Author's Note: Sorry for the delay. I had a boring chapter of interactions with Elodie and everyone back in New Hope, when I decided to skip that and move ahead to a more interesting plot point. That decision came about around 2pm Sunday afternoon, so yea. Sorries.

Another thing I wanna talk about is the schedule for December. I'm gonna try to write as many chapters as I can, because we're actually coming up on the end of the volume, which should end around 100-110. I think. I could be wrong, but I'm pretty sure I can close it up in less than 20 chapters. That said, I will eventually have to go on break for Christmas, because I have too many social obligations to attend and I don't want to be writing and immediately publishing to RR. I'll try not to leave things off on a cliff, but you never know. If it does end up being cliffy, I'll get back asap, and also catch back up to +10 chs from RR releases before resuming those come January. No idea of any actual dates, but the next week is looking free and clear at least.

That said, sorry for the delay, hope y'all bear with me, and if anyone wants a refund for December, just hit me up and I'll do that ASAP. Hope you enjoy the chapter, and as always, thank you for reading :D

The problem with being a Diviner is you gotta learn to use a lot of tools, but each one really only does the one specific thing.

Take Detect Magic for example, which ain't as useful as it sounds. Sure it does what it says and shows you where the magic is or has been, but nothing about what it does or might do. Take the mantle clock sitting on Ron's kitchen counter which I almost overlooked, a fancy little contraption positively glowing with Aetheric flows. Most clocks do, as they're typically powered by Aether, though there are wind up clocks that don't require any Aether at all to function. What drew my eye in this particular instance however was the sheer quantity of Aether flowing around the mantle clock, enough to almost light up the room if those glows actually gave off illumination. That's all I saw though, which was only enough to tell me that clock was probably Spelled and nothing more.

So why'd I go diving for cover then? Well, my jimmies were a jangling, and I trusted them enough to get to cover. Was only after the fact when I put everything together and realized I heard Ron thumb back the hammer on his Naga and figured the Spell on the clock for Clairvoyance. Without my portent, I likely would've gotten shot while staring at the Aetheric glows and wondering what sort of Spell you'd cast on a clock. Could've been an unshielded Spell Glyph set to explode when I got close, a localized Phase Spell to shuttle the Caster off into the Immaterium so they can hide in plain sight, or even something as simple as an Arcane Speaker set to trigger when I get into range, like what Tim

used down under dark to confuse Abby on our way out. That's only the tip of the iceberg really, especially once you get into the realm of stored or delayed Spells and Spell-like effects, meaning the Detect Magic didn't really do all that much for me in the moment.

So yea, it's a great Spell for uncovering the presence of Magic, but not so great for anything else. Least that's how it's been in my experience, though Mervyn's unfortunately named son Lynn says different. No idea how he could 'see' the magic in me, because I look at Elodie, miss Amelie, and Carter and don't see nothing of anything at all. They got some faint glows in their totems, ones hung around their neck, ankles, and biceps respectively, but so minor I wouldn't have even seen them if I didn't know what to look for. The way Kevin described it, Tina had Aether flowing around her, and I know for a fact it wouldn't have been her daily suite of Spells. She don't care for Mage Armour, doesn't wear Makeup, prefers soap and natural perfume to Deodourant, and doesn't use Enhance Allure because she hates that sort of attention. Only Spells she keeps on at all times is Hearing Protection, and all the boots would've had that on too because that's Standard Operating Procedure.

Except for Errol I guess, though I suppose he could've learned the Cantrip by now. I wouldn't put money on it, but miracles have been known to happen.

As for Detect Magic, it ain't useful for familiarizing myself with a Spell neither. I don't see the flows as they form like Chrissy seems to, and instead, all I see is nothing until the Mage Hand takes form. Then it glows bright with Aether, as if I needed the Spell to tell me the blue, spectral hand floating about is some sort of magic. Doesn't mean Detect Magic can't show me those flows taking form, but rather I'm not good enough with the Spell to parse all the information it gives me. It's the same concept as Detect Aberration, in that most novice users like Kacey will find themselves with a detection range of 50m, whereas I can detect Abby out to 500m with the same exact Spell. It's not that I'm getting more from the Spell than Kacey is, I just know how to read the signals better and glean information from the weaker feedback which she likely overlooks or doesn't sense at all.

