Despite having been a part of the reconstruction efforts for about two months now, it still hurts to see New Hope in such disrepair.

Even with all hands on deck, we've yet to clear out all the damage which can still be seen under a blanket of snow. Divots, ditches, and sinkholes where we used to have parks, benches, and fountains, to say nothing of all the missing houses and infrastructure. Work on the central wall hasn't even started, because it's not like you can just build up top of a ruined foundation. That's why excavation was the name of the game to start, and we've done all that we could, with Third and Fourth Order Spellslingers breaking out the big guns to really get things done. Alas, the cold weather put an end to all that, because even the strongest Spells can't do much once the ground freezes solid.

Still doing what we can to work through the winter, making bricks, cutting stone, grinding mortar, and more, but it'll be a rush come springtime to see if we can get a workable defense up before the bugs come calling for round two. Or the Greenskins show up for their debut, possibly with bug friends to augment their forces. Either way, it'll be a hard fight, one I hope to be here for if I can.

And maybe this time, I won't fuck things up for everyone. Tough pill to swallow, knowing that if it wasn't for me, most of the inner district might still have been in decent shape. Sure, the main thoroughfare had been all chewed up and torn to bits, and the buildings probably would've needed to be torn down and rebuilt.

Same for most of the main street which runs north to south, but doesn't intersect with the inner district. The Rangers ran the same play there as they did on the main thoroughfare, letting Abby in through the gates to disperse, divide, and conquer bit by bit, so there's a fair bit of damage there and along the side streets. Otherwise though? I'd say a good 60% of the central district was still in decent shape before I blew up them Doomspitters and sent the swarm into an all-out frenzied attack.

Between trampling bugs and our close-range bombardments, the entire central district was left devastated, and we've made next to no headway in the restoration process unless you look real close. The central walls are the priority after all, so the ruined buildings are all still sitting around, save for whatever scraps of wood we've had to haul away for firewood. Shouldn't have had to do that, as our reserves held more than enough for the population we've got, especially with so many locals having moved south or downriver to what they hoped would be greener pastures. Problem is, the Second Wavers don't understand the concept of restraint, unable to see past their immediate needs and conserve for the future. From what I hear, any and all efforts to curtail excessive firewood use fell flat on its face as the Second Wavers got an attitude that is all about the here and now, with no regard for others or what may come in dark days ahead.

A quick glance is all it takes to see which bunkhouses have folks from the first or second wave. The latter got chimneys which are pouring out smoke, and windows with curtains pulled open to reveal folks walking around in shirts. The former? Minimal smoke,

just enough to keep the pipes from freezing, and curtains that are closed to conserve heat. If they were open, you'd see folks in bulky outfits with extra shirts, pants, gloves, and hat, if not full-on winter gear. Now granted, I understand it ain't exactly comfortable to sit around in so many layers, which is why I invested in an Endure Elements Imbuement into my duster, but for every second waver to behave this way is mind-boggling and frustrating to boot.

They don't understand the difference between individual rights versus collective obligations. Sure, it's your right to choose what work you do, but there's only so much work to go around. No, we don't need more pencil pushing clerks or media-savvy salesmen. We need craftsmen, soldiers, and labourers, and since most don't got the skills or the courage for the first two, they fall firmly in the third category, so that's what they ought to do. They can choose not to, but unless they got some other applicable skills, why should we keep feeding and housing them on the taxpayer's dime?

There's more to it though. Little things which annoys me something fierce. Like how they complain about everything and make it sound like it's our fault we weren't able to catch up with modern standards in the better part of 20 years. Every day, I gotta hear about how the food and clothes ain't up to their standards, or the lack of internet, cellphones, or free radio stations that broadcast entertainment makes for a miserable and soul-crushing experience. They expect things like perfect looking fruits and vegetables, or reliable power that runs 24/7 without interruption, when the truth is we eat what we get and we gotta take the grid

down for a couple hours maybe once or twice a week for maintenance. They even do it at night when everyone else ought to be headed for bed anyways, but the Second Wavers bitch and moan about it because they wanna stay up late to read or work or whatever and can't be bothered to learn a Cantrip or light a candle.

