Carter’s probably gonna kill me.

Wouldn’t blame him either. Man sent his only daughter out into the world and trusted me to look after her, and now she’s thinking about signing on with the Pathfinders. Objectively, it ain’t the worst decision Elodie could make, as she could stand to learn a whole lot from basic army training. Could also end up dead in a ditch somewhere, a casualty in the war against Abby so very far away from her home. One that’s had her so miserable these last few days, and now she wants to go all in on it, and I don’t really how she made this abrupt decision.

Might be she thinks that this is her Path, the one she set out to find, and if so, then I can’t argue against her decision. She do be awfully well suited for fighting in the Deadlands, what with her natural agility and ability to navigate the swamps and marshes with casual ease. She’s pretty handy with that billhook of hers, and considering she can take a compressed Blast from the Whumper without injury, I’d say she’d make for a stellar Vanguard when she Wildshapes into a diamondclaw. An awfully big one at that, much larger than before. Wasn’t exactly tiny back then, about the size of a decent wheelbarrow, but today, she Wildshaped into a diamondclaw that was about the size of a wagon. Still smaller than what you’d find in the wild, and nothing compared to her mama who towers over the walls of their compound, but at some point, bigger ain’t always better.

So I'd say that in most scenarios, Elodie's Wildshaped diamondclaw makes for the perfect addition to any team, and the Pathfinders would be silly not to take the bright and cheery girl in.

The pang of grief in my chest is my first indication that I don't want her to leave, because I've grown accustomed to seeing her sweet, silly smile day in and day out. My reluctance ain't about romance or carnal desire; it's about losing a friend, and I got precious few of those, so Elodie's amicable companionship is much appreciated. Not that I've ever told her, or even shown it really, as I ain't good at showing emotion. Even if I ain't willing to marry the girl, I do care for her, and even daresay I love her like I love Chrissy and Tina. In less than a year's time, Elodie's guileless charm and joie de vivre has won her a place in my heart, and now her impending absence has got me feeling empty and lost.

Chrissy too, who's still sitting there and staring off into the distance with an Elodie sized gap between us. "Elodie leaving?" she asks, sounding so sad and forlorn that the shattered pieces of my heart burst apart once more. After a bit of a rocky start, they've become fast friends and maybe even Chrissy's best friend, as Elodie was the first person who truly understood and accepted her as she was.

“Maybe,” I say, scootching over to slip my arm around her shoulders and pull her in for a hug as we both watch the green-haired girlie disappear into the Métis section of the camp. Marched right on over to talk to the first person she came across, and she didn’t hesitate to go along with him to see this Adsila of the Wind. How Elodie even knew this woman would be there is a mystery to be sure, but I didn’t stop to think things through after her abrupt declaration. “Might not be though. Even if the Pathfinders are willing to take her on, that don’t mean she’ll start right away. I’m sure we’ll have time to say a proper goodbye.”

Chrissy makes a sad little whimper as she deflates next to me, and heartbreaking as it is, I’m heartened to see her emoting more than ever before. Time was, she’d just declare that she was sad and that was that, assuming she even did that much. I remember after her daddy died, she spent most her time just sitting around in a funk, so I worked extra hard to cheer her up every time I saw her. Would bring her and Tina out for walks through town, and hold both their hands as we did, even though I was at an age where I found it embarrassing.

Don’t think Chrissy ever made a sound like this, which ain’t to say she didn’t love her daddy. She just didn’t know how to emote back then, or maybe never bothered to because she did it all in her head. Don’t know if it’s better for her to show her emotions, but it brings her one step closer to being like any other girl her age, and that there has been the dream for ages. Ain’t nothing wrong with Chrissy as she is, but would be great if she got out of her head

more, and I think Elodie did a lot to help with that. She was a friend who understood her, talked to her in ways she understood, not just through body language and emotion, but also learning Arcane Sign Language so they could gab about whatever thoughts might come across their minds.

Mostly pointing out animals as we trekked through the swamp, as Chrissy do love cute animals. The gators are kinda adorable, and the birds beautiful as can be, but otherwise, the Deadlands do be woefully short on the cute and cuddly.

To make matters worse, Frowny's gotten awfully attached to Elodie in the last two weeks or so, and now he's wondering why she done run off without him. He's much too attached to Stella and Terrance to go a hopping off after her, but seeing him waddle forward a step or three while staring after her is heartbreaking to be sure, so I lift him into my lap and use my Mage Hands to pet him.

