that he might be consorting with them. Could still be, truth told. Just cause I don't think Ron is my outlaw don't mean he ain't cozy up to them. Man like him who run this town the way he do, he probably welcome the help of monstrous men like the ones I'm hunting down.

“Look, why don’t I save us all some time?” Drumming a bit on the bar top while I gather my thoughts, I rattle off everything I just put together. “I’m thinkin’ you and your boys got a problem. An Abby problem, to be precise. An armoured Abby problem would be my best guess, on account of all the Tec-LS’s and Snapdragons I seen outside. Any gunsmith who can make those should have the chops and know-how to make the Tec-L and Tass98, both of which are easier, cheaper and flat out better. Unless you shooting something armoured, of course. How am I doing so far, Ron?”

A knife slams into the bar with a bang, the steel quivering between my thumb and index finger while Hobb leans in real close. “That’s **Mister. Jackson. Boy.**”

There’s the sharp inflection at the end, which turn the word ugly. Unimpressed by Hobb’s actions, proximity, or odour, I fix him with a blank look. “Ye missed.”

“...What?”

Ugh, that stench. I get it, we in a desert and water is scarce, but ain’t Hobb ever heard of a Cantrip called Deodorant? “My hand. Ye missed.” Slowing down my speech to make sure he understands what I’m saying, I explain, “I get it. Ye wanted to take a little initiative and get us back on track. Put a little scare into the boy so he more liable to do whatcha want. Thing is, if ye wanna intimidate someone, it work better if ye stab them, not the bar.” Flicking the flat of the knife’s blade with my left hand, I pick up the pace and continue, “Besides, ye slammed it down so ‘ard the darn thing’s probably stuck. Makes for a sorry sight, ye strugglin’ to pull it back out. Not to mention now ye up close and personal, so ye can’t keep track of what’s happening around ye.” Hobb’s confusion is clear, and his hesitation even more so. This isn’t the reaction he expected, but he seen enough to know it ain’t an act. I ain’t scared of him, and he don’t know why. Then his eyes widen as he feels the answer poke him between the legs, and backs up a few steps when he sees it. “Now that there is how you make a threat.”

“Jacob?” Ron finds his lack of control over the situation aggravating to the extreme, especially since he’s not sure how he lost it.

“Fucking Qi – he got a Blastgun pointed at my balls.” Pressed right up against them in fact, and angled so the spray will shoot clean through his spine. Credit to him, Hobb’s voice only quivers a bit while his eyes are fixed on my gun. “Got another one pointed at Franky too, through the bar.”

That’d be Jumbo, but I’mma keep their nicknames. “No, no, no.” Shaking my head in denial, I turn to Ron and say, “I ain’t pointing a Blastgun at yer man. Well, okay, it is **currently** pointed towards his nether regions, but only so’s I can bring out a proper armour penetrating Aetherarm for you to admire.” Having made my point clear, I wait while holding Ron’s stare, his eyes just brimming with questions. Considering he can see both my hands still flat atop the bar, I can understand his confusion regarding how I’m holding two Blastguns to his men, but I ain’t ready to show and tell just yet. “Is that alright, Mr. Jackson? Or is your skittish boy here gonna be a problem?”

Though displeased regarding what’s transpiring, I’s say most of Ron’s ire is directed towards Hobb, who jumped the gun, so to speak. We was just talking about their problems, and I ain’t had a chance to say my full piece, but now I got my guns out and hold the upper hand. Hands, in fact. “Jacob,” Ron begins, and to his credit, Hobb finds it in himself to pull his eyes away from the gun pressed up against his dangly bits. “Stop looming over our friend here and come around to this side of the bar. The long way, with your hands where he can see them.”

“Thank you for your understanding, Mr. Jackson,” I say, and I mean it too, though I keep my guns trained on Hobb and Jumbo for now. Don’t get me wrong, I’ll paint the walls with Hobb’s blood and everyone else’s too if I have to, but we ain’t that far gone just yet. That’s why I’m putting so much effort into enunciating my words now. Sound more proper like. “And I apologize for getting overly familiar and calling you by your first name. Bit of it is the shine, but most of the fault lies with me, for letting it get to me. Won’t happen again.”

“Nonsense.” Ron’s smile don’t reach his eyes, same as ever before, but this time they hold a promise that run contrary to what his lips be saying. “You can call me Ron anytime you like.”

“Appreciate it, Mr. Jackson.” Now that we know where we both stand, I turn a bit so I can face all three from across the bar, and keep an eye on the bar patrons and anyone else who might be coming in. Helps that it puts my back to the wall too, but I don’t think the drinking folk even notice anything amiss. They all still sitting quiet and working on their drinks. While I scan the crowd, Jumbo tries to be all sneaky like and move, but I snap back onto him like a harpy who



done spotted a lone child. “You keep your hands where they are Franky, because if you reach for that weapon again, I’m of a mind to start Blasting.”

And Jumbo believes it. Hobb and Ron too, because when I say I’m liable to start shooting, I let it show. That same air of violence that all men of our nature possess, a primed readiness to inflict brutal and savage harm upon another. The only difference is, I show mine with a smile. It ain’t because I enjoy it, or even because I want it, but about the necessity.

If there’s killing that’s needing to be done, then I’m more than happy to do it. Make the Frontier a better place, one Bolt or Blast at a time.