Which is another thing that bothers me. Even after two months, most have yet to grasp the basic concept of working by daylight. We don't sleep early and wake up at dawn because it's a preference. We do so because it's easier to work when we have sunlight to illuminate things. The second wavers? They bitch and moan about early hours and how they're night owls or some shit, and make it out like we're the unreasonable ones when we do what we do because we got no other options.

Another aspect most have yet to understand. "Why don't you do X," is the most common question I hear, where X is use some sort of tech or machine that we don't have because the infrastructure required to build enough of X to be useful would be prohibitively expensive in money and manpower. And most of the time, the question is asked because the majority of second wavers act like they're too good to put in a full day's work where it comes to hard labour. They'll demand resources to do this or that, when we already have people that could feasibly do what they're asking, except we don't have resources enough for it.

Another concept they can't seem to grasp. The scarcity of resources, whether it be materials or manpower. They all think I'll be so simple because they intend to just order what they need or put together some machine that'll make it for them, but I done put together two of Spencer's Fabricators and it ain't easy. One to press a variety of different sized cartridges out of brass, and another to check and pack them, but even then, I find myself double checking all their work more often than not and scrapping bullets that are misshapen or the wrong diametre and will likely cause a jam.

Granted, I mostly use revolvers, so it ain't like they can jam, but the Merlin 45 and the Dragunov need consistently sized ammo for them to cycle properly, and I ain't about to risk some bumpy brass ruining my day while I'm out and about. Spencer says it's a matter of quality control, in that the parts we've used aren't up to snuff on account of having to make most of it by hand. If they were machine cut using what he calls a CNC, then their measurements would be accurate to within 100^{th} of a centimetre and we'd have more consistent results, but failing that, we just gotta get by with what we have.

Looked into making a CNC machine too, but that's a project for someone with a bigger budget than me. That's why I passed the idea along to Mr. Kalthoff, only to learn he's already got a few dedicated to gunmaking and can't just take them offline to make a few cuts for me. Just goes to show that even I don't know it all, and that things are harder to make than your average joe from the Second Wave seems to think.

All in all? There's been a good bit of friction between the First and Second Waves, but that's nothing compared to the friction between Americans from the Second Wave. Not even sure I can call them Americans anymore, since they insist on labelling themselves as Bureaucrats, Constituents, or Unionists. Or the loud ones do at least. Folks like Spencer who're just trying to get by typically keep their heads down and their mouths shut, but they still get dragged into the fracas all the same. The Second Wavers still have yet to acclimate to the food we eat, the hours we keep, or the lives we live, but they didn't waste no time segregating themselves into different bunkhouses depending on political affiliation.

In my opinion? The Bureaucrats are the worst of it, but the Unionists are next. The former be loud and opinionated, always shouting about how this wouldn't stand in 'their America', or how things ought to be a certain way just because that's their preference. Annoying, but easily settled by either ignoring them or putting them in their place with a hard slap and a boot to the backside to send them on their way. Let them leave and go build 'their America' wherever they like, so long as it ain't here in the town I grew up in, but the Unionists won't let that happen. Anytime someone says, "There's the door", the Unionists get all up in arms about how we're being divisive and 'unAmerican', even though most Americans have always been divisive as all heck.

I mean hell. They had a civil war, then broke apart, which led to the United States of America being replaced by the United Federation of American States. Division might as well be in their D.N.A, so I say let the Bureaucrats and Constituents both go and make their own version of America, because here on the Frontier, the Federation still stands.

For now at least. If democracy works the way it does in the old world, that might not stand for long. Ain't my fight though, so I've been keeping my head down and looking the other way even when I catch angry mutters about how I ain't American or how I'm everything that's wrong with America somehow. Don't matter how many times I tell them I ain't American or Qinese, that I'm Frontier born and proud of it. It's always the same in the end. Either they disassociate and fall back to the same talking points they all share, or they double down and get to screeching about how foreigners and immigrants are ruining America. Do be fun to point out that technically, they're the foreigners and immigrants, as I was born here in these lands and they just got here, but logic and facts don't seem to count for much with most Second Wavers.