It's no different how a master carpenter can look at a piece of wood and know it'll be no good for the job he has in mind, or how a blacksmith can hear a flaw in the metal and pound it out right quick. My lacking ability with Detect Magic is user error pretty much, so I gotta get good before it can do what I needs it to. Never one to waste a minute, I keep it on while we walk and eat our sandwiches, and even multi-task by Conjuring up Mage Hands and kicking them apart as we go, a fun sort of game that catches Elodie's interest right away. "Howie," she begins, her green eyes bright and cheery as watches me kick apart a Mage Hand again. "You are playing game, yes? May I play too?"

“Sure,” I say with a smile, Conjuring up a new Mage Hand right in front of her which she promptly claws out of existence. Makes a right happy little noise that’s somewhere between a squeal and a whoop which gets Old Tux to prancing beside her, and it warms my heart to see the two of them getting along. Problem is, she broke the Mage Hand too quickly for me to get any real practice in, but I let her have a few more tries before ruining her fun. And fun it is, because she thoroughly enjoys destroying the Mage Hand again and again, alternating between smacking, clawing, tearing, and even in one instance biting it apart like she done before. It’s like giving a knotted rope to a marty and watching it work out all its aggression against it, and believe you me, Elodie got herself a whole lot of it.

She knows how to move too, with a lightning-fast jab that could rival a pro’s. She don’t wind up and throw her fist out like she pitching for the Cubs, or windmill her arm for a big flappy hit, no she got a perfect extension on her arm and a little rotation in her wrist, to say nothing of how she keeps her shoulder almost perfectly still throughout the whole process. Bright and bubbly though she might be, Elodie strike like a seasoned predator taking down her prey, with optimal efficiency and no mercy whatsoever when it comes time to deal the killing blow. This ain’t the sort of thing you get from practice, not with how varied her strikes, claws, and thrusts have been, but all instinct and talent that comes from being wholly comfortable in her skin and familiar with what her body can do.

Gotta say, she a real diamond in the rough, one that'll take a lot of shine and polish to get Ranger ready, but if she got the drive and desire for it, then I reckon she could be one of the best.

Granted, having seen how her parents fight, that should hardly come as any surprise. Carter got himself plenty of military training, and while I ain't so sure about miss Amelie, she got the toolset to be a real powerhouse in any encounter she might find herself in. Can't rightly think of many situations where turning into a giant diamondclaw doesn't instantly give you the upper hand, and most of those are easily solved by having a friend with some utility magic nearby. Diamondclaw gotta go underwater? Have someone cast Waterbreathing. Can't fit into a tunnel? Minify and go. Need to hit something at range? Let a buddy do the shooting, or alternatively, dismiss the Spell and let the Bolts fly yourself.

Or do what Raja does and learn how to cast Spells in animal form. I imagine that's how he does it, Wildshape into a rhino then casts Conjure Armour to gear up. I wonder if you could use Conjure Weapon too and turn into sword wielding wulf or staff wielding bear…

Yeah, Wildshape is an incredible Spell, especially when you use it to turn into a massive, magical, death dealing beastie with swords for claws and an affinity for Abjuration Spells. Them other animals, not so much, but they still got their uses. Turn into a horse to carry more on the road, or a panther to go slinking

through trees, or a marty to move about unnoticed in town. In combat though, I'd probably avoid going toe to toe with anyone as a bear or rhino, because even with armour, animals have long since been outclassed by humans as apex predators, and that was before we had Aetherarms. Our lead has only grown ever since, so I'm not sure I'd want to Wildshape into anything besides a diamondclaw before going into battle, though I'm sure there are other animals that would do in a pinch.

Still would love to learn it though, but Carter doesn't say word one about teaching me, and I don't want to press the issue. Instead, I let Elodie vent some aggression against my Mage Hands for a minute or two before stepping in to change the rules so I can actually practice. "Elodie," I begin, and she turns her focus to me like a gryphikin spotting a duck. "From here on out, you mind if you gimme a count of five before hittin' the Mage Hand? I need time to prepare before you smack it out of existence."

"Okay Howie," Elodie replies, all too happy to comply and still having fun with the game. Then, as if it only just occurred to her, she tilts her head in thought to process her question before asking, "But why? What is there to prepare?"