Once I’m sure Hobb and Jumbo are going to behave, I turn back to focus on Ron, who gives a little whistle as my Blastguns float on up to settle on the bar. Carried there by my Mage Hands, two transparent, almost spectral constructs made entirely of Ectoplasm. They start with a wrist and end at the tips of five fingers that look just like mine, and do most things I can with little more than a thought. Just a silly little Cantrip I used to play with all the time, on account of all the stories my daddy told me about my mama. She was an industrious sort, always crafting or writing, and the Mage Hands helped her do even more. Work on knitting both socks at once or making dumplings while she write, little things to speed matters along and make sure everything ready before I arrived.

That’s why Mage Hand was the first Cantrip I ever learned, which make it one of my more practiced Spells to boot.

“Never seen someone Conjure two Mage Hands at once.” I can see Ron’s mind working, wondering if I got a hidden friend helping me out, but I ain’t about to ease his worries. “Impressive technique too.” On account of how he didn’t see me wagging no fingers or hear me muttering no chants. The Mage Hand Cantrip typically requires both, but while I could use my Metamagic bracelet to eschew one of those vital components, I usually don’t bother. I just cast it when no one looking or listening, and leave them hidden under my duster holding the handles of my Blastguns. Had my Mage Hands at the ready before I rode up to Pleasant Dunes with my arms out and to the sides, on account of how I’ve had worse welcomes. I had to dismiss them before my horse bath, then recast them after, because I didn’t want no one to know about them until I needed to use them. A surprise is only a surprise if no one see it coming. “Impressive weapons too,” Ron remarks, nodding at my Blastguns resting on the bar top, next to the Mage Hands which are laid out flat too.

Only seems polite now that everyone knows they're there, but it's alright. I still got more cards to play, like the big Spell I been holding and don't really wanna use, plus more surprises waiting outside.

That being said, I can't resist talking tech when it relates to Aetherarms, so I allow myself to puff up at the compliment. "These babies are custom jobs," I begin, silently asking for permission to handle them, to which Ron allows without hesitation. "Modelled after the Dresden Forzare and hand-tooled by Armand Kalthoff himself," I proclaim, holding one of my babies to show off the side profile. Not in a proper grip, just two fingers a hand, though Jumbo and Hobb still flinch. Not Ron though, because he understand the game we playing, and he play it just as well as the first. Difference is that I'm the one in control now. He don't like that, but he get it, so no harm in allowing him the appearance of control, if only for the sake of saving face.

A complicated thing, the games of power among men. Be a lot more simple if we just started shooting, but I still got a job to attend to.

"Now it don't look like much," I say, after giving them a moment to drink in the view, "But this sawn-off double barrel Blastgun packs a real punch. Breech loaded and takes two 12-gauge shells packing 40 Grain of Aether a piece, the Forzare is built around two First-Order Blast Spell Cores which each deliver a spray of pure kinetic Force in a cone-like pattern. Can fire one or both barrels with one pull of the trigger, just gotta cock the hammers. The base Spell itself got a 45-degree arc and only go up to 5 meters, but this one narrows and stretches it to be about 20-degrees and 10 meters. Not a lot of range, I know, but the base model, well that's a 20' long single barrel pump action that's got even better coverage and range. That's the gun you really want for armoured Abby. Comes in all sorts of damage types too; Fire is a favourite, but you might want to consider Acid too, depending on what you up against. Something real big and armoured gonna take more than single Blast, but you hit it with Acid, and that armour will melt right off, leaving it vulnerable to regular Aetherarms which ain't armour penetrating."

Like them gatling guns along the wall. Too many Metamagics focused on rate of fire and accuracy to fit Penetrate Metamagic too, and you can't burst-fire when things take ten, twenty, or thirty Bolts to kill.

“Very impressive.” Ron squints his eyes in silent permission, and I glance at my other Blastgun on the bar. Picking up my sweet little dubsie, looking so cute with its short barrels sitting side by side, he looks it over with an expert eye. While pointed away from me and down the bar mind you, since I still got mine in hand, and he ain’t in no mood to gamble his life on which one of us gonna be first to shoot. Especially since we standing so close. Even if he kill me first, my finger could still pull the trigger, which likely will kill him too. That’s why these Blastguns are perfect for using with the Mage Hand Cantrip. Although I can control the spectral hands with a thought, aiming is still tricky, and they have no hope of ever controlling recoil at all. Add in the fact that they can only hold up to 5lbs each, and accelerate and move too slowly to be of any use with a knife, means they ain’t good for much else in a fight. With a dubsie in hand though, I just gotta get them Mage Hands pointing the guns in the general direction of what I mean to kill, and a touch of the trigger will handle the rest.

These little darlings have saved my bacon more times than I can count. Sure, there’s only four shots between the two of them, but if I ever get myself into a mess that take more than four shots from a Dresden Forzare Blastgun to buy me time to breathe, then I done gone and made a real mess of things.

Course, I might need all four barrels here, and more to boot if things turn south, but I’m thinking Ron ain’t looking for a gunfight. He wants my help, which is why he still playing along, but I’m afraid that’s all about to change.

“Incredible craftsmanship. Beautifully put together.” Placing my Blastgun back down with a little shake of his head, Ron posts back up against the bar with his predatory lean and a knowing look. “Only... I’m afraid I was looking for something a little more... robust. Something similar to what you have mounted on the roof of your wagon outside.”

At this point, miss Laura has the unfortunate timing to pop out from the kitchen with my steak and taters, and everyone is startled by the unexpected noise of the heavy doors. Jumbo just starts in place, but Hobb is quick on the draw, his hands darting towards the guns on his belt and leaving me with a choice to make.

Do I only kill Hobb and give Ron another chance, or should I just start Blasting and call it a day?

Dagnabbit. And here I was hoping I'd still have a chance to go after my outlaws, but now I might not even get to deliver the mail.