It ain't just the Americans either. The South Americans are surprisingly divisive. Those from countries that were overrun bear the brunt of the hatred, because somehow it's their fault their nations fell to Abby and ruined things for everyone else. The European Union has got its fair share of friction, with members of more prosperous nations looking down on less prosperous ones for dragging the rest of them down. Britain is a whole other kettle of fish, having gone through Brexit to leave the E.U and

seemingly intent on acting like it was the best thing ever, when the facts appear to say otherwise as Abby have overrun large swathes of the island nation and left a big chunk in ruins. Africans are hit and miss. Some groups have come together irrespective of the nation they came from, while others refuse to work alongside this country or that one for various reasons, which makes it difficult considering there do be language barriers and often times the only ones that can understand them are those very people they won't work with.

The Soviets have been surprisingly docile. Most do their work while requesting extradition to a Soviet settlement, but the only one I know of is up north in the Muskari Steppes. Which is technically Métis Territory and not officially recognized as a Soviet settlement, or Independent for that matter, but there be enough Soviets there to call it their own. No idea how that's gonna play out, but according to Sasha, the new Soviets from their Tsardom be 'monarchist lap-dogs yearning to lick the feet of their oppressors'.

So yeah. I try not to bring it up around her all that often, because she can be just as bad as any settler from the Second Wave. Which Aunty Ray would say is divisive thinking, as regardless of where we from or when we got here, we're all in this together now. Tell that to the rest, as I ignore a whole host of mutters and stares as I pick up Aunty Ray and Chrissy from the bank and walk them all the way over to the diner/pub. One which is surprisingly empty with only two other tables occupied, with one group looking like well-to-do captains from downriver, and another occupied by

a local Rancher by the name of Wade Becker who thinks his shit don't stink and hates being reminded that Aunty Ray did a better job raising and training horses than he ever could.

More stink eye to avoid as we steer clear of Wade and his family and sit on the other side of the room. Closer to the captains than I'd like, but they ain't the rough and tumble sort I'm used to. They're the more successful captains who pilot the big expensive barges that often get targeted by pirates and gangsters looking to make a quick buck, so while they might be dangerous, they're also a more disciplined lot and only do a modicum of respectful staring before averting their eyes once its clear Aunty Ray ain't got no interest in any one of them.

Or Chrissy, which gets my hackles up, but Aunty Ray gives my Stetson a swat which makes it all but impossible to glare. "We here for a nice quiet meal and that's it," she says, giving me a look that I would call a pleading scowl. Ain't exactly a plea, and ain't exactly a scowl, but somewhere in between asking and telling me that this is how it's gonna be. It's the perfect sweet spot between petition and demand that leaves me no room to say otherwise, because I'm still feeling all manner of guilt for all sorts of different reasons.

So I give her my best and most genuine smile while moving Chrissy to sit with her back to the Captains so as not to upset me or them when I go and plant a boot in one of their faces for staring at my sorta sister in the wrong sort of way. Aunty Ray can handle

herself, but Chrissy is completely off limits. Luckily for them, the Captains are more interested in talking shop and keep to their lane, while me, Chrissy, and Aunty Ray have us a nice little meal out after a long, two-week trip out into the Badlands.

A shame the other girls ain't here too, but it is what it is. Slipped Tina some cash to pay for a meal at Shirley's Harbourfront though, just so she wouldn't have to cook for all three of them when they get back. Hú Dié I can understand, but how in the dickens did Sasha make it all her years without learning to cook a meal? Might be the Soviets she grew up with saw that as women's work which she avoided like the plague, but that don't explain how she hopeless in the kitchen even after so many months of trying. Even Chrissy can cook pancakes with minimal supervision now, but she won't eat Sasha's pancakes even to spare the other girl's feelings anymore.

Seriously. They're pancakes. How's it even possible to get them wrong in so many different ways?

The dinner is pleasant enough, though the food is somewhat lacking. Understandable as we mid-winter and already feeling the pinch what with all the extra mouths to feed. I've yet to see any hard numbers on total settlers in the Second Wave, but New Hope still got a few thousand even after sending the majority elsewhere. We ain't the only ones hurting for manpower after all, and while most would rather stay here where its relatively safe

compared to downriver settlements still under attack from crabby Abby, those without relevant skills don't get a real say.

