

The Border Between Magic and Maybe

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Dedication:

The entire Halpin clan who have taken me in like one of their own. One of these days, you'll win the lottery. For my family two legged and four, always.

Conjurors and sorcerers, that afraid of him
By magic verses have contrived his end?

Henry VI, Part 1

Tis true: there's magic in the web of it:
Othello, III, 4

And 'twixt the green sea and the azure vault,
Set roaring war: to the dread rattling thunder
Have I given fire and rifted Jove's stout oak
With his own bolt;
Tempest V, 1

Magic of bounty! all these spirits thy power
Hath conjured to attend.
Timons of Athens I, 1

There's magic in thy majesty, which has
My evils conjured to remembrance and
From thy admiring daughter took the spirits
Standing like stone with thee.
Winter's Tale V, 3



Chapter 1

I came home from the shipyards to find my father dying and my mother already dead in his arms. She had been brutally murdered, her skull bashed in so that her face no longer resembled the beautiful woman that I had known all my life. That men had flocked to from all the towns and cities to see for themselves, or so my father had boasted. Her glorious red-brown hair was mostly red---her violet eyes blank with that strange emptiness that defined a departed soul.

My father lay under the remains of the porch in trampled mud with both my mother's blood and his own in a pool around him. His rifle was near him, broken at the stock but had been fired.

"Toby," he called my name in a whisper and I dropped to my knees beside him. His wounds were massive and I couldn't believe he was still alive. I wanted to do something, anything to help but could only flutter helplessly. I stroked the ruins of mother's face and bawled.

“Dad, what happened?” I asked, finally getting my ravaged emotions in check. My eyes roamed over the two story cottage in the meadow that our three hands had raised. The barns and fields all wrought with honest labor and not slavery. Four hundred hectares of prime Upper Caladienne land in a small valley fed by ice cold streams coming down from the glaciers of Tenesk.

Secluded. Mostly peaceful with only an occasional hunter or trapper coming through. My dad was a peaceable man but wary, he’d have kept his rifle handy except for neighbors. Or kin. Most of ours were still back in Gleneden and Ehrenberg, the capitol across the Great Sea.

“What happened?” I asked again. The barns were still standing, the front part of the cottage torn down as if a giant wind had come through it.

“Masked men on big horses,” he gasped. “Stole the barn horses. Took the new stallion. Wore the uniform of the Baron’s Rangers.”

I was silent. We had just spent a year’s worth of earnings on that stud horse, destined to be the foundation sire of the farm. My father was the impoverished son of a Gleneden Lord who had immigrated to the newly opened lands before the Border War to start his own empire. The empire of the race horse, one of the few ways a younger son or commoner could elevate himself to the ruling classes. Five years later, he had spent every bit of his hard earned cash to purchase a little known grandson of the famous Eclipse and have him shipped at great expense to the port city of Albans and on to Caladia. All three of us had made the three-day trip to the closest town only a month ago and brought the small 15.2h dark bay stallion home behind the farm wagon. He was dwarfed by the immense work horses but far outshone them in quality. A gleaming dark mahogany color, he had only one white foot and that was the off hind but he did have a small star on his forehead. I memorized his unusual cowlick, a large wheatear on his chest, and swirls on his legs above his chestnuts shaped like fox heads. A feather shape on his flanks where the hairs swirled from his belly. He carried his tail to the left, indicating a right-sided horse and he picked his hooves up in that delicate daisy paddle. His weight was no more than 800 lbs and his head was lean, dished and with a wicked eye. He nipped, reared and struck at his handlers. Their comments as they handed him over to my father had been one of relief.

“Right bastardy he is. Sorry, mum,” the crewman said. “All the way from Gleneden.” He handed my father the packet of papers containing his pedigree and receipts, all stamped and embossed with the Earl’s wax seal. My grandfather, the Earl of Gleneden and the Warlord of the Emperor of Ehrenberg, of the great kingdom across the sea.

No one seemed to care or watch us as I took the lead and tied the stud to the back of our wagon. I remained near him, talking foolish nonsense all of the three day ride home.

My father wasn’t one to boast but after a few mugs of Caladienne ale, he had let slip in the Depot that the little bay was of royal blood and that made a few ears perk up.

Dad tugged on my arm and brought me back to the present. His mouth twisted and blood pooled. He spat weakly and I saw bright frothy blood, I knew that meant he was lung shot. My heart ached and I didn’t know what to do. The closest neighbor was a day’s ride and was an older man who did not know first aid. There were no healers close, they were too valuable a commodity to risk out in the Wilds.

“Was the Lemieux brothers, Toby. I recognized them. That’s why they shot us. Tried to burn the house down but your mother stopped them. They ran their horses over her, hit the house and went through it. They took Diomed and the mares, four were in the barn.

Turned the rest out, ran to the hills." I waited. "Toby, go after them. Bring my horses back. You can do it. You can track them."

"You can count on me, Dad," I said swallowing the lump in my throat.

"Tobias Lynette Swan Spencer," he said and his eyes filmed as he left me.

I buried my parents under the old apple tree, said to be one of the original trees planted by the first Rangers to explore this land. I carved their names into the simple wooden plank cross promising a marble stone on my return. Said my goodbyes to Lord D'Arcy George Simpson Spencer, second son of the Earl of Gleneden and Maleen Primrose Davenport, my mother, a young lady from a small village on the coast of Erhen.