"Well I'm doin' this for practice," I explain, and then continue one because she still looks a little lost. "The Mage Hand comes apart under impact because the force applied goes beyond the construct's limit, which causes the flows to unravel like a ball of

yarn rollin' downhill." Elodie cackles to hear it, just a short little guffaw that ain't ladylike at all, but is utterly genuine and all the more endearing for it. "So what I'm trying to do is manually maintain those flows with focused Concentration, which would allow me to do more with the Mage Hand than I normally would." Like fire off a shot from the Doorknocker without coming apart at the seams, which would allow me to Blast one barrel at a time instead of having to use both barrels for the sake of safety. Could even upgrade and use Marcus' twin Judges instead, giving me 6 shots a Blastgun before I gotta reload.

Would be one heck of a step up, though I'd have to get real good with the Mage Hand first, seeing how I'm not sure if I can shoot the Judge one-handed myself. The gun's got a whole lot of kick for a sidearm, more than most rifles in fact, as those 12-gauge Blast Cores pack a real big punch.

Nodding in sagely understand, Elodie says, "I see." Then she hits me with her eager eyes, ready and waiting for the next Mage Hand, so I cast the Cantrip and try not to smile as she counts out loud for me to hear. "1-2-3-4-5!" Rattling off the numbers like it's some kinda of race, Elodie rends my newest Mage Hand apart then takes a savage bite of her sandwich, which don't got no sauces because she didn't want no chimichurri, but makes up for it by having more cheese and meat than bread. "Again!"

I happily oblige, and for the next few minutes, it's the same pattern of cast, count, and destroy while I do my best to maintain the Mage Hand in the face of Elodie's ferocity. She even brings Old Tux and Cowie into the mix, directing them to nip to headbutt the Mage Hand with little more than a word or gesture. Both animals love the game almost as much as Elodie, though Old Tux seems a little miffed by the lack of tactile feedback when he chomps through the glowing fingers. Hardly seems like a good idea to be encouraging this sort of behaviour, but Old Tux is having so much fun I can't bring myself to stop him.

"Howie," Elodie says, after tearing my Mage Hand for the umpteenth time. "You say you are trying to maintain the flows, yes? But you are not doing a very good job."

First Chrissy, then Lynn and Kevin, and now Elodie. Seems like I've been getting put in my place when it comes to magic all too often lately. I ain't one to hold it against them though, because I'm always willing to learn. "How so?" I ask, all too eager for some feedback from someone who can actually perceive the flows and speak in full sentences. "Could you explain what I'm doin' wrong?"

Elodie tilts her head in thought, first to the left, then the right, then left again. "Mmm," she begins, making a non-committal sound as she thinks. "It is just wrong," she declares, before taking another bite of her sandwich and thinking about it some more. "Mage

Hand is soft and squishy, so you cannot make it hard and tough. The flows are too delicate and flimsy to be anything but."

Which is just all sorts of disappointing. Really thought I had something here, after so many weeks of fumbling around in the dark. "I see," I say, trying to sound calm and upbeat instead of disappointed and crushed, but Elodie sees right through me. "Well, thanks anyways. Least you saved me a trip down a dead-end path."

"What is this dead-end path?" she asks, glancing around at the surroundings. "This is the way back home, no? Then we go to New Hope."

"A dead-end path is a figure of speech," miss Amelie explains, and Elodie blinks a bit as she takes it in. "One that is to say a situation or course of action that leads no further, much like a dead-end path would." What follows is a whole slew of French as Elodie and her mama hash out what it means, leaving me free and clear to polish off the rest of my sandwich. By the time Elodie's got a handle on the term, I've long since resolved not to use any more figures of speech moving forward, because far as I can tell from what little French I can follow, Elodie takes words at their face value and has trouble understanding rhetorical nuance. Words have meaning, and the fact that those meanings could mean other things when words are put together in different ways is throwing her for a loop. Which to be fair is an issue a lot of

people have when learning a second language, or even when people speak the same language but come from different cultural backgrounds. You gotta know the lingo if you want to follow along, like how Michael came out and called himself a made man, which don't sound like much of anything if you don't know nothing about the Mafia.

Soon as Elodie's got a grasp on the term, she turns to me with a frown. "Howie," she begins, sounding all stern and matter of fact. "I did not say you are on dead-end path. You must listen to my words, yes? I only say you are wrong, so you must do it right instead."

She says it so plainly and simply, I can't help but smile to hear it. "Sorry Elodie. My mistake." Then, because I've no earthly idea where to go next, I ask, "So how do I do it right then?"

"I do not know," she declares, bold as can be. "I have two hands, so I do not use this Spell." She ain't rubbing it in, just stating facts, so I can't rightly hold it against her. "Again," she says, gesturing at me to Conjure up another Mage Hand for her to swat. "You practice and make progress yes?"

