Author's note: I'm gonna backstep on Han boy's hand injuries. Clean broken wrist rather than permanently crippled hand, because the latter seemed a bit much. And impossible to recover from. That's all.

"*Stop hand*."

That's how I translate the demand, as those are the literal words he uses. 停手, which are literally stop and hand. I'm sure someone who understands the nuance would translate it a little different, but I get the meaning well enough to punch Hán Wén Xuān one more time before leaving him be. I ain't stopping because I was told to. I'm stopping because this here be the line, one I ain't about to cross just yet unless someone makes me. Somewhat gently depositing my supposed nephew onto the cobblestone road, I glance over at the familiar speaker who finally dropped his Settle in Shadows Spell and stopped hiding in plain sight.

Then, feeling sheepish over how I treated him last, I draw myself up to full height and give him a tip of my hat, only to remember I left it hanging on the fence post behind me. "Sword Saint Mu Bai," I say by way of greeting, feeling too silly to clasp hand to fist like all them other Qin do. "Good to see you doing well." Nudging Hán Wén Xuān on the should with my boot, I add, "Or well enough I suppose. Shame they keep stickin' a man of your calibre with

babysittin' duties." The pleasantries out of the way, I turn slightly to address the people behind me without taking my eyes off the Sword Saint, a man capable of blocking a Bolt with his sword. A skill I respect even if he failed to block the next two, but he survived it without falling over, as I don't think any one of my shots even penetrated.

"Sasha?" I say, making sure she's paying attention. "Keep Masha trained on the Sword Saint will you? If he so much as twitches a finger towards his sword, feel free to light him up."

Sasha grunts in reply, but not in an affirmative sort of way. It's more of a 'don't teach your grandma how to suck eggs' kinda grunt. Probably clocked the cloaked swordsman early on like I did and marked him as the most dangerous fella out of the bunch even before I addressed him by title. He don't look all that threatening at a glance, as there's nothing about his appearance that really stands out. He's not ugly, but I wouldn't call him handsome either, with a strong chin, narrowed eyes, and prominent cheekbones blunted by his rounded, yet masculine face. He's got thick, black hair that ain't got a touch of grey yet, all naturally swept back and held in place by what looks like willpower alone. Wearing his greatcoat that matches every other Vanguards, he stands out due to his relaxed and almost charismatic presence, with shoulders loose and hands folded behind his back like he out for a nice little stroll.

Even if I never saw his skills, I'd know this is a man I want to fight beside, not against, because you don't pick up that sort of poise collecting bottlecaps.

Stern as he appears, an almost mischievous ghost of a smile flits across his face when he hears me directing Sasha to light him up if he twitches, as if he's holding back the urge to do so just to test us. Might also be that he agrees with my assessment, that his talents are wasted looking after petulant children and man-children, but he's just too polite to say.

He doesn't though, because he's here on business, namely keeping the Han scion by my feet alive. Don't care much about the fella's dignity though, else he'd have stepped in much sooner, so I get the feeling he ain't all in on the Han Family bandwagon. Might just be Elder Sang Chang… no, Sang Rang. No that's not it either. Chang Sang. That's the one. Maybe he's the one backing the Hans, and the Sword Saint is just being a good little follower. Shame that. He's got skills, but terrible judgement when it comes to who to follow, because one look at either little lord silk pants he's served last time around would've sent me running the other way.

Hán Wén Xuān ain't any better. What sort of man shows up on the Frontier and demands not one, but two fancy spider-silk suits to wear? I imagine they're both Imbued too, so the cost must've been ridiculous just to supply him with some daily wear. In a time when his people are probably struggling for food and housing no

less, though Fuyuan being in the Flatlands means they could've just put all those extra hands to work planting quick crops right away. Round these parts, we've had to resort to foraging for breadroot and alabaster nuts because prices have gotten out of hand. We still got enough to eat so as not to go to bed hungry, but only because Miss Fiona spent a full week planting and magicking caddishes and potates for all of our gardens as them tubers can keep growing throughout the winter months.

And now I get to harvest me a spider-silk suit, because everyone present saw me make the bet. Rather than risk alarming the Sword Saint, I leave Hán Wén Xuān where he lies and step back to allow his men to come treat him. They got some first aid skills, but in the interest of being cordial, I add, "If y'all need medical treatment, Miss Alice is a nurse and will look after the young master for a fee. I'll even ask for the friends and family discount for my nephew here, so a hundred fifty ought to cover it." Pointing at one of the Vanguard who's treating the man-child, I add, "Don't you cut up those clothes either. The suit and pants are mine."