I took a rucksack loading it with a spare shirt, trousers and socks, the last loaf of bread and journey cakes plus a side of smoked bacon and the emergency cash buried in a coal can in the woodlot. The fires in the kitchen and parlor had gone out but I made sure no dormant sparks could torch what was left of my house. Lastly, I tucked in my waistband my father's Dragoon pistol, a memento from his service in his father's Hussars. Looked around one last time and pulled the last book I'd started to read from the bookshelves. Tucked it into my shirt and took dad's greatcoat with its many capes as it was warmer than my cloak. I already wore my drab green and brown woodsman's vested shirt and loose pants with leather boots good for walking or riding.

Outside, I whistled, two sharp blasts between my fingers as I walked down to the stone barn. Gambrel, two storied and built of the stones we'd pulled from the cleared fields, its loft was full of hay and had enough stalls for a dozen horses and several milk cows. We even raised a few beefers. The hogs were out in the rear pens and I turned everything loose to fend for themselves. The milk cows had calves on them so milking them would not be a problem.

By the time I had freed all the livestock, the rest of the horse herd had come up out of the woods and entered the stalls to eat the bait of corn I'd left in the mangers.

I kept the gelding Beau and the mare Peony, both animals were broke to ride and the new stud tolerated them. I saddled the gelding and packed a few things on the mare as extra halters, feed and gear. I let the others loose and while they were still eating, mounted and left them behind.

The trail out of the valley followed the creek and I didn't pass another homestead for at least two hours. I wasn't following tracks but aiming straight for the woods and caves reputed to be the holdouts of the Lemieux Brothers.

There was a whole clan of them, buying and selling horses. Rumors had it that they would steal your team and disguise it, sell them back to you and you'd swear you'd never seen them before. I'd heard that they sold mostly down to the horse markets in the southlands, and to the local government council for remounts to the war.

The woods were quiet but never truly silent. The wind whispered or roared through the trees depending on the seasons, leaves crackled like peanut brittle underfoot. Squirrels, chipmunks and birds hollered at me and I saw the white flash of a deer's tail. Overhead, I saw the broad outline of a redtail and heard its sharp whistle.

When I heard the loon cry, I stopped the horses and eased my rifle out from the scabbard and waited. The trees rustled around me. I was on a deer trail that switch-backed up a hill with large pines and hemlocks above me. Oaks, maples, elms and chestnuts predominated below on the lower slopes. Not much brush as the trees were too thick and nothing could grow in the underbrush. Lots of rocks everywhere.

An explosion of partridges from above and to my right startled both me and the horses but I maintained my seat. I saw a black bear, it stood up and chuffed at me. We waited as the horses fidgeted and it ambled off. Still, I kept my rifle on it until the black ball of fur disappeared into the brush. Under me, the gelding relaxed, his ears flopped back and forth so I nudged him forward.

Atop the ridge, I found where a man had stood and watched us before he disappeared onto the lower slopes. Anyone who lived in or near the forest knew that a loon wouldn't be this far from water, the nearest pond or lake was miles away.

From his tracks, I judged him to be a fairly good height and weight, his boot heels sank deep and his stride was over two feet long. He smoked, too but he hadn't lit the cheroot while he observed me. In the woods, the smoke would have been a dead giveaway that humans were near.

I snickered as I saw where his tracks jumped when he'd spotted the bear. Tracking him as far as the next deer trail, a whole mess of agitated tracks spoiled my readings. They went off in twenty different directions and I had no clue as to which one I should follow. Even the tracks of Diomed weren't clear enough to pick out so I just guessed and headed south in the general direction of the next village.

Two days travel brought me to Spiorad and the first place to which I was headed was the Constable's office, a two story brick building next to the jail. Both were built of the local bluestone, quarried nearby and worked into an imposing edifice. Buggies, wagons and riding mounts were hitched up in front of the mercantile as I dismounted and tied the gelding to the hitching rings. An amulet and charm witch came to the door of her shop and stared at me. I ignored her, they were one step above a conman.

Oh, I was right glad to get down and stretch my legs, take the weight off my rear end and maybe get a hot meal and bath. The door to the Constable's office opened with a shrill creak and I entered the administration hallway leading to a courtroom. There were several offices where a pot-bellied stove was burning busily along keeping out the chill of a late fall afternoon. The big windows were barred and looked out on a small yard between the office and the jail, I could see men walking about wearing manacles.

"Can I do something for you...boy?" A rough voice asked behind me as I turned around.

Broad shouldered, his shirt tails hanging out, his suspenders barely holding his trousers up behind a huge belly stood a man nearly a head taller than me with more hair than a marmot. He looked like a woodchuck, with a mustache waxed to points, heavy black brows over dark brown eyes. He wore a vest over a white shirt, both open showing off a pelted chest. He was the hairiest man I had ever seen and if I'd encountered him in the wood, I would have assumed him an ogre.

"My name is Toby Spencer. Tobias Spencer. I'm hunting four, maybe six men. Robbed and murdered my family back in Cayden's Valley."

"Old Gleneden's son's place?"

"My father."

"Murdered your ma and pa? Right sorry to hear that, I am. You know who done it?"

I nodded. "My father recognized them. Said it was the Lemieux brothers."

"You got any proof?"

I stared at him in disbelief. Proof? Didn't the dying words of the murdered victim constitute proof? "When I find my horses that'll be all the proof I need," I retorted.

"You ain't thinking of going after them yourself? That's not your job, boy." His eyes got really hard and ugly. Town constables were not responsible for events that happened outside the village limits, those jobs were usually taken on by the Rangers but the Lemieux brothers *were* Rangers.