Which is another point of friction, from what I've read and overhear from the captain's table next to us. Same issues I've been seeing, as the Second Wavers keep trying to reinvent the wheel and bring us up to modern standards without understanding why we do things the way we do. I ain't the only one frustrated either, though I will admit that there do be some validity to the Second Waver's concerns regarding the fact that ain't none of them got a seat at the table. While the Marshal's welcomed a few military rankers into the Rangers and given them suitably high positions, so far, I've yet to hear about any Aldermen doing the same for a Second Waver. On the one hand, I get that most Second Wavers don't got the skills or experience necessary to weigh in on the big decisions, but how are they supposed to get those skills and experience if we don't help them along first?

Elections won't solve nothing either, for a few reasons. First off, the Second Wavers already outnumber the First. Wild I know, but the old world sent a whole lot of folks through, more than any of us were expecting outside of those in the know. I mean, the fact that I picked up 7 people within a day's travel of Rimepeak is proof enough, and I shudder to think what the death toll might've been for folks who landed in the Deadlands, the Divide, or one of the many uninhabited parts of the Frontier that are two to three days from civilization.

Secondly, we still haven't figured out a way to tabulate all them votes in an aboveboard manner that prevents a few bad actors from padding the votes. Least I ain't heard about one that don't devote more manpower than we have to spare across the whole Frontier. That's the final clincher, accounting for all Federal citizens everywhere. It ain't just us here east of the Divide. There's a whole continent to the west, and I hear tales of other continents every now and again that I don't even half believe, but could be true nonetheless. Makes for a real mess when the laws dictate that every Federal citizen capable of voting is able to do so within reason. That means a polling station no more than half a day's travel away from every Federal citizen, which is a big ask by any stretch of the imagination. Some folks don't even got access to their mail a half-day's travel away, so that ain't gonna happen either.

End of the day? I'm glad I went Independent, because it means I get to pick and choose whether to take settlers on, instead of having them foisted on me. Luckily for me, I didn't get any takers when I (quietly) made it known I would accept settlers in need of housing. Was really hoping Spencer and a few others would take me up on it, but no dice. They're all city folk, to the point where New Hope is too backwater country for them, so ain't none of them all that willing to move out into the boonies that is Ming's Quay.

Which is silly considering the scale they're used to. They don't see that once we do get automobiles going, the Frontier gonna get a whole lot smaller overnight. The 4-hour trip up to the quay is

only 25 klicks as the crow flies, so I been working with Sasha on getting a motor into the Longhorn Belle to make that trip in an hour or less. Problem is, any motor we do put in would need to be ridiculously heavy to do work in water, and the math says that we'd end up moving more or less the same speed even with sails to help. A real shame that, but we're keeping up with the news as best we can, because engines are the next big step up for us all.

One that couldn't come sooner, but ain't here just yet. From the looks of things, it'll be at least a year, assuming we can finagle the money and manpower to put heel on the boot of industry and really speed things along.

I do what I can to keep the conversation away from politics and shop though, because I'm self-aware enough to know that I, like many of the Americans I grew up around, am most certainly loud and opinionated. I also got a tendency to get heated when we talk about stuff like that, so we keep it light and breezy without touching on the heavy stuff me and Aunty Ray both be dealing with. She likes to pretend she's all easy breezy about the Mimic inside her head, but she spends a lot more time grilling Chrissy about what she can and can't do and how she goes about doing it of late. Our sweet Princess does her best to help, but some things just can't be conveyed, like how it feels to tug and prod a Spell until it do exactly what you want it to do.

I can’t explain how I make Detect Abby go from radiating out in all directions to beaming out in one direction of my choice. I just gather it up and funnel it out in my head, except there’s so much more to it. It’d be like explaining how you breathe, or how you see colours and differentiate smells. You just do it, much like most of us do, except we don’t all do it the same way, now do we? I’d say the tablecloths we’re eating off of are white, while Aunty Ray would call it beige or cream or off-white depending on her mood, and magic is about 10 times more complicated to explain.