Hú Dié helps with the translation, and I get a few darks looks but a lot more amused ones from the rogue's gallery of old world and Frontier born Vanguard. There are a fair few of the latter in this group. Not as many as in Jinfeng's cadre, but out of twenty guards, six can't be more than sixteen, which is a fair few proportionally. Old enough to fight if you ask me, but then I look at all them fresh faces and wonder if maybe, just maybe, sixteen is a touch too young to be going to war. Not everyone is cut out for it

after all, and while I can't make any judgement about these kids here, I don't much care to find out firsthand.

Brings to mind that kid lying gut shot in the Badlands while crying for his mama, all because he had the misfortune of following Ao Tian into battle against me. I did what I had to do in the circumstances, but that don't make it any easier to stomach.

Maybe it's my age showing as I grow into a more mature Howie, or maybe it's all the introspection I went through when I thought I was gonna die, but lately I been looking back on all my exploits and feeling more than a little regret. Even though I was justified in almost all of my kills, that don't feel like enough no more. Hitting those women and children with a Fireball in Pleasant Dunes? Drowning that mafia kid in a wash bucket? Leaving little Dick to bleed out after I gutted him clean? All moves I regret making, though granted, a lot of the last bit comes from the fact that he lived. Got a lot of regrets these days, chief among them being the death of Deputy Corey Macintyre, but I ain't been able to track down his widow or three children. They just up and left Rimepeak on a boat headed west, and I can only hope they made it through the Convergence in one piece.

All of which to say that I ain't looking to add more regrets to my list, like killing six Qin kids who had the misfortune of drawing the short end of the stick when it comes to baby sitting duties. So I wholly intend to leave things as it is and not rock the boat any further, a move that wins me a few points with Sword Saint Mu

Bai. “*A word of warning*,” he says in Qinese, and even though Hú Dié starts translating for me, I’ve more or less given up on the charade since Jinfeng saw right through it. Problem is, I only understand conversational Qinese, so when the Sword Saint breaks out one of those idioms they so love to use, I’m left at a complete loss. “*Huái bì qí zuì*,” he says, and all I can do is blink and turn my head to catch Hú Dié’s translation.

“*To be guilty of possessing a jade*,” she signs, which ain’t all that clear if I’m being honest. She sees it too, and explains, “*There are times when possessing a treasure can itself become a crime, as others will covet what you have*.”

Seems a bit backwards to blame the victim, but the Qin do have some backwards notions. Either way, he’s talking about the Arcane Grimoire, though I long since clocked how it was worth far more than expected. I suppose some folks from Jinfeng’s cadre ended up talking, because I trust Mr. Thornwick well enough not to blab about what I brung him to appraise. Largely because Gunnar trusts him, and ain’t none of his industry secrets have gotten out, so the leaks gotta be on Jinfeng’s end. Or maybe this was the plan all along. My mother’s brother hands me a hot potate, one too valuable for me to give up easily, but also too dangerous for me to keep for myself. Leaves me no choice but to hand it over or ask him for help, is what I suppose the plan could’ve been. Well, too bad for them, I ain’t all that interested in keeping the Arcane Grimoire, because even if I don’t got a source for Fourth Order Spells, I’d soon languish at Third Order than risk

Attuning to something that's so obviously wrapped up in mind magics.

I already got two Mimics in my head I gotta guard against. I don't need more on plate, not from some mythical metal that holds all manner of information and can meld directly into my brain. Danny and Sasha both think I'm much too cavalier about what goes into my Grimoire Script, as there do be poorly written or intentionally malicious Scripts out there that could do some real damage if you Invoke them. I do my due diligence though, and walk myself through the logic of it all, and if it don't make sense, then I work at it until it does. Spencer calls it Spaghetti Script because I ain't all nice, neat, and orderly about it, but so long as it makes sense to me, I call that good enough.

And the Arcane Grimoire given over to me by Jinfeng last year? It don't make no sense at all and stinks to high heaven.

Seems like Mu Bai ain't holding grudges over our clash in the Badlands, which is good because he seems like a dangerous man to upset. "Ten thousand dollars," I say, just throwing a number out there. "That's my price for what you want. I take cash, precious gems, metals, or useful Spell Cores. I'll accept Artifacts too on a case-by-case basis, but don't expect top dollar for them as I got no guarantee that they won't be second hand."