"You going after them?" I asked and from his expression, I said, "Thought not. Where can I get a hot meal and a bath?"

"Plenty of eating places in this village. The Hotel has baths for rent. You got any kin?"

"In Gleneden." I turned on my heel and went out onto the street hunting up a dining establishment that wasn't too rich for my blood or my wallet.

Chapter 2

The restaurant I found was called Millie's, it was in a separate building near the river and in summer, would have a cool breeze blowing through the open windows. Now, it was cool and well lit by gas lanterns, the tables were made of oak and fireside armchairs with red gingham tablecloths and cushions were scattered around the large room. Flowers were in vases on the circle tabletops and fresh white cotton curtains were on the windows.

When I opened the door, a bell tinkled and a pretty lady with blond hair and light green eyes came out of the back wiping her hands on her apron which was dusted with flour. She grinned at me, her teeth large and very white. "Just in time for fresh bread and apple pie," she said. "Just came out of the oven. Sit anywhere. Tea or ale?"

"Tea." I had my father's love of his country's beverage.

"We have roast pork and taters, fresh catfish or beef pot pie. Applesauce and pie. Fresh bread."

I grinned back. One thing about me being a growing boy, I could eat. "Bring me the roast pork and applesauce, pie and bread," I ordered and picked the table where I could watch out the windows. I set my greatcoat on the back of the chair, my rucksack at my feet and my rifle near to hand. Bowed my head and gave thanks for the meal and my safe journey. She came back out in minutes with tea, cup, lemon and honey and then retreated to emerge with a huge brass platter covered with a trencher of roast pork encrusted with salt and cracklings, roasted taters and butter, fresh white bread drenched in butter and parsley, cinnamon with applesauce and near a half of her pie in one slice. I ate without coming up for air and sat back with a sigh as I finished every bite.

"Ma'am, you are one fine cook," I admired.

"Would you like to take a sandwich and a piece of pie with you?"

"I surely would, ma'am."

"Where are you headed?"

"South."

"Albans? Or Caladia?"

I shrugged. I didn't know. Wherever they took our horses is where I was headed. Casually, I asked her if there was a horse market nearby where you could buy mounts or farm animals.

"There's a fair down at Kateriberg. They sell teams and riding horses. Trotters. You looking for something special?"

"A stud horse. Blooded and some mares."

"No one has come through town with anything in the last week," she shrugged. She wanted to question me further but refrained and I wasn't about to go into my parents' murder.

"Where can I get a cheap bath? And the room for the night?"

"The hotel or Mrs. Callum's boarding house." She gave me directions and I paid her two pence for the meal and the seconds she'd wrapped up for me.

Mrs. Callum's boarding house was down Grove Street up against the ridge with towering hemlocks leaning over the roof. It was a three-story wooden building with wraparound porches and a dozen rocking chairs. Two of the three were presently occupied when I rode up and asked where I could stable my horses. Of the three men on the porch, one pointed to the back of the house and asked if I was looking for a room. He eyed both of my horses.

"A room and a bath."

"Junie!" He yelled and a woman came out, banging the screen door. She was dark skinned, wrinkled with white blonde hair and looked frazzled.

"Hello, I am June Callum. You'll be wanting a room?"

"Yes, ma'am. A bath, room and a stall for the night."

"Russ," she spoke to the older boy in cutoff trousers and smock top. "Take his horses to the barn. Feed and water them. Peter, bring up some hot water. Room six is empty on the first floor, down the hall to the left. You wanting to eat?"

"No, ma'am. I ate at Millie's." I dismounted, peeled off my pack and musket. I was so full, it hurt and it made me sleepy. Following her inside, my boots echoed on the polished floorboards in the quiet, clean house.

The parlor was huge with a roaring fireplace, daguerreotypes of family on the wallpapered walls, a piano lit by kerosene lamps, couches and plush chairs occupied by drummers, merchants and a traveling wizard. One or two ladies both old enough to be my grandmother. She had me sign a register, Tobias L. S. Spencer, Bt. I considered myself a Newlander but I was also proud of my father's heritage and the Spencer name went back to the Domesday Book.

The room was good-sized, 10 x 12 with a double brass bed, feather ticked mattress, linen sheets and a comforter. Everything was spotlessly clean. There was a washstand with a basin, mirror and a desk with a chair. A wardrobe sat in one corner and a cedar chest at the foot of the bed. One window looked out on the yard near the barn. The outhouse was close enough and she showed me the washhouse where the copper bath was being filled by a sour faced young boy. There was a wood stove in there roaring away with kettles full of boiling water and an inside pump.

"I can wash your clothes, too," she offered but I declined. I was leaving in the morning before sunrise and didn't have time for them to dry. She wanted a silver for the bed, Bath and barn, I paid her without haggling and she took my paper money without complaint as it was from the Bank of Caladia and not local script.

"I'll be leaving early," I told her and she promised me a breakfast waiting that I could eat on my way. It took 20 minutes to fill the tub with enough hot water to cut the cold. I stripped quickly to slide in and bury myself to my chin. The boy whose name was Russell handed me a bar of homemade soap and two heavy linen towels. He watched as I scrubbed myself and washed my hair finally getting the courage to ask questions.

"What's your name?" He looked like the lady, short, stocky with dark eyes and skin, a strong nose and chin. He was about 12 and hadn't had his growth spurt yet.

"Toby."

"You from Caladia? You have an accent."

"My father is from Gleneden. My mother is from Ehrenberg." I stopped, realizing that it wasn't *is* anymore but *was*.