"Yeah, that's how it's supposed to go," I reply, finding renewed confidence in her straightforward demeanour and Conjure up a Mage Hand while trying to think of something new to try. I've been

trying to hold the flows together, maybe even harden and solidify them so the Mage Hand is tougher, but now I know that's not the way to go about it, but if the flows are too delicate and flimsy, how do I make the Cantrip more durable then?

"There are two ways to deal with the recoil from an Aetherarm," Carter says, out of the blue as he ain't said a word yet. "One is to keep the weapon tight to your shoulder or your arms fixed to absorb the recoil entirely, which works well with a rifle. With a pistol though?"

"You ride out the recoil," I say, instantly picking up what he's putting down since that's how I handle my sidearm. I move with the recoil; let it play out of even work with it to bring me to my next target before getting the gun back under control. Conjuring a Mage Hand in front of me, I cup its fingers like I would to catch a ball before giving it a good, measured punch. Not all out, but hard enough to make it come apart on impact. Before my fist hits though, I have the Mage Hand try to catch and move back with my knuckles, not so much absorbing the full force of the strike but rather going along with it. The Mage Hand still comes apart at the seams, but there was an undeniable moment, a fraction of a second in which the spectral blue hand was able to maintain its cohesion before coming apart at the seams.

But that moment there, that quarter of a second should be enough for me to maintain the Spell with Concentration, because then it's

not a matter of torn flows, but of overburdened ones as the Mage Hand exceeds its natural speed limits.

“Thank you Carter,” I say, doing my best to convey my heartfelt gratitude with my words and expression only for him to wave me off without a glance.

“You would have figured it out soon enough,” he says, as he brings his wife around a massive whitewood trunk. “We should shift now so we can arrive in New Hope before it is dark.”

Which is true and sort of a shame, because even though I got no interest in seeing him or his wife strip nude, I was kinda hoping I could watch them Wildshape and see if I could perceive any flows. Hopefully he’ll teach me the Spell himself then, because it seems like he’s changed his mind about me making friends with Elodie. Or maybe he saw how upset she was when I didn’t drop by for a few weeks and just wants his daughter to be happy. Whatever the reason, I really hope she doesn’t get hurt because of me, whether it be physically or emotionally since she’s such a sweet girl, but ain’t much I can do about any of it. I can’t stop someone from coming after me or the people I care about; the best I can do is strike first, strike hard, and show no mercy to my enemies.

A mantra I learned from Tim, and it's great advice, though everyone always laughs when I say it out loud. No idea why, but it's also real hard to follow through with while staying on the right side of the law. Still think we made a mistake by not going after the Pugly-Annies, and even though they have yet to make any moves after the kerfuffle in the Sherrif's Office, that don't necessarily mean they've forgiven and forgotten just yet. Don't much like waiting for the dagger to drop, like I got the Sword of Damocles hanging over my head, as I'd much rather seize the initiative and wipe out the Mafia once and for all.

Some innocents might die, get caught up in the crossfire or press-ganged into helping out, but in my opinion, that's a small price to pay compared to all the pain and suffering the Mafia inflict through virtue of their continued existence.

While Elodie's parents are off Wildshaping, I get to saddling up Old Tux. "He does not like to wear it," Elodie says, patting the piebald on the nose with a mournful expression, even though Old Tux himself don't seem to mind one bit. "It is not as comfortable as going without."

"You think I wear all this gear because it's comfortable?" Grinning as I take in her thoughtful expression, I say, "Most of the time, I could do without 90% of what I'm carrying, but that other 10% is when it really counts. Same with the saddle. I can ride bareback sure enough, but if we get into a fight, I need the stable seat and

the stirrups to brace against if I want to shoot or move fast. Reins also help give Old Tux direction if he should get spooked or panicked, so even though it ain't as comfy, he knows the deal well enough."

That said, I do feel for Old Tux, because soon as the saddle goes on, there ain't no more prancing to be done. It's his work uniform, and when he's working, he's wholly focused on the job, which is what makes him such a great horse. Still, he getting long in the tooth and deserves to have a proper retirement, one that don't got him confined to the ranch for most of his remaining days. Giving him a pat on the neck, I come to terms with the fact that he might be happier living with Elodie and her people than he will be with me and mine. I'll talk to Aunty Ray about it, and Tina and Chrissy too, but I don't think any of them will be against the idea of giving Old Tux to Elodie.