Mu Bai gives me a look of stern disapproval, and for a second, I think it's because he don't like how I'm extorting the Republic. Then he raises an eyebrow ever so slightly, and I catch a hint of amusement too, one that tells me I set my price too low. "A hundred thousand dollars?" I tentatively say, earning me a deeper frown, so I change it up to, "One million dollars." That earns me a slight nod followed by pursed lips, so I add, "And that price is only good for the next few months. You know how it is with inflation and all."

Boy do I ever. Food prices have gone up, but wages have stagnated, so folks are getting priced out of everything these days. Still, a million dollars is a big chunk of change, but not exactly unattainable for a government like the Republic. I mean, at the current Federally mandated minimum wage of 5 dollars a day, that's an expected salary of $10,400, so employing 100 minimum wage workers for a year will run you just over a million. Same goes for about 33 Rangers, and there are a whole lot more than 33 running around these parts, so a million dollars ain't as unattainable as I previously figured.

Is what I tell myself while grappling with the sheer scale of economy that I'm dealing with, as I would've been happy with ten grand.

Fact is, I ain't none too happy to be demanding a million dollars either, because it ain't like money grows on trees. Granted, you can get a fair bit from Aetheric Condensers, but you'd need

52,000 of them to pump out a million dollars worth of Aether in a day. Maybe less if they're more efficient and well fed than mine, but still. That's a lot of dead Proggies, more than what's been killed in 20 years on the Frontier if I had to guess, seeing how that works out to 50 kills a week every week since the Advent more or less. Granted, ten thousand of them working for a year would get you the same, and that's a slightly more realistic number, but only if you take the Frontier as a whole, rather than just Fuyuan.

Meaning that if push comes to shove and the Republic really does pay out a cool million for the Arcane Grimoire, it ain't the big dogs up top who gonna suffer.

I threw it out there though, and I can't really take it back. Suppose if they do pay, I'll have to make sure the money gets back to my mama's brother minus a percent or two for my troubles. And taxes, though as an Independent, I'm still not entirely sure how that works anymore. That's neither here nor there though, as I focus on what matters, namely figuring a way to smooth things out with the Republic once more.

Or make more waves as it were, because I'm less of a Controller and more of a Disrupter. "You sure you backed the right horse in this race?" I ask, meeting the Sword Saint's eyes without flinching. Ain't easy, as he got a piercing gaze that sees right through a man, and I don't care much for it. "I don't know much, but I know the likes of Prince Gong and this fool will only lead the Republic to ruin here on the Frontier. Either that or they gonna

need a big attitude adjustment before they ready to do right by your people, and I ain't entirely sure they capable of such." Sucking through my teeth, I curl my lip in a self-derisive sneer as I think back on yet another regret. "Y'all would've been better off backing Ao Tian, or working on getting him out of prison. Least he knew how to fight for what he wanted. Should've never let him take the fall for that fool of a prince."

I ain't saying all of this for the Sword Saint, though I do hope to sway his loyalties a bit, as his employer do be taking in all sorts of idjits. No, I want the other Vanguard to hear this, the Frontier born especially, because this is their future we talking about, and there's no way they're pleased to see one of their own fall on their sword to rot in American prison, or some jumped up young master from the old world show up acting like he owns the place.

In reply, the Sword Saint pauses to choose his words carefully, only to hit me with, "*Zhōng zhēn bù èr*," he says, another idiom I have no grasp of, but Hú Dié translates it as, 'loyalty without wavering. "*A thousand pieces of gold cannot buy back a promise once broken,*" he continues, a stance that don't deny he don't approve of recent moves made by Elder Chang Sang, but don't leave much wiggle room either.

"And what's the price of one man's honour weighed against the future of the Republic here on the Frontier?" I ask, eliciting a deep and introspective gaze from the Sword Saint. "Don't get it twisted. What happens to the Republic don't got nothin' to do with me, not

as I see it. Same goes for the Federation, the Métis Nation, or any other country really. I'm for the Frontier, and here in these lands where I was born, you can't afford to humour fools like him, especially if they callin' the shots."