"They died." He was intuitive. "Sorry."

"They were murdered."

"Bandits?"

"Thieves. They robbed the farm while I was gone."

"Gone where?"

"I went to town to pick up some supplies and some equipment. I was gone for three days when I came home, I found my mother dead and my father dying. Our animals gone."

"You tracking them? Do you know who did it?"

"Yes, I know."

"Are you going to contact the Rangers? Best not to say who did it lest it get back to them and they wait for you. Where are you headed?"

"Nine-mile Swamp. Glenbrook. Up that way, maybe all the way to Albans. You see any blood horses come through town?"

"No. Just a few teams delivering grain to the mills."

I rinsed and relaxed until the water grew cold, then climbed out to dry off and slip back into my long johns. Carrying my clothes and boots I made it back to my room. I put the chair under my doorknob and fell asleep with dad's revolver on the bed near me. My sleep was peppered with dreams, nightmares really. I kept seeing a hoard of faceless men riding through my house chasing my mother and father through each room swinging a cudgel at their heads to knock them off. They played polo with them through the yard. I woke up screaming into my pillow and to a pounding on my door. By the time I got up stumbling to open it, the entire house was awake stirring from their doorways or the top of the stairs. Mrs. Callum wore a flannel robe over a long cotton nightdress, her hair under an old mob cap and she carried a lighted candle. "You screamed loud enough to raise the dead, Tobias. Are you injured?"

"No, ma'am," I said sheepishly. "It was just a bad dream."

"You're keeping everyone up."

"Sorry," I apologized to everyone.

"Would you like a cup of tea since you're already up?" I pulled on my trousers, shirt and vest as I sunk my feet into my boots and met her in the kitchen at the big pecan table. A tea kettle was whistling on the hob, she poured hot water into two mugs and we watched it steep. She added milk and honey to hers, lemon in mine. I wondered where she got the lemons. "What brings you to these parts, Tobias?"

"I'm looking for some horses."

"Stolen horses?"

"Why? Have you heard something?" I was sharp.

"What's giving you nightmares isn't just stolen horses. Unless you stole them yourself and someone's threatened you to return them? Did you steal them?"

"No, ma'am. They were stolen from my family. My parents were murdered over them. My father's dying wish was for me to retrieve them and bring the murderers to justice."

"You're just a boy. Leave that to the constables or the Rangers. Besides, you don't know who stole them or where they've been taken."

"Yes, ma'am. I do." I finished my tea, thanked her and went back to my room spending the rest of the night wide awake and lying on the mattress reading *The Masterpiece of Magic* by the Wizard Gibbons. One of the few rare books left from the old country and it spoke of magic and things we did not believe in.

I rose at dawn, packed my things and was out to the barn to saddle up. By the time I had both horses brushed, saddled and ready, Mrs. Callan came out with the burlap wrapped bundle that she handed over to me. "Breakfast. Johnnycakes and bread. A flask of tea, it'll stay warm for a while. Are you headed south?"

"Thought I'd track as far as Albans and stop at the constable's there, see if there are any wanted posters out. I'll report to the magister at the consulate so they can notify my grandfather."

"Grandfather?"

"Yes, ma'am. My father was a son of the Earl of Gleneden, Lord Spencer, Baronet, a second son. He'll need to know."

"Well, good luck to you, Tobias."

She watched as I mounted and rode off into the rising sun following the pike along the Delos River. It was easy going, wagons and travelers had broadened and widened the lane and the railroad had developed a track on the ridge opposite the river. I couldn't get lost either way, not until I left the road to venture into the woods away from the open fields lying fallow.

Here and there, I passed herds of dairy cows and flocks of sheep guarded by black and white collies who barked at me as I scattered the flock. Both of my horses danced through them, skittish in a show of good spirits. Beau wanted to trot so I let him and we made good time down the pike.

I stopped on the river for lunch, eating a sandwich and bread left from the restaurant and shared my pie with the horses. Beau liked the apples and begged for more, the mare lifted her lip and made that face amusing me. I let both of them loose to graze while I threw stones onto the water watching them skip across the surface.

There was quite a bit of traffic along the River Road, I had passed stage coaches, farm wagons and peddler carts. A boy driving a six pack of hogs and another of turkeys were taking them to market. Several Rangers went by me on well-bred stock staring at me.

I mounted and rode on, now climbing Franklin Mountain named after the Ranger who fought a battle with the people who had once owned this land. I'd be lucky to get up and over before nightfall so I kept my eyes out for a decent place to camp. Finally, I found a small meadow off the road around the sharp turn and just into the wood line. A dry fieldstone wall cut in and encircled an old homestead that had burned, its chimney the only thing still standing, with an apple tree in what used to be the front yard. There was a well but unreachable, the bucket and line had long since disintegrated and fallen in but I also found a creek and a spring. Both horses drank eagerly and I loosed them to graze while I set up a camp against the back wall of the old cabin—mostly burned logs with the bark peeled off.

I made my fire small and sheltered so couldn't be seen further than a few feet out and laid out my sleeping bag as I put on a pot for tea. I watched the stars, not the fire and listened to the sounds of the night's breath before I fell asleep. Come morning, I was awake by dawn, and both horses were standing near the coals of my fire, hip-shot and dozing when suddenly, the gelding raised his head and whickered. I reached for the Dragoon pistol and kept it under my greatcoat as two men approached my campsite.