Which makes this our last ride out, because after this weekend, he won't be my horse no more. Ain't that a kick in the gut?

Making the most of what time I got left, I press my head against his cheek and give his chin a good scratch as Elodie heads over to pick up her parents' clothes and pack them away for later, before returning atop horsie Carter's back with a big, bright smile on her face. "Howie, it is my turn now," she declares, and it takes me a moment to realize she's talking about smacking the Mage Hand again. She's fixed on the game even though there ain't no

winning or losing, as she's just living her best life and I know she'll help Old Tux live his too. Beats heading out to a farm or a stud ranch at least, because she'll treat him like family, and he don't deserve anything less.

End of an era, my days of riding with Old Tux, but it's for the best. Still don't know if I'll be doing any real riding with or without him, not for the next year at least, so I buck up and head on out back to the compound and New Hope beyond it.

After Conjuring up a Mage Hand for Elodie of course, who promptly speeds through her count before tearing into it with glee. She's a touch too fast for my Mage Hand to react to, which means I gotta anticipate her strike and get moving before she strikes. When it comes to gunplay though, that's a cardinal sin, the number one reason why most people can't hit a man-sized target with a pistol from 25 metres away. They're all too ready for that recoil, maybe even afraid of it, so they drive the barrel of their gun down to counteract the recoil **before** firing off their shot. Which of course spoils their aim, and the solution to that is to tell them they're not supposed to control the recoil, but rather absorb it or ride it out. Now though? Now I'm supposed to go with the flow, which I can already tell will do terrible things to my aim, but so long as I'm using a pocket Blastgun like my Doorknockers or the Judge, then my Mage Hands should have no problem hitting their targets.

Theoretically of course, but there's still a long road ahead, as I Conjure up Mage Hand after Mage Hand for Elodie to strike. Makes for some entertaining practice at least, as she's having a ball and keeping me on her toes with all the various ways she attacks. Even gets on my case for putting the Mage Hand too close and has me move it further so she's really gotta reach, and after ten minutes of lunges and shifting back and forth from her daddy and mama's back, it's a miracle she has yet to fall off.

We're still a good 30 minutes from the compound when the thundercrack of gunfire spoils our fun, and I quickly move Old Tux to put me between the shooter and Elodie. Ain't as noble as it sounds, as I can tell the shot wasn't aimed at us, nor was it all that close either. Maybe twenty minutes hard riding back to the north east, which makes me think it ain't nothing but a hunter bringing down some game. That theory goes out the window as the gunshots continue to ring out, in a pattern too capricious to come from a semi-automatic. Three shooters at least, all using bolt-action rifles and firing them off as quick as they can, that's what it sounds like to me, meaning someone brought a hunting rifle to an Abby fight and ain't doing so hot because of it.

"Y'all continue on," I say, waving Elodie and her parents off. "That sounds like trouble, so I'mma bring Old Tux over to take a gander. Don't wait up, just head on in to New Hope without me and let my people know what's what."

“Okay,” Elodie replies, without so much as a word of argument. Taking her agreement at face value, I heel Old Tux into a canter to bring us towards the fight, only to quickly realize there are two sets of hoofbeats still following along behind me. Glancing back, I give Elodie a questioning look, and she has the decency to at least look ashamed as she follows behind in spite of my orders. “Papa and mama do not agree,” she says, giving me a little shrug as the two people turned horses give me a bit of side-eye on the go. “They want to follow and see what is the problem.”

“Fair enough,” I say, biting my tongue to keep myself from saying anything about absolving myself of blame should Elodie get hurt. Mostly because I don’t want to put that out there and tempt fate, but also because it ain’t true. Doesn’t matter whose decision it is to bring her along, I’m gonna do everything I can to keep her safe and sound regardless. “Can you still keep your seat on horseback as a diamondclaw?”

Elodie shakes her head, which gets her green-highlights to gleaming in the sunlight. “No, I cannot keep balance while standing on my wrists and ankles.” To keep her curved talons from digging into Carter and Amelie’s soft horse flesh. Explains the adorable diamondclaw waddle, as I never did get a good look at her paws. “*Pour-quoi*?” she asks, wondering why I’d ask something so silly at this particular moment in time.