We have ourselves a good time though, and even order dessert as Miss Dawson’s Chicago style confectionaries and ice cream parlour is still closed on account of Abby bashing down the doors of the house she was sheltered in and killing everyone inside. Not every house had a former Ranger like Miles to help them out, or was built sturdy enough to withstand an attack, but even those that were didn’t stand no chance against a Burrow Hulk. Sad to see it happen, as I’d always thought Miss Dawson would be good for Uncle Teddy, and not just because I wanted free candy and ice cream. She was a bit of a flirt, but high-spirited and sweet as the candies she sold, so she’d make for a much-needed injection of sugar and sweetness in Uncle Teddy’s life.

Ain’t on me to meddle no more though, as he don’t even wanna take down my reports no more. I don’t blame him either; I done made a mess of his defense, and while it’s arguable whether the lives lost are all on me, there’s no denying the fact that I set New Hope back a fair bit by forcing the Marshal’s hand and making him bomb the central district into the ground.

Had I shown up an hour or two later? Most of the central district would probably still be standing, and I don't think I can ever forgive myself for that.

I ain't the only one to think this way, as after I settle the bill and step outside with Chrissy and Aunty Ray on my arms, I'm greeted by a collective sneer from a group of fellas hauling goods from one place or another. It's well past dinner-time by now, but they're still hard at work in the winter's cold, as there's still daylight left to be had. "Must be nice," one of the mutters, in a none too quiet tone that I know is meant to be overheard. "Having cash to spare for a nice dinner out while most are getting by on scraps."

"We don't all have Cultists lookin' out for us," another man adds, spitting off to the side. Not in our direction, as then I'd have to have a word, but the point still stands.

"Or politicians," a third says, following up with, "Hard to say which is worse. Least the Cultists put the kid to work killing mafiosos."

Gets a chuckle out of the rest, but they double time it right quick when they catch me glancing. More or less sums up the mindset of the First Wave here in New Hope. The implication being that I ought to be made to pay some sort of reparations for my gaffe, but that I'm still better than the Second Wavers. Only works out that way because they know I been working without pay, as

whatever I earn here in town is directly donated back to the relief efforts. Granted, they're only paying me $5 on paper no matter what work I do, whereas Danny, Spencer, and Sasha make $7.50 because they're one step up from unskilled labour, but not skilled enough to be considered actually skilled.

Well, Danny is, but he don't got no license. Not because he don't know enough to get one; there simply ain't no one to give him a license because there ain't no State or Federal licensing board to issue them. No Professional guild, official authority, regulatory department, or nothing, so even though Danny's as good or even better than the next guy, he don't got the paper to hang up on his wall that says he went to school for Artificing or whatever. Silly that, but he ain't the only one to lose out because of oversights like this, as the Frontier-born are all coming into their own and ready to make waves if things don't change.

Might have to make big waves, what with how things are shaping up, as we pass by the only other building that's got customers tonight. The saloon as it were, though I've no idea what's the difference between a saloon, bar, tavern, pub, and cantina. Whatever you wanna call it, business is booming as the lights are on and the room packed, with folks spilling out to finish their drinks outside since it's much too cramped indoors. Terrible idea if you ask me, as alcohol dilates blood vessels near the skin, bringing all your heat up to the surface where it's easily lost. Also lowers inhibitions so you don't realize how cold you really are, to say nothing of what happens if you get black out drunk and collapse in a snowbank somewhere. Even with street lights to

illuminate the surroundings, chances of someone finding you buried beneath the snow is slim to none, and even a jacket with Endure Elements Imbued into it won't be enough to keep you from losing some of your fingies and toesies.

Or dying, but that's less fun to remark on, albeit a very real way to die here on the Frontier. One out of a million, but deadly all the same, and I can't help but check the snow backs to see if anyone done fell in.

Which in turns mean I ain't looking at the folks still stumbling around on two feet as much as I should. If I was paying attention, I'd've steered clear of Travis who comes a sauntering up with his posse of like-minded Bureaucrats. I ain't guessing, as they're all sporting party colours like an inner-city street gang. Deep red, like dried blood, with some dark navy accents so as not to be mistaken for Constituent blue or Union purple of all things. Armbands for the most part, though there are a couple headbands and shoulder patches in the mix. They even embroidered their jackets to spout party lines, like "Taking America Back", "Not In My America", and my favourite, "By the People, For the People".