Been all of a minute since Elodie ran off, and her absence is already sorely felt, especially in the wake of the happy little birthday party we done threw for her. She loved every minute of it and had a big, silly smile on throughout it all, and now she done run off to join a foreign army. Well… maybe not foreign to her, as her papers do say she's Métis, not American, but the point still stands. To make matters worse, even though the Métis got themselves a pretty decent reputation overall, that don't mean

they squeaky clean. All it takes is one scumbag with a badge to take advantage of Elodie's trusting nature, and I'd be lying if I said wasn't worried for her.

Worried enough to sign on with her? Can't say that I am, not just yet, especially since there wouldn't be no guarantee that the two of us would be deployed together. Least with the Rangers, I could lean on Uncle Teddy or even some other contacts to see that I get paired with Tina, but the only influential Pathfinder I know is Storm Caller Sam Horne over in Nakoda along the Eastern Front. While a Storm Caller do be high up there in ranks, equivalent to a Marshal in the Rangers more or less, he's a little too far to help out in this instance here, to say nothing of the fact that I ain't seen him in two years, before everything went down with Pleasant Dunes and the Puglianos, so who knows how he's feeling about me these days. While he ain't as uptight as Uncle Rigsby, Sam Horne is a straight shooter similar to Uncle Teddy, which might well be why they all got along so well with one another and have since been sidelined on the Eastern Front, as that there is a thankless task with little upwards mobility and almost no expectations of success.

Well, less so for Sam Horne, seeing how the Emerald Plains ain't exactly bordering on the Divide and has since become a thriving agricultural powerhouse that supplies foodstuffs for many towns and nations on our little slice of the Frontier. They're also a burgeoning naval power, what with their investments into

harbours and shipyards in and around Deadlock Bay, but they ain't all there just yet, so who knows how that'll shake out.

Either way, the reality of it all is that I got little to no pull with the Pathfinders, so I can't really help Elodie none. Maybe her daddy can, as Carter's gotta have some sort of military history or training, and I get to thinking that maybe I ought to talk to Elodie some more and convince her to table her decision to join the Pathfinders until she has a chat with her parents. Sure, she's eighteen and legally capable of making these big decisions for herself, but that ain't the same as saying she should. Joining the army is a big decision, one I feel Elodie is taking much too lightly as she's treating it like hiring on a tutor or something.

Plus, that saves me from dying at Carter's hands once he learns I done let his little girl sign on for a ten-year stretch defending the Deadlands.

Just as I'm about to convince myself to go in and extract Elodie before she signs anything legally binding, I spot the silly girl come running out of a cabin with a goofy smile on her face. "Adsila of the Wind said she will guide me," Elodie exclaims. Sweet Frowny gets to bobbing and weaving with his little bouncy dance, so she scoops him up into her arms before continuing, "She had much more to say, but I did not understand, so I say I need you to come listen and help me understand." Extending a hand to help me up, she all but drags me and Chrissy along behind her as she heads

back to the Métis camp, and I go along with and wonder if I really should dissuade her from going all in on this right now.

I mean, she seems pretty fired up about it and is in higher spirits than she has been in days. Then again, I'm not entirely sure she knows what she's signing on for, because as cavalier as she might seem about taking Dakota Slim's life, Pathfinders do gotta police people sometimes, and I can't see her particular brand of conflict resolution working out all that great.

The Pathfinders got themselves a uniform just like any other military, but I ain't partial to it. They got these hooded canvas jackets that got a robe-like look to them, what with how one flap goes so far over the other like you bundled up in a blanket. Which according to what I know, was how the style originated, as the Native Americans took the blankets given to them by the explores and turned them into full on coats to wear outside during the winter months. Since it ain't winter, their spring jackets ain't as thick, but it still got the same cut to it, so it don't look all that stylish. It's like a trench coat almost, but instead of flaring out as it goes down, it's just a straight shot with no flattering cut to the cloth to show the shape of what's underneath. Course, it also keeps them well camouflaged even in plain sight, despite being a sandy brown that ain't seen all that much around these parts. It ain't the colour that does it, but rather the indistinct shape of their hooded profile that does the work for them, allowing them to blend into the shadows so long as it ain't all that bright out.