I meet Carter's eyes, or one of them at least, and he gives a little huff in return, one that says 'I know how to handle my business' whether you be a horse or a man. "No reason," I say with a smile, and Elodie smiles back because that's just how she is. All the while the gunshots are still going, with long pauses as the shooters stop to reload their bolt-action rifles. Sounds like they only hold 4 rounds max too, given the pattern of shots, which fits with what Fireforge offers. Can't give an exact model, but their weapons are meant for shooting elk and hoggi's, not home defense or Abby warfare unless you got no other option.

Terrible iron sights and tiny capacity aside, most Fireforge offerings are Single Core Aetherarms. That means 40% of that 10 Grain, 22 caliber bullet is being used to power Efficient and Prime, which gimps it right from the get go. Another 20% for your standard Distant and Extend Duration Metamagics to stretch your effective range from 40m to closer to 500m, and you don't got a lot of Grainage to work with when it comes to power. Maximize and Intensify is what these particular rifles got, or at least that'd be my best guess seeing how they ain't Silenced, but I seen a lot of strange Metamagic loadouts that don't make no sense. Stabilize to reduce recoil on a bolt-action, Precision to increase accuracy on a revolver, Quicken on a gun with a 10-round internal magazine that can't be expanded, there are all sorts of wacky weapons out there, and while I'd never buy one, there ain't as many informed buyers out there as you'd think.

Doesn't take more than fifteen minutes for me to catch wind of the fight, and I let Cowie down and gesture for him to stay close to Elodie before proceeding any further. Drawing my Model 10 and both Doorknockers, I keep one Blastgun on either side with both hammers cocked and ready should there be any Abby lying in way. As always, I proceed with my own safety in mind, but soon as I lay eyes on the conflict in question, I realize my presence here is all but unnecessary. Don't come as no surprise to see Old Clayton in his jean overalls there, fighting side by side with two of his shirtless buddies while playing ring around the rosie with a small pack of about a dozen merhounds. Well, small now that the herd's been thinned out, as there a trail of them dead doggies leading back northeast as Clayton sits in his saddle hurling all sorts of obscenities at Abby. "**C'mon you shit-eating, scum-sucking, sorry excuse for a hound**," he shouts, his gravelly, smoke-damaged voice sounding strained from over use. "**That the best you got? I have old socks tougher than you. Go eat some fucking grass and drown yourself in mud, because that's the only way you'll ever contribute anything to your Proggie. Stick to chasing blind chitter rats, mushroom for brains, because at least then you got a chance.**"

Harsh words, even for Abby, and he don't let up even for a second as him and his weave their way through the trees just ahead of the pack. A poorly coordinated pack if there ever was one, meaning there might be some truth to Clayton's insults. Or at least there would be if my Detect Magic Spell wasn't pinging to show flows of Aether literally spewing out of his mouth as he continues his unending tirade of insults to keep them doggies hot

on his heels. That Spell there is what we in the business call a Challenging Shout, which is a Third Order Enchantment which causes multiple targets to fixate on the caster in a hostile manner. Really draws their ire it does, to the point where they'll crawl through fire and glass to get at them, or at least that's how it is with Abby. They ain't all that great at resisting the Spell, while most people can shake it off fairly easily, with the real downside being the need for continued taunts to keep your target on the hook.

It's a fun Spell, probably the most acceptable Enchantment to learn aside from Battle Ballad and Rallying Cry, and it's brought about some real fun contests where people do their best to one up each other with clever insults and witty comebacks. Course, the words don't really matter when it comes to the Spell, only the emotions and vitriol behind it, as Abby don't understand English or any other language really, but the Magic makes sure the full sentiment gets passed along.

Riding in at an angle, I move in alongside the pack and start shooting, picking off the doggies one by one with my armour Penetrating pistol. That's the real issue they're having here, as they gotta hit the doggies in the eyes, mouth, or ankles to do any real damage from head on, whereas I can shoot them centre mass and drop them where they stand. I take my time, keeping my Doorknockers poised between the pack and myself while I shoot, reload, and shoot some more, but it's all smooth sailing as Clayton strings them along and I put them down one at a time.

Don’t take more than a minute to clean up the fight, and I gesture at them to rest up and see to their tired horses while I bring Old Tux on a circuit around the area.

Ain’t no more Abby around, not according to my eyes, ears, and Detect Aberration Spell, and then and only then do I whistle to let Cowie know we’re all clear. Carter and miss Amelie come walking in with Elodie all too quickly, which tells me they didn’t wait where I told them to wait. Then again, the only reason Carter ain’t calling the shots is because he a horse who can’t talk, so I suppose most of my orders are superfluous to begin with. Putting my Model 10 and Doorknockers away, I approach Clayton with hand in plain sight just in case him and his are feeling twitchy. “Anyone hurt?” I ask, and all three men shake their head in the negative. “Y’all done some fine work, no two ways about it.”