Gesturing at the unconscious Han scion, I resist the urge to spit if only so as not to upset Aunty Ray who raised me to be a gentlemen. No idea what went wrong along the way, but I still try my best all the same. As for the Sword Saint, he don't got much to say in response, probably because he can't say nothing without sounding disloyal or critical of his backer. I ain't one to chase a wounded man out onto the road either, especially seeing how I was the one who injured him, and even offer them a ride down to New Hope for further medical treatment if they want it. They don't accept, so I send Tina and Aunty Ray into town to have Uncle Art check up on Hú Dié, while Chrissy decides she'd rather stay here in the village.

Which is fine with me as I send everyone off to go about their day since the big troublemaker is out cold and in no shape to make mischief no more. Plus, if I really want to keep track of their comings and goings, Sasha got a levitating Automaton we can make use of. I know Vicente is still gonna keep one of his people on the place, while Mr. Lund and Hazewalker don't look like they going nowhere, not even after I tell them they can pack it up and head on home. I get no respect, so rather than insist, I head on back with Sasha to ask about the Aetheric Condenser in not so many words. Only for her to tell me in no uncertain terms that she's got it handled, and that she not only decided to move the

Condenser, she's also rigged it with an explosive device to destroy it and anyone who might come looking for it.

Which is fair. I done asked her to handle it without me, and she's doing just that. I just don't care for it because I'm a bit of a control freak. End up giving her a budget for things like lead shielding and ventilation, one she graciously accepts before shooing me off so she can get back to her work. Then it's just me and Chrissy in the village for a bit, though Astrid and Elsinor show up soon enough to gush about what happened and pump me for stories about the Badlands. Granted, its mostly Astrid doing the questioning, as I get the feeling Elsinor would rather be pretending to read while watching Harald work, but he kicked her out a while ago for being too disruptive.

Which was showing his hand a bit, because I don't think Elsinor could be disruptive if she tried to. Girl wouldn't say boo to a mouse, so if Harald finds her distracting, it's not because of anything she's doing. Even though its still winter yet, young love is blooming in the air, and it's a wonderful thing to see. I know Harald though, which means its gonna be a slow burn, but Elsinor don't seem ready for anything more than admiring the scatterbrained genius from afar, so it all works out.

As for me? I ain't looking for love, and ain't ready for it if it should find me. That's alright though. I've got too much baggage to be taking on a wife or even a girlfriend anytime soon, so I gather up Bandit, Frowny, and Cowie and head back home with Chrissy to

do a bit of crafting. Could make more Dreamcatchers, but Chrissy deserves a day off too. Could build up a backlog for her to ‘upgrade’ as it were once they’re all put into place, because whatever it is that she do, it’s gotta be done after they’re already hung and static. Soon as you pick it up to move it, that’ll ruin whatever it is Chrissy does to make them even better. That’s why most ain’t just hanging from wherever, they’re suspended in place so even if the wind gets to blowing, they won’t shift too too much and break.

So rather than put pressure on my sorta sister to do her thing, we hang out with the kiccaws in the house while I study some Spell Formulas. All Second Grade or under for the sake of speed, as I need to expand my options since it’s gonna be a whole new Frontier by the time spring rolls around. Already, Proggies be testing out their bigger, badder Aberrations like what they’re calling the Ironwing Harpy that almost done Spencer in while he was at the workshop. From what little I picked up, I gathered that these Ironwings ain’t just taller and tougher. They were Spellslingers one and all, with most utilizing something along the lines of Frost Barrier or Barkskin to make themselves even harder to kill.

Wasn’t all defensive either, as a fair few were flinging Ice Knives and Frost Grenades, which leads me to think the Harpy Proggie is somewhere north of New Hope, rather than south as most suspected. Granted, they been known for using Ice Knives before, but now that we got a clear Frost theme going, that tells us the Proggie is familiar with the cold and how to weaponize it. That’s

just how it is sometimes, which means we'll probably find it somewhere in the Snake Fang Mountain Range.

The Rangers will know more, as I'm just an amateur enthusiast when it comes to tracking Proggies, and it'll probably stay that way since I ain't ever gonna get training.

Time was I'd be down in the dumps for a good little bit after remembering that much, but these days, it's just how it is. Getting back on topic, them Ironwings were on a whole different level from your standard rank and file Harpy, and they would've done some real damage if not for two facts. One, there weren't all that many of them, and two, they didn't much care to work together as a flock. That's how it sometimes be with stronger Abby, especially when they don't got anyone to pull rank on them. If they'd come with a whole flock of standard Harpies, then they might well have been a bigger problem, but as things stand, they got cleaned up pretty quick and easy since folks were all staying indoors for the most part and packed together in the denser parts of the inner district.