And in the Deadlands, I don't think it ever gets bright, as there's a persistent fog lingering about since the day I got here.

Course, not all of them are wearing the same jacket, as the woman sitting at the table Elodie leads me to has one in a more flattering cut, with a collar that turns up and proper lapels to give the jacket some definition. She's also got a lot more fringes to her jacket, which Elodie reaches out to tug on she heads over to her side and says, "This is Howie and Chrissy. They will help me understand, so could you say all of that again?"

"Of course Elodie," the older woman says, nailing the pronunciation with her French-Métis accent. Though not what you would call conventionally beautiful, with nothing delicate about her features which spoke of long days spent outdoors, this Adsila of the Wind has kind eyes and a warm smile as she watches Elodie take a seat at the table beside her and reclaim a cup of hot herbal tea. "Be welcome at our table, Howie and Chrissy," she says, with that distinct French separation in the syllables of our names. "I am Jocelyn Savard, a Sky Watcher in the Pathfinders. Would you like some tea?"

"Thank you, but no," I say, while Chrissy nods and accepts the cup poured out for her. Glancing around, I say, "Elodie mentioned another woman she wanted to learn from, an Adsila of the Wind. Is she here?"

Jocelyn smiles and says, “That is another name I am known by, but only to those of my tribe. To the rest of the world, I am merely Jocelyn.” There’s no reproach in the way she says it, just the facts laid out as they are, and after seeing my nod of acceptance, she gestures towards Elodie and asks, “How much do you know of Elodie’s gifts?”

Though we ain’t exactly private here in this cabin, what with some nine other Pathfinders going about their business indoors, they make a show of pretending not to listen. After making sure with Elodie that it’s okay to talk, I say, “I know she’s a talented Shaper, as you saw for yourself out there. Don’t know about her Spells, as I ain’t seen her use many, but she picked up Arcane Sign Language with minimal instruction and can gab away faster than I can follow. She more than meets and physical fitness requirements you might have, and while she ain’t all that sneaky, it’s more a matter of her mindset as opposed to lacking in ability.”

“All good to know,” Jocelyn replies with a shake of her head, “But these are not the gifts I speak of.” Reaching out to take Elodie’s hand, the older woman gets this far-off look in her eyes as she looks at the girl but sees something else entirely. “I speak of her other gifts, ones that have nothing to do with qualifications or competence. Did she tell you how she learned of my name?” I shake my head, and Jocelyn heaves a sigh of relief to see it. “During the battle outside of the compound, she was told to seek

me out if she should wish to learn the Enemy Way, and seek me out she has."

"What you mean told to seek you out?" I ask. "Told by who?"

"By my Sister of the Storm," Jocelyn replies, heaving a sigh of sorrow as she does. "My sister who fell to the Great Enemy three years ago."

As much as I want to make light of the situation, I rein in my tongue while processing what I just learned. Now I ain't one for religion, but deep down, I desperately want to believe in a life after death, if only so I can be reunited with all the people I done lost along the way. As for Jocelyn, she's gone and decorated her standard-issue jacket with beadwork that is typically reserved for prominent members of the tribes. She's also got a charm pouch hanging down from around her neck, as well as copper and silver wrist and arm bands peeking out from under her sleeves. There's a staff leaning on the wall beside her that's adorned in feathers, bones, and colourful cloth strips, all of which tells me she's likely a Faith-based Intuitive caster of Native American origin.

So I doubt she's a Catholic or any other denomination of Christianity, which is a bit upsetting now that I'm learning ghosts might well be real.

“So Elodie can speak with dead people?” I ask, because that’s the sort of thing that needs clarification before moving on.

Jocelyn smiles, but there’s little humour in it, more patience and understanding in the face of ignorance. “Not in the way you believe,” she says. “Before she was allowed into the Deadlands to find her Path, she first had to announce herself to her people. This was overseen by Sun Keeper Daniel Norwest stationed in Stillwater, who carried out the Ceremony of Seeking so that she might hear what guidance the Earth Mother and Sky Father had to offer. Once this was done, the Sun Keeper called for a witness to her journey, and my sister stepped forth, or rather the Spirit who was once my sister.”

“She said she would guard my spirit from the Great Enemy,” Elodie interjects, looking solemn and serious as can be. “I did not know what she risked by making this claim, and I am very grateful for it, for hers is a Spirit full of strength and vitality, a Spirit the Great Enemy would covet greatly.”