Tickles me pink really, the irony of it all, as they've opted to ignore the start of that phrase. "Government of the people, by the people, for the people," is how it goes, capping off a speech given to celebrate the end of the civil war and slavery both. Odd for a party that's seized power and refuses to play ball come election

time, not to mention their more extremist views that most claim ain't what the party is actually about despite real proof of deportations, illegal police actions, and what anyone in their right mind would call concentration camps, but have since been rebranded by the Bureaucrats as "Civic Reconciliation Centres", where anyone who got a dissenting opinion in a Bureaucrat led state gets sent for 're-education' purposes.

Seriously. How far do they gotta push things before the Bureaucrats stop ask if they're the bad guys? It's wild hearing someone go off about how your viewpoint is wrong and you ought to be 're-educated' as a threat. Me, I figured it's just be some extremist kooks holding those viewpoints, but apparently that's par for the course in the land of the free.

As for Travis? He's a Bureaucrat to the core and exceedingly vocal about it. The washed-out wannabe soldier turned glorified meter maid is sober enough to be steady on his feet, but not so sober as to watch his tongue. "Well if it isn't the fabled Firstborn," he sneers, raising his mug and sloshing a good bit of his watered-down beer in the process. "Back from his **dangerous** trip through the **hazardous** Badlands!" Scoffing to put some extra spit on his sarcasm, he glances around at his boys to cue them to laugh, and gets a handful of chuckles for his troubles. "How dangerous can it be if one woman and a bunch of kids can make the trip?" he asks, doubling down because he thinks his buddies didn't get it, but the truth is he just ain't funny.

“True that,” I say with a sagely nod, throwing Travis and his buddies for a loop. “Hardly dangerous at all. Why I reckon a group of red-blooded gents like yourselves could make a real go of it. Strike it rich as a soldier of fortune killing bugs in the Badlands and clean them Abby right out.” Here’s hoping they remember as much and head out come spring, because I’d rather feed Abby than have to feed these worthless layabouts. From what I’ve seen and heard, they get drunk and belligerent each and every night, which they can do because their room and board is free. Five bucks a day is enough to keep a family of four fed and housed, but they blow through their money every night, so much so that Clayton’s been making a killing even with the extra taxes he gotta pay. Problem is, these fellas and others like them be wilding out so much, the local women don’t feel safe to travel without a man and a gun no more. Then these drunkards wake up close to noon and show up for work all hung over to do the bare minimum before clocking out at five and picking up their pay to start the process all over again.

Aunty Ray knows what I’m thinking, and gives me a little nudge to say, ‘Don’t go overboard’, so I just leave it at that. Giving them all a smile, a nod, and a hard stare, I silently bid them adieu and mosey on my way with Aunty Ray and Chrissy on my arms. Unfortunately, Aunty Ray’s on my right seeing how she got my Overture on her hip, and the fellas be on my left. Bring’s Chrissy close to their orbit as she glides on pass, without so much as a care in the world as she’s lost in her head, only to freeze in her tracks and recoil away when Travis reaches out to grab her by the wrist.

“Woah there,” he says, smiling his stupid smile that he probably thinks is charming. “What’ve we got here? What’s your – ah, ahh, ahhhhh!”

The last bit is because I done clamped down on his wrist and broken his grip on Chrissy. My daddy taught me how to do it with leverage, while Uncle Raliegh showed me several pressure points I could hit. I don’t need any of that for Travis, as I got me an Automaton Prosthetic that can crush stone and dent metal. “You don’t touch her,” I say, my smile gone and eyes burning with rage. “You don’t talk to her. Fact, you don’t even look at her, you hear me?” Travis is still bellyaching about the pain, so I wrench his arm up and back to put him in a lock that keeps his body between me and his buddies. “I asked you a question, Travis. Do. You. Hear. Me?”

“I hear you,” he exclaims, gritting his teeth and glaring at me something fierce despite being caught up in my grip. Makes me want to rough him up some more, but I don’t wanna make work for the Sheriff. Instead, I give Travis a none too gentle shove back into his boys, then stand and glare to see if they got the stones to throw down. Aunty Ray’s already got Chrissy behind her, but she ain’t moving too far in case one of these fellas comes out swinging with a knife, bottle, or whatever else they got close to hand.