The real problem was revealed after, when they cooked all them Ironwing Harpies down and didn't get much in the way of Spell Cores. Rule of thumb is that most Ferals that can cast Spells will typically have a Spell Core, as they usually ain't smart enough to figure out Spellslinging for themselves. Now, Frost Stones, Elemental Barrier, Ice Knife, and even Bark Skin ain't all that valuable as far as Spell Cores go, as there are easier ways to get

those defensive Spells, while the offensive Ice Knife is only rarely used in tech as there's a somatic component involved where you gotta chuck the knife. I seen folks get around this by making a spring loaded, underbarrel attachment that lobs the spell out through a barrel of its own, like a grenade launcher almost, but one that you gotta aim.

So missing out on those Spell Cores ain't no big deal, until you account for the fact that this means most them Ironwings were natural Spellslingers. Not entirely unheard of, just exceedingly rare, as Proggies can't pump out Ferals who can learn Spells all that easily, or even on purpose since it relies on the Abby itself figuring things out on their own. So that means the Harpy Proggie been pumping out hyper intelligent Ironwings, or at least intelligent by Feral and gobbo standards. Intelligent enough that most pick up the knack for Spellslinging all on their own after being exposed to it by the minority of Ironwings in their group who do have Spell Cores.

Keep in mind, most people in general have trouble picking up the knack for Spellslinging beyond basic Cantrips. What's more, there ain't a single case of an animal casting Spells outside of Magical Beasts, meaning an animal that done eaten a Spell Core to become an Innate. Since Ferals are based on animals for the most part, they tend to lack natural Spellslinging capabilities outside of Spell Cores or Spell-like Abilities given to them by their Proggies.

Except in one specific scenario that ain't all that pleasant to think about, namely when Proggies use a human as the base to spawn Feral Abby.

I ain't talking about humanoid Abby, like the bipedal Goatmen or dog-faced, stone-slinging Rotherds. Even though they walk on two legs, they're still largely based on animal biology with a little bit of human physiology mixed in. Which is the same physiology Greenskins use for the most part, so there's gotta be a reason besides mimicking the human race. What I'm talking about though is when a Proggie gets a hold of a living, breathing human, one they then modify so that they can spawn Abby right off of them.

I'm not talking about stealing human DNA. I'm talking about embedding alien growths into your flesh, ones that grow into Abby and split off as fully formed monsters. Small, baby like versions granted, as they grow in time and with resources to sustain them, but monsters all the same. Proggies will do this with other animals too, as something of a learning curve for how to figure out the ins and outs of making canine, avian, or whatever flavour of Abby they're fixated on. Humans are on a whole other level though, because any Abby that spawn off of a person like that tends to inherit their intelligence more than anything else.

That's the only way I know how to get Ferals who're natural Spellslingers, and most the Ironwings that attacked New Hope last week were naturals. According to the papers, only one in twelve corpses yielded a Spell Core, though not all Ironwings

were killed as plenty of them got away. They just showed up to start something big, then flew the cuckoo's nest when things got hot, which already makes them about twice as smart as their smaller, uglier brethren.

And that's just one type of Abby from one small nest of what the Rangers believe to be a single Progenitor. What sort of nightmares are other nests cooking up?

We know what to expect from the Greenskins well enough. Typically, more Orcs and Goblins than ever before, led by Hobgoblins and High Orcs a plenty, smarter, stronger, tougher, versions of their lesser selves that typically learn a whole slew of Spells and Abilities. Ones that will work well together to create a deadly Evoker, a powerful Illusionist, an unstoppable Transmuter, or just an all-powerful close combat machine. There'll be more Bugbears too, a lot more than before, as well as the odd group of Ogres and Trolls to really ruin your day. Picture an Orc that stands 8 feet tall at least 6 feet wide, then add more horns, tusks, talons, and armoured hide for Ogres, or Regeneration for Trolls. Then make them smart enough to learn how to read and speak human language and you're almost there, because the true terror comes in their ability to craft. Not just weapons and armour, but full-on machines, ones they understand well enough to teach their Goblin underlings and set about mass producing all manner of implements of war.

Don’t even get me started on Giants, ones big and tough enough to treat 7.62x54mmR ammunition like bug bites while throwing out all manner of Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Order Spells.

The Soulless are even worse, because tough as it is to deal with a tide of Ghouls and Zombies, it gets even tougher when full regiments of Wights start showing up to the fight. I ain’t talking about one group all based on one corpse; I’m talking squads and companies of Wights with complimentary skills, utilizing not just Spells and skills they learned in life, but tactics too. Forget Zombies hiding underwater and imagine getting hit with an alpha strike out of nowhere as someone puts a Fireball right over top of your head, and follows up with single target Spells for any survivors. Or a Fly by bombing run to start off a hit and run assault that leaves you counting the seconds until the fighting starts anew if only to get it over and done with. Then there’s the simple option, which might well be the most effective, namely a group of dedicated close combat Wights juiced to the gills with Spells like Haste, Warrior’s Ward, Bull’s Strength, Cat’s Grace, and whatever else they can squeeze in, because they got a bullpen that’s both wide and deep.

There’s also the other option, namely getting overrun by Abominations, souped up Ghouls who’ve eaten enough goop to shed all pretense of humanity. A fate I myself might one day face if one of the Mimics in my head ends up taking me over.

Course, you also got your Death Knights and Revenant Mages, which is what happens when a dying body gives in to a Mimic and becomes something that's neither dead nor alive. Eventually, when we got Grandmagi on the Frontier, we'll have to deal with Liches too, humans who've fully forsaken their humanity to become the living embodiment of Undeath.

In contrast, Spellslinging Ferals don't seem like much of a threat until you remember that the lack of Spellslinging is the trade off Feral agree to in exchange for all that muscle, fury, and animalistic instinct they get. I wouldn't want to tangle with a wulf pack intent on taking my life, and I might never have to, because wulves don't know how to hate, or at least most don't. Ferals though? They'll hate you and die just to get a tooth or claw in you, all too willing to throw themselves into the fray and let numbers do the talking until either they're all dead, or you are.

How much harder would the Convergence have been if the bugs assaulting New Hope had more Spells to them? They only had a handful available to them, and even then, they claimed a whole lot of lives, like with the Burst Bolt Spitters working in tandem with the camouflaging Razorscythes, or the Enlarging Burrow Hulks that rampaged through the streets like one bug wrecking crews. Don't get me started on the Acid and Force resistant Dreadmaws who were a pain to deal with, as I could only really rely on the Wounding Imbuement of my polearm to poke away at their legs until their flesh rotted away. Then, once they were crippled or immobilized, I was free to finish them off, but I still need a proc from the Imbuement to make it happen.

That's why I'm studying up on some new First and Second Order Spells. Up until the Watershed, numbers was the name of the game, meaning you wanted Spells to slow or kill a whole lot of smaller, weaker Abby. Moving forward, those Abby are still gonna be around, but they'll also be bolstered by stronger, tougher Abby in the form of different strains or evolved variants, ones who will need to be taken out right quick before they take me out in turn. All it takes is one Spell to really ruin your day, so I need to expand my toolset in order to deal with these singular threats.

So Spells that I never would have used before are getting another look. Single target Spells like Magic Missile and Lance might soon have a spot on my list, and I might even get around to actually using Hunter's Mark on big important targets. I ain't all that great with Enchantments so Hold Person is a no go, but Abjuration has Force Bind which does something similar by holding a target in place with literal bands of Force. It's not as good because most Abby are vulnerable to Enchantment since it targets their often stupid and underutilized brains, whereas Force Bind is a flat-out contest of strength where most Abby excel. It's still an option though, especially if I'm up against something fast or exceptionally tough as it'll give me time to get all my ducks in a row for one, big, penetrating hit.

Or utilize the Divination Probing Projectile to figure out what Element my target is most vulnerable to. Up until now, I've gotten away with using Force against everything, but if more Abby start

showing up with Resistance to it, then I might have to diversify my weapons too. The Flamethrower on Sasha's Automaton is a start, while I also got the Big Stick for doling out big bursts of Mental damage if need be, but I wouldn't say no to an Ice Knife underbarrel attachment, or even a full-on Elemental Bomb launcher. Course, the best all-round choice for killing Resistant Abby would be one or three of Mr. Kalthoff's new Exorcist guns, which is what he's taken to calling his pistols that shoot out Paladin Smites.

Wild that, seeing as a Paladin has to channel Radiant energies into their weapon before delivering a blow in order to Smite their foes. No idea how Mr. Kalthoff turned that man-made Spell into an actual factual gun that hits Abby at range, but he did it and I want three. Unfortunately, he's not selling them yet and ain't even open to letting me test on in real world conditions, as there are still too many flaws he needs to work out. Starting with the massive diametre of the cartridge required to ensure every last Grain of Aether is transformed into Radiant energy in an instant. Forget 0.44 of an inch, or even 7.62. The Exorcist guns use a custom cartridge with a whopping 30mm diametre, which is round about the size of a bottle cap. Ain't no sense making a revolver that'll only fit two or three shells at most, so you're stuck with only one round in the chamber at all times.

Which is why I wanted three of them, but no dice. A real shame that, but it is what it is. The new reality of the Frontier means I'm gonna need more heavy ordnance to cut through the chaff and elites alike, which means spending more on new guns and special

bullets that's gonna cut into my paydays. Granted, I don't think I really need to go hunting for a living no more. I've made plenty already from selling houses in the quay, more than I ever dreamed of having, while I still got the proceeds from the Aetheric Condenser to live off of if need be.

And since I ain't ever gonna be the best there ever is without the proper training, then why am I still so gung-ho about risking my neck out in the wild Frontier?

I guess it's a question of who I wanna be moving forward. Do I wanna be the homebody who helps out around the village, doing odd jobs wherever I can while living the good life? Or do I want to rest, recuperate, and then eventually find love again so I can start my own family and raise my kids in a house with two parents? Third option is to go full corporate, and start something up with Danny, Sasha, and Spencer like he keeps suggesting, because we got the brains and know how to do a whole lot if we put all our heads together and worked on a single project at a time.

Or do I stay the course and continue my life as the wandering gunfighter and Spellslinger? Knowing what I know, I can already tell that I'll be pushing my luck even more than before in this newer, deadlier, post-Watershed Frontier, but might be that's for the best considering the ticking time bombs I got in my head. Chrissy says its safe, or at least one of the Mimics is, one who claims it's keep me safe from the other. Which ain't as reassuring

as it seems to think, like the Spider telling the fly to step into his web so he'll be safe from the wasp following behind.

Putting all thoughts of my uncertain future aside, I glance over at Chrissy who's been playing with Bandit and making him chase Illusory butterflies. It's a sight for sore eyes it is, our Princess so involved with the world around her and looking happy as a clam, instead of cold and emotionless all the time. Granted, most people who meet her today might still describe her as such, but I see a clear difference from just last year. Though her expression is still mostly neutral and impassive, there's a quiet contentment to her that wasn't there before, a warmth in her eyes and an exuberance to her demeanor that speaks volumes to her emotions. Not only is she happy, she's showing it, which might not sound like a lot, but it represents a world of change from how she used to be.

Mostly happy, but rarely showing it, or at least that's what I assumed. Hard to tell if Chrissy was ever sad or worried outside of the times when she openly declared it, like when she shut down after her daddy's death, and after my daddy's death too.

The Princess is so aware she even catches me staring, and gives me a little tilt of her head to ask what's going on. Don't gotta give her my warmest smile, because it's already there as I shake my head and say, "It's nothin' Chrissy. Just happy to see you happy is all." Gets me another tilt of her head before she takes this as

permission to come sit with me on my lumpy sofa chair that I still haven't fixed.

"Happy," she declares, before settling in with a sigh as she leads Bandit to come climb into her lap while Cowie gives me the baby eyes to beg for a cuddle too. Takes some rearranging of the kiccaws to get him into my lap, but the kiccaws are more than happy to make room because they love snuggling into his fur, and that's how Sasha finds when she comes looking for dinner a few hours later.

Ain't nothing to be done except head out to the Harbourfront, where I run into Vicente and his family having themselves a meal too. He quickly catches me up on what's going on with the Qin, which is pretty much nothing as they been keeping to themselves, even cooking their own meals or eating travel rations instead of sampling the local goods. Feeling a touch generous and maybe even a little guilty over killing so many of them before, I head over to the bakery after dinner to buy a choice platter of baked goods and meaty treats from Agnes before delivering them myself. "Figured y'all were sick of travel foods and could use some good eats," I say, handing the platter over to the Sword Saint after he opened the door. I suppose he figured it was best for him to stand in front just in case I was fixing to open up on some fools, but I'm just feelin' charitable is all. Seeing that a good number of the Qin also smoke, I head over next door and pay Olav to deliver a couple cartons of pre-rolled cigs too before turning down an invitation for a poker game and heading back to Sasha's with Chrissy.

Only makes sense since I don't wanna be too far away if the Qin try anything funny, but Mr. Lund seems ready to watch them all throughout the night, as I'm not entirely sure if he actually needs to sleep. I do though, sending Chrissy off to cuddle with Sasha by saying she probably feels lonely since she likely slept by herself last night. Had to leave the kiccaws and Cowie in the barn, because you don't just bring a bunch of birds and a bull over to someone else's house for a sleepover, but I still got Bandit. The snuggly little swamp panda is all tuckered out from chasing illusions around all afternoon, while I'm finally able to relax now that I ain't being pressed on all sides by feminine flesh. It's the best sleep I've gotten in weeks, and it's not until morning that I realize something's off about all this.

How come the Feds didn't send no one to find out what the Qin are here for?

I would've figured some pencil pushing big wig would've jumped on the chance to make a connection or curry favour with the Republic, but even though Tina sent word over the Radio, there ain't been no official visit from any Federal authorities. Once I've got a cup of coffee and some pancakes cooked by Chrissy in my belly, I start to wondering why that might be, and the answer ain't a reassuring one. If the Feds are no longer looking to work with the Qin, then it might be they're looking to distance themselves from them. Every Second Wave settler I brought back to civilization was downright terrified I'd be dragging them back to a

Republic work camp, so might be that sentiments have shifted now that the world knows what the Qin have been up to.

Then again, Hú Dié wasn't wrong in saying it was no different from Federal Prison. Might be easier to find yourself in a Republic work camp through no fault of your own, but it ain't like the Federal Justice System is without flaw.

That said, if the Feds ain't looking to curry favour with the Qin, then that's a big shift in policy that seems to have happened overnight. Might be because they don't gotta worry about the next Advent no more, not for another 20 years maybe, or might be because they've been reassured that the Republic no longer has the strength to bar the Federation from using the Gate the next time it's needed. Won't be until we're already using Sixth Order Spells and moving onto Seventh, because even though there's gonna be a mini-Watershed every time we move up an Order, there's only a significant, qualitative change at Fourth and Seventh Order, and possibly one more after Ninth Order too.

Which like I said, is at least 20 years away, so nothing to concern ourselves with just yet. Still worrisome though, because as much as it annoyed me to see the Feds trying to curry favour, it's a little alarming to see old world sentiments take root on the Frontier so quickly. Policy is written from the top down after all, so if the Feds as a whole are adopting this dismissive stance, I gotta imagine it's because there are old world settlers from the Second Wave in the upper echelons of High Command. Don't much care for that,

because it ain't like arrogance and idiocy are the sole providence of the young, like Hán Wén Xuān. There are plenty old people who are dumb and arrogant too, not to mention ignorant and unwilling to learn, so if they're writing policy without knowing the lay of the land, then that bodes poorly for the Federation too.

Seems like we all got our growing pains to deal with. Or should I say they, because regardless if it's the Federation or the Republic, it don't got nothing to do with me.

Don't know what I do have to do though, because for the first time in a long while, I'm feeling aimless, with no real reason to head out or stay here in one place. Ain't the worst thing in the world though, as I got plenty to do here at home, whether it be hitting the books, shoring up defenses, or improving things for me and mine as best I can. And as I bid farewell to the Qin delegation leaving under the cover of stealth, I head on home with Chrissy to do just that.

Aunty Ray said it best. Whatever may come, we'll get through it together. As one big, happy family.

- End of Book 6 –

Author's Note: Bit of a meandering ending there, but the idea I had before didn't pan out, not with the timelines as they were. I want some time to pass before the next important thing, so the easiest way to do that is with a clean break and timeskip. I want stuff to change and happen in the background, but I don't wanna suffer through those slow changes, so a jump seems nice. Moving forward, we're gonna see a bit more of a domestic Howie who might not be at the top of his game anymore, and will have to work his way back up to the top.

Either way, that's all I got for Book 6. I don't love it, but I don't hate it, especially since I knew going in that the latter half (which wasn't really half because I took too much time going through the big fights) was gonna be a transitionary period, setting up for what comes next. Here's hoping I can dive right into the thick of things and get the ball rolling, because I'm not taking any breaks until it comes time for my Christmas break. Sadly, with how it works out, that means I'll also be posting Book 7 onto RRL before the break, so I dunno how that'll work out.

NBD though. I'll figure it out when I get there. For now, thanks for reading, and hopefully I'll have something for you all come Sunday. Bye for now!