Chapter 3

They rode big horses with heavy rears and small heads, eastern bred for the Ranger's service or Emperor's troops. There were many such animals roaming under use by the discharged and freely moving warriors from the war. One of the animals was an odd buckskin color, the other a golden yellow with white mane and tail, blaze and four white feet. Wearing heavy saddles that were double rigged, I had never seen anything like them before.

Both men were small, five foot six and light boned wearing the remains of uniforms of blue tunic in serge and trousers of heavy twill with stripes down the seams so that they did not rub the inside of their legs on the leathers. High cavalry boots and bowlers, not uniform caps. Both of them carried shotguns and muskets and one had an officer's sword on his right side.

"You alone, boy?" the older one asked, his blue eyes scanning the camp. He was older than my father, early forties with a weathered face and sun wrinkles. His accent was southern, almost a drawl. He spat tobacco juice off to his right, missing his foot in the stirrup. Their saddles creaked.

"I ain't alone," I stated. "I got me a pistol and a musket and two horses."

He watched my hands under my coat. "You got the fixings for coffee?"

"Just tea."

"Tea! We been here in the Newlands for over twenty years. Mind if we share your camp?"

"The fire's yours. I'm up and off to the Constable's in Sageny, he's expecting me," I lied getting slowly to my feet. I tucked the Dragoon into my belt and started to pack up as they dismounted.

The older man made up a pot of coffee and unloaded a cast iron skillet before proceeding to cook bacon. His buddy brought over a bucket of water and fussed with their mounts.

"Eastern bred?" I asked admiring their chunky build and strong muscles. They made my own mounts look weedy.

"Wild caught on the range west of the White Fangs." He named the fierce mountain range where the Emperor's forces had driven the last of Borderland natives into hiding. "Yours? Look like blooded horses." He eyed the gelding's long legs, long neck and fine boned head.

"Just a farm horse, part trotter," I returned. "The mare's from Caladia."

"My name is Penn Rhodes. My partner is Haliburton Lewis, call him Hal. We're up scouting for some thieves. Counterfeiters."

"Counterfeiters? Of what? You Rangers?"

"Government Councilmen. From Albans. You an Oldlander? I hear an accent."

"My father was from Gleneden. I'm Toby Spenser."

"What are you doing down this way? Isn't your father's place out by Cayden's Valley?" Now I was suspicious that they knew my name and township. "Constable from out your way sent a message about your parents and to warn you to return, not to take on this vengeance trail."

"I'm going to get my horses back and bring those murderers to justice," I retorted. "If I depend on that fat, lazy Constable, I'll die of old age before he gets on his horse."

"You're going to wind up in a grave out in the pines yourself, boy, if you keep up this foolishness. You ain't no tracker or Ranger and certainly no bounty hunter. Let those men take care of it. How old are you, anyway?"

"Sixteen, mister. I've been to Albans, Caladia and Fort Tigh all by my ownself, I don't need no babysitters. I've bushwhacked since I was eleven. I've seen the elephant and ain't afraid or stupid. I know who took my livestock and I aim to find them and read them from the book. Then, I'll go home."

I mounted the gelding and kicked him into a hand gallop with the mare following close behind. We ran for three miles before I pulled him down to a walk and let both of the horses blow to catch their wind. Beau was no race horse like Diomed but there wasn't another animal capable of keeping up with the gelding once he found his stride and the mare was a close second in speed and stamina. They had been part of the legacy my grandfather had given my father when he had left to make his fortune in the Newlands after the war.

The flies and mosquitoes were bad along the water. As soon as we slowed, hordes of them swarmed us. I prayed for the first cold snap to put an end to their misery. I looked where we could get away from the biting flies and finally decided to head up onto the ridges where the stagecoach lines ran.

Up high, the only torment were the deer flies but at least the scenery was prettier and the view clearer. I could see the valleys, the small hamlets nestled below and smoke from the railroad's charcoal pits burning busily away.

The leaves were changing colors to the west, just a few turning bronze and crimson red. The willows along the creeks were butter yellow through the glint of blue. Before too long, snow would cover these ridges and hills, making travel through the area difficult if not impossible.

There was plenty of deer sign but I really didn't want to take one, besides the hours spent in butchering I had no way to preserve the meat and refused to eat it raw. I settled for rabbit instead and spent a quiet hour on the river taking both a good-sized bass and catfish.

I came into Brookglen after dark and the main street over the Chinanago and Delos rivers was dark except for the saloon where lights spilled out onto the dirt. A few drunks were sitting on the boardwalk hugging the posts and honky-tonk piano music drifted down the lane. The hostel was closed so I pulled up in front of the ale house and dismounted. Walking inside, I was greeted by a collection of farmers, merchants and the constable wearing his uniform open to show off his long john top and more than half drunk. They were singing sea chanties which surprised me as most of the population in this area were of Oldlander stock from the farmlands of the inner plains.

They moved out of the way so I could reach the bar and the saloonkeeper poured me a beer without asking. He was an older man with muttonchops whiskers and little on top, his nose a testament to his own drinking.

I gave him a four pence and looked around for a table finding one in the corner near the windows. He sent a barmaid out to ask me if I wanted a meal, a pretty young girl with red hair and freckles, she rattled off the menu. She was as old country as I had ever seen and she flirted with me over the hum of conversation, pulling up a chair and sitting with me which elicited frowns from the older men. The bartender yelled over the crowd, "Beatrice! Get back to work!"

She leaned towards my ear and whispered, "Meet me at the pump house when you're done."

I nodded solemnly and resolved to be out of there before she could corral me into trouble. Her dad looked the type to shoot first and ask questions later.

