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The Life and Origins of Paul Bunyan: Volume 1

By

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of

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ABSTRACT

The Life and Origins of Paul Bunyan: Volume 1

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This novel is a chronicle of the early days of Paul Bunyan, an important figure in American folk culture. While Paul Bunyan is a central figure in the tale, the story itself is told through the eyes of Clay Filinger, a young man from the backwoods of Kentucky who leaves his home on a journey of American exploration.

Clay reaches Boston, where he hires on to work for John Patrick, a wealthy merchant headed to Maine in search of pirate treasure. John is travelling with his nephew, Randolph Bunyan. Along with them are two more hired men: Stokes, a foul riverman, and Silas Jefferson, a smooth-talking man with criminal intentions.

As they travel up the coast, they encounter a shipwreck with one survivor, a pregnant Irish girl named Muirenn. Muirenn reveals to Clay that she is, in fact several hundred years old, having been trapped as a girl by the King of the Fair Folk. It is this supernatural king who is the father of her child.

Clay, not wanting anything to do with these events, flees as soon as possible. He is turned back, however, by threats from a pooka, a mysterious creature. Shortly thereafter, Clay confronts a mysterious and powerful being called Liath Luacra. During the conflict, Muirenn gives birth to a boy named Paul, who is adopted by Randolph Bunyan. She then dies.

The men finally find themselves in The Aroostook Valley of Maine. John Patrick continues looking for his treasure, and Clay does what he can to protect Paul. After some months, Silas Jefferson rides into town with a band of armed men, looking for Patrick's treasure. Clay fights him, and Jefferson is killed, but promptly possessed by Liath Luacra. The pooka is forced to become a huge blue ox while Clay and the others flee. Finding themselves on the other side of a river, Clay and his companions eventually are forced into a final confrontation with Constance Jefferson, who came with her brother, and finally with Liath Luacra. With luck and supernatural help, Constance is defeated and Liath Luacra is forced to flee.

Keywords: Paul Bunyan, Maine, Aroostook War

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

The Life and Origins of Paul Bunyan: Volume 1

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My first experience with the folklore surrounding Paul Bunyan was with the Disney cartoon produced in 1958. The deep, booming voice of Thurl Ravenscroft is something I still remember, even though it has been many years since I've seen the cartoon. I remember thinking that it was an almost otherworldly voice, something that made Paul Bunyan linger in my memories longer than other characters from similar cartoons. Around the same period of my childhood, my mother gave me an old copy of a book of Greek and Roman mythology that she had read as a child. I was very taken with the stories of gods and heroes, incorporating them in my play as other children might incorporate popular television characters. I compared the gods to superheroes like Superman, or the Flash, melding them into my own personal mythology. It is no surprise, then, that when I found a book of American "tall tales" I could easily fit them into the world of gods and heroes. These characters, like Mike Fink, Stormalong, and yes, Paul Bunyan, were, to me, simply the demigods of Americana.

As an undergraduate in college, I was a history major. Progressing through my course of study, I became more and more interested in the folkloric aspect of history, the melding of beliefs and ideas to reflect new cultural identities. For example, my capstone paper in the History program was an exploration of the Cibola myth. Cibola is the name given to the legendary seven cities of gold, a legend made most famous by the Coronado expedition. I posited that the Cibola

myth was the result of a cultural blending that began soon after the Spanish conquest of Mexico. There was the legend of Antilia, which told of seven Portuguese bishops fleeing from Iberia during the Moorish invasion in the early 700's (Weaver 25). There was the Aztec legend of Aztlán, their mythical homeland, which consisted of seven caves (Zorita 145). It was these myths, along with several others, including ancient traditions connected to the number seven (Reynolds 669), and the medieval legend of Prester John (Nowell 435), which, in my theory, joined together to create the Cibola myth; one strong enough to send Coronado and hundreds of men chasing a dream.

It is this idea of exploring mythological origins that led me to want to look at the American myth of Paul Bunyan in a new way. This is not to say that my novel is claiming to be a true understanding of the various myths involved, rather, my novel is an attempt to incorporate different mythologies into a new understanding of Paul Bunyan. It is, in other words, a new take on an old character as well as an attempt to demonstrate the usefulness of combining mythologies in order to understand them. This is, of course, a piece of fiction, but fiction can be very useful for exploring mythology as opposed to a historical or folkloric approach. My original intention was to explore the entire life of Paul Bunyan in one novel. However, as I wrote, the story became more and more interesting and complex, forcing me to divide it into pieces, the first piece ending when Paul is less than a year old. This is not to say that I have failed at my goals, rather, quite the opposite. By focusing on the origins of Paul Bunyan in such detail, I was able to combine myth and history in a satisfying way as well as being able to lay the groundwork for future volumes in the Paul Bunyan saga.

I began with a look at what could be considered defining American impulses of the nineteenth century. There is of course, the notion of Manifest Destiny, the idea that the United

States would eventually fill the North American continent. This idea was very important during the nineteenth century, showing up in political campaigns and in the popular media of the time. However, I decided to look beyond this to the writings of Fredrick Jackson Turner. Turner was a historian who, at the 1893 World's Fair, read his "Frontier Thesis" which claimed that America's westward expansion functioned as a "safety valve." In his own words, "As has been indicated, the frontier is productive of individualism. Complex society is precipitated by the wilderness into a kind of primitive organization based on the family. The tendency is anti-social. It produces antipathy to control, and particularly to any direct control" (Turner 33). This is to say that America's frontier created individuals who looked at individuality as a virtue and rejected being told what to do. If they disagreed with prevailing cultural norms or taxes, they could simply pack up and move.

If these ideas are viewed as a sort of American myth, it is possible to see how these ideas might work well with other ideas. After all, the myth of Manifest Destiny is the offspring of Christian beliefs and doctrines, particularly within the cultures of the predominately Protestant groups that immigrated to America. Likewise, the myth of the staunchly independent American has been around longer than the United States and while Turner helped to explain it, the idea still persists in many forms today.

It is this idea that most influenced the creation of my main character, Clay Filinger. He is a product of the frontier, having grown up in Kentucky, a state which, in the early nineteenth century, was the frontier, settled by and producing individuals defined by their individuality. Jackson went on to describe this type of American by saying,

The works of travelers along each frontier from colonial days onward describe certain common traits, and these traits have, while softening down, still persisted as survivals in the place of their origin, even when a higher social organization succeeded. The result is that to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy, that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier (Turner 38).

This is how I would choose to describe Clay Filinger, a man who is coarse, but inquisitive, and full of restless energy. I felt that using this particular notion of American identity had created a myth that would be useful to create a character in a story based on older myths. It would help to fit the American experience into the mythical experience.

Because I wanted to explore how myths can combine and influence the creation of new myths, I wanted to look for an older myth that could inform a new interpretation of Paul Bunyan. Since my concept of Paul Bunyan had included the gigantic, deep voiced Bunyan of the Disney cartoon, I looked for giants in myth. The first that comes to mind is the Goliath story of the Bible. I thought about using this idea, having Paul Bunyan be the descendant of Goliath, but this idea seemed too foreign, requiring more of a convoluted backstory, and hindering my idea of creating American myths. The ancient Israelite world was too far removed from nineteenth

century America to make a reasonable connection. I then remembered hearing a story of Fionn mac Cumhaill (pronounced “Finn MacCool”) a legendary Irish giant. I’ve always considered immigration to be central to the American story, and the nineteenth century was a time of great immigration.

One of the major immigrant groups was the Irish, most of them fleeing the famine caused by the blight on their potato crops and the ruinous administration of their English overlords. The Irish have an important place in American history and took part in the colonization and expansion of the frontier that Turner spoke of. I explored the story and legends surrounding Fionn, including the medieval texts, “The Boyhood Deeds of Fionn,” and “The Ossian Cycle” (Cross and Slover). It is in these stories that I found an interesting way to combine Irish myth with American myth and personify this combination in Paul Bunyan.

Using the life of Fionn mac Cumhaill as a template, I began to structure the origins of Paul Bunyan. For him to be a giant, or at least a man of abnormal height, I wanted to give him a supernatural background. The Ossian Cycle describes how Muirne, the daughter of druid Tagd Mac Nuadat was abducted and impregnated by Comhall, leader of an Irish tribe called the Fianna. Comhall is killed and Muirne is ostracized, eventually leaving her child in the care of others. An important villain of the piece is Liath Luacra, who, in the story is a tall, ugly warrior of the Fianna (Cross and Slover).

Muirne is of course the inspiration for Muirenn, the Irish girl who was abducted and held for centuries in the realms of the Sidhe. I felt that by connecting this character to the mythic past in Ireland, having her father follow the old religion, would serve to connect the story and the American characters to the ancient past which forms their collective heritage. In this way, there is a subtle illustration of how new myths are always indebted to older ones.

I decided to make Liath Luachra into more than simply a transplant from the Fionn tales. Rather, I pulled details and information from a broader Irish mythology base into to make him more threatening. Instead of Paul's father being a chieftain of a rival tribe like in the Fionn stories, I decided to incorporate Irish tales of mystical beings who live under the earth or in a different plane of reality. I felt that this could tie into a broader mythological base than just the simple Fionn tales which is why the pooka and Liath Luacra speak of the "Sidhe" in the story. The word "Sidhe" refers to either the mounds under which these people lived, or the people themselves.

I was comfortable that these elements could form a loose framework for the life of Paul Bunyan. There is more to both the life of Fionn and the life of Paul Bunyan, but as my intentions to tell an entire life story became more complicated as I found the story growing, I focused on the birth and early childhood of Fionn. Using these elements of Irish mythology and my desire to explore Frederick Jackson Turner's America, I was able to fashion an origin for Paul Bunyan.

The Fionn stories were not enough, however, to tell the story completely. There are elements in the Paul Bunyan stories that traditionally must be included in any telling of his tale. Along with his great height, there is his occupation as a lumberjack and his companion, Babe the blue ox.

Babe was problematic at first. I wasn't sure how the traditional tale, that of Paul finding a frozen ox that had turned blue from the cold, could work in my story. I wanted to find another mythical creature that could either replace Babe or work as a way to create a blue ox. I found my answer again in Irish mythology. In these stories, there is a creature called a pooka. This is essentially a shape-changing horse that has the power of human speech. Finding the pooka took a good deal of research, but finding such a creature in the Irish stories worked perfectly as a way to

explore the nature of Paul's blue ox, making him an important character in his own right. In my story, the pooka becomes an ox in order to defend the infant Paul Bunyan and is forced into keeping that shape. In this way, I was able to also connect with Turner's idea of an individual being able to cast aside prior identities and become someone else in America.

Along with Babe the blue ox, I needed to establish a way for Paul Bunyan to become a lumberjack. Many of the old Paul Bunyan stories explain that he came from and worked in the North Woods of Minnesota. I rejected this notion because, at the time period in which my story takes place Minnesota was growing, but did not become a major lumber center until the late 1830's and early 1840's. Also, I felt that Minnesota was too much a part of vague "West" at the time. There was immigration, but it wasn't a dynamic and changing part of the frontier. It would become that, but not until at least a decade later. I wanted to move Paul Bunyan west along with the growing nation. If he was going to be the product of immigration, it would make sense to begin on the east coast. It is for that reason that I decided to place the opening events of Paul Bunyan's life in Maine.

Maine in the 1830's was a major center for logging, sending lumber to the growing cities of New York and Boston (Judd 56). Along with that fact, in 1830, the early stages of the Aroostook War began, a conflict between the fairly new state of Maine and British North America. Some version of the Paul Bunyan stories claim that the basis for him was a Canadian lumberman, so a conflict with Canada in the story was my way to allude to this while keeping the story as a part of the American Experience.

Maine may not be considered by some to be a part of the frontier, as it is an area that was long claimed by the United States and had long been settled, with ties to New England culture, religion and politics. However, the Aroostook Valley, where the Aroostook War took place and

where the main action of my story takes place was sparsely settled, with a large rush of immigration in the 1820's, which would lead to the Aroostook War in the 1830's (Judd 58).

The Aroostook War is a real conflict in American history. After Maine was spun out of Massachusetts to form a new state as part of the Missouri Compromise in 1820, the issue of their border with Canada remained unsettled. After a fire drove many of the New Brunswick lumbermen to the Aroostook Valley, conflict began. The area had already been settled by American, who felt that the valley was rightly part of Maine. The British government was involved in the dispute and finally, the Dutch king offered to form a compromise. This angered all the lumbermen and settlers involved and there was still no border. The resentment lingered until 1839, when Maine actually declared war on Canada and a militia was formed. General Winfield Scott was sent to resolve the dispute and eventually the border was settled with no bloodshed (Jones 520). I felt that this would be a solid historical backdrop with a dynamic background for the early years of Paul Bunyan, where he could learn his trade and still participate in the American frontier experience. Setting his life against a historical event like this helps to position the story in a real setting.

This relatively new settlement at the time my story takes place allows for Maine to function in the same way that other frontier areas did at the time, being populated by strong individuals and those looking for escape. Also, many of the immigrants were Irish, which suited the construction of my story better than would the largely Scandinavian background of settlers to Minnesota.

The frontier nature of 1830's Maine also allowed for character development in the person Clay Filinger. Clay is from Kentucky, already a product of frontier culture. However, in true frontier fashion, he rejects the notion that he must head west to seek his fortune and instead

heads east, not seeking the nation's frontier, but his own. It is only after seeing what life is like outside the frontier that he is able to go back to a frontier, namely Maine, in order to explore who he is and what he is capable of doing.

With such a devotion to exploring complex myths and obscure American history, it may be difficult to place my novel with other contemporary literature. The very notion of a novel about Paul Bunyan may seem like an ideal piece for juvenile literature. However, there are several authors who explore myth and folklore in a very adult setting. First among these is Charles DeLint, who writes in what is called "urban fantasy" where he tells stories of people, usually down and out city dwellers, drug addicts, prostitutes, street musicians, artists and others who have encounters with mythical beings. DeLint uses ideas from various mythologies, most predominately Irish and Native American tales, to create his world. In DeLint's stories, knowledge of the supernatural is shared by those who have inadvertently experienced it, not by the populace at large. His novels deal with sex, drug use, rape, incest, and other adult concepts, all while using characters and creatures from fairy tales and other folklore.

Along these lines is the work of Bill Willingham, writer of the award winning graphic novel series *Fables*. The primary premise of *Fables* is that characters from popular fairy tales and nursery rhymes have been driven of their fictional homelands by an army of goblins and other evil creatures, led by a mysterious "Adversary." These characters, including those like Snow White, The Big Bad Wolf, Prince Charming, King Cole, and many others have taken up residence in contemporary New York where they hide their fictional natures, as well as their immortality from the outside world.

While *Fables* is a graphic novel and deals with characters that might appeal to children, the content is very mature. *Fables* includes many characters from mythology and folklore,

presenting them, like Goldilocks, in a new light. Characters from different stories and even different cultures interact in a very adult context. It is this that makes the work valuable. By demonstrating that interesting stories can be made using characters from old tales, from blending cultures, and can allow adults to enjoy favorite characters in a mature setting, Willingham and DeLint show that what I am trying to do with my Paul Bunyan tale can and does succeed.

While *The Life and Origins of Paul Bunyan* may not adhere to the strict history or folklore related to Paul Bunyan or to Irish mythology, as a fiction piece it explores folklore and mythology in a unique and interesting way. The reader can appreciate Paul Bunyan in a new light and understand something of how migration and historical trends can shape and be shaped by myth. While the first volume hints that more is to come, and there is certainly enough in both the Paul Bunyan stories and the Fionn stories to warrant a longer saga, this first volume does explore these myths and ideas in a satisfying way.

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The Life and Origins of Paul Bunyan: Volume 1

Taken from a conversation with Clay Filinger, Montana mining camp, 1872

Chapter 1

I hear that the damn Minnesotans claim he was born there. Now, I've been known to drink my share of whisky and none of my former wives would call me anything but a lazy bastard, but there ain't no man alive who would dare call me a liar. And what I am telling you happened, as real and true as God in heaven. And it sure as hell didn't happen in Minnesota.

I was born in Fingal Kentucky in 1814. Pappy, having recently relocated to Kentucky, he named me after one of the state's more prominent citizens, Henry Clay. They called old Henry, "The Western Star" or "Henry of the West." Henry Clay was a big man if ever there was one. Newspapers called him the man more responsible for the War of 1812 than any other. Pappy liked that. He'd been a volunteer during the war, and I suspect it was the only time in his life he was a happy man. When he was drunk, something that was the case more often than not, he'd speak for hours. Describing battlefields, remembering old comrades, or just cursing the hated British.

After the war, a veteran and a drunk, Pappy, also known as Clinton Filinger, made the move to Henry Clay's home state. He brought with him a wife, my mother. She was an Irish girl, fresh off the boat when he found her. I don't see how he'd have gotten any woman to touch him otherwise. The old son of bitch didn't treat her too kindly. He spent most of his days drunk on the cheapest, lowest, whisky you could get. This was the kind of vile drink that would leave you gasping for air with the merest swallow and would set your belly aflame with the fires of hell. When he'd come back to the house after a drink, his hands would be clenching, clawing, maybe

trying to hold on to something. I don't know. But he'd wallop her good before carting her off to the bedroom. You can hear screams real well in a two-room cabin.

Ma died when I was six. There was a night in January, bitter cold and the winds were screaming like a man being flayed. Pappy was drunk in his bed, snoring, his hands clenching into fists, again and again. I was dozing myself, wrapped in a few blankets to keep the cold off. I almost didn't notice Ma walk to the front door in her nightgown and step outside. I expected her to come back in, but by the time I went to go find her, she was gone. I expect she knew what she was doing, and the long cold night on that 1820 winter night was calling to her. Pa didn't have time or the inclination to bury her, so I made a hole myself, just my little hands scrabbling in the snow. Tore a few fingernails out, but I managed to dig in the frozen dirt just enough to cover her up. As I was just a boy, I didn't know about the wolves. The next day, when I went to pay my respects, I found the hole. At the very least the wolves hadn't left some grisly remains for me to find.

Then it was just me and Pappy. Seeing as how we didn't have much in the way of money or other possessions, I learned at a young age that what others didn't take too much care of could easily find its way into my pockets. I also learned the hard way that I didn't keep watch of my things myself, Pappy'd trade them off for whiskey money. It didn't take me long to find a place in the forest, a hollow spot under a rock that I dug myself. I didn't take everything there, of course. I let Pappy discover just enough to keep him good and drunk, away from me.

When I was about 18, in the spring of 1832, that two-room cabin simply became too small for both me and Pappy. We both knew it, but we waited until there was a reasonable excuse for me to leave. Pappy came home one day to see me helping myself to a large portion of

his favorite whisky. He didn't take kindly to that. He also didn't take kindly to my fist striking the underside of his jaw. Of course, he got a few licks in of his own, as is only fair.

I made my way north and east with a black eye, empty pockets and a fancy to make a sailor out of myself and see a bit of the world. I'd heard that the China trade was running high and I'd always had a notion to see myself a Chinaman and maybe get myself one of those little Shanghai girls they tell the stories about. Still wouldn't mind it, to tell the truth. There were many directions I could have taken, west being one of them. Many people were heading west, the great migration just beginning. But there was something about being named after, "The Western Star," that grated, made me want to head east just to spite my own name. And there's nowhere further east than China.

Leaving the only home you've ever known is more difficult than most people expect. I didn't have much to take with me: a satchel with a few apples I'd snatched, two loaves of bread, a felt hat I liked as it kept the sun out of my face, and a pair of good boots I'd taken from a local man named Desmond Chandler. I didn't see as he'd need them much, living in the rooms above his dry goods store.

The road kept moving, and so did I. I walked all day long, pausing only briefly to pull an apple out of my sack and eat it as I walked. I was damned hungry, but I needed to find some other place to steal from before I ran out of food. There was the occasional farm. I'd tried my hand at farm raiding once or twice, but farms tended to have large, unhappy farm women in them. And those women seemed to take a powerful joy in using a pitchfork to skewer those simply looking to take something so as to make their way in the world.

That first night in the wild of Kentucky was not wholly unpleasant, but curling up alone in the dark alongside a dirty country road is not my favorite way to spend a night. When you're

alone in the dark like that, you can hear everything that happens in the trees. All night, I was awoken by sounds of creatures. The only ones I was sure of were the owls. The others might have been bears, wolves, the hordes of Hell itself for all I knew. I was a boy raised by an old drunk, and I was starting to realize I had little to no ability to survive on my own.

Crouched there, cold, hearing noises, I began to see what I suspected to be by my own imagination: a cold, blue light moving through the treetops. It was a bright, clear blue, like a newly dyed calico dress, not quite as pale as the sky, and not as dark as the ocean. I imagined it moving like a squirrel, leaping from tree to tree. I don't know how long I sat there, watching it, but after a while, I fell asleep and thought no more of the blue light.

The next day brought more of the same. Walking, endless walking. I had awoken so starved that I had eaten one of my two loaves of bread. Having never left Fingal before, I had expected to find more towns along my way. I had no idea that America was so damned big.

I wasn't totally alone as I walked my way east. I was passed several times by wagons carrying cargo or people. They were all headed the other way. Back towards Fingal. There were a few men on horseback, and a man in a hay wagon being pulled by a mule. All in all, they didn't seem to care about me one way or another and I wasn't comfortable asking for help.

The second night was just as cold, and just as noisy as the one before. That night, I didn't see any lights, however, blue or otherwise. I managed to get a few hours of sleep in the dark, but my journey was starting to wear on me. The third day brought nothing new. Neither did the fourth. I'd run out of food, and I was as hungry as I'd ever been. I nearly turned myself around and walked back to Fingal, but I liked being alive and hungry more than being stuck in a cabin with Pappy. And finally, that fourth night, I again saw something bright and blue in the trees.

On my fifth day, I did walk through a small village, nothing more than a few houses grouped together, but not enough to even call a proper town. I lingered, hoping to find some food, but the townsfolk eyed me, staring at me like I was Satan's grandchild. I moved on, with time lost and my belly empty.

That night, I decided to walk past sunset, knowing that it was dangerous, but figuring I wouldn't sleep anyway. Travelling at night is slow going. I couldn't see what was on the road ahead of me. The black took my vision away and gave me nothing in return. Little by little, I became aware of a light in the trees ahead. This wasn't a blue demon light like I'd seen before; rather this looked a hell of a lot like lamplight. I had never realized before how much I had liked lamplight on a cold night.

I stalked my way through the road's edge, hoping to find some sort of shelter, or at least something that I could eat. I didn't however, want to find people who'd kill me or otherwise harm me. As I got closer, I could see the source of the light. It was a wagon, one of those newer ones designed for long distances with the canvas covering fixed to hoops spaced down the wagon bed. The canvas was painted brightly enough to look like a flock of damn birds, even in the low light. Bright enough, in fact, for me to take a moment to realize it was writing.

My mother had taught me to read, before she took that walk into the cold lonesome, and it was a skill that had served me well since. Pappy couldn't read, and neither could a lot of folk in Fingal. I kept the skill to myself, and had occasionally been hired to run messages back and forth. Since no one expected Pappy's boy to know anything, much less reading, they'd never bothered to seal the messages. I'd learned a lot of things about the residents of Fingal that way.

The bright, whorish letters on the wagon spelled out the name of the owner, and his business: UNCLE NATHAN'S SALVATION WAGON. I'd seen this type of fellow before, a

preacher travelling about the country, telling Bible stories and collecting cash from the gullible faithful. Realizing this, I sat and thought about what to do. I was hidden by the trees, and had a fair view of Uncle Nathan's campsite.

His wagon was some distance off of the road itself in a clearing. He had built a small fire, and had surrounded his camp with a few small lanterns. A man, who I presumed to be Uncle Nathan himself, was stirring a pot over his fire. The smell of beans rose from his pot and wandered over to my nose, making me salivate like a dog standing over a cut of fresh beef.

Jesus and I are usually on pretty good terms. I don't say anything against him and he leaves me alone. It's a fine way to exist, at least for me. Sitting there, watching Uncle Nathan prepare his meal, I wondered if Jesus would be unhappy with me for stealing from a preacher. I suspected that a lot of them didn't work for Jesus so much as they were working for themselves, but it would be hard to tell without more time spent watching brother Nathan, and my hunger was telling me not to wait any longer.

Uncle Nathan stirred his pot of beans slowly, and the rasping sound that his spoon made against the bottom of his pot sounded a lot like a knife being sharpened on a whetstone. *Rasp*. Another few seconds. *Rasp*. Each time he made the sound, I snuck just a bit closer to the other side of his wagon, where hopefully, he'd had some food.

Rasp. I inched closer. *Rasp*. One more step. *Rasp*. I had one foot in the air, ready to move when the rasping stopped. When it stopped, I moved. The deepest voice I have ever heard then slammed into me with the force of a sledgehammer. "Easy now, boy." I lowered my foot and looked toward the fire. Uncle Nathan hadn't gotten up, hadn't turned around, but he had stopped stirring his beans. "Come here. No tricks, just step into the light." I obliged, seeing as how I had nowhere to run to and I suspected he'd catch me quickly if he had a mind to.

The few times I'd been caught in situations where I'd find myself in trouble, my mouth would start flapping like a fish tossed onto a riverbank. "Now Sir, I don't mean any harm. I was passing through this here forest..."

There was a snort of laughter. "Passing through in the black of night?" Finally, the man in front of the fire turned so I could see his face. Uncle Nathan had the largest beard I have ever seen. When I say this, I do not mean longest beard. Rather, this man's face was almost covered by a dark brown beard that reached out from his skin like a million bramble weeds, each one looking to force its brothers out of the sunlight. I reckon it was a beard for the ages.

The beard so captured my attention that I had to think for a moment before I could do or say much of anything. In the meantime, Uncle Nathan eyed me, and his eyes were shrewd. Not kindly, but not looking to grind me into paste either. A rule that I lived by at the time was to never spend much time with a man with shrewd eyes. Men like that usually had some plan to take advantage of poor trash like myself. It doesn't help that I still spoke like a rustic fool. Too ignorant to use more than a few words, and them awkwardly. Truth be told, I still lapse into that speech when I think about those days of my youth.

I was still standing just behind his wagon, so there were a few feet between us. He kept eying me. "Well, come here lad. I asked you to step into the light. I don't mean to ask again." That mixture of question and command is what made me move more than anything else.

I stepped out of the woods, made my way past the wagon itself and stood in the circle created by Uncle Nathan's lanterns and cooking fire. "Here I am." I said.

Uncle Nathan smiled. "So you are." He reached into a leather bag I hadn't noticed he was wearing and pulled out a gun. It wasn't fancy or anything, just a single barreled musket, but at this range, I was pretty sure it could kill me without much trouble.

My eyes widened. "A man of God wouldn't kill a traveler."

"Who says I'm a man of God?"

I pointed. "Your wagon."

When he laughed, his great beard shook and moved like a dancing drunk. "Maybe I stole this wagon, killed the man who owned it. Did you think about that?"

I hadn't. "If you're fixing to kill me, I'd rather you do it now. I'm damn hungry. Either fill my belly with lead, or fill it with something else."

He laughed. If he had tied any weapons to the beard, I would have been killed. "You're a bold one. A bold one." He gave me one more look in the eyes and placed his gun back in his bag. "Sit."

I stood for a moment, blinking. I hadn't been this direct before with anyone. In my experiences in Fingal, I'd mostly kept to myself and said as little as possible. My aching belly had prompted me to say more than I usually would.

"Sit." He repeated himself. I obliged, making myself still my confused and fearful frame and seat myself on the dirt near enough to the fire to keep warm, but with my back to the road, making it easier for an escape if I needed one.

Uncle Nathan busied himself taking the pot of beans off of the fire, pouring a good portion of them in a bowl, pulling a fork out of his leather bag, and handing me the pot. It was hot.

"It's hot," he said, as my hands gingerly took the handle and placed the thing on the ground.

I had hoped that there'd be another fork in his bag for me, but he just looked at me. "Shall we say grace?"

“Of course.” I closed my eyes and waited for him to say something. When nothing happened, I cracked open one eye and peeked at him. He was staring right back.

“Well, say grace, damn it,” he commanded, his beard shaking with indignation.

I swallowed. I had never said any kind of prayer, at least not out loud. Most of my praying was done in silence, asking the Lord to keep me from being caught. I didn’t know what to say. “God? We have some beans here. They smell like good beans. I think it’s damned decent of you to make these beans for us to eat. Amen.” I glanced up at my host to see if my prayer met with his approval. I saw his beard shaking with barely constrained laughter.

We ate our beans in silence other than Uncle Nathan’s lips smacking and muttered curses when the beans got caught in his beard. My pot emptied very quickly and soon enough I had the pleasant feeling of a full belly again. When I finished, I sat back and waited. I hadn’t wanted to go back to sleeping in the cold and dark alone, and I was hoping that I would get an offer to rest inside the lamplight. The feel of a full belly and a warm fire had made me forget my early decision to stay away from the man and his shrewd eyes. Uncle Nathan took a bit longer to finish his beans and clean his beard.

Beard clean, lips still smacking, Uncle Nathan took a longer look at me. It was a few minutes before he spoke, although under the gaze of those eyes and that beard, it seemed like a few days.

“Well, I’ve done the Christian act; I’ve fed the weary traveler. I don’t suspect God would require me to do any more.”

I got to my feet. “I reckon he wouldn’t. Thank you, Sir, for your charity. I’d best be leaving.”

“Sit down, boy. I didn’t give you leave to go. I just said that I’d done all the Lord required.”

I wasn’t sure what he was talking about. I sat. “So I take you are a man of God, and not a highwayman who stole his wagon?”

He laughed, beard dancing. “I am a man. I’m not sure yet if God considers me his, but I like to think I serve him. Now, I meet a lot of travelers on this road. Most good folk, a few dangerous.” He leaned in, closer to me. “What I do not see a lot of are boys like you roaming alone in the middle of the night, no food, no gun, just some dirty clothes and a nice pair of stolen boots.”

I looked down. “Stolen?”

He nodded. “It’s plain to see, for any man that can.”

“My pappy gave me these.”

He laughed again. “Your pappy must have an odd sense of compassion.”

“Are you going to preach to me?”

More laughter. The beard moved back and forth like a sapling in a windstorm. “If I figured preaching would do any good, I’d lay some down, sure enough, but I don’t think you’re the kind who takes well to preaching.”

He had me there. “What do you want from me, then?”

He smiled. “Nothing, until you tell me who you are and where you came from.”

This may surprise you, but never in my whole life had I had someone interested in my story. Being raised in Fingal, I knew everyone, and everyone knew me, or at least they knew Pappy and shied away from me because I was Pappy’s son. I didn’t know much about Uncle Nathan, who he was or if he really was a godly man, but he was an audience and in that moment

I discovered how much I like telling my own story. I told him what I had done in my short life, about Pappy, and my Mother, about the folk in Fingal, and about my plans to see some Chinamen.

When I finished, he gathered up the pot I'd eaten from, his own bowl and fork, and washed them with water from a barrel sticking out a ways from his wagon. With his back to me, and without turning around, he calmly said, "You can bed down near the fire. Just stay within the firelight." With that, he climbed into his wagon. Within a few minutes, I could hear snores that could grind a stone into dust.

Chapter 2

I slept well that night, within the circle of the campfire light left by Brother Nathan. A long day's walk and exhaustion can do that to a man. But there was something else, an unease that I'd felt since that first night alone in the dark left me. The muscles relaxed, my mind rested. But for a second, just one second, as Uncle Nathan looked at me before entering his wagon, I thought I saw a flash of blue in his eyes, the same shade as what I'd seen in the trees.

Uncle Nathan and his beard were headed the same direction I was. We travelled together for a time. He fed me while I aided him as he preached to townsfolk all over the country. I'd help him set up his platform, and help spread the word that he was in town. I'd also make sure that his collection money made its way to him. You might think I'd take a bit now and then, but Uncle Nathan was straight with me, and I suspected he'd know if I tried something like that. By the time we'd gotten to New York State, Uncle Nathan decided to head west, along the Erie Canal. I had no mind to go back to the frontier, so I took my leave of him, and made my way to Boston. I was grateful to Uncle Nathan, but I didn't expect to see him again.

Boston was big damn city filled with big damn folk. Rich merchants, politicians, high class whores. All the same sort of people, really. I took my sorry, starving belly down to the dock and tried to get myself a place on a ship. My luck, such as it was, had reached the bottom end of itself and here was not a single ship bound for China. I spent a few more days sleeping in holes and whatever corner I could find, waiting for my ship to come in.

I didn't realize it at the time, but I was likely only a few days from the cold embrace of the Reaper Man when I met John Patrick. Now, I'm the sort of man who looks out for himself rather than help out any of those rat bastards out there in the world, and I'm not surprised when those rat bastards do the same to me. Stuck in the wilderness, I can survive, hunt, fish, or get by when I need to. In the city, I find it much more difficult. After a few weeks in Boston, I was starving before I was able to hire myself out as a guard for a few trade wagons headed to nearby communities. There had been a gang of highway man that the Massachusetts state militias hadn't been able to find, so my presence was needed to protect the assets of a few cautious merchants.

One of these was a man named John Patrick. Patrick was a wealthy man, at least in my mind at the time. I've since seen richer men, but for a poor boy from Fingal, Kentucky, Patrick seemed like a King. He was a religious man, although not in the same vein as Uncle Nathan. While Nathan had a comfortable relationship with the Almighty, John Patrick lived in fear. I've always heard Jesus preached as a loving god, but Patrick lived in continual fear of hellfire and damnation.

On the occasions when he'd hire me, He'd have me walk beside him so he could tell me all about Jesus and the Apostles. I've always liked a good story, so I listened. I've never been one to say much when I don't need to, so I didn't comment much on Patrick's preaching. Patrick took this to mean I was coming to believe. No such thing was happening, of course. I still

enjoyed my relationship of mutual indifference to Jesus, but I wasn't going to tell Patrick otherwise.

Especially not after he started telling me about his treasure. "Do you know," he said to me one morning on our way back from Cambridge, "That I am a descendant of Captain William Kidd?"

I nodded. That name meant nothing to me. Rather than reveal my ignorance, I said nothing.

"It is for his sins, that I must atone."

I had plenty of my own sins, and this idea of paying for the sins of another didn't sit well with me. I looked up at Patrick as I walked alongside his wagon.

He didn't notice. He was too busy telling me his story of woe. "William Kidd, most famous of pirates, operated along the coasts of America. Plundering, murdering..."

This began to interest me more than his usual Bible stories. Although, to be fair, the Bible does have a fair amount of plundering and murdering.

"When he was executed in London in 1701, he spoke of a cache, a burial spot for his treasure." He turned and finally looked at me. "Clay, I know where his treasure lies. I think you a trustworthy young man. It is clear that you seek the truth. I wish for you to help me find this treasure."

I blinked. Treasure was something I found highly interesting. "Where is it?"

He patted the pockets of his large, gray coat. "I have information with me. It is not for you to know the details of our journey, rather, you are to help me uncover it and protect it so I can bring it back here."

“How big exactly is this treasure?” I had some understanding of how much gold weighed and I knew transporting any significant amount of it would be trouble.

“I only know that it’s large enough for me to atone for the sins of my family.” Saying that he smiled serenely. He looked so damn peaceful that I knew his brain was addled. The man was insane.

“How, pray tell, does that work?” I tried to put as much naïve curiosity into the question as my nature would allow. It wasn’t much, but he didn’t seem to notice my growing wariness.

“I will build a mission with this foul gold, a beacon for the heathen, a place of hope and worship to our God!” He threw up his hands like he was preaching a sermon.

Of course, I thought he was just shy of foaming at the mouth, but soon enough he was telling me all about some map he’d found that was supposed to show the location of the buried pirate treasure. I thought about my options. I could leave and try again to find a ship for China, or I could follow Patrick to see if he were telling the truth. Mr. Patrick planned to use the treasure to fund a mission to convert the Indians out in Indian Territory, if you can believe it.

I told Mr. Patrick right then and there that I’d help him find that gold, come hell or high water. Of course, I didn’t mention that I didn’t plan to leave any of the gold or jewels, or fine silks in anyone’s hands but mine. A mission, I’m sure, was a fine thing, but Patrick was the kind of man who’d give it all away to dishonest scoundrels before a single brick was built. I’m sure he’d rather the money went to a scoundrel he knew rather than one he didn’t.

A few weeks after my conversation with Mr. Patrick, I found myself on horseback heading north. Patrick had picked up a few more fellows, most of whom looked to be about as honest as myself. There was Stokes: a riverman with a thick, black beard that seemed as tangled as a politician’s morals. Stokes liked his drink a fair piece, in that way, he was a bit like my

father, but he also had a habit of chasing after anything in a skirt. Hell, we almost put a pig in a dress to see what he'd do. There was Silas Jefferson: an angry son of a bitch from Georgia. Now, I've met more than a few Georgians in my day, and hate them almost more than any other race of man, but this man, Jefferson, thinking about him today makes my blood boil. If I could kill him all over again, I'd do it in a heartbeat.

Jefferson was my height, and while his clothing wasn't much better than mine, he spoke with a refined air. He claimed he was "educated," although he never said where or how. All I knew was that I didn't like him from the start. I'm not a fool, and I see the benefits of learning and intelligence, and since those days, I've read enough to have a fair vocabulary myself, but I do not take kindly to men who flaunt it as if it makes them better than other men.

Finally, there was a young man, about the same age as myself, named Randolph Bunyan. They way I understand it, he was a poor relation of Mr. Patrick, a nephew or some such, brought along so he'd learn to be a man. How Mr. Patrick thought that the likes of me, Stokes, and Jefferson would show him true manhood, I don't know how. We were the same age at the time, but I swear this boy had never seen anything of the world. I think he must have been locked in his parent's house in Boston, made to read the Bible and taught to be terrified of anyone and anything. One night, Stokes gave a salty description of his night with a Boston whore and Bunyan's face turned red like my behind after Pappy'd come after me with his belt. The boy started spending his evenings wrapped in a blanket, staring at the ocean.

Chapter 3

We made our way along the mud trails and roads that led north. North, always north. And close along the coast. It made sense to me, as a pirate wouldn't have wanted to take his treasure too far from the sea. Mr. Patrick was at least smart enough not to tell us exactly where we were

going. He kept the map in his shirt, close to his heart. He only took it out when we needed to switch roads or when he needed a compass bearing. I'd never been through New England before, and all I can remember now is that it was wet. Damn wet. I had to spend some of the wages Patrick paid me to buy a new hat, but it didn't do much keeping the rain off. Harder still was knowing that each night, I had to sleep on the ground with Stokes and Jefferson while Patrick and Bunyan had a tent, canvas that kept out most of the water and a canvas sheet that protected them from the worst of the mud.

Mud, cold, wet, and miserable, seeped and crawled into every part of my being. I had mud in my boots, mud in my armpits, and even the food we ate began to taste like mud to me. Stokes's beard seemed to drip mud like it was a tapped keg. It was late into the evening one night when I overheard Stokes and Jefferson whispering. We had built a fire that seemed to be just as upset about the wet as myself, and I was so cold and damp that I couldn't sleep.

"Accursed mud! I can stand no more. No more!" That was Jefferson, his rage coming through, even in a whisper.

"Mud ain't so bad, Silas."

I laughed silently. I was sure Stokes had grown up in a mud hole and the hell we were in now was only natural to him.

"Once we find this treasure, I am going to bury Patrick in this damn mud!"

"As long as I get to kill him."

"You can kill the old bastard, don't worry."

Stokes laughed. His laugh was foul like the belch of air from a rotting corpse.

"I'll kill him right now."

“If you want to risk not finding the treasure, I’d say go ahead, Stokes, but Patrick needs to take us to the treasure before we kill him. Then, we kill Patrick and that waste of skin Bunyan.”

“And Filinger?”

“He’s not a bad sort. If he helps us kill the old man, we’ll let him help us move the treasure before we kill him too.”

Stokes laughed again. Jefferson said no more, and the conversation ended.

The fact that they liked me well enough to not kill me outright didn’t do much to comfort me as I lay in the mud. I thought Mr. Patrick was a madman, but I didn’t want him dead either. As for Bunyan, he was not used to rough men like Stokes and Jefferson, and I didn’t think it right for them to kill him either.

As we made our way north, we were almost always within spitting distance of the coast. The unbearable wetness came from the large, dark clouds that always loomed off the horizon like giant priests, watching our every move and unhappy with everything we did. The terrain got rockier the farther north we got. We hadn’t seen people in days, and I didn’t feel inclined to talk much to any of my companions other than to make sure that Stokes and Jefferson didn’t kill Mr. Patrick. Instead I listened to the sea noises. I’m not crazy, but it seemed at times like something was out there, calling. Not to me, but calling for something or someone. And the farther we went, the more insistent and needier the call. For the first time, I began to wonder whether this damn treasure was worth it.

One morning we woke up, shook the mud off us that had collected over the night, and found ourselves face to face with a ship. Not pieces of a ship, the whole damn ship. The thing seemed to have run itself aground in the night and the shattered hulk sat there like a plug of

tobacco, chewed up and spit out by an ornery sea. Our camp that night had been right near the shore. A storm was raging and we'd found a reasonably flat spot among the rocks and set down to sleep with the angry sea at our backs and the angry sky overhead. It's no wonder that we didn't hear a ship run aground in the night.

"My God!" whispered Patrick. He and Bunyan had stepped from their tent and were struck, frozen in horror.

I'd seen death, of course, so the bodies hanging from the rigging and the stench of death, while not quite welcome, were at least tolerable.

"Those poor souls...we must..." Bunyan was unable to finish his sentences. I imagine that the shade of green that his face was now turning was affecting his mind as well.

Stokes and Jefferson had different ideas. "What do you suppose the cargo was on a boat that size? Or maybe it was passengers? Passengers have things. Gold, jewels, cash..." Jefferson's eyes lit up at the thought. Stokes merely licked his lips in anticipation.

Jefferson's words had caught my interest as well. I like money, jewels and the like, and I figured that the dead didn't need them no more. It's not like it was grave robbing, as these folk didn't have graves.

It took only a few moments to make up our minds what to do. Patrick and Bunyan, ever the good Christians, began taking down the bodies and digging graves. Well, the kinds of graves that a muddy beach can provide. All the same, it made them feel better. The ship itself seemed to have remained mostly upright, but there were gouges in the sides as if some sea god had tried to make a meal of it. Seeing one such hole, Stokes and Jefferson entered to see what they could scrounge from the cargo hold. I myself had a notion to see what treasures may be found in the Captain's cabin. If I were a Captain, I'd surely want the most precious treasures with me rather

than in a cargo hold where greedy sailors could have their way with it. Wooden planking splintered and snapped beneath my boots as I made my way across the beach. There was a piece of rigging draped down the side of the hull. Up I went. Slime and seaweed clung to my hands, but I managed to pull myself over the deck rail. I didn't get a good look at the place until after I'd made sure the deck would support me. Right away, I wished I'd gone to look at the cargo with Stokes and Jefferson. I've seen some crazy, terrifying things in my life, but I will swear to Heaven and back that I have never seen a sight like that. The deck of the ship was smashed all to hell. There was more. Bodies, twisted in bizarre positions, some almost torn in half. I don't know what could have done such a godforsaken thing, but it sure was no storm.

I slipped on the slime coating the deck more than a few times, but I wanted to make this little adventure worth my while. The Captain's door was a mangled wreck, and it was nothing for me to tear it off. The furniture was a mess of scraps and splinters. Books, paper, clothes, everything was tossed around. Being the careful man I was, I checked everything I could find, but there was nothing, no piece of paper that had any use to me. Thinking I had made a bad gamble, I was about to leave, but I kicked over the desk as a last thought and found the body of the Captain.

I've been frightened a time or two in my life, but I have never seen any man with the same look of terror that I saw on what was left of the Captain's face. He looked to be a man about the same age as my father at the time, with the same red, veiny nose that came from years of drinking. His eyes were wild. His mouth was open in a scream. His fingers were clenched around the handle of a pistol. The back of his head was gone. Shot away in an attempt to rid his mind of whatever it was he had seen. Whatever it was that slaughtered his crew.

I had only enough time to see that his other hand was clutching a scrap of parchment. I took it, tucked in my belt where no one could see and prepared to take what I could from the man's pockets, but a yell cut me short. Randolph Bunyan had found a survivor.

By the time I got there, they'd pulled her out of the wreckage and had put her on her stomach. Stokes was pounding her on her back with his meaty hands, and she was coughing up water. Seeing that Stokes was getting a bit more pleasure out of saving the drowning woman than I thought healthy, I shoved him off and helped the woman sit up. It wasn't until then that I got a clear look at her face.

Eyes. That's what I remember most about Miss Muirenn Cumhal. Eyes. As big and blue as the sky itself. Set in a face as fair and pretty as I've ever seen. Her clothes were rags, her skin battered and bruised, but that face, and those eyes, they had something. I don't hold with royalty, kings and such. I'm an American, through and through, but if I were to ever kneel before any living person, it would be our Muirenn.

Of course, it would be some time before we got any story out of her. The storm had taken its toll, and when I got her up and she saw that she was safe, she collapsed. She slept for almost two full days. We used the time to scrounge what we could from the ship. Jefferson found some guns and a sword that hadn't been damaged beyond repair. Stokes stumbled back to camp with a few bloody pieces of clothing that I thought better not to ask him about. Bunyan managed to make a clean tent of sorts from the sail. Mr. Patrick spent most of the time praying. Giving thanks to God that we were able to help a poor soul in need. Stokes and Jefferson were quiet. Quieter than I'd seen them before. At first, I thought it was because they were taken by the presence of the woman like I was.

When she woke up, it was Bunyan who noticed first. He rushed over and took her by the hand. “Ma’am, are you feeling better?”

She looked at him with those eyes of hers, and I think, in that moment, his future was tied to hers forever. “Who are you? Where am I? Her accent was Irish, just like my Mother’s,

His reply was calm and careful; his shyness that had always followed him seemed to be gone. “My name is Randolph Bunyan. Your ship was...destroyed...in the storm.”

I would have thought that she’d have asked for other survivors, maybe a husband, or other travelling companions, but strangely, she scrambled, her hands searching for something on her person. A purse, maybe, or a letter. Her hands came up empty.

She grabbed hold of Bunyan and sobbed into his shoulder for a good long while. I don’t suspect the man had ever had a woman hold him, let alone like she was never going to let him go. When it seemed that the tears had finally all left her body, Bunyan grasped her by the shoulders and looked into those eyes.

I’ve seen people in love. I’ve seen people who think that they’re in love. Damn, I thought I was in love once. Turned out it was just a cheap bottle of whisky and a face that was much prettier the night before. But seeing the look that Bunyan gave Muirenn, I knew that somehow, in a smaller amount of time than it takes me to decide between whisky and water, those two fell into real, marrying, goddamned love. I think that right then, I saw that there was something not quite right about her. Something unnatural. Looking at her gazing into the face of that naïve young Bostonian, I was suddenly possessed of the urge to take out the scrap of parchment I had found on the body of the Captain. I pulled it out of my belt. “Liath Luacra.” I had no idea what it meant. I thought maybe it was Latin, like the papists use, or some other made up language. It was

written in a clear hand, at least one I could read well enough, but the paper gave me no clue as to who had written it.

I knew I wouldn't be able to work it out on my own, but I wasn't ready to ask her about it. I kept the scrap of paper to myself, wanted to understand a bit more about this woman. She told us her name and that she had been travelling to America from Ireland when the ship hit a storm and was driven to land. She made no mention of any companions or kinfolk. I asked her what she had seen and if she knew how all the sailors had been ripped apart like that. She claimed that she had hit her head and been unconscious during the storm. I didn't believe her. Now, I'll fight any man who claims that Muirenn was anything other than an angel on this earth, but she was lying through her teeth. Even angels have to lie sometimes, and hell, can you blame her? She wakes up surrounded by a handful of rough men, covered with a mud and with Stokes's damned eyes lusting over her! It's enough to give anyone nightmares.

Chapter 4

It was a done deal from the start that she'd join with our little crew, at least until we got to some more civilized place. Well, as civilized as the coast of Maine can ever be.

Bunyan, of course let her take his horse while he walked alongside. I felt sorry for the boy. He'd never been in love before. I could see it all in his face, the widened eyes, ears perked to drink in anything she said with her musical accent. The deep, longing sighs whenever he looked at her. On the other hand, Stokes rode a slight distance behind her, and said nothing, but I could see what he was thinking. He was fixated on her too. Of course, a man like Stokes doesn't know what love is. He was an animal. All he wanted was to use her. Sate his lusts and be done.

Jefferson, though, I don't know what was going on in his head. Whereas before, he'd spend his days huddled together with Stokes, trying to find a way to liberate the treasure map

from Mr. Patrick, now he sat, said nothing, and stared straight ahead. Watching the road. His eyes narrowed, revealing nothing.

Mr. Patrick, seeing that the young woman was Irish and with a little digging, a papist, spent as much time as he could trying to convince her to give up her corrupt ways and join a true Christian faith by announcing her allegiance to Jesus. It didn't work, though. She smiled and nodded, but never said anything to give the man hope that he was having any success. After a week or so of this, he gave up and began telling her what he was going to do with the treasure money in Indian Territory. I don't think she cared much, but she listened. Listening to Patrick must have seemed a lot easier than having to tell your story, particularly if you didn't want that story told.

As for me, I kept my distance. I knew something was not right about the girl and her supposed ignorance of something that had caused a man to take his own life. Well, I planned to be a survivor. If she had something to do with this "Liath Luacra," whatever it was, I was going to be somewhere far away.

When we were about two weeks away from the ship, I noticed that Muirenn was getting up in the morning and vomiting. I'd seen pregnant women before. But somehow, I don't think that the other men caught on. Giving her a more considering look, I figured that she must be two months along. Whoever the father of her child was, he was either dead on the ship or still in Ireland. Either way, she didn't seem much to care. She was mooning over Randolph Bunyan.

Having been the only man to notice her pregnancy, I decided I had to do something to get us off of the bedamned coast and inland where we could find a place for Muirenn to stay while we continued our search for Patrick's treasure.

Patrick was staring into his fire the night I went over to him. He and Bunyan had given Muirenn their tent and Bunyan was helping her with a meal. Patrick had taken the makeshift tent formed from the ship's canvas. The firelight danced in his eyes. He wasn't blinking. He spoke before I had a chance to.

"Clay, has God ever spoken to you?"

I took that as an invitation and sat down next to him. "Can't say as he has."

"I used to be a sinful man. Drink. Whores. I had nothing. I was nothing. I was living in filth, no money, no friends, sick, dying. At the lowest end of darkness, I saw a vision. A Bible, floating in the air before me." With that, he pulled a worn and tattered Bible from the ground next to him. It took him less than a second to find the passage he was looking for. "Then will I teach transgressors thy ways, and sinners shall be converted unto thee. Psalms fifty-one: thirteen." The bible closed again with a slam. "It was that verse that appeared before me, Clay. That is what motivates me. Makes me strong. A strength you can share."

"Could be." I was hoping that my lack of commitment wouldn't inspire him to keep trying to convert me. I leapt in before he could say anything more. "Mr. Patrick, I think we should head inland. Get away from this shore. The woman. Muirenn. She's with child."

Patrick looked at me as if I were the mad one. "With child? How can this be?"

"In the usual way, I'd wager."

"Are you the father?"

This question took me by surprise. We'd only had her with us for two weeks. "No! She was with child while aboard ship. I suspect her husband died in the storm."

"A widow? Christ takes care of widows."

"And I suspect he'd have us take her inland. To a town where she can be cared for."

Patrick stared into his fire for a few minutes before speaking. “The treasure lies up the coast. Going inland would cost us days. Weeks, maybe and winter is coming early this year. That storm, a storm like that comes in October, not in August.”

A Kentucky boy didn’t know much about the mighty storms of the Atlantic, so I had to take his word for it. “Sir, she’ll be better off among other women.”

“And so I am faced with a choice. Take care of the papist widow, and perhaps lose a season, or seek my treasure and perhaps lose the widow.”

The decision to care for Muirenn earned more than a few sour looks from Stokes, but oddly, Jefferson said nothing, just followed along as before. I’d have paid more attention, but I just wanted to ease my worries about the woman. Bunyan and Muirenn chatted with each other. Talking about life in Ireland, or about the bible. Bunyan didn’t seem to have the same trouble with papists as his uncle did.

It wasn’t but a few days before we made our way through the forest not far from the coast and found us a village. It was a little place, not more than a few buildings, homes to woodcutters, mostly. Seeing five mud-covered men and a woman wander into the place caused no small upset to the townsfolk. They came out in droves to see us and ask what we were doing. Mr. Patrick told them that we were men of God come to teach them. He didn’t say anything about the treasure. Stokes just grinned at them, his tobacco stained teeth looking like cankers on his soul. I was too occupied with watching Muirenn and Bunyan that I didn’t notice Jefferson slip away.

Turned out the village was called Heaven’s Landing. A shiny name for a dull scrap of landscape. The place had been around for maybe five years. It was a cluster of cabins surrounding an open area. A town square or some such. I noticed right away that they had a

large, well-fashioned gallows for such a small town. That just added more to my discomfort with the whole damn situation.

We didn't see Jefferson again for days. In the meantime, Mr. Patrick negotiated for us to use a cabin that had been unused since the owner, another woodcutter, had been killed in an accident. This was a lucky stroke, because the stormy weather that had been dogging us since Boston caught up with us and dumped rain on us. This was more water than I'd ever seen outside of the ocean. I was indeed grateful for the shelter, but I didn't like being in the same space as Stokes, who smelled like a dead polecat in the best of times, but in the rain smelled like a dead polecat that had first taken a bath in an open sewer. To top it all, he still grinned at Muirenn in his lustful way. I was afraid I'd have to kill him sooner or later, as Bunyan or Patrick would have no way of defending her.

The smell got worse and worse over the next few days and I took to trying a piece of leather over my mouth and nose. Even then it felt like I could see the stench rising off of Stokes like clouds of tobacco. I'd have gone outside, but for three days, the rain and wind pummeled that cabin like a riverman in a fight with a bear. If we wanted to piss, we'd make sure the lady wasn't watching and do our business in a corner of the dirt floor. The dirt floor which soon turned to mud. Not just from our water, but from the drippings that came through the cracks in the walls and ceiling.

If Muirenn had been any normal sort of woman, I'd have been afraid for her health, seeing as she was in a delicate condition. But she treated the unnatural storm and rain like it was nothing at all. In fact, she and Bunyan sat and gazed at each other like the rest of us and Stokes, with his foul odors, were not even there.

Now, I 'm a freethinking man, but even I might have trouble falling in love with a woman who was obviously carrying another man's get. As I sat there, through the three long days of the storm, I wondered what sort of spell or hex had been put on Bunyan to make him so easily swayed. Sure, her eyes were something remarkable, but I hadn't fallen in love with her. I studied Muirenn. Studied her face and head for any sign of devilry, but could find none. My uncle Arthur kept a Negro woman for himself down in Kentucky and the woman always swore that you could tell if a person was touched by the devil because they'd start growing little horns. She said she saw a man down in New Orleans who had curled ram's horns a foot long, he was so evil. But with all her talk of the devil and staying away from evil, I saw her blessing their house with herbs or some such, spreading some foul brown concoction on the walls. She said it was to ward off spirits, but I never saw anything in the Bible about that.

I didn't see any horns on Muirenn, and I couldn't see any other outward signs of evil. In fact, I found myself at times being charmed by the woman. She was intelligent, graceful, and at times, at times she'd sing songs in that Irish brogue that made me think fondly of my mother and of far off Ireland, a place I've never been to. Hell, even Stokes seemed to forget his fleshly lusts for a while and would stare at the wall or at the ground rather than focus his all-consuming gaze on Muirenn.

While the smell and the songs occupied our time. Mr. Patrick alternated between reading the Bible that he kept in his pocket and studying his map. I'd be dishonest if I were to say that I didn't think about grabbing the map away from him, running out the door and leaving that whole mess behind. But every time I thought about this, I'd look through one of the cracks in the door to see the storm raging like a hellfire and damnation preacher sermonizing about the ills of alcohol. Now, I've been out in foul weather before, rain ain't usually much to me but an excuse

not to take a bath for another week, but storm was more than even I could handle. I figured that I'd respect any storm so full of itself and wait for another chance to take my leave of my companions. I'd take the map of course.

When the rain did let up, I rushed outside as soon as I could to take a piss. Doing it outside like God intended was relaxing in a way that I've known only a few times in my life. I've heard talk of men and women telling how they found God, like it was a moment of pure bliss or a fire in their belly, but if that sort of feeling is how a man knows he's close to God, then I must be the patron saint of relieving oneself.

My moment of spirituality was short lived. No sooner had I done up my trousers before I was snatched roughly from behind. My first thought was that it was some enforcer of public decency or some such, but the two burly arms that held me spun me around and I found myself facing a crowd of angry townsfolk.

Angry townsfolk were and are not a new thing for me. I've been in a scrape or two from time to time but these people didn't seem merely annoyed with me, ready to toss me out or something normal. These folks looked like they were ready to string me up on their fancy gallows.

I was tossed into the cabin where we'd spent the last few days. The smell hadn't gotten any better in the few minutes I'd spent outside. At least I'd been able to relieve myself. A man, I guess the leader of the village, some lumberjack with arms as big as a country ham, held his axe at me as if I'd try to attack him. No worries there. I know how sensitive my skin is to axeheads. He was surrounded by a few others, men and women.

"We let you into our town. We acted in a Christian way, and your people kill us. I should kill you right here." His accent was Irish, like Muirenn's.

“Now, I don’t know what crime I may or may not have done in your town, Sir, but I can say that my bloodstains won’t leave your axe soon.”

The man looked at his axe, a momentary flicker of fear crossing his face. I could tell he’d never killed a man. But just after that his grip on his axe handle tightened and stern resolve appeared on his face. “A family: man, wife, and aye, two wee lads were slaughtered during that rainstorm.”

“I...we were in that cabin. You can tell as how I smell like the Devil’s shit.”

The man sniffed. “Aye, that you do.”

“We didn’t kill any of your folk. We only came here as the lady we’re travelling with is with child.”

There was a gasp from one of the women in the room. The axe man looked at her and gestured her to keep quiet.

“We’re humble traders. We found the woman in a shipwreck and brought her here. That’s all.”

“There was another one! Another one, the killer!” This came from a different woman, a thin, scarecrow of a woman, the kind who worries so much about their neighbors as to shrivel up at a young age.

I cursed silently. My only way out of this was to keep us out of the blame for what I guessed had to be Jefferson’s work. Georgians murder people without discrimination. Bastards. I was about to tell them to take Stokes and string the man up, but I was interrupted.

While I was being captured and questioned, the townsfolk had gone after Patrick and Bunyan. The two were brought in and tossed next to me in a rough fashion. I could tell the two

men had never been treated like that. They were scared. Then came Stokes. He looked almost like he was happy, the dirty teeth showing through his smile.

Muirenn, on the other hand, was different. Her dander up and her brogue in full effect, she stepped out into the room between, Patrick, Bunyan, and myself and the angry crowd. I didn't know what was going to happen, but I did not expect her to plead our case. When I say "plead our case" I mean that I assume that that's what she did. I don't remember what she said, only that when she said it, it seemed like the most reasonable thing in the world. The axe man, who moments before looked ready to give my insides a chance to catch some fresh air put down his tool and looked somehow ashamed of himself.

I took advantage of the situation to gently nudge the townsfolk out the door. They left, without even giving me a second look. Hell, I've been in some tight spots, but I don't think I've ever let out such a sigh of relief in my life. Stokes looked like he'd messed his pants, but with the smell in the cabin already bad enough to send the Devil packing, I couldn't tell. Bunyan was looking at our Irish lass with even more love than I'd seen before. Patrick was upset, not saying anything, but his face was grim.

I waited as long as I could in the cabin before the smell drove me out, but stepping outside, I saw what sort of damage the unnatural storm had done. There were tree branches everywhere. Some of them looked like they'd been stripped totally bare. Patches of the forest looked like the ships at Boston harbor. And the mud seemed deeper and more aggressive than it had before. I made my way out from the cabin to see what I could find.

The townsfolk were milling around another cabin, one that looked like it had been badly damaged by the storm. I crept around the back of the crowd and peeked through the door. The bodies were torn apart, like the sailors on Muirenn's ship. I didn't feel like investigating much

further. Blood was mixed with the mud, making a purple ooze that clung to my boots as I walked away.

As I left, I started to think on what I'd gotten myself into. What sort of thing was killing good folk like this? Why had Jefferson turned murderous?

Chapter 5

With Patrick and Bunyan still shocked and reeling from the rough handling of the lumbermen, and Stokes not doing much of anything, Muirenn was the only one who left the cabin. I watched her exit that stench-filled cabin with the grace and dignity of a queen. She glanced around at the buildings of Heaven's Landing before seeing me. Her approach filled me with wariness. I felt like a fox trapped by a pack of hunting dogs.

"Clay Filinger." Her voice was strong, beautiful and musical. It scared the hell out of me.

"Muirenn."

She laughed. "You are a wise man, and stronger than you look."

"I'm no wiser than any others; I just like my hide more than most folk do."

She laughed again. "I can see why you were brought to my aid."

I didn't have a good response to that. So, I changed topics. "Who are you? Really? How did you get those folk to not kill us with their axes?"

Her face grew more serious. "My name is Muirenn Cumhal. I am the daughter of Tagd mac Nuadat." The name sounded strange to me. I'd never heard my Mother or any other Irish I'd met say names like that. The confusion must have shown on his face. "He was named after an ancestor, a druid in the old religion."

"What does that have to do with me?"

“When I was a girl, young, pretty, and innocent, I was walking in the hills of what they call County Kildare. My father had warned me not to disturb the spirits and the little people in those hills, but I did. I went anyway, and I thought that the Virgin’s love would protect me.” She began walking, taking me away from the cluster of houses, toward the northern road out of the village. “I was wrong, of course. It was sunset, the time between times, the time when the fair folk, the little people are about.”

I followed her, curious and compelled.”I don’t know who these fair folk are.”

She looked at me. “Creatures of magic. Those who walked the earth long before man ever set foot here.”

“Demons?”

“I forget that you Americans have forgotten everything.”

I was feeling a mite angry at her calling me ignorant, but when I looked at her to give her hell, I was immediately calm. I didn’t like the feeling, but it was something I couldn’t grasp, and before long, it slipped away, just like my anger.

“I was taken. I...I don’t remember much of the place, but I feel like I was there for a few seconds, and I feel like I was there for an eternity. Sometimes I feel as if I am still there. It was a place made of light and dark. Extremes, and nothing more. There were voices, and thoughts...” She looked away, struggling to regain her thoughts. The careful mask of grace I’d seen her in for so long was beginning to slip.

“Why are you telling me this?” To me, it looked like she was suffering, and I wanted it to stop, but I knew she was manipulating my feelings somehow, and I wanted that to stop.

She continued as if I had said nothing at all. “When I was...released, I couldn’t find my way back home. Everything had changed. Places, people. There were roads and towns where

there had been none.” She looked me directly in the face. “Centuries had gone by. Everyone I knew was long dead.”

I had heard some tall tales in my day: ghost stories, tales of witchcraft and demonry. Most of it was just that, tales. But when this beautiful woman looked at me and told me her tale, I knew it was damned unlikely, but I could see that she believed it to be true, and the knowledge of it chilled me to my core. “Muirenn, how old are you?”

“We didn’t keep mark of the seasons in the same way, but I was born around the year 1320.”

Five hundred years old. Damn. I looked at her and didn’t think I’d ever be the same. There was more going on in the world than I’d ever imagined living in Fingal, Kentucky.

“More than five hundred years had passed. I was still young, but I had nothing but my clothing.” She paused. “Well, my clothing and one more thing. A leather pouch. Drawn tightly with a leather cord. Try as I might, I could not open it.”

This part didn’t register with me, since the notion of a five hundred year old woman had my mind reeling like a drunk bear. “So, you were alone? What did you do? How did you get...?” I gestured toward her swollen belly.

She didn’t seem to mind my lack of decorum. “Five hundred years is a long time. Even the language was different. I couldn’t speak or communicate with anyone. I...I got a job as a washerwoman. I was there, treated no better than a dog. I couldn’t do anything to rise above my station. When the time came that I finally could make sense of what the other women were saying. I learned about my nation, and the harsh rule of the English. I learned of the light of the West, people leaving for brighter shores. Here. America.” Then, surprisingly, she laughed. “A

place known by my people as the far off land St. Brendan had fled to spread Christianity. Amazing to find so many Christians here.”

I didn't say anything. I knew she was taking her time to get to the point of her story.

She continued, “Some months after my escape...release...I knew and understood what America was. I wanted to go. My home, my family, they were all gone. What better place for me to start a new life than in the New World?” She glanced around her, now that our path had taken us away from the bustle of the village and the carnage of the bloody cabin, there were no people around to overhear us. “I didn't have the money to come here. I tried to find work, but people were not trusting of a girl with no family, no money. It was night, of course, when he came to me. At first I thought he was a vagrant, and man planning to attack me and...take my virtue.”

I was prepared for the worst. “Muirenn, don't say no more. I understand.”

She looked at me in surprise. “No, it is you who does not understand. He came to me in the night. I looked at the sleeping forms of the women beside me where I slept with other poor washerwomen. They did not stir, nor, do I think, could they. He was alive, Clay. Bold.” She ran her hands through her hair. It was unconscious, like a wisp of a memory.

As she continued, her voice rose and took on a sing-song quality. “I knew him. Although my memories of my time among the fair folk were gone from me, I knew him. He was one of them. His hair was gold, not blonde, like yours, but gold. His eyes, how they glittered!”

She then looked me square in the eye. “He took me, Clay, and there was nothing I could do anything about it. He owned me, possessed me. Our time was short, but some weeks later, I knew I carried his seed.”

I was shocked that a lady would talk about such things with a lowborn scoundrel like myself. “You mean to say that the father of your child was some spectre or goblin?”

“He was not foul like those things, but yes, a creature not wholly human.”

“And he abandoned you? Bastard.”

“It is their nature. To stay on one place or to explain themselves to humans is not something they even consider.”

“Doesn’t make it right. And he’s still a bastard in my book.”

She laughed. “You have a good heart, Clay; you hide it well, but a good heart.”

“Why am I privy to this? Why me?”

“I need someone to help and protect me.” She looked down. “And my son.”

“Son?”

“I know it will be a son. And I need you to help him, teach him, and protect him from that which might harm him. His time is soon.”

“I took you to be two months along.”

She laughed, clear and bright. “No, I am at the end of my term. This is why I need you now. This very day.”

No one, anywhere, had ever asked something of me like this. I was used to being scored, ignored, kicked out of bars, but no one, let alone a woman had ever *confided* in me before. I didn’t like it.

“I’m not one for helping others. Much as I am fond of you, Muirenn. And I don’t know anything about birthing a child.”

“But you must!” She looked frightened and confused. “I was told...”

“You were told I would help you? Me? I sure as hell think that’s wrong.”

It didn’t take more than fifteen minutes before I had saddled my horse and was headed out of town. Don’t get me wrong, I was fond of Muirenn, and I liked Bunyan and Mr. Patrick

well enough, but I liked myself more. I had a strong suspicion that if I stayed any longer, I'd be trapped like a fox in a bear trap. And like that fox in a bear trap, this whole thing was too damned big for me. Call me a coward if you will, but life in Kentucky with Pappy had taught me, more than anything, to keep my head down and stay out of the way of trouble.

A couple of the village folk watched me pass, their eyes narrowed in suspicion. I didn't take no heed. Suspicion can't do any physical damage. I figured they must still be under Muirenn's little spell, or they wouldn't let me leave. I said a little prayer for small miracles. I wasn't sure that Jesus was overseeing this particular scrap of Maine at the moment, but it never hurts to try. Plus, Jesus is a good man to have on your side in a fight.

Chapter 6

As I rode, I let the cool clear air wash the stink of the cabin and the memories of the twisted corpses out of my mind and soul. I wished that I'd been able to find some treasure before I took flight, but I reassured myself that I was alive, hale and had a horse, tack and clothing.

There was only one road out of Heaven's Landing other than the one that led to the coast. I wasn't going back there at all. That was where all of this started. The road that didn't lead to the coast instead led south. When you're in Maine, a road that leads south is the best road to take. As I rode through the daylight, the trees at the side of me seemed to tell me stories about the good life I'd have in Boston once I got back there. I could sell the horse, and use the money to keep myself fed for at least a while.

These thoughts kept me warm for a dozen miles or so, but before long, it began to be dark. I'd forgotten that in the north, it gets dark before it does in Kentucky. The damn trees didn't look so friendly anymore.

Now, I've seen strange things in the darkness. Once, when I was a boy, I went outside to avoid my father and his whisky-fueled desire to lecture me on one or more of my failings. In the black Kentucky wild, I heard a crashing in the brush. I was so frightened that I actually picked up the shovel that my father had been planning to lecture me with earlier. It was my first time with such an object, but I'll be damned if it didn't feel reassuring. Anyway, holding the shovel for protection, I stepped away from Pappy's farmhouse and saw, just for a moment, a figure framed against the full moon. It was a man, but the tallest man I had ever seen. More like a beast on hind legs. Hairy as my grandmother's backside and oddly enough, it smelled like a dead possum. The thing looked at me for just a moment. I held my shovel and my bladder got itself ready by emptying itself before the fight. But before anything happened, the man-thing turned and ran into the wilderness.

I've never known such fear since, but as I got farther and farther down the road, fear began creeping up on me like ants crawling up a log. Along with the fear, came something new: guilt. I'd always lived as much of a guilt-free life as a man can have, but instead of imagining Boston and the good life, I began imaging my reception in Hell. Was the Devil a decent host? I figured he couldn't be holding any serious grudges against me. I'd never done him no harm. All the same, I said a little prayer to Jesus just in case he'd see fit to let me into his house too. I didn't think abandoning a woman in need was going to go well with him, though.

In the forest, the dark increases quickly. Before I knew it, the twilight that had me imagining my death turned into a night that had me wishing for it. I rode farther down the road, the clapping of my horse's hooves the only noise I could hear. Did Maine have no other settlements? Had God completely forsaken this country?

Through the black, I rode and rode. I couldn't go as fast as I'd have liked for fear of the horse tripping and making me use my own legs. Damn. It was dark. Damn. It was cold. I started swearing that I'd never come back to Maine. Then I just started swearing.

As I rounded a bend in the road, I saw a light a few hundred yards farther. Normally, I would have been happy at the thought of light. Light meant food and warmth, or at least someone I could steal from. This light...well, this light was not the light of a fire. This was the light of something unnatural. Something unholy. Firelight is orange, sometimes red, but this was blue. Blue like light through a still pool in the river. Blue like a dress dyed in calico. It was a blue I'd seen before.

I didn't like it. I wanted to turn around, run away. Hell, I wanted to scamper down into a hole like a rabbit. Say what you will about me, but I'm only a brave man when I know I'm not going to die. As much as I wanted to get away, I could not get the horse to move. The damned thing kept trotting forward at a steady pace. The clapping of the hooves slowly began increasing in frequency. Figuring that the horse could find certain doom without me, I gathered myself to leap out of the saddle. I could not. I must have damned the horse fifty ways to hell and back, but my legs would not move.

On we went. The blue light grew stronger and stronger. Finally, we rounded another bend in the road and what I saw still gives me nightmares to this day. The light was coming from a horse. Or at least what looked like a horse. Now, in my life I've travelled around the country. I've fought in and run away from wars. I've seen Injun sorcerers work their magic several times, but I had never in all my life seen a blue horse.

My first thought was that it was a ghost. A ghost of some horse I had wronged in the past come to avenge itself on me. I can't remember ever harming a horse before, at least not

deliberately, but who's to say that a ghost can't be wrong about who has done them wrong? My fears of the horse being a ghost were quickly replaced by my fears of it not being a ghost.

As I grew closer, I saw that the horse was simply standing in the road. Waiting for me. I was getting well past merely frightened, to terrified, then to petrified. But as I got closer to the blue horse, I somehow got beyond all common notions of fear or cowardice to just being angry. My life was my life, and who the hell, be it man or beast or creature of legend, had the right to make me afraid?

Soon, I was close enough to see through the haze of blue that surrounded the beast. And from what I could see, there was a human figure kneeling in front of it. A few feet further and I who it was.

“Stokes? What the hell are you doing here?”

I didn't hear a reply. The bastard was gazing up at the creature his adoring gaze like he would if the most beautiful whore in all the world were dressed in nothing but solid gold coins.

I heard a voice and couldn't tell if it was Stokes, giving some kind of drivel to the horse, or my own fancies. The hair on the back of my neck, hell the hair all over my body started to rise. Closer and closer I went. As much fear as I was feeling, I was still feeling more anger. My legs were still clamped close to my horse's side like they were covered with tar. I soon realized that I could not move my arms either. For good or ill, I was being led to whatever destiny involves a glowing horse. The voice grew louder and clearer the closer I got to it.

Suddenly, I realized that the voice did not belong to Stokes at all. This voice was far too strong and powerful for that. More, it was like the sound of the wind rushing down the mountains, a roaring river coursing through the land. As I listened, I started seeing images in my

mind. Green hills, fields, rain. I had never seen any of these places before in my life. Yet, they were as clear in my mind as if I had spent my whole life there.

When I finally got to within a few feet of Stokes and the horse, I saw that Stokes was gazing up at the creature not with awe and reverence, as I'd supposed, rather he was struck with fear. Sweat rolled down his ugly face as if it was all too glad to be out of his body.

My horse had stopped, but I had noticed, seeing as how I had my own fear to deal with. I'm normally the kind of man who runs from what can kill him, but seeing as how my legs were unable to do so, I looked the glowing monster right in the eye.

Then the last thing I expected happened. The thing spoke. As long as I live, I shall never forget those words. They bored into me like they were a nail driven into my skull with a sledgehammer. Looking me in the eye, the glowing horse opened its mouth and said, "You were right to flee. You have seen much that would frighten an ordinary man. Do you fear me?"

I nodded a yes, and then spoke. "Hell yes, I'm afraid. Do you think I'm some kind of fool?"

"Good." The creature replied. "This one..." and it nodded at Stokes, "Has a black heart and a black soul." Without taking another second, the beast opened its mouth wider than I would have believed possible and swallowed Stokes in one motion. Within seconds there was nothing left of him. The creature turned back to me and gazed at me again with a liquid eye that seemed as deep as all the oceans. "You must help me."

I didn't say anything. This wasn't really a time for negotiating.

"You must protect them until the child is born. Then, you must protect the child." It didn't take an idiot to see that it was talking about Muirenn and her baby.

I still didn't say anything. I like to think that it was because I knew better than to try to make a deal with some creature from hell, but in truth, I was just too damn scared. At least I hadn't voided my bowels yet. I'm not sure if hellspawn or demons or fairy folk take that sort of thing well. Although, to be fair, the thing had eaten what was the foulest, most stench-covered man I had ever encountered.

Curiosity drove me to ask, "How did Stokes get here? I didn't see him leave the village, and all of the horses were accounted for."

"I summoned him. His mind was weak. He posed a threat to the child. I brought him here so you could see his fate."

"Why in hell would you want me to see you eat that disgusting bastard? I imagine that there were other ways to get rid of him."

"You needed to understand the power you are dealing with. You needed to understand your role."

"My role? My role?! My role, seeing as how this is my life, is to get myself safe, well-fed, and rich. That's my role."

And then the horse spoke again. "You're a bold one, a bold one." I knew that voice. I'd heard it all the way from Kentucky to New York.

"Uncle Nathan?"

"In the flesh." As soon as the horse said this, it *changed*. The horse shape blended and blurred until it matched that of Uncle Nathan, beard and all.

My fear and anger by this time had settled into a dark lump in my belly. This was stranger than anything I had seen. "Are you really him? Uncle Nathan, I mean."

The man who had helped me cross the nation smiled at me. He beard waggled in a familiar way. “I am he, son. I was sent to guide you, to make sure you got to where you needed to be.”

“This is nonsense. I’m the son of a drunk sharecropper. Nothing more.”

“You are more than that. Your mother was of an ancient Irish family. That makes you part of an ancient Irish family.”

“Are you Irish? You sure as hell don’t sound like it.”

“I am anything I wish to be.”

“Are you even human?”

“I am a Pooka.”

“Pooka? Is that something I should know?”

Uncle Nathan sighed in frustration. “Do you Americans know nothing?”

“We know what we need to. What in the backside-blistering fires of hell is a Pooka?”

“We are creatures of spirit. I come from the realms of the fair folk, while our natural form is that of the horse, we can take what form we like and have the power of speech.”

“I figured that, seeing as how you’re talking to me and all.”

Then, as if tired of speaking to me in human terms, Uncle Nathan became once more a horse. The blue light seemed to shine brighter than ever before. “We have no more time to waste. You are needed. We must make haste.”

I noticed how his voice and language changed when he was a horse, but I didn’t have much time to think about it.

Although I had said nothing, the horse seemed to take my silence as a sort of agreement to do what it said. Without knowing what was happening, I found myself dismounting from the

horse I had taken from the village and climbing bareback on top of the glowing creature. At the very least, I thought, the damn thing couldn't look me in the eye anymore.

This entire episode didn't take more than a minute, maybe two, but before I knew it, I was riding atop this monster, riding faster than I had ever thought possible. In the darkness, it was hard to see how fast we were traveling, but judging by the strange light that the being gave off, I could tell that it was at an incredible rate. How I wasn't bucked off, I don't know. What I do know is that the distance it took me to travel in an entire day, took me less than an hour to repeat. In that short span of time, I found myself right smack in the middle of the village I had left the morning before. I swore. I swore again.

Chapter 7

Heaven's Landing didn't look any more inviting or civilized in the dark. Since I'd spent my only real time there huddled in the cabin with Stokes and his foul reek, I hadn't had much mind to see what it was like in the dark. The gallows looked, if anything, even more frightening and out of place. The blue horse unceremoniously deposited me on the ground and forced me to look in its eye once more.

"You will protect the child." The only thing I could do was nod. "All you have to fear is fear. If you do not fear it, it cannot harm you." I began wondering how deeply this thing had looked into my soul because I was not the type of man who tried to hide his fear. Fear and I were old friends and it had gotten me out of trouble more times than I could count. "You must do it."

With that last command, the blue glowing horse ran off out of the town faster than Stokes would have after a whore. I was left alone in the town square. It seemed to me that all of the townsfolk had retired into their cabins. I reasoned that I would do the same if an entire family had been murdered in their home.

Taking care not to make any noise, I crept my way through the town toward the cabin where Mr. Patrick and the others were staying. When I reached it, I took a stroll around the outside to see if there was anything amiss. Other than the smell wafting out from the cracks in the wall, there was nothing. The stench made me almost want to stay outside. I debated with myself which was worse: The foul residue left by Stokes? Or an angry blue horse that could eat a man in a single bite? The debate took me a while. Eventually I decided that the smell wouldn't kill me as quickly as the horse would.

I carefully tapped on the door and was quickly challenged by the voice of Mr. Patrick. I made myself known and they let me in. Once inside, I could see that they were all terrified. As late as it was, none of them were asleep. Patrick was holding a rifle, a panicked look on his face. Muirenn was lying in bed, sweat glistening on her forehead like stars in the night sky. Bunyan was next to her, holding her hand and singing softly to her, some hymn that I'd never heard before.

"Where have you been, Clay?" asked Patrick.

I took a moment before I replied. "I rode south a ways."

"Is Stokes with you?"

I shook my head. "No, I saw him. He was..." I didn't want to talk about the Pooka. They'd think me a madman. "He's dead. I saw him killed on the road."

"Good God!" Patrick looked genuinely upset. "Criminals and monsters so close!"

"Monsters. Yes indeed." The news of Stokes's death must have distracted him from asking why I had taken my ride in the first place. I was thankful. Then, I noticed that something else was wrong. Patrick was subdued, from something more than just the death of Stokes.

"What? Did something happen?"

Bunyan spoke, the words coming out from between his clenched teeth. “Jefferson. He came back.”

I rushed for the door, hoping to find or catch the man, I don’t know.

“He took my map. Threatened to kill Muirenn if I did not give it to him.” Patrick’s voice was laced with utter sadness and disappointment.

Seconds later, Muirenn gave a sharp cry. I realized why there was so much sweat on her face: she was about to give birth. My first instinct was to run from the cabin. Again. Childbirth involves a lot of fluids that I’d rather not have anything to do with. However, just as I was considering this, there came a noise like a thousand screaming children outside the cabin. The hair on my body stood up again, just as it had when I met the blue horse, but this was different. This sound had an evil quality to it that I had never felt before in my life. The strange sensation that I had gotten from the unnatural storm was here magnified a hundred times.

Mr. Patrick raised his rifle and muttered a prayer to the Almighty. Muirenn screamed. Bunyan held her hand tighter.

The noise outside grew and grew until I was sure that I could stand it no more. Mr. Patrick, his face as white as ashes pointed his gun at the door. Almost as soon as he did that, the door started shaking like it was caught in a powerful wind. Muirenn screamed again.

Seeing the door shaking and everyone terrified, I wonder why in hell the damned demon horse had brought me back here and told me that there was nothing to fear. Of course there was something to fear! It was outside and about to come through the door.

Mr. Patrick stopped praying and began to moan in a low voice. The door started shaking harder. Muirenn screamed again. I didn’t know what to do. It was then that I noticed Randolph Bunyan. The young man was so engrossed in his love for Muirenn that he was oblivious to the

horror outside. He was still softly singing his hymn to her, trying to keep her calm while she gave birth. I saw that around him and her, it just seemed calmer.

It was then that I knew what the horse had wanted me to do. I called for Mr. Patrick. He ignored me and continued his low moans. I called him again. Nothing. So, I hit him in the face with my fist as hard as I could. The man crumpled like a piece of paper. He was out cold. As soon as he collapsed, the door stopped shaking. I arranged him on the floor so he was more comfortable and moved myself over near the bed where Muirenn and Bunyan were. Taking careful note, I began to sing along with Bunyan's hymn.

Then, I bunched my fists and swung open the wooden door. Hesitating for only a second, I stepped through the threshold and outside. The door closed behind me with a wooden slam and I knew that I was alone outside. I was still singing Bunyan's hymn, my voice not carrying a lovely tune at all, but that I was managing to sing at all was surprising.

The night and the powerful gloom blinded me to what was out there for a moment. I like to think of that moment as the last moment of my youth, because when a lightning strike illuminated the Terror of Heaven's Landing, I became a man. A man who was scared shitless, but a man.

What I saw I remember clearly, even now. Try to imagine a skinned deer: the shape of the head, the white and red of muscle. That's what this thing was. It stood like a man, on two legs, but it had hooves for feet, and antlers branching out from the skull, just behind the eyes. It bellowed at me, and again, the scream that came forth was the sound of a thousand murdered souls crying as one. It raised its arms and I could see that it had hands instead of hooves, each finger tipped with a black claw, sharp and looking likely to draw some of my blood.

I don't know where I found it I me to keep singing Bunyan's hymn. I was scared, but I was also damn angry. I don't like being told what to do. I don't like being forced into some damn cabin. I didn't like this thing threatening a woman like Muirenn. I sang at it. It screamed at me. The hymn ended, and I'd never learned any of the words, not really. I'd just heard Bunyan singing it in the cabin. When I stopped, the thing lowered its head and appeared ready to charge me.

I was fresh out of hymns, so I sang the next thing that came to mind. It was one of Pappy's marching songs from the war of 1812. When he was drunk, but before he'd get so drunk that his voice would get slurred, he'd sing it. I hated the damn song, but I knew it as well as I knew anything.

I sang the song that had been sung by Pappy and his comrades as they marched to war. The song they sang as they fought the damned British. I hated it. I hated him. As I sang, Pappy's face appeared in my mind and I felt such hate that all the fear I'd felt at the beast melted away. I sang my rage at it and the charge never came.

Instead, the deer-creature screamed at me once more and fled into the forest.

Chapter 8

About an hour after dawn, Muirenn gave birth to her child. It was a large boy-child, healthy as an ox. In spite of myself, I felt obliged to help her out and found myself covered with the unpleasant fluids that came with childbirth. As soon as the child was born, and the sun was out, I staggered to the door, hoping to find some water outside with which to clean myself. Upon opening it, I was almost blinded by the daylight. The sun seemed brighter and hotter than it ever had to me. The day seemed clearer and it was all I could do to not jump and prance around like a child.

I was still covered with birth juices, so I made my way to the town well where I stripped off my shirt and washed myself as best I could. The coldness of the water didn't do anything to take away the thrill of being clean. As I was bathing, I heard a voice in my mind. It was Uncle Nathan. "You have done well. Your actions have helped set in motion something that will have long consequences. Keep well"

I looked around, carefully so as to not appear insane. There was no horse nearby, and I hoped that I would never see the damned thing or any other glowing animal as long as I lived. Seeing nothing and being clean, I made my way back to the cabin. Mr. Patrick had awoken and dragged the stinking corpse of Stokes to the woods where it would be more welcome. I peeked through the door and saw mother and child together in peace with Randolph Bunyan wrapping his arms around both of them.

As I was looking on this scene, Mr. Patrick put a hand on my shoulder and thanked me for punching him. I told him that it was no matter and that I would be glad to do it for him anytime. He laughed and led me into the cabin. Muirenn looked up at me and without saying anything, with only a look in her eyes, thanked me. Bunyan stood up and shook my hand. I asked about the child.

Muirenn handed him too me. I held him gingerly in my arms. I knew that this boy was going to be big. He was already as heavy as a good sized pig. When I asked what his name would be, Mr. Patrick went into a long speech about how the events of the night before had changed him like the apostle Paul and for that reason, he was going to name the baby Paul. Patrick and I looked at the child, and as we did, the terror that had so gripped us in the cabin seemed to fade away. I don't know how, but the birth of this boy, this Paul, meant that we had won. At least for the time being.

A sob from Bunyan brought my attention back to the birthing bed. He was holding Muirenn's hand and weeping openly. It took just a slim second for me to understand what was happening. Muirenn was dead. The birth had taken too much out of her and she had lived long enough to hand her child to me. For all that she had lived for centuries, Muirenn was as mortal as I was. Mr. Patrick himself, seeing this, walked over and quietly placed his hand on his nephew's back. I took the boy outside, not wanting him to be around so much death and grief in his first moments.

I didn't know much about babies at the time, otherwise I would have thought before taking the boy into the cool morning air. However, this boy, this Paul of ours was no ordinary boy. One he was free of the cabin, his lungs filled with air and he began to scream.

Now, I've heard screaming. I've screamed myself a time or two, but the infant Paul screamed so loud and so powerfully, that the few panes of glass owned by the folk of Heaven's Landing were shattered outright. I'm amazed that my own ears didn't blacken up and fall off from the wail. Then, as soon as the wail began, it ended. I don't know how or why, but I began to think that the babe was grieving for the loss of his mother. Uncle Nathan had told me to protect the boy, so I guessed that it made him special. I hadn't wanted responsibility like this, but I had to do it if I didn't want a horse to eat me.

“Well, boy, my name's Clay Filinger, and I'm here to see you grow up alive and such. I'm not much of a man to speak of, but I'll do my damndest to make sure you don't get hurt by no monsters.”

Paul, having stopped crying, looked up at me and gurgled contentedly.

“I guess that means you and I are friends.” He smiled at me once more and I took him back into the cabin to gather my things.

Chapter 9

Glowing blue horses are seldom clear when they give instructions. I knew that I had to stay close to this boy, son of a woman I'd only known for a short time, but I didn't know how close. If it meant my death to wander too far, I wanted to stay pretty damn close. If I had known when I left Kentucky that I'd have to spend years of my life in Maine, I would have stayed with Pappy.

Maine was a new state then, bastard child of Massachusetts, forced into being as part of the Compromise of 1820. Maine was to be the free counterpart to slave state Missouri. At the time, I didn't know a hell of a lot about politics or state disputes, but from what I could see, Maine had enough problems without having to be the opposite of Missouri.

After the death of Stokes and the disappearance of Jefferson, John Patrick and I knew that we weren't welcome in Heaven's Landing, but with Muirenn being buried there, Randolph Bunyan hesitated to leave the area. He had claimed the child as his own, promising to care for it. This meant that I couldn't leave either. We stayed through the winter in Heaven's Landing. Patrick's money buying us food and supplies, and I did my best to hunt and gather what game I could. Every time I entered those woods, I armed myself with Pappy's marching song, but I never saw or felt the abomination that had attacked us.

That left the three of us, Patrick, Bunyan and myself, to make some sort of life in Maine. In those days, there were not a lot of folk or ready work to be found.

"There's not a lot a man can do in this backwater wilderness," I said, sitting before our fire with Patrick and Bunyan, the latter doing his best to feed little Paul with mare's milk dripping from an oilcloth sack.

“Have you forgotten the treasure, man?” Patrick’s old fervor came through even stronger now, I suspect because it gave the man something to hold to after the events of the previous weeks.

“Jefferson has your map, Sir. I don’t see as how the three...” I looked at the babe in Bunyan’s arms. “...four of us can find it without a map. One of us being a swaddling child and all.”

This brought Bunyan into the conversation. “He speaks truly. Paul must be guided and protected. The time for vain searching for wealth is done.”

“I cannot simply give up. I must find this treasure! I must atone for the sins of my ancestor!” Patrick stood up, his zeal shining in his eyes. He looked down at the both of us. “I spent many an hour poring over William Kidd’s Map. I know it like I know the scriptures. I can still find it.”

“Then I suggest you tell us where and how you expect to find this treasure, Mr. Patrick.” I was growing bolder with my former employer. A blue talking horse telling a man he was involved in the destiny of heroes can do that to you.

Patrick refused to say anything on the matter, and we were still unsure how to proceed. Bunyan insisted, and I agreed that the road we were on was hardly the place for an infant. Paul was a lusty lad with a loud, strong cry that could peel the bark from a tree, or turn my brain to porridge. That meant I spent more and more time foraging for firewood, or hunting for food.

As I did, I had plenty of time to think. If Jefferson had been at the cabin just before we were attacked, would he have seen the beast? Had he simply avoided it and make his escape? Had it killed him? I didn’t know. One possibility that continued to surface in my mind was that Jefferson had colluded with the creature. And I was not willing to let that idea go.

When spring, and then, late spring came, we convinced Bunyan to continue our journey to find the treasure. We'd well overstayed our welcome in Heaven's Landing and Paul was strong, still an infant, but tougher, I suspected, than many men.

The road north from Heaven's Landing took us even farther inland. We were already north of Portland, the capital of the young state. The interrogation of passers-by on the road told us that we were headed toward the center of Maine, the city of Bangor, placed on the Penobscot River.

We made good time, since the spring rain had begun to taper off and the damned mud that had clung to every surface I owned had started to ease a bit. I began to feel like a man again. The end of the rain also eased the feeling of gloom that I hadn't even known I'd had since Heaven's Landing. I unclenched my buttocks for the first time in weeks, and truth be told, they were a bit sore for the clenching.

As we rode north, I scoured the woods for the tell-tale blue light that would herald the presence of the talking horse, but I saw nothing blue except the now clear sky the whole way to Bangor.

Bangor, Maine was a growing town, the center for much of the lumber that was needed for building in Boston or New York. So many damned loggers and lumberjacks in the area made it a rough place; men came from all around to make their living there. That gave it a frontier feel, not unlike Kentucky. I felt right at home. A bar brawl is a bar brawl, after all.

It was after one of those, my hand cut and bleeding from the teeth of a Welshman up from Boston and my own face bruised from where his tankard had struck me that I arrived back to the inn where I had been staying with Patrick and Bunyan. Patrick had been looking for work

to earn money to replace his stolen wagons and Bunyan was obsessed with caring for the infant Paul.

The man had loved a whole lifetime, it seemed, in the time he'd been with Muirenn and her shadow clung to everything he did. What he did for her son, he was doing for her.

I'd spent the few weeks of our journey avoiding the babe as much as I could. I've never been a man to take to folk lording it over me; I don't figure any man can tell me what to do. In this case however, I had been commanded by a powerful force that had eaten Stokes in one gulp. Now, while I don't much care for threats and attacks on my person as a motivating tool, the threat of quick, terrifying death obliged me to stay near the child. I kept him within eyesight, but not much closer. If I had seen anyone or anything make a move on little Paul, I'd have done my damndest to protect him sure enough, but that didn't mean that I wanted to stay near the squalling, gurgling symbol of my new prison.

Staying away meant staying in the taverns and bars, as there was not much else to entice me in Bangor. After more than a few brawls, I made some friends in the town, loggers mostly. They were good enough folk, men who worked hard in a dangerous profession. And after proving myself to them as a man who can take and give a decent punch, they began to talk of the troubles besetting the new state of Maine.

One fellow, name of Jasper Coleridge, was an ornery old cuss, a man weathered and worn by life and the elements. His skin was tanned and hard like pigskin left in a desert. As unpleasant as he may have been to the eye, after sharing a few mugs of whisky with him, I learned that his leathery shell contained an able mind, shrewd and capable. It was he who explained to me what the excitement I'd seen among the lumbermen meant.

“Now, young feller, have you been hearing of the Aroostook Valley up north?”

I shook my head. "I'm new to Maine."

He snorted. "We're all new to Maine, or Maine is new to us. You see, the state ain't been around long. And what there is, ain't exactly full of folk, you see. In fact, the border twixt here and New Brunswick isn't even fixed. That's what's causing all of the fighting."

I took a sip. If there was danger, gunplay or even riots, I didn't want little Paul involved. Hell, I didn't want me involved. Not if the fighting was at all organized. "Fighting?"

"Not in the bloody sense. Yet. The first men in Aroostook were Frenchies. Nobody paid much mind to those Frenchies until five years ago. There was a fire. Lightning strike. Burned a hell of a lot of trees. Lumbermen out New Brunswick way moved west for better stands of trees. About the same time, Folk from here in the States moved in too. Now, they all want to call the valley theirs. The damned British, and our people too."

Saying so much made him thirsty, so he took a long pull, wetting his throat. I had a few questions. "Why the urgency? Why is all of Bangor in an uproar right now?"

He smiled. "Ah, there's the thing. The U.S. government felt it right to send a few men up there. Something called a census. Them two fellows did their job and counted everyone in the whole valley, Frenchies, British, and Americans all alike. That was last fall. Two months ago, John Baker ran up an American flag his wife made, put it out there in the wind, plain and proper. Man got arrested and forced to pay a fine."

"And that's why Bangor's upset."

"Oh sure, a man getting jailed for raising the flag of his homeland is a bad thing, sure enough, but no, the folk here are riled up as the King of the Dutch says he'll decide the border."

"Damn." I was surprised at how angry I myself was getting. "We had a goddamned revolution to make sure no kings told us what to do ever again."

“Damned right!” I hadn’t realized that our conversation was being overheard. The men sitting beside us and behind us raised their glasses to me. I raised mine back. The lot of us then proceeded to get good and drunk. I’d had some money paid to me by Patrick keeping me company on the road. It seemed like a good time to part myself with some of it.

Chapter 10

The next morning, when I came to myself and staggered back to the inn to rejoin Patrick and Bunyan, I saw that they were getting ready to leave Bangor.

“There you are,” was Patrick’s dry greeting.

Bunyan heard him and looked up at me. “We’re leaving.” He then left the room and walked downstairs and out of the inn to where our horses were stabled. Baby Paul was sleeping in some harness he had rigged to his back.

I pointed to the departing man. “Why’s he in a hurry? I can’t imagine that the boy’s going to last long on the open road, young as he is.”

“I was out today. I saw that man... Silas.” Patrick’s voice was subdued. I wondered how much he remembered.

“Jefferson!” The word came out of my mouth like a curse. “Where is he?” I was so enraged that clenched my fists so hard my arms started shaking. “Where is he?!!”

Patrick didn’t answer right away. His head was down, and he took quick, short breaths through his nose as his mouth was tightly closed.

“Where is Jefferson?” I was yelling now.

“He was headed south. Towards the Bay Tavern.” The Penobscot Bay Tavern was a local drinking establishment named after the large bay that was 30 miles to the south of Bangor.

“Clay...”

I didn't listen to anything more that Patrick had to say. I was no longer in his employ. He couldn't tell me what to do.

When I stepped onto the compacted dirt that made up the streets of Bangor, just like it did in Fingal, I didn't have any sort of plan for dealing with Jefferson other than using my fists and boots to destroy as much of him as I could. After all of Pappy's lessons in my youth, I knew I could take a punch. Or a kick.

I've mentioned that Bangor was a rough sort of place, but the bars and taverns don't quite tell the tale. Any town that is settled by transients, men working in a trade that causes them to move around, is going to have problems. I saw the same thing in Dodge City, Kansas, many years later. Bangor was so rough that the locals referred to it as "The Devil's Half-Acre."

And the one place in Bangor that even the devils feared enter was the Bay Tavern. The name sounded pleasant enough, although I wouldn't be surprised if it was a way for them to get away with using saltwater in their beer. But salty beer was hardly the most discouraging thing about that place. The owner, a man who went only by the name of "Hatchet" Meers was a thin man, thin but tough. I'd seen him throw folk out of the place and he was more of a sword than a cudgel, if you catch my meaning. He was quick, sharp and deadly. A man that thin didn't usually look like much of a threat, but even the roughest, biggest lumbermen in Maine had learned to not offend Hatchet.

That's not to say that he was easy to offend. On the contrary, he let a fair amount of unseemly behaviors slide, which is how his tavern got the reputation it had. Hatchet had a sharp eye and could tell what a man was about two seconds after meeting him. If there were criminal acts transpiring in his tavern, Hatchet let them transpire, provided he got himself a share of the proceeds. There was an upstairs in his tavern where Hatchet had a few ladies of questionable

character working for him. There were better brothels in Bangor, but the Bay, and the women who worked there, allowed for things most self-respecting whores would shy at.

The men who offended Hatchet were those who thought they could intimidate others into doing their bidding. If a man entered into a an agreement to work for another out of his own free will whatever the work might entail, Hatchet turned a blind eye, but if that same man were forced or blackmailed into it...Hatchet Meers didn't like that so much. I heard form whispers around town that Hatchet was the son of a wealthy New York banker and his household slave. There was a darker tint to his skin, but I couldn't tell just by looking at him if this story were true.

Knowing the Bay's reputation and likely patrons, Jefferson being spotted going there meant he was up to no good. I didn't know who else might have been behind the grisly slayings in Heaven's Landing, but I was told that Jefferson was a threat. I may be one to cower now and hide if it's necessary, but in this case, I wanted to go on the offensive. I had no proof that Jefferson had colluded with the creature, but I simply didn't trust the man, and he was an enemy that I could find, an enemy that I could protect Paul from. I suspected that this was the sort of protection I'd been charged with. If I could eliminate Jefferson before he got close to Paul, maybe I could be released from my indentured protectorhood and be able to make my way in the world again a free man.

As I walked into the Penobscot Bay Tavern, the smell of stale beer and staler men entered my nostrils and decided to make itself a summer home there. My previous visits to the establishment had taught me to ignore the smell, and, after all, it was nothing compared to a wet Stokes in that damned cabin.

The interior of the place was perpetually dim, as if the sun itself were ashamed to go past the doors. The usual clientele were there, lumbermen hard on their luck, criminals, smugglers, thieves, and a few whores come down from the upstairs to display their wares.

I didn't see Jefferson. I thought for a moment that I'd missed him, or that Patrick had been wrong about his destination or even the fact that he was in town. My anger that had brought me to the Bay without a plan dropped to a simmer. I needed to think. There was an empty table in the corner, all of the chairs but one had been taken for a nearby poker game. I set myself down with a great wooden creak and thought.

Hatchet had noticed my entry and brought me a beer from the bar. He knew I preferred whisky to beer, but he also knew that my funds were light and he'd be obliged to take less out of my hide if I only owed him for a beer and couldn't pay. He also did me the courtesy of standing next to me, his thin arms folded, but ready to spring into action at a moment's notice.

I dug in my pockets for the money to pay him. "Say, Hatchet, you ain't seen a fellow come in here just now. Evil looking fellow, goes by Silas Jefferson?"

Hatchet just waited calmly for his money. Once he had it, he replied, "Folk come in, folk go out. I don't ask more than that, save they are looking to make trouble." He leaned in and stared at me, his face as calm as can be. "Are you looking to make trouble, Clay? You're new in town and you don't have enough friends around to help you if you make trouble. That being said, I am not going to involve myself in your business. You don't have the money or the connections to make it worth my while"

I raised my hands into the air in surrender. "Fair enough, fair enough. Do you mind if I head upstairs?"

“Now, that’s business I can do with you. Pay up front and you can take whichever girl you like.”

I paid the man, inwardly grumbling, seeing as how I wasn’t planning on whoring. I just needed to see if Jefferson were up there. Once my pockets were empty, Hatchet nodded to the block-shaped man who was standing in front of the stairway. The man stood aside for me with a weary grunt when I had made my way there and allowed me to head up the stairs.

The upper floor of the Bay was just four bedrooms and a hallway. The hallway itself was nothing special, no decorations, just wood planks. I suspect this was done in order to make the whores look better. They needed it. The kind of girls who would do the things Hatchet’s clients paid them to do were girls who did not need to get by on looks. The five girls waiting in the hallway for customers were dressed in nothing but bits of cheap silks and other fabrics, dyed colors so bright, it’d make the most garishly feathered bird blush.

Once they noticed me, two of them stood to let me ogle them, the other three remained sitting on the floor. One of them did pull her breasts out, but remained sitting. I wasn’t sure whether this was due to laziness or lack of enthusiasm about me. I was too concentrated on finding Jefferson to think too much about it. One of the standing girls, a plain-faced creature so thin, she could have been used for firewood, put an arm around my neck and led me to the waiting... cluster of whores. I’m not entirely sure what you call a group of whores, so cluster will have to do.

“Ladies,” I said. “I’m not here for the usual business. I’m looking for a man.”

One of the girls smiled, a plump, matronly woman wearing a sickly green petticoat. “If you want that sort of thing, there’s a place on the other side of town.”

I blushed. Damn it to hell, I blushed. I'm sure it didn't do much to raise their opinion of my manhood. "I didn't mean that. If I had the time, one of you fine creatures would do just fine. I'm looking for a man called Silas Jefferson." I described him to them. "He hasn't been here long, maybe just a half hour."

The thin girl who had led me to their group gave me a suspicious look. "If'n you're a wanting to kill this here Jefferson, don't be doing it here. Ol' Hatchet, he hates it when we get blood on the floors." There was a murmur of agreement from the other whores.

I was getting more and more frustrated with everyone's lack of cooperation. "I need to know if he is here. That's all."

The women looked at each other, the significant looks that only women can give when they're communicating without words. Finally, the green-skirted matron, who I took to be the leader of the whores, pointed toward one of the closed bedrooms. "He's in there with Constance."

"Thank you mostly kindly." I moved to walk down the hallway.

A pull on my sleeve stopped me. "I mean it. No blood, or you will leave this place much less of a man than you are now." A pain between my legs emphasized her point.

I nodded. I made my way past the rest of the whores, carefully avoiding the girl with the uncovered breasts, who it appeared was now asleep.

I'm not entirely sure what I expected to see when I burst through the door, but my expectations, whatever they were, were dashed. Well, dashed and quite confused. I wouldn't have been surprised to see Jefferson and his chosen whore caught in some depraved act, nor would I have been unduly surprised to see him murdering her with a satanic grin on his face.

Whatever I was prepared to see, it wasn't Jefferson sitting at a table, the whore across from him, and both of them sipping tea from dainty little cups.

My surprise stopped me in my tracks. Jefferson and Constance were both staring at me, the same amount of surprise evident on their faces. "Silas," I said.

"Clay."

While my vague plan had called for a good deal of violence, I hadn't even thought of what I was going to say when I actually confronted the man. "You killed all of those people."

Jefferson smiled, his face taking on an inhuman visage. "Which people are you talking about, exactly? I've killed a good deal in my time."

That caught me by surprise. "The folk...the folk in Heaven's Landing."

"Ah, yes. I did have a hand in that, but I wasn't alone, Clay. I wasn't alone."

My suspicions about his collusion with the Beast were becoming more likely, it seemed. I prepared myself to kill Jefferson, whore at his side be damned.

Constance chose that moment to add her voice to the conversation, "Who is this man, Silas?"

Jefferson glanced at her, but didn't take his eyes off of me for more than the merest flicker of a second. "His name is Clay Filinger; he's some backwoods fellow from out West. He's no one."

Constance took another sip from her teacup. She then looked at me, "I'd prefer it if you'd please leave, Mr. Filinger. I don't often get visits from my brother and I'd rather you didn't spoil it."

I was not at all sure how to reply. A whore sipping tea is one thing, but a whore sipping tea with her brother, a man I suspected of killing a family in cold blood was something new.

Jefferson just looked at me, his eyes calm. When they caught mine, they flickered toward the door, telling me that I had overstayed my welcome. There was a time in my life not so long before when I would have just walked away, but that was before an angry Pooka had commanded me to protect a newborn babe.

The voice was stronger than I thought it would be. “Silas, you damn skunk-livered bastard. I ought to kill you right now.” I turned to his sister. “Ma’am, I’ve got no trouble with you, and if you’d like to leave, I’d be obliged. It’s not right to kill a man in front of his kin.”

Constance laughed a clear, musical laugh. Not the laugh of a whore. “Oh, Mr. Filinger, you do have a gift with words. If you were somehow able to kill my Silas here, why, you’d give me quite a show, one I wouldn’t miss.”

Jefferson piped in, “My dear sister does enjoy her entertainments.”

She continued, “Why else would I submit myself to the attentions of the men who frequent this place? I enjoy seeing men debase themselves.” She licked her lips as she said this.

Jefferson took a long pull from his teacup and placed it gracefully down on the table, a satisfied smirk on his face. “Clay, I like you. You’re a unique sort of fellow. However...” He wiped his mouth with a handkerchief. “If you do not leave this instant, I will be forced to end your life right now. Right now!”

His voice rose and there was a twinge in it. I had been about to leave, guessing that maybe he wasn’t after little Paul after all, rather he was just in town enjoying tea with his sister. But the twinge. It was fear. Not much, but enough to make me look more closely at him. He was wearing the same fine clothes he’d always worn. They were a bit threadbare after such a long journey, of course, but he looked himself. It wasn’t until my second glance at him that it finally caught my eye.

A small, unassuming leather pouch. Not remarkable in any real way. I'd seen it on him before. He'd always carried that pouch. Or did he? I searched my memory. He'd had it after we had left the shipwreck. I could recall him sitting around our pitiful fire in the mud, clutching it, caressing it. As I hadn't much liked the man, even then, I'd chalked it up to one of his many personal flaws. But as I stood there, in that upper floor of the Penobscot Bay Tavern, I knew what it was.

Muirenn's words came flooding back into me. "Well, my clothing and one more thing. A leather pouch. Drawn tightly with a leather cord. Try as I might, I could not open it."

Jefferson, the bastard, had stolen it from her when we were attempting to revive her after the shipwreck.

I pointed at the pouch. "That ain't yours."

His eyes hardened. "As I understand it, Muirenn is dead. That makes me as much the rightful owner as anyone." He strolled right up to me, leaving his sister sitting at the table. His hand raised and pressed right against my chest. The pressure was enough to knock me back a few paces. "I will kill you if you don't leave right now. "

I punched him. Jefferson may have me beat in a war of words, but there was nothing in my life up to that point that had led me to believe that he'd best me in a fistfight. My punch was careful, calculated, and staggered the dapper bastard back at least five feet.

He raised his head to me, his hand to his lip. There was a satisfying amount of blood dripping from between his fingers. His glare was as icy as I knew New England gales to be. Then strangely, he cocked his head to his side. "Let me kill him," he whispered.

I looked to Constance to see if he was asking for her permission. She was regarding him calmly, saying nothing. A glance back to Jefferson showed him still listening to something I

couldn't hear, his hand on the leather pouch. His attention was focused, sparing neither me, nor Constance a second glance.

I punched him again, sending him reeling into his sister's table. Constance was able to salvage her teacup, but she hurriedly pushed her chair back from the table with her feet. Jefferson quickly recovered and with his hand free of the leather pouch, he lunged at me. He managed to get his hands around my neck, giving me a hell of a squeeze. I did what I always do in these situations, which was to kick. Hard. I suspect if I'd kicked a little bit harder, the Jefferson family would have ended right then and there. Jefferson's balls weren't any harder than other men's and he let go, dropping to his knees on the floor.

I made to take the leather pouch from off of his belt, but a click made me pause. A gun being readied to fire is not the most restive sound in the world, and it's one I've heard too many times to ever be comfortable with it. A quick look to Constance showed her calmly holding a new cavalry pistol, the barrel aimed squarely at me. She smiled, "Now, Mr. Filinger, I'm going to have to ask you to leave. I enjoy a good, masculine brawl just as well as any girl, but you have hit below the belt, so to speak."

I stood, leaving the pouch where it was. "Your brother stole this from a friend of mine. I aim to see it makes its way to her kin."

"Leave it. Believe you me, Mr. Filinger, that's not something you want. Not right now. You leave, or I will shoot."

I knew when I had been whapped. "Damn you, Miss Jefferson. Damn you."

She laughed again, the clear throaty laugh. Her outfit seemed unwilling to follow her body's movements as she did, causing an interesting show. "I do find you interesting, Mr.

Filinger, do come back and we'll spend our time together properly." She gestured her gun to the door.

I left without another word. Back in the hallway, the rest of the whores were going about their business as a few men had made their way up the stairs. Those that weren't occupied ignored me as I stormed past them. I was angry. I didn't like that Jefferson had stolen from our Muirenn and had gotten away with it. As I was new to the task of defending others from almighty evil, I didn't let my thoughts linger much on Jefferson's strange behavior. I'd seen too many folk in the grips of various types of home brewed whisky to put much stock in odd behavior. The man could just as well have been drunk or otherwise out of his mind. And if Jefferson had been the one to slaughter that family in Heaven's Landing, it was because he liked it, deep in his soul.

Chapter 11

Bunyan and Patrick were still getting ready to take leave of Bangor. I found them in the stable, saddling the horses and loading our supplies onto Patrick's wagon. Little Paul was in some kind of Indian getup on Bunyan's back. When he saw my face, Bunyan quietly said, "You went to find him didn't you?"

I punched a saddle that was hanging from the ceiling, causing it to sway dangerously back and forth. "Bastard."

Patrick looked stricken. "Merciful God in heaven."

Bunyan's quiet face quickly grew to a face of quiet rage. "I was hoping we'd be able to leave town before he knew we were here. Now Jefferson will bring who knows what kind of hell down on us."

His words hit me like the punches Jefferson hadn't thrown would have. It took me a moment before I could muster up a reply. "I...I wasn't thinking. I just wanted to deal with him here and now. I don't like the idea of running and hiding if we can get rid of the son of a bitch here."

Bunyan calmed down somewhat. "Clay, I know your heart was in the right place, but your duty is to protect Paul."

I looked at him in surprise. In all the time we had spent together, I had never mentioned what the Pooka had said to me. "Who...?"

"Muirenn. She told me. She told me many things before her death." Mentioning her gave his voice a slight catch, the sadness he felt coming through. "She told me that you had been chosen to protect the boy; that I was to raise him and teach him morals, and that Uncle John..." Here he looked to Mr. Patrick. "...is to provide for the boy's upbringing."

That was new. I thought for a moment. If Muirenn had lived...or if I had stuck around to hear the rest of what she was trying to tell me before I cut and ran, maybe I could have had a clearer picture of what I supposed to do. "What else did she say? Did she say anything about Jefferson?"

Bunyan sighed. "She said that she didn't trust him. That he was wicked. That's all I need to know."

"He stole something from her. I saw it on him."

Mr. Patrick joined in. "Stolen? From our Muirenn? What could it be?"

I looked to Bunyan. "Randolph, did Muirenn ever mention a leather pouch?"

He looked at me in confusion. "She did, but said that it must have been lost at sea. She didn't know what it was, let alone claim that it had been taken by Silas."

I started pacing. “There’s something important in that pouch. I need to retrieve it from Jefferson.”

Bunyan resumed carefully placing foodstuffs in the wagon. “The most important thing Muirenn carried with her is this boy that I carry on my back. If you wish to do right by her, you will accompany us up north. Uncle John will find the treasure, and we will be able to provide all the best for her son.” He said everything with such quiet resolution and conviction, that for a moment, I felt entirely sure that Mr. Patrick would find the treasure in a matter of weeks, and the three of us would be on our way to riches and safety.

If Bangor was Hell’s Half Acre, the northern half of Maine was Hell’s Outhouse. While I’d been comfortable enough with the rough and tumble nature of the folk in Bangor, the men and women who made their livings in the lumber communities up north were almost a different breed entirely. They were hard, solid men, men who knocked down trees with an efficiency I admired. The Mayor out in Fingal had a gold watch that I’d gotten my hands on once, and I always marveled at how everything inside moved at such a measured pace. These men were like that, masters of their craft. Of course, they were also loud, rowdy, and liked their drink.

Mr. Patrick’s map, at least the one in his head, detailed a trip by Captain Kidd up the coast of America, where, the map claimed, the good Captain sailed up the St. Croix River and left his treasure deposited somewhere north of that.

“Where are we going? If I’m a part of this gang that’s destined to protect and provide for little Paul, there, I think I deserve more information. Suppose we get separated, or some such thing? I won’t be left in the dark no more.” We were riding in the rapidly cooling autumn air, which gave me a sense of foreboding. There wasn’t much up north after Bangor, and Paul was

only a few weeks old, after all. Bunyan, babe on his back, sleeping, drove the wagon. Patrick and I rode alongside on our horses.

Patrick looked at me askance, and then back to Bunyan. Bunyan nodded a yes, revealing how the balance of power had shifted between the two of them during our little journey. I, of course, was still at the bottom. No position of power or prominence for Clay Flinger. With Bunyan's permission, Patrick spoke. "Kidd's map showed the treasure to be north of the St. Croix River. They sailed up it as far as they could, then hiked into a small uninhabited valley."

"Is it still uninhabited?" I asked.

Patrick grimaced. "No. There are plenty of souls there now. They call it the Aroostook Valley."

If I had been walking, I would have stopped dead in my tracks. As it was, my horse took no notice of my shock and kept walking the same lazy pace he'd been using all day. "Aroostook? That's a troubled area, so I hear."

"You know it?" Patrick replied.

I relayed to him what the old man had said to me in the tavern the morning we had seen Jefferson. Bunyan listened quietly, as he always did, nodding at times, but mostly absorbing the information and holding it, like a sponge that never gets squeezed.

When I had finished, he finally spoke up. "This treasure is important. I can feel it. Muirenn would have wanted us to continue on, and so we shall."

I had spent enough time in Randolph Bunyan's company to know when he was unwilling to argue. Muirenn was like a long lost saint to him now; obeying her dictates was his new gospel. I shut up for the time being, but I worried about what we'd find when we got to the valley.

I'm not sure what it's like to travel with a baby. I say this because, although we had Paul with us, I don't think he was like other children. I, of course, had heard his origins from Muirenn, and I hoped that since she was human enough, that her offspring would be as well. My tale until this point doesn't include much about Paul, which may seem shocking to you now, knowing what you do about him. But frankly, although I had been dragooned into being his protector, I didn't feel I needed to spend any time with the boy.

That journey, from Bangor to the Aroostook, changed things. Two days after Bunyan had decided in no uncertain terms that we were headed to find the treasure come hell or high water, or more likely, angry Maine lumbermen fighting angry Canadian lumbermen, he got sick. It wasn't something life threatening, at least not to my eyes. Rather he had a head cold: sneezing, coughing, a steady stream of God knows what running down his face from his nose to his lips. At the very least, he wasn't like those small children you often see who slurp it up with their tongues. That always gives me nightmares.

Since Patrick was more trained in the healing arts than I was, he took charge. We made our way to a nearby logging camp, where, for a fee, Patrick was able to secure us lodging. Patrick stayed with him, nursing him back to health, feeding him broths and bread from our dwindling stores. That left me with Paul.

I don't know or care much about infants. I'd never been interested in having any, aside from the making of them, and they were mostly too loud for my taste, especially when a man was trying to liberate a few of his neighbor's possessions. A baby's cry can be good for a distraction, but is far more trouble than it's worth.

When Paul Bunyan was handed to me by his ill, adoptive father, I slowly realized that I hadn't held the boy since the day he was born. Looking at him closely, I could see that he had his

mother's eyes. They were powerful, blue and deep. But they weren't a calm, tranquil pool of blue like hers had been; rather, Paul's were the blue of the ocean bristling for a storm. I could see it there, even as he was a tiny babe.

Paul looked at me, and smiled. I'm a rude, cold-hearted bastard at times, but that smile cut through me like I was made of hog lard. Seconds later, there was a sound and a smell that left no doubts in my mind that his bowels were functioning properly hit me.

I hurried the smelly child over to Mr. Patrick, who was feeding Bunyan his broth. "I need your help!" My voice carried no small amount of anxiety.

Patrick turned to me quickly. "What? Is the boy sick?"

"Sick?" I looked at the gurgling infant in my arms. "No... not as such. But there is a stink that would scour the holiness off a nun."

Patrick looked at me in disgust. "You deal with it. I'm making sure that my nephew doesn't die."

I was torn." Maybe he'll be okay as he is. Could be nothing."

Again that look of disgust. "Clean the boy. There are rags and such in Randolph's saddlebag."

Damn. Damn. Damn. Damn. Damn. I was not happy about that situation. The smell coming from baby Paul was gagging me. I felt like if I waited any longer, the smell would start congealing on my tongue, like steam turning back into water.

The saddlebag contained the necessities that Bunyan had bought or bartered for in Bangor. Nothing much, rags and clean wrappings. As the weather was cold, I didn't want the boy to be uncovered for long, so I quickly threw up a cover of canvas in the wagon and, well, cleaned him up. It was foul; it was undignified for a man to do such things. Yet... I couldn't help but like

the little fellow, in spite of his unwholesome troubles. He was a quiet boy, seldom cried, and for an infant that had lost his mother on the day of his birth, seemed like a tough one to me. After all, I could relate somewhat, although I'd at least been able to know my mother. He wasn't at the time any larger than any other babes I'd seen. As far as I could tell, he wasn't and wouldn't be anything other than a regular boy.

With Bunyan indisposed and Patrick taking care of him, I was left to gather wood, food, and other supplies. I made liberal use of Mr. Patrick's rifle hunting game in those Maine woods. I managed to take down a deer and a few birds. Eating enough for the likes of us, at least until Bunyan was fit to travel. During this time, I grew closer to Paul, taking him with me on wood gathering excursions, keeping him strapped to my back in Bunyan's Indian device. I began talking to him. I know that babies can't speak or understand the way regular folk can, but since Patrick was always wrapped up in what concerned him most, sin and gold, and Bunyan was a hard man to talk to, I unburdened myself to the boy.

And maybe it's nothing, perhaps it's the way a man feels loyal to a favorite dog, or to a gun he's used in battle, but a bond grew between myself and Paul Bunyan. I felt that he and I knew each other, that he'd taken his measure of me, and liked what he saw. That marked a line for me, I felt like I'd crossed from being a man bludgeoned into being his protector by threats into being a man who was willing to protect a member of his family.

He heard my complaints about the nature of man, my musings on God and Jesus, and I figure he heard more cussing during that time than he would have if he'd have stayed in the Penobscot Bay Tavern for a week. That being said, I refrained from discussing things of a more delicate nature. I didn't talk to him about whoring, gambling, or drinking.

It was on one of these excursions for firewood, mostly an excuse to get away from Patrick, who was using Bunyan's convalescence to read to him from the Bible. I had taken the boy with me, and we were making more of a leisurely stroll through the Maine forests than spending time gathering wood. I'd found that if I went to where the lumbermen had already been, I'd find plenty of branches and bits of trees cast aside from their labor.

"You see, Paul, if you could just learn to shit in the woods, like a decent, civilized man, you and I could have a much easier time of it."

Paul gurgled happily.

"When will you talk, I wonder? I suspect little folk can after a few months, is that right?"

More gurgling.

"Or do babies like you speak their own kind of speech, and you're back there telling me off for traipsing around this here hellhole of a state and not taking you to Boston or Philadelphia?"

"In the name of the King and Queen of the Sidhe, what are you doing with that child?"

The new voice stopped me dead in my tracks. I knew it, and knew it well.

"Uncle Nathan?" I looked around me for the source of the voice.

"Up here." The voice was coming above me and to my right. I looked. In a nearby tree rested a glowing blue squirrel.

I looked up at the Pooka, and it looked back at me. I waited for the beast to say something. It was evidently waiting for me to do the same thing. Finally, a cry by Paul broke the silence. I quickly unstrapped him from my back to see what ailed him.

What ailed him was something I'd never heard about nor considered in all my days. Paul was growing. Right before my naked eyes. He was still a baby, a bit more than seven months old,

and when I say growing, he was not aging, but he was getting bigger. It scared the hell out of me, I didn't know what I'd do if he got too big for me to carry him. I could do nothing but hold him in front of me and watch. The growing didn't seem pleasant, as he cried and squalled the whole damn time. In the end, it wasn't overly much. I watched him grow for maybe three minutes, while he grew an inch and a half.

I'd been so startled and amazed by what I had seen that I had forgotten that the Pooka was there in the trees, watching me. The sound of Uncle Nathan clearing his throat shook me from my fascination. When I looked, the Pooka had left the tree and had taken the form of the bearded preacher and was awaiting my acknowledgement.

“What the hell do you want, Pooka? Did you do this to him? Is this some sort of Satan curse?”

Uncle Nathan sighed. “I did not cause this to happen. I merely came to observe it. Now, why is he in this dangerous place, where any damn thing might devour him?”

I shrugged. “I can't see as how he's in any more danger here than in among people, seeing as how folk in these part are a rough sort.”

Uncle Nathan sat down on a stump and looked weary, in a way I'd never seen him, even during the few months we travelled together. When he spoke again, his voice carried that weariness. “I reckon that you are right. At least you are caring for the child. That is something I had hoped to see, Clay Filinger.”

I looked at the sleeping child that I was now placing into his harness; a harness that I could now see needed to be altered to accommodate his new size. “He's good company, he cries some, but he makes up for that in conversation.”

Nathan laughed. “You do make me laugh, which is something I do not often say to mortals.”

I sat on a stump next to him, taking note to avoid the patch of sticky sap that had welled up from the roots of the mortally wounded tree. “Well Sir, seeing as how you’re here, in a laughing mood, and we’re in no imminent danger that I can see, let’s have you tell me what the hell is going on.”

The look from Nathan’s blue eyes was full of thought, anger, sadness, fatigue, and resignation. The voice that issued from his lips carried the same weight of feeling. “Very well. I feel that it is proper that you understand what it is that we fight. Muirenn told you her story?”

I nodded. “She was five hundred years old, kidnapped, released and raped by some demon or some such.”

“There was much she didn’t know. Muirenn Cumhal was the daughter of a druid, a powerful man who made a bargain with my master, the Lord of Sliabh Bladhma.”

“Slab...Bladma?”

“Sliabh Bladhma is the center of what you call Ireland. Do you know nothing of it? Your family is deeply connected to this place.”

“My mother didn’t tell me much of her youth. I think it made her too sad to compare her life with my Pappy to her life before.” I paused, as thinking of my mother made me melancholy. “She came here seeking something new and exciting. She found hell. A hell she could only escape from in one way. And I do not begrudge her that.”

Uncle Nathan watched me sagely. “It is unfortunate that you do not know our lore or the nature of your task. I shall do my best to explain it to you.”

“You sure as hell better!”

“My Master, the Lord of...”

“Slave Bladmoon?”

That earned me a dirty look. “Sliabh Bladhma. In your tongue it might be called the Slieve Bloom.”

I shrugged. “That doesn’t help me one way or another to get my tongue around your Irish words.”

He went on, “Regardless, Muirenn’s father, Tagd mac Nuadat, was a druid who managed to keep secret the old ways by pretending to be Christian. Even his family was taught the Christian ways. That was not enough, and he needed shielding and protection from the eyes of zealots while he participated in the old rituals. For that reason, he promised the hand of his daughter...”

“Muirenn!” I interrupted.

“Didn’t I say so? Stop interrupting!” The frustration was ever growing in his voice. I thought about Stokes and the removal of his person from the mortal coil. I decided to be quiet. Uncle Nathan looked at me. I held up my hands in surrender. “She was promised to my Master and so she was given. On the eve of her seventeenth birthday, she was allowed to walk in the hills of the Slieve Bloom. She was seen and taken, by a servant of my Master.”

I had some ideas as to who that servant had been. I also had some ideas about what should happen to men who took young women against their will to be brides in a strange land.

As he talked, his voice grew different and his words changed. “She dwelled with us for a time, dining with us in our halls, watching our various entertainments. In truth, nothing was denied her. Not knowing much about the wants and desires of mortals, we thought her happy.” His eyes grew distant. “Truly, there are many differences between my folk and yours, Clay

Filinger. For all that we gave her, for all the courtesy and respect that my master showed unto her, she was not happy. Although she and my Master were wed, she did not love him. I myself could not understand.” He looked at me. “Is it not true, that mortals, when they are wed, express love and devotion, one to another?”

I laughed. “Most folk fall in love before the wedding.” I thought about my parents and the laughter died. “Although there are mortals who think as you do.”

The Pooka nodded. “She did not love my Master and begged him time and again to release her to see her kin again. For many weeks, she begged, pleaded, and sorrowed. My Master was moved to mercy. She was allowed to leave, but with no memories of her time there. It would not do to have her spread the secrets of the Sidhe to the mortal realm.”

I was confused. “If this was so merciful, why the hell did your bastard of a Master send her out five hundred years later, when her kinfolk were dead and gone?”

“Is that the case?” The Pooka sounded genuinely confused. “I am aware that time runs differently between the worlds.” The Pooka, still in the shape of Uncle Nathan stood and began pacing. “This is perhaps the why of her escape from Ireland. We thought she would be happy to be once more in the mortal realm, but if, as you say, she had no one to go to, it would make sense for her to flee to this new land.

We allowed her to leave our realm and to once again exist in the mortal world. However, scouts sent to find her in her father’s keep found nothing. She was missing. I was sent to find, protect her, and if possible entice her back.” He looked to me as if to offer an explanation, “Once a mortal has been granted leave, the mortal must choose to return.”

“But you took her memories of the place! How did you expect her to know to go back? If you ask me, you magic Shid people, or whatever you call yourselves are damned stupid.”

“Sidhe,” Uncle Nathan corrected. “It was thought that My Master’s power and charisma might draw her back. So, he went to her. They sported with each other, as mortals do.”

If I had been Randolph Bunyan, I would have blushed. “I heard this part of the story. They had a bit of fun, he left her with child, she left him and came to America.”

‘Essentially. My Master did not know of the child quickening within her womb, else he would have kept her with him by force. It wasn’t until later, that we discovered the truth.’ He stopped his pacing and looked me square in the face. “My Master’s rival for power in the Sidhe courts, Liath Luacra, had sent his agents to observe her. To look for a key to My Master’s weakness. They discovered the pregnancy before we did, as she was about to embark on her journey here.”

I pulled the paper out of my pocket that had been there since our discovery of Muirenn’s shipwreck. The words “Liath Luacra” were faint, but still there amidst the folds, wrinkles, and waterspots covering the scrap of paper. I handed it to Uncle Nathan. “I’ve heard that name before.”

He took it gravely. “Yes, it was he who attacked the vessel Muirenn used to arrive here. It was he who tried to kill her, and the babe you carry on your back.”

It was finally settling into place for me. This, I could understand. This man, Liath Luacra was trying to kill Paul as a way to take power in the kingdom of the Shed people. Sidhe, or whatever.

Nathan began to speak again. “My master is not lacking in generosity. Before she left our realm, Muirenn was given a relic, kept in a pouch at her side what would protect her from the harm. It is what allowed her to survive the shipwreck.”

My eyes widened in horror. “Jefferson, he stole the pouch, not knowing what it was, and that’s why Muirenn died.” I punched a tree with my bare hand. It hurt. “Bastard! That thieving, good for nothing, whoring, backstabbing, wretch! He killed her!” I punched the tree a second time, drawing blood and hurting me enough to stop me from cursing.

Uncle Nathan went on as if I were not bleeding. “I was sent to watch over her, but as she was aboard ship, I came first to this land, where I could find those to help me.” He looked at me again, blue eyes gouging into me. “You, Clay Filinger, you were the only one with the proper blood to be a protector to Muirenn and the son of my Master.”

This I didn’t believe. “You had to go all the way to Fingal, Kentucky to find me? That’s the most foolish thing I’ve heard in a very long time.”

“It is true, Clay Filinger. You were what I needed. That is why I guided you, until you were on the path to intercept Muirenn.”

“And Bunyan and Patrick? How did you know I’d find them? Or they’d find me?”

“John Patrick was encouraged to seek for servants in an area I knew you to be. I posed as a fellow religious man...” he gestured to his appearance as Uncle Nathan, “And I nudged him in the right direction. His blood and that of his nephew is also that of an ancient family, however, not a pure as yours.”

I snorted. “I don’t hold to talk of blood and kings and such. I am an American. Any man can do what they damn well please here.”

“I have explained my reasons to you, believe them or not.”

I pulled off my harness to have a look at the sleeping Paul Bunyan. “So, are you taking the boy back to his kin in Ireland?”

Uncle Nathan shook his head. “He would have to prove himself a man mighty in word and deed for such a thing to happen. As the son of my Master, his is entitled to the protection that you and I can give him. That is all.”

“And his growth? Is that going to keep happening? What the hell does that mean?”

“It will, though not again for a while. When mortal blood and the blood of the Sidhe is mixed, it can have unintended consequences. I have been tracking you, and felt the stirring of his blood. I hoped to see what form it would take. And now I have.”

That was fantastic. Not only did I now have a knowledge of what had killed Muirenn, but now I had a boy with uncontrollable growth spurts. Damn. Damn and Hell. “Why hasn’t this Liath Luacra killed us, then? We don’t have the pouch. We don’t have any protection.”

“It is my belief that the man Silas Jefferson has corrupted the relic within the pouch. Since he was not entitled to the use of the power within, his touch has allowed Liath Luacra to claim it for himself. While you were travelling to Heaven’s Landing, the two of them began a... dialogue. Jefferson was recruited into Liath Luacra’s service.”

“Evil begets evil.” I muttered to myself. “Damn. I saw Jefferson in Bangor. How much does he know?”

“As much as he needs to. And remember with the power