“They took ‘em,” Clayton growls, and the look on his face is almost animalistic with rage. “Creasy and the women along with all the kids. Walked them right out of our home.”

“Who took ‘em?”

“**Abby!**” Throwing a hand out to gesture at the lake, Clayton snarls, “That fucking Mindspire did something, a Suggestion or-or Enthrall or something. Walked them right out of their houses and

into the waiting pack, while those frogs and mudkippers kept the rest of us busy."

My heart drops as I consider all the angles, and just to be sure, I ask, "They took your people alive?"

"**Yes**!" The sheer rage and desperation coming off of Clayton is painful to behold, and his buddies don't look much better. "We cleared out the Abby pinning us in and our people down, but they split up soon as they were out of earshot. We split too to follow after, but this group didn't have anyone. I need your horses to double back and chase them down. Take ours."

I glance at Carter, who shakes his body, but not to say no. Instead, Elodie hops off and mounts up on her Mama instead, while the now riderless Carter moves to stand alongside Clayton and offer his services. "I'll come with," I say, gesturing at the other two to come on over. "Elodie, you ride for New Hope and tell them what happened. They'll send Rangers to help, and they'll know how to find me. The rest of us will ride double up to Mueller's Quay and borrow horses from them." And guns too hopefully, as well as people to use them, though I don't got high hopes there.

"I got no time or inclination to deal with those fats fucks," Clayton growls. "I need to find my wife and kids. All of them before – " The man cuts himself off before he can give voice to the horrors in his

heart, because we all know there's only one reason why Proggies take people alive.

To turn them into living, breathing incubation pods for birthing smarter, more powerful Abby. For the most parts, you are what you eat applies to Proggies and the Abby they spawn, but there are certain aspects of Abby production that's easier to outsource, like providing human levels of intelligence to Abby. There's something about the human brain that makes it special, better than any other brain out there in terms of proportionate size, complexity, connectivity, and so much more, and most Proggies learn right quick that it's easier to implant their fungoid spores into human flesh and let them blossom into intelligent Abby than spawning them outright themselves.

And the worst part is? Proggies are quick to figure out how to keep their incubation pods alive, meaning anyone unfortunate enough to be caught could end up spending weeks, months, or even years as a monster spawning factory. Men, women, children, it don't matter what reproductive organs you got or what stage they at, so long as you got a working brain and functional body, a Proggie can use you in a pinch.

"Any of your people wearing something distinctive?" I ask. Blood works better, but folks tend to react poorly when I ask for that. "A pendant, a bracelet, earrings, something unique that you got a clear photo of?"

“Creasy’s got a locket,” Clayton replies, hopping up on Old Tux behind me before pulling out a photo from his wallet. It’s a much younger Clayton and Creasy looking happy as can be at what looks to be their wedding. The pendant is there clear as day, a hand carved bit of antler shaped into some sort of prickly pocket thing with two orb looking things inside. “It’s a chestnut husk,” Clayton says, and I can sense his eyes burning a hole into the picture as he clings fast to hope. “We’re both from West Virginia, where there’s plenty of chestnut trees. Got C&C engraved on the two nuts inside, for Clayton and Creasy.”

The man’s voice almost breaks then and there, so I give him a job to focus on. “That’s perfect. You hold that picture up right there for me,” I say, already rummaging through my pouch for what I need for the Ritual while heeling Old Tux on ahead. Ain’t no path for him to follow, just a general direction, but Carter moves on ahead to lead the way and my horse falls in behind him. Gives me the freedom to focus on the Ritual as I cup my Chrysoprase gem in hand, a pale turquoise stone smoothed and rounded out like a plum sized egg. There’s a hole in the upper third of it, with a fine brass chain threaded through it, and I let the gem hang free while looping the chain around one finger. My Mage Hand brings over a pinch of powdered ash, which I smear over the gem while keeping the image of Creasy’s pendant in mind and nothing else. Ain’t much to look at, but it’s distinctive to be sure, and though the link will be weak seeing how I ain’t ever seen or touched the object in real life, that doesn’t mean one won’t be formed.

Them's the requirements for Locate Object, a Second Order Spell I'm using this Ritual to cast, but I've long since learned to circumvent them using a few tricks. Like the photo in Clayton's hand that shows the pendant so well, and his emotions towards it and presence behind me, I feed all of that into the Ritual as my phantom hand goes through the motions of tracing out sigils in the air and I Intone the words to a chant which I've long since forgotten the meaning of. Mostly because my daddy never really cared to tell me much about it, since it didn't matter what I'm saying. What matters is my intent, and the urgency behind it as I pour everything I know about Creasy into the Spell as it takes form. The image of the pendant remains fixed in my mind, but I also throw in the sound of her voice, the cadence of her sales pitch, the taste of the cider she handed to me and more. Add to that the emotions pouring off of Clayton as he holds the picture in hand, and it should be enough for the Spell to latch onto the correct object worn by the right person we're racing against the clock to save.

Her and the children of Clayton's village, his kids and the kids of everyone who lives there.

With the final word of the chant complete, I blow out a puff of air onto the pile of chalk held out by my Mage Hand, and cover the turquoise stone in a faint mist of white powder, one that moves along with us as Old Tux brings us away. The chalk dust forms up

into a cloud as we ride, one orbiting the stone and pulling it towards my two'o'clock, and I shout as much for Carter's sake. The other two riders ain't the best horsemen, nor do they know how to guide a horse without reins, but Carter moves unerringly in that direction a step after Old Tux. My smart horsie knows his directions, though to be fair, I also put pressure on his right side with my heel to guide him the right way, so far as Clayton can tell, I'm the one leading the way, while Carter is just a horse taking cues from Old Tux underneath us.

"Forget Mueller's Quay then," I say, keeping an eye on the gemstone which is now pointing straight ahead and bringing us away from the village I done just left. "We're not far," I add, as the gemstone is at a 20-degree angle almost, measuring from a straight line down, while 45 is the most it will pull even when we're right on top of our target. "Don't worry," I add, sensing Clayton's anxiety as he leans forward like that'll get us there any faster. "Them Abby went to great lengths to take your people alive, so they'll stay that way for a good while yet. Not to mention this looks like we're moving inland, and I got it on good authority that the Proggie is somewhere under the lake." Least I hope it is. The entrance I pointed them to was in a pretty central location, but Proggies are exceptional tunnellers and this one has had the better part of 18 years to burrow wherever it pleases.

No, it ain't underground. Can't be. Uncle Teddy said the Mindspire and Proggie are both underwater, which is why they gotta train up for the mission. Creasy and them kids will be fine.

Clayton don't say a thing, but I gotta keep talking just to make sure he understands how this is gonna play out. "Your people are alive and well, and they're gonna stay that way," I repeat, more for my own benefit because I gotta believe it before I sell Clayton on this plan. "So once we find them, we make sure they're not moving and then hunker down to wait. The Rangers will be here right quick, so we'll leave it to them to get your people back safe."

"The hell we will," Clayton growls, his voice almost giving out as he does. "You just get me and mine there, and we'll handle the rest."

"You don't got the guns for this fight," I say, and the cold, hard truth hits the graying man like a ton of bricks. "Your rifles hold four in the clip, and you got no sidearms whatsoever. I got a Rattlesnake and a Model 10 with 6 shots each and 2 double-barreled Doorknockers with a 5m range. We ain't handling shit, not when it comes to an assault on Abby who already dug in. Best case scenario, they cut and run with your people. Worst case? We push too hard, move too fast, and they kill your people and skedaddle." After devouring them of course, so they can bring that biomass back to big momma Proggie, because waste not, want not. "We don't got the heat for this fight and you know it, so our best option is to sit tight and wait for backup."

“You can sit and wait,” Clayton says, lacking any heat in his cold rage, anger directed not at me, but at the Abby who done took his wife, his kids, and his people. “All you need to do is get us there, and me and mine will bring the heat.”

My gut instinct is to shrug and say, “Your funeral,” but I know that ain’t true. If they go in after their people, there’s no way I’ll sit out on the sidelines and watch. I ain’t gonna encourage him to go in either, so I don’t offer my guns just yet, hoping that cooler heads will prevail once we arrive at our destination. That said, I don’t got high hopes of things working out like that, and I get the feeling that I ain’t making it back home to New Hope tonight.

Sorry Josie, Noora. I know I promised to be back home by Friday night, but duty calls, and while I ain’t no Ranger or even the Firstborn no more, I haven’t hung up my gunbelt just yet.