Supper was thick venison steaks, gravy, biscuits and applesauce. There must've been a bumper crop for apples this year, I had applesauce with nearly every meal. Of course, I never turned down pie. A growing boy could eat his weight in apple pie. Deep dish, crumb, dried apple and raisin. I was connoisseur of all things pie.

I listened to the drinkers and they were discussing the conditions in the South, how slavery was an injustice to the few Overlanders that had remained and it wouldn't surprise them if war broke out again with a draft to follow. A tall, thin farmer complained that his team was stolen right out of his barn while he was hitching his mules to the logging chains, he'd searched in vain for them. Heard the Lemieux gang was involved but couldn't prove anything. They saw his sister, Cornelia in the neighborhood but that was the only clue that it might have been them.

The constable snorted. "Ain't a soul would testify against those boys unless you want your barn burned down. Fact is, I saw Plum go through Glenbrook last week with four horses. Had papers on them, bloodied animals from their looks."

I stood up. "Two bays and two blacks? And a stud horse?"

"I didn't see no stud. Just mares. Had no white markings on them, solid colored animals with long legs. You know 'em?"

"I own them. They were stolen from my father's farm a week ago. They murdered my parents."

"Lemieux's might be thieves but they ain't killers," someone muttered and I rounded on them.

"Tell that to my father. He saw them and told me so before he died," I snapped. "And I aim to bring back my horses and whoever done it." I stormed out of the bar, caught up my reins and rode out of town. I made it as far as the Jericho and took a bed in the barn near my mounts. I went hungry because the kitchen was closed. When I checked my pockets, I was down to my last gold piece and a handful of small coins equal to a day's pay.

I slept fitfully, it was chilly under my bedroll and greatcoat, and the nights were shading into winter, fall dropping away rapidly after a long Indian summer. I heard the stage come in and it woke me. The hostler nearly tripped over me as he led in the coach horses. I stood up, stretched and stayed out of his way as he set the four animals into their tie stalls. "Come in late?"

"After midnight," I admitted. "I owe you for the bed. And my horses' stalls."

He shrugged. "Pay for feed and the horses. Sleeping's free. Where are you headed?"

"I'm looking for some horses. Stolen about a week ago, came through near here. Four mares and a stud. Have you seen them?"

"I heard up North towards Glenbrook some Gleneden bred horses were for sale. Mares, though. No stud horse. A Daughter of True Briton."

"Did they say who had them?" I asked and wasn't surprised at the answer. Lemieux.

I ate breakfast inside, eggs, toast and coffee. The tea was weak. Loaded up on supplies and was back on the road by daylight, right behind the next coach which was headed to Rabbit Town and the Forks. I rode close enough to hold a conversation with the driver, a young man named Timothy Ives who lived nearby. He warned me that the gang had informers who were cousins all along the route from Waterville to Albans and way houses where they stashed stolen animals. They stole sheep, dairy cows, horses and whatever they could get their hands on, even whole teams attached to their wagons.

I rode the ridge line with them until they turn off to Glenbrook and there, I found tracks of my horses that I recognized. The four mares were being ridden at a good pace and the tracks were over a week old mingled with a pair of work horses and a mule. It took me two days hard riding before I reached Glenbrook and it was wild country with heavy forests, swampy trails and cemeteries stuck in lonely meadows buried in tall grass.

The town itself was a good sized village with a mill, general store, jail, bank and library. A barber shop sat on the crossroad next to a funeral parlor and four taverns. There were a few places to eat, a stable and blacksmith's, a small hostel and a horse auction. Attached next to the corrals was a stone barn and in the area was a herd of everything from chickens to goats mingling in the pens. A whole mess of folk were waiting to buy and sell. I made my way to the Constable's office first and dismounted, tying my two horses out front to his hitching rails. As I went inside, I saw where three uniformed men were standing around the pot-bellied stove drinking coffee.

"Constable," I interrupted. "My name is Tobias Spencer---."

"I heard about you," he said. "You're tracking down some stolen horses."

"Yes. And murderers."

"Let's leave that to the Emperor's law, Mr. Spencer." He eyed my musket and the Dragoon revolver in my waistband. "Where are you from?"

"Cayden's Valley."

"Huh," he said thoughtfully. "The Warlord's Land Grant. Where's your family?"

"I'm a Newlander, sir," I retorted. "Born in these lands regardless of where my father was born or how I speak."

"Gleneden, huh? Well, it's better than Tenesk," he named the colony that had been started by imprisoned criminals and thieves. He turned to one of the other constables. "Bull, get a description of his livestock and we'll print some flyers. Don't get your hopes up. Ain't never found a one of them stolen animals yet. I think the thieves push them over the Borders to the Oldlander refugees."

I sat down while the aide laboriously wrote out descriptions of each mare and the stud horse. He asked if I would post a reward and I said yes, 100 gold pieces which I didn't have but hoped I could appeal to my grandfather for help. He asked if I had a hundred golds and scoffed when I said the Government Council in Albans would cover it.

"Why?"

"Because he's my uncle." That brought an uncomfortable silence, the Governor of Albans and the Ehrenberg Ambassador were close friends.

"Did you notify him of your parents' death?" He asked me.

"Not yet. I was going to send a letter when I reached Albans."

"Wait a bit. I'll organize a mounted patrol and we'll track through here. You say you heard the horses come through Brookglen?"

"The auction is this weekend. I suspect they will be here with my horses."