“Okay,” I say, still struggling to wrap my head around this while studying Elodie a little closer. “Still though. You speak with dead people?”

Elodie frowns. “Not dead people. Spirits. Not that which they were, but that which they have left behind, an echo of the person who once was much like the slivers stolen by the Great Enemy. You know this Howie. I speak with the Spirits every time I go to Wildshape yes?”

Right. The whole Ceremony of Connection to learn how to Wildshape was based on reaching out to a Spirit and connecting with it. I never really understood it, as I only had to reach out to the Spirit of my hand, which was all too happy to be off doing its own thing until I reminded it there was work to be done. Maybe the pain in my hand is its way of reminding me it don’t really want to be here, but them’s the breaks. Just because it got chopped off don’t mean it ain’t mine anymore, so the Spirit of my hand best get used to the way things work around here.

Course, there’s a big difference between the Spirit of a hand or animal and the Spirit of a real person. One who died three years ago no less and has been whispering in Elodie’s ear for the better part of a week now.

“These are the gifts I speak of,” Jocelyn says, giving the girl’s hand a little squeeze. “In fact, I believe her gifts in Wildshaping stems from this, her ability to hear and understands the Spirits she connects with. This deeper connection enables her to do so much more than most, but the power lies not in her hands, but in the hands of the Spirits she gives herself so freely over to.”

Pursing her lips in concern, Jocelyn adds, “This can be dangerous, for not all Spirits are as benevolent as the ones she has bonded with, but that will be a lesson for another day.”

Again, I’m reminded of how she panicked as a filly and again when the Mindspire hit. I’m also reminded of those tales of skin-walkers Aunty Ray kept tiptoeing around, so of course I had to go out and learn all that I could. That cannibal serial killer was barely scratching the surface of it all, as there were some dark legends going back way before the Americas were colonized. The original skin-walkers were shamans of the First Nations, ones who violated some taboo and turned their Healing and Protective magics to harm and hurt. I’m not talking about Fireballs and Beam Lightnings either. I’m talking Hexes and Curses, Spells to rot healthy flesh before your eyes, poison victims so that their organs putrefy from within, or steal the life energy right out of a body and plunder it for themselves.

Course, a lot of the stories say that those shamans were driven mad by the Spirits plaguing them, and now that I realize there might be more than just a kernel of truth to it all, I’m wondering about the implications of it all. Never occurred to me that Elodie might be at risk, not with how sweet and innocent she is. Thing is, she was seeing and talking to a Spirit without even knowing they was one, so I shudder to think what an intelligent, malevolent entity might be able to do if they could convince her to help them.

Noticing my alarm, Jocelyn nods and says, “So you see the danger. Elodie’s mother was wise to guide her in the Holy Way, not only so she can mend that which was broken, but to also defend herself should any wicked Spirits seek her out. Now, I wish to guide her in the Enemy Way, so she can eliminate those wicked Spirits whenever she might come across them, and also lend her strength in the war against the Great Enemy.”

“Okay.” Now that we getting down to brass tax, I put aside all thoughts of Spirits and focus on the task at hand, helping Elodie navigate the legal hurdles of the Métis Government. Sure, they’re big on acknowledging their Native roots, but not ever Métis citizen is First Nations. Fact is, most aren’t, so their government is tricksier to navigate than most because you got two systems operating side by side, with neither one being dominant over the other. “So I take it she gotta sign on to the Pathfinders before you’ll train her. How long’s the contract for? Ten years?”

Which sounds like a long time, but considering how much of an investment it takes to get a raw recruit Ranger ready, ten years is almost shortchanging the government considering they’re all Tier 1 operators. Before lowering their standards for the Frontier, you needed ten years of military experience before the Ranger recruiters would even consider looking at your resume. They’re the soldiers who go where no one else can or will, whether it be deep under dark to take down a Proggie or far behind enemy lines to hunt down a Synapse. Those are the roles the Rangers were meant for, and they were so effective they became the face

of humanity in the War against Abby. Not just for the U.F.A, but for the entire world, as the Rangers were free to operate without restraint in all allied nations, because their job was to kill Abby and only Abby.