They ain’t none too shy about it either, brandishing their improvised weapons like that. Mostly because these fellas got more courage than sense, or maybe I should call it anger. Courage is the ability to act in spite of perceived danger, but these fellas don’t got two brain cells to rub together and see that there’s danger aplenty. They just see a kid, a Qink kid at that, and they might well be angry enough to do something about it.

I hope so. It’s past due someone knocked some sense into these fools, and I’ll happily take my lumps for the honour.

So I stand my ground until they’ve made a decision, except there ain’t a leader among them worth a damn. Travis ain’t it, all but sulking and pouting as he rubs his wrist and mutters, “Just looking for a bit of conversation is all. Fucking Aberrant filth ought to be honoured for the attention.”

My body acts before my brain even registers the insult, and before you know it, I’m brawling in the streets and smacking fools left and right as they pop up. Ain’t much of a fight really, as these drunks don’t got skills worth a damn as I bob, weave, and lay on them with hard lefts to keep things fair. I ain’t a southpaw, but I could roll these drunks with both hands tied behind my back. Granted, I’m wearing my duster and pretty much immune to any of their hits unless they aim for my legs or head, so that only makes it that much worse for them. This is on Travis though, because he should’ve seen the odds stacked against him and watched his damn mouth.

Which is what I tell Sheriff Patel after his deputies break up the fight and drag me in for holding. The fact that they was brandishing weapons helps some, and I walk away with 40 hours of hard labour for throwing the first punch. Seeing how I didn't break any bones and only loosened a few teeth, he even sends me home for the night after it's all said and done, reminding me that my lack of anti-magic manacles is still merely a courtesy, rather than an order from the court. Aunty Ray's got words for me when I get back, but luckily Spencer don't know how to read the room and is there to play board games with Danny and Nikki. Chrissy joins in too, and I spend the evening brushing Cowie and spoiling him silly as a reward for his two-week haul through the Badlands.

Doesn't stop me from talking shop with Spencer either, because he's a font of knowledge who's always happy to answer whatever questions I got. He claims he ain't all that smart, but he got a firm foundation of fundamentals under him, as well as the breadth of experience from having seen and used all manner of tech I can only really dream about. Fact is, I got all sorts of ideas running through my head, especially with how he keeps talking about how I should focus on improving and expanding my range of prosthetics even though I only lost the one hand.

"It doesn't have to be a replacement though," Spencer says, all flushed and excited while still halfway through his first beer. "Think about it. An arm that goes over your arm to augment your

capabilities. Or a full suit, with four limbs in total to really kick things off. An Automaton exo-suit that could let you run faster without getting tired and lift more without effort. Doesn't have to be for combat either. Just think what you could do in construction with two or three people in suits like that."

"Yeah," I drawl, seeing the vision, only to shake my head and add, "Nah. See, three suits means three people with the know-how to Etch the whole thing. Sure, we got three right here, but that means we'd have to be the ones doin' all that haulin' and liftin'. Could teach folks to Etch one themselves, but I have trouble enough convincin' folks to Etch their own seals on the bullets they use. That's Etchin' a circle, two lines, and a dot where them lines intersect, maybe five seconds work, tops. I got me a jig to really speed things along and can hammer out a hundred seals in five minutes flat, but most folks would still rather pay the premium to buy their seals at the store. Or pre-packed bullets even, which misfire far too often for my liking."

Heard plenty of tales of jams and misfires during the big fight, and I shudder to think how many folks ran afoul of poor ammo and didn't live to tell the tale. That said, I'm seeing less variance in shells produced by the Fabricators I threw together, and passed the admittedly limited stats over to Mr. Kalthoff already. Who knows? Maybe soon enough, ammo will be worth buying in bulk, though I'd still rather put it together myself. Or use the Fabricator I built to do it.