"More than likely, they'll be sold closer to the big city where no one will know them. They're probably already in Albans and gone."

"Then, I'll head to Albans."

"You staying for the Auction?"

"Yes," I answered.

"The Pradmout is a good clean, cheap hotel. They will feed you and your horse. Got money?"

"Yes, sir,"

"Don't be lugging around those guns. Check them in at the Hotel."

I didn't like that but nodded. I turned on my heel and walked out. All four of them followed and watched me lead my horses down the main street towards the smaller hotel.

Chapter 4

The auction drew a huge crowd, folks from all over the counties and even some from as far away as Great Neck, the city where all the Oldlanders came into the country. I rubbed elbows with rich folk and farmers as we all paraded through the pens inside the barns. I saw great shire work horses and big work mules, trotters and riding horses. Even oxen and dairy cattle with calves at their side.

New arrivals were coming in all the time so I hung out at the Registrar's shed checking out the horses as they were entered on his lists. That's when I overheard a Freidan boast about purchasing two of the finest mares he had ever seen, two bay racehorses if he was any judge of horseflesh and he was there to pick out a stud to breed them. I butted my way in.

"Where? Where did you buy them and where are they now?" I demanded.

"Who are you?" the Freidlander snapped.

"Toby Spencer. I've had four mares stolen from my farm. I'm here to pick them up."

"I've got papers on these horses," he returned.

"Bays, 16 hands. One mare has a white sock and a star, the other is a dark bay with a blaze and two stockings. Wheatears on the neck, no chestnuts on the front legs and a scar above the off-hind coronary band. Carry their tails to the left and the tip of one ear is missing on the bigger mare. Both are six years old. They'll come to me when I call."

He stared at me, his mouth agape. "Both are dark with no white."

"They'll be dyed. Neither are broken to harness. One mare's had a foal, she's got an udder. Where are they?"

"At my farm in Depot."

"How much did you pay for them?" I asked my mouth dry. He named a sum that made me snort, they were worth 10 times that much. "I'll be speaking to the Constable and the Judge," I said. "To get my horses back."

"If you can prove they're yours, take them," he said "I won't keep stolen stock."

"I'm still looking for the other two and my stallion," I looked at him hopefully.

"I haven't seen them. Just the fellow who sold me the mares, a tall, heavy fellow with muttonchops and named Grove."

“What’s your name?”

“Henri Chalfant.”

“I’ll be watching for you after I speak to the Judge.” I stared, memorizing his features before I hustled back to the courthouse in the Constable’s office finding him conversing with the judge.

“Well, if it isn’t the bounty hunter,” he snorted.

“Judge, Constable, I found two of my animals. I want you to come with me out to the man’s farm and pick them up,” I interrupted rudely.

“Whose place?” The judge asked.

“He says his name is Henri Chalfant.”

“I know Henri. He’s cheap but he’s not a thief. If he says he bought them, he did it in good faith.”

“Well, they’re mine and I want them back,” I repeated.

“You’ve seen them? Positively identified them?” That was the Constable sticking his nose in where it wasn’t wanted.

“No, but he’s described them and I recognized them.”

“Go check them out, Anderson. If they’re yours, Spencer, come back and we’ll head out there and liberate them.”

“By then, the mares will be gone,” I yelled in frustration. I strode out, slammed the courtroom doors and went back to the auction yard searching for the Freidlander. When I found him, I insisted we leave for his place and reluctantly, he agreed.

I’d already scouted out the horse lot and not seen my other horses. When Chalfant saw Beau and Peony, his eyes lightened. “Laoch spironie,” he gasped. “These two look just like the two I bought.”

“Peony is the younger mare’s dam,” I answered. I followed him out to the spring wagon, mounted up behind a smart looking Caladian horse of almost black hue as he drove east towards Hamilton. He chattered nonstop the entire way, telling me about his people who had come down from Acadia and settled in the area after the borderland wars. Of being in the Navy and escaping from all the warships before coming home to the farm and raising sheep and wool for the Mills. I was expecting a small farmhouse. What I saw rivaled the Governor’s mansion, he must’ve been a big-time wool merchant to afford such a spread.

Servants came out of the house to take the reins of his cob and greet him. “Will you come in for a drink and a meal, Mr. Spencer?” He asked me. I told him no, that I was in a hurry to find the rest of my animals.

Inside the three-story pole barn in box stalls facing each other, I found two of my horses. Well fed, deep bedded but sporting no white markings at all. They put their delicate muzzles in my hand and lipped me softly. I buried my face in Athena’s neck and sobbed quietly reminded again of my mother’s bludgeoned face. Athena had been her favorite mount and the other mare was Falice. The Freidlander said nothing but ordered them haltered and let out.

“I don’t need halters,” I denied. “They’ll follow me.”

“Well, Tobias, are you going to drag them along with you all the way?”

I grinned sheepishly, “I hadn’t thought that far ahead, Mr. Chalfant.”

“I have a proposal to make. Will you do me the courtesy to listen?” I answered him in Freidsch and he smiled, a great big flash of white teeth and pink gums, rattling off a

week's worth of conversation in Freidsch. I understood most of it, here and there a word that sounded different, most likely from his Acadian accent. "You speak Freidsch!"

"My father spoke many languages and he taught me."

"Wonderful. My proposal is this. You leave your two horses here and I will feed and house them for a stabling fee and you pick them up on your successful trip back. And I get first crack at your first foal crop."