Not so much here on the Frontier, as they're more than just the tip of the spear. Even then, ten years seems like a fair trade considering they'll spend at least six getting you up to snuff, if not more. Either way, I'm guessing the Pathfinders are offering round about the same terms, but Jocelyn shakes her head. "She will stay by my side until she has learned all that she needs to learn, but you misunderstand," she says, glancing over at Elodie before turning back to me with a smile. "Her path is not that of a government soldier, but of a tribal *hatałii*, or Shaman if you prefer."

I can't help but frown to hear it, because that's both good and bad. Good in that Elodie won't be beholden to orders from some appointed halfwit like the Métis equivalent of Alderman, but bad in that she won't have those same protections that soldiers get when signing on to fight. Joyce does her best to explain it, and most of it goes in one ear and out the other, as I got myself an aversion to all things political. Best as I can understand it though is that Elodie would be working for the Confederated First Nations, which is that second system of government independent of their regular Unitary Government, which is different from a Federal Government in ways I don't really understand.

Long story short though, as an official *hatałii* in training, she'd be an employee of the Confederated First Nations, which is no different from any other government employee really. Keep in mind, soldiers are also technically government employees, so make of that what you will. Either way, Elodie will be paid a wage that matches her role, and expected to carry out the duties assigned to her. Duties which will revolve around the Deadlands, because those who can learn the Enemy Way are not only well equipped to deal with the Soulless, they're also few and far between.

"She has eyes to see the Enemy," Jocelyn explains, as if that's all that needs to be said. "Like the soldier we fought today, the malignant Spirit bolstering its army of false corpses and fallen warriors."

It takes some parsing to understand, but soon as I pick up what she's putting down, my eyes go wide in surprise. "You saying you shot those arrows at a Mimic? That it was just hanging out over our heads that whole time instead of hiding inside a body?"

"Oh?" While there's nothing wrong with the way she looks at me, I can't help but squirm beneath Jocelyn's piercing gaze, like she's fitting me for one of those ugly canvas jackets or something. "Describe what you saw."

I shrug. “Nothing really. Detection Spells didn’t show nothing, and it wasn’t like there was anything there. I just knew there was some bad juju overhead, some sort of magic brewin’ that I reckoned was makin’ all them Soulless stronger, faster, and tougher to boot. Could feel the magic closing in around us, like a thick fog blanketing the surroundings but never really touch you, you know?” Tilting my head in thought, I ask, “It is just the one Spell the Mimic gotta cast to do all that? I figured it for at least three, something akin to Bull’s Strength, Cat’s Grace, and Bear’s Endurance, but now that I think about it, you’d probably need a fourth Spell to fix them bodies up. Even if it’s more of a Mending than an actual healing, that sort of intense, wide spread effect has gotta take a whole lot of juice.”

Jocelyn don’t answer, but Elodie is more than happy to enlighten me. “It is not the Magic you know,” she says, looking all pensive and nervous. “It is dark magics, very much like a Ritual yes? A very powerful Ritual tailor made for the Soulless which the soldier of the Great Enemy carried out in the skies overhead.”

The more I learn, the more I realize that Orthodox Spellcasting is but one of many ways with which to use magic. It’s a simple fact, but one I fail to appreciate time and time again, which makes my dreams of learning that Spell that sent them arrows up into the sky feel that much farther away.

To get back on track, I ask a few more questions about Elodie's role in the Confederated First Nations and what would be expected of her during her training. Honestly, it don't sound all that different from being a soldier, though she won't have to take orders really. She's just got duties to uphold, most of which involve taking the fight to the Soulless. Not Zombies, Ghouls, Wights, and whatever, but the Mimics themselves, the Spiritual entities who make all them varieties of Abby possible.

Which I suppose I already knew, but again, I'm having trouble grasping the concept of fighting something I can't see. Also adds to the difficult of finding a Synapse Soulless, as it might well be hanging about as a disembodied Spirit without form. The more I hear about the Soulless, the less I care to fight them, especially since I ain't seen a single Spell Core yet. I was told there'd be lots of them, but I've killed and cooked at least two-hundred and fifty Zombies in the last five days not including today's haul, and I don't got shit to show for it beside Aberrtin.

Course, that's the bread and butter of Abby hunting, as most Spell Cores ain't even worth all that much. Still like finding them though, because at least then I got something to show for it besides a bunch of stinky black gold bars. Literally stinky, as they smell like death and rot, to say nothing of all the precautions you gotta take when working with it as you don't want to accidentally inhale or ingest any. Rot you from the inside out it will, which is why Spell Cores make for better keepsakes.

When all is said and done, there's only one question left to ask Jocelyn. "You gonna keep her safe?" I ask.

"Safety is for children," Jocelyn replies, with that typical, stoic Native American outlook. "Elodie is a brave and will one day be *hataałii*, so safety is not for her. The Pathfinders will protect her as best they can, but ultimately, her fate is not for me to say."

"And what about dangers outside of Abby?" I ask. Giving Elodie with a concerned glance, I add, "She's very… honest and trusting, so I and her parents will worry if she has no one to watch over her."

"She will have me." There's a touch of heat in her tone as Jocelyn sits upright and hits me with a steely glare to match Aunty Ray's best. "The bond between teacher and student is no different from family. As her guide, it is my role to not only help her find her own understanding of the Path she seeks, but also to protect her as we undertake this journey together, so know that I will guard her as I would my own flesh and blood."

Not sure if she has kids of her own, but Jocelyn is fierce as any mama bear I done ever did see, and has thus far been patient with all my questions even though I'm just some kid who ain't

even related to Elodie. Thing is, Elodie trusts me, and Jocelyn respects that, so I'm inclined to trust her too.

Still… I don't exactly relish the idea of heading home without Elodie and telling Carter and Miss Amelie what's what. "You sure about this Elodie?" I ask, chewing on my lip because I can't think of any good reason why she should give up on this. "Might be here a long time, learnin' all that you need to learn. Maybe you should talk to your parents about this first?"

"*Non*," Elodie replies, squaring her jaw as she meets my eyes. "This is my Path. I know this. Even if Mama and Papa do not wish this for me, I must see it through." Deflating just a bit, she adds, "If they want to come see Elodie, will you bring them here?"

Can't help but smile to see it, even if it is heartbreaking to see how scared she really is. There's no uncertainty though, because she's dead set on doing this even though she's not sure what the future has in store. "Course I will," I say, reaching out to give her hand a squeeze, and when she holds on tight, I squeeze even harder to let her know she can always count on me. "And if you ever wanna head home, then all you gotta do is write me a letter and I'll be here quick as a bunny. In fact, that sounds like a great idea. How about you write your parents a letter telling them what you've decided, and I'll deliver right to them myself."

“Okay Howie,” Elodie says, brightening up at the prospect of talking to her parents, even if it is through a letter. Jocelyn also says she’ll have a letter for me in the morning, and that’s all there is to the meeting. Elodie don’t stay behind, as she leaves with me and Chrissy to go say goodbye to everyone and spend one last night with Chrissy and Astrid. Can tell she wants me to join in too, but squeezing three into a hammock is difficult enough, and I’m pretty sure Astrid would have herself a conniption if I even tried. Let’s not mention what Gunnar would do, or even Harald, as even though he seems like an even-tempered sort, he’s still her big brother and won’t stand for no disrespect.

They three do make for an adorable sight, all bundled up together in the hammock with Elodie in the middle of a Chrissy and Astrid sandwich while Cowie and the kiccaws squeeze in as best they can. It’s only a short reprieve however, as come morning, it’s time to say goodbye. Ain’t a one of us willing to watch her go, and Edward even assures her that he’ll check in whenever he can in a very loud, very public, and very threatening fashion. Elodie is happy to hear it though, and she gives him a big hug goodbye same as the rest of us.

Except for me, as I get a peck on the cheek too, and a pause as she offers her cheek for a kiss too. Can’t bring myself to say no, so I plant a quick peck and say, “Take care of yourself out there, Elodie. Once you know where you settled, write your parents another letter so they know where to send you mail.”

“Okay Howie,” Elodie replies, beaming as she stands with arms wrapped around my neck and head resting on my shoulder. “You will write me too?”

“Course I will,” I say, making a mental note to get a letter out to her before the end of year at least. Yeah, I know it’s only the tail end of March, but communication ain’t my strong suit. “Might even come back later on in the year, so who knows?”

Elodie is happy to hear it, but she don’t say nothing. She just gives me a dreamy look with her big, bright, emerald green eyes, one that is so full of love and adoration that it makes me wish I could love her the way she wants me to. I can’t though. All I see when I look at her is a sweet girl who I gotta protect, not just from Abby and outlaws, but from people like me too. She deserves better than a man who’s still all broken up about not one, but two loves of his life that he done messed up, better than the mess I done become. I don’t say nothing about it, but she sees the implicit rejection and ain’t fazed by it as she flashes her big bright smile and runs off with Jocelyn and the Pathfinders.

And with that, the mood of our group drops down in to the negatives, because even downcast as she’s been, Elodie was the brightest and cheeriest of us all. She was the chattiest of the bunch, always pointing out the wildlife, asking Edward about the

birds, or helping Chrissy and Astrid out with whatever might ail them, whether it be unsteady footing or leeches on their skin, a job that now falls to me. Her absence is felt keenly as we head out towards the central regions of the Deadlands by way of the swamp instead of using the roads like the Pathfinders. Course, they got things to do and places to be all along them roads, while our goal is to not only indiscriminately kill Abby, but also seek out three separate varieties of plants and get close enough to a location where I can slip away to pick up both packages I been commissioned to deliver. Still haven't figured out how I'll get to them without alerting Edward to what's up, but I'll cross that bridge when I get there.

In the meantime, I busy myself tending to Chrissy and Astrid while also doing my best to cheer Frowny up. The little guy was so sad to see Elodie leave that he don't even want to stand or sit upright anymore. Instead, he insists on being carried, not with a hand under his feet but an arm under his butt and back as he snuggles in with Chrissy and heaves little kiccaw sighs all the livelong day. I offered to let Elodie keep him. Stella and Terrance too when Elodie said he'd be miserable without his flock, but she was adamant he stay with me. Probably is, he's also miserable without her, and I can't help but commiserate with the little guy as he mourns the loss of his friend.

The one bright spot in the day is when Cowie directs us to a patch of bright vegetation that's got Astrid hopping all about. "Cinderfern!" she squeals, in a high-pitched, shrieky sort of way

that ain't all that loud but is piercing as can be. "That's Cinderfern! The fronds have blackened tips, and the stems have reddish veins that pulse with Aether." Grabbing Chrissy's hands, she skips about in circles until the other girlie is skipping with her, and I can't help but smile to see Astrid going out of her way to cheer Chrissy up. She's hamming up her reaction a bit to make up for Elodie's absence, and we're all happy to see it. Astrid don't got the stamina to hop and skip for long though, which is good because neither does Chrissy, so they break it off soon enough so Astrid can get to studying the samples.

Which turns out is super boring and takes way more time than I feel is necessary. I mean how long can you spend observing a plant? It's growing in a sunny patch where there ain't no trees overhead, got a faint, almost ashy pine scent, and a taste Cowie don't much care for. I know that last bit because he comes to me for a reward instead of chomping down on the ferns like he usually would, which I suppose is a good thing seeing how unwilling Astrid had been to part with the stale, dried up samples she brung with. "Good job partner," I say, keeping my voice low because it's still kinda embarrassing to talk to a bull like he a person. "Earned yourself a fistful of candies I'd say."

Gave Elodie a jar to take with her, so I'm running a little low, but I'm happy to share what I got left with Cowie. Stella and Terrance look awful interested too, so I give them a candy each just to see how they like it, and get me a song and a dance in return. Frowny accepts his candy too, but he don't cheer up none, just crunches

down on the honey drop and swallows it down with a sigh. Lucky for him, he's got Chrissy's full attention as she cuddles him close and strokes his head while watching Gunnar, Astrid, and Harald at work.

The mundane stuff ain't all that interesting, what with gathering nearby plants, soil samples, and all that jazz, but they also got a bunch of devices and doohickies I ain't ever seen, and they glow with an Aetheric light when I look at them through the lens of Detect Magic. Dunno what Chrissy is seeing, but she finds it fascinating as she follows Astrid around while the other girl takes Photos from every conceivable angle. Not just of the Cinderfern either; she's taking Photos of the surroundings too, and I've no idea why until she finishes up with her collections and comes over to Cowie to ask, "Is there more of this plant nearby?"

Which of course he don't understand, not really. All he knows is she wants him to find more, so he gives the air a little sniff and noses in another direction. Don't take more than ten minutes before we come across another Cinderfern, where the Askefjords get to work once again while I hang out with Edward while Aaron and Luthor keep watch. "So," I begin, which is my way of opening up a dialogue. "We ever figure out why them Pathfinders were attacked?"

"The Soulless hardly need a reason to act," Edward replies, sliding his arm around my shoulder as we pace about. I've noticed

him doing that more often of late, probably because most folks won't let him get all that close, whereas lately he's been spoiled for choice with me, Chrissy, and Elodie all comfortable in his presence. "They harvest human wherever they can, for a more powerful host makes for a more powerful Aberration. More to the point, the Soulless are not mindless, and considering all the fuss we've been making these last few days, I daresay that the Pathfinders might well have been a target of opportunity, one which stumbled into an ambush meant for us."

"Really?" Furrowing my brow in thought, I ask, "They'd really go to all that trouble just for a party of nine?" Eight now that Elodie's run off, but I put that out of mind as best I can.

"Not just any party of nine," Edward replies, taking on that smug and haughty tone he gets when talking about his family history or bloodline. "Ours would be a prize most welcome by the Soulless, and for once, not solely due to yours truly. The Askefjord children have only a single Core to their bloodline, but much like with their lovely Mother Miss Alice, the magic has ingrained itself deeply. Not all Innates are made equal after all; there are individuals with three, four, even five Cores to their name who've less concordance with all their Cores combined compared to young Harald and Astrid. Tempting as they might be to the Soulless, they are but the least of us all aside from their father. Cowan and that round-tailed finch you're raising would also make for fine hosts for the Soulless, while Christine might even move a Progenitor to action. Though she would make for a fine host, she would be

even better as a partner, one who does not bend to the will of the Progenitor, but works alongside it."

"Like the adherents of the Nahuatl Faith?"

Edward nods. "Indeed, they were the most ambitious of the bunch, but there were others who tried to reach an accord with the Soulless. In recent history, the most famous attempt would be the Thule Society, who hypothesized that a Progenitor might well unravel the mystery of immortality if given the chance to study an Immortal Monarch, but they never were able to procure such a specimen for their pet to examine. They almost got their hands on the corpse of the Sicilian Immortal Monarch you know? My Grandfather put a stop to that, in a most riveting tale of clandestine action."

"The more I hear about the Thule Society, the crazier they get." Shaking my head, I ask, "Before you tell me the story, what exactly is it about Chrissy that makes her such a great partner?"

"Well, as you know, many Innates have an almost natural understand of Aether and magic, and Christine's grasp of the Arcane is greater than most." Peering over at her like a proud papa, he heaves a sigh and shakes his head as if wondering what could have been between him and Aunty Ray. "That understanding is what the Progenitors are after. Their Aberrations

are… less than optimal, as most require Spell Cores to make use of magic, whereas Progenitors wield it like you or I would breathe. With a subject like Christine to work with, they could slowly unravel the mysteries of magic and why it is so much more difficult to work with compared to the Immaterium, where Magic is akin to physics in that it simply exists."

"Then I suppose Elodie would make for a good partner too," I drawl, unable to get my mind off the green-haired girlie even though it's barely been half a day without out.

"Oh absolutely," Edward replies, only to add, "If not for the inherent threat she poses, I'm sure a Progenitor would be delighted to work alongside her."

"…What threat?"

Taken aback by the question, Edward looks at me in surprise. "Did the Shaman not tell you? How naughty." Shaking his head with a smile, Edward explains, "The ability to sense the Mimics is one Arcanists have studied at great lengths, but thus far, not much is known about it. It occurs in a small percentage of the population, and when the Soulless become aware of their abilities, they will often go to great lengths to eradicate the subject even at great cost to themselves. Native American Shamans, Puritanical Inquisitors, Catholic Chaplains, the French Chasseur

Lanternes, and more, every organization who specializes in hunting Spiritual Aberrations and Soulless Progenitors are almost always hunted in turn, for while Zombies, Ghouls, Wights, and other chaff can easily propagate, creating a new Mimic requires a significant investment in time and resources."

"You saying Elodie will be considered a priority threat once word of her ability gets out?"

"Of course," Edward replies, all too cheerily for my tastes. That's just how he is though, as he continues, "What's more, if they haven't already, yesterday's battle will have revealed the shaman teaching her as one too, so I daresay they might be in for a rough patrol. No need to fret Howard," he adds, patting my shoulder when he notices how concerned I am. "People with the ability to sense the Soulless are well guarded, and the Métis are especially fierce when it comes to protecting their Shamans. Elodie is in good hands."

I sure hope so, because if not, then I might as well have delivered her right into the open mouth of a hungry Proggie myself.