“You build yourself a working exo-suit,” Spencer says, rolling his die and playing his piece much to Danny and Nikki’s chagrin, “And I guarantee we’ll have people coming out of the woodwork wanting to learn. There’s this book called Starfleet Soldiers, it had a movie that was pretty good, but the 3D animated series was even better, and they had these mechs called the P13Pillager…”

Spencer goes on for a bit about his book, movie, and tv show that’s all about killing marine Abby on some far-off world somewhere. Science fiction is what that is, because if humans could fight Abby underwater, we’d have plenty of wars to fight on the old world and Frontier both. I’ve missed out on two weeks worth of news while I was out on the Frontier, but today’s paper on the kitchen table got a front-page article about crabby Abby attacks all along the Wayfarer. This is 2 months after the fact, so either the Rangers and locals are slacking in their efforts to hunt them crabs down, or more likely, the Ocean Abby done established a bulkhead somewhere along the river complete with baby Proggie to make more Abby.

That’s bad news all around, and now we got the possibility of Greenskins and bugs working together in harmony. Scary that, because if the Greenskins take over, they won’t be content with what Bugs are already available. Their Proggies will press the Bug Proggies into making custom Ferals to support the Green tide of Goblins, Orcs, and Bugbears, as well as the Ogres, Trolls, and Giants that are soon to come. They don’t just get bigger; they get smarter too, and I have trouble enough outsmarting stupid Abby as is.

So maybe a full-on mechanized armour wouldn't be the worst idea in the world. Would be difficult though, because even though I made my prosthetic hand fairly durable, it'll still break if I punch too hard. It's just brass and wood after all, so maybe its time I melted down that Orichalcum Shield and crafted myself a prosthetic that's a little harder to break.

Or dream a little bigger and make something that'll really make a splash when I slap a fool across his face.

With the Bernier's staying in the house, the only room that left free is Chrissy's. Missus Bernier be in Aunty Ray's room, while Nikki and Manda are in Tina's, with Danny picking up the spare in Danny's room. Since Chrissy don't like sleeping alone, it ain't no thing for Aunty Ray to share the bed with her, but rather than leave me to sleep on the sofa or recliner, they both insist I join them in Chrissy's room. Gets me a few weird looks from Nikki and her mama both, and a giggle from Manda as she calls me 'Mama's boy'. Her new nickname for me ever since she heard me call Aunty Ray 'Mama', and even though her laugher colours my cheeks, ain't nothing I can say about it. Aunty Ray done more than enough to deserve the title, and I been treating her as such in everything but name, so why shouldn't I call her mama?

Unfortunately, that means Aunty Ray is much more affectionate of late, always hugging and kissing when before she'd at least try to show restraint. Even set up a rotation during the trip so everyone

took turns sleeping beside me, all save for Sasha who stood a man alone at the far end of our group. Means I was always sleeping in the middle even when I had second shift at guard duty, but I didn't even have that on our way back since I wasn't about to trust myself or Aunty Ray alone and awake with the Condenser.

Here and now though? Aunty Ray has me more or less to herself, albeit with Chrissy also thrown into the mix. Now, you'd think calling her mama and treating her like my own flesh and blood would make things less awkward, but Aunty Ray is still gorgeous as can be and utterly clueless as to how that might make a young man feel. Puts on a loose jumper that shows far too much skin between the buttons and the way it slides off of one shoulder as she sleeps all pressed up against me, with her head against mine and leg overtop me like I'm a big cuddly teddy bear. Even Chrissy don't go that far and keeps her legs to herself, but Aunty Ray don't got no qualms about none of this.

Not like I can say anything either. How would it even go? "Even though I consider you my mama, I still see you as a woman too, so please stop being so sexy?" Yeah, that'll go over great. I tick enough boxes in the stereotypical American checklist as is; don't need to be adding 'incestuous thoughts' to it too.

Then again, I suppose that box done already been checked. This would just be admitting as much, but I got too much pride for that.

That said? I’d rather deal with these issues than having to grapple with losing the woman who done raised me. Torturous as it might be sleeping in the same bed as the scantily clad woman who raised me, I wouldn’t trade it for anything in the world.

Author's Note: NGL... i'm meandering a bit trying to fill in all the politics and backstory and whatnot. Can't really think of a way to make it more interesting. Blerg. At least we're coming up to the end of it, as I got an end point in mind. Still a bit more meandering to go, as I gotta cover the happenings up at the quay too. I'll think on it some more and see if I can make it more interesting without opening up a whole new plotline i have to go through with lol.