We haggled over the fees but I was satisfied as he'd already taken good care of the mares while he had them. In truth, having two more would prove to be a distinct disadvantage in the woods. He tried to entice me to stay the night but I was eager to keep on especially after he told me he'd heard of other blood horses being sold down towards Alban Springs. I patted both mares and put them up, told them I'd be back soon and rode out.

He and his people watched me ride off heading south along the turnpike towards Albans and the Hudspeth River. I knew I had to cross on the ferry and wasn't sure how Beau and Peony would take to that. Then again, I had nigh on a hundred and fifty miles to worry about it before I got there.

I loved riding in the woods. The smell of the trees, the smokiness of fallen leaves and the crisp crackle as the horses' hooves marched through the piles. The chuckling of water as it bounded over rocks and the smell of piney woods and mossy swamps.

The trail I was on was an old one, worn and rutted by many others before me and kept to the high ridges rather than go up and down the valleys. Because it was higher, it was colder and to find a decent camp, I came down into the valley to find a spot sheltered with water and grass for the horses. I was lucky enough to come upon an old campsite with a ring of rocks already set up covered with old ashes.

I stepped down and unsaddled as I let both horses loose to graze while I gathered deadwood for a fire. Coffee brewed in the pot as I fried bacon and journey cakes, ate my last piece of saved pie squatting on my haunches next to the flames.

Dark came quickly like a woman dropping her skirts on a child as the night hushed. I tried to read by the firelight but it was too dark and shadowy so I stretched out and watched the stars. I fell asleep with my eyes on Orion and the Gibbons book on my chest.

I woke up to see something standing over me about to collide with my head. I rolled frantically out-of-the-way grabbing for my musket as I was knocked over onto my ass. I yelped and teeth bit me tearing my shirt and my coat. I put out my hand and touched bone and hair. I sighed in relief, clucked and managed to get to my feet as the nearly black head of the new stallion pushed into me again. I could barely see him, unsaddled and with a broken halter on his head. He lowered his face as I scratched between his eyes.

"Diomed, mi carriadhe," I spoke to him in Ehresh, the language of horses and he nipped me with his teeth. "Were you a bad stud? Tracking me on your own? Boy, I am glad to see you."

Running my hands over every inch of him, I checked for spur and lash marks, cuts, bumps or soreness. His mane had been roached and his tail shortened but without light, I couldn't see anything else. I did not feel any problems and he seemed as fleshy as before he'd been stolen.

I heard men's shouts, more than I could handle from the sound of them so I threw myself atop the stud and kneed him down the hill calling quietly to the other two horses.

They followed. I hated to leave my gear behind but I had managed to get my rucksack and musket.

Diomed slipped down the hillside on his haunches, the pair close behind me. Shouts followed us and I wished desperately for moonlight, starlight, anything to see by so I could urge the stallion into a gallop. Once he was running, no one could catch him. Unfortunately, we were in the deep woods and I had only my knees to guide him as both hands were occupied. I used one to brush away branches and the other held my musket strap and pack.

"Son of a bitch!" I heard and then a loud thump as someone met a tree trunk. I wouldn't snicker or the fates would mock me next. Diomed broke into a canter and started going flat rather than downhill so I assumed he was on a broader trail. He ran as if the very devil was behind us instead of two horses and men. I kept low and prayed I wouldn't meet up with a low hanging branch. I felt the horse gather his hindquarters under him and he leaped over something. I wasn't sure if it was a ditch or a log but shortly after a half mile mad gallop, he broke down to a prancing trot, a walk and blew catching his breath. I slid off, listened and heard only the sound of Peony and Beau trotting up behind me. That gave me time to drag out one of the halters in my sack and fashion a set of reins to it with the extra leads. I pulled the rucksack back on and slid the musket over my shoulder. My powder and balls were back at camp, along with my cookware, bedrolls and saddle. I still had my money, my clothes, papers and pistol, my coat and best of all, Diomed. He was as good as a watchdog and faster than anything around, capable of making me enough monies to replace what I'd lost.

I scratched his neck and he cow-kicked at me, tried to nip at me as if he blamed me for his kidnapping. I slapped him and told him to behave. I could well imagine what a pain he'd been to whoever had stolen him. He was an ornery, opinionated devil of a horse and tolerated only a few people. He'd only been ridden by a handful of which my father had been one. He loved my mum and went like a lady's palfrey for her but then, she was half horse.

Of the three, Beau was the smoothest to ride bareback so I climbed on him and led the other two. Diomed wanted to flirt with Peony and charge the gelding but a few quick slaps changed his mind. He could behave when he wanted to. I dozed, the only one part of me that was warm were my legs against both sides of the horse but getting sweaty and prickly from his roughening coat. I kept one hand out to deflect branches from my face, but luckily this trail descended into a valley along the river and broadened so that I didn't have to worry about getting knocked off.

Dawn found us heading southeast in the opposite direction than from where we'd started. I saw no post signs, no travelers on the water and no recent wheel marks from carriages. I had no clue where I was or where we were heading.

The town after Glenbrook was Hamilton, the next largest Alban. I didn't think I was heading towards the city nor was the river the Shannaque. In the dark, I could have doubled back. The worst I could do was wind up back in Glenbrook and have to retrace my steps.

I didn't have any food left but I did have a set of hooks in my hat and fishing line. Fishing the river seemed a good idea if I wanted breakfast and I figured I was far enough away from those that were following me and the stud. Besides, I was tired from riding all night and my rear end was ready to have a respite off that horse's spine. Dropping to the ground, I sighed with relief and let them graze on the rich bottom grass along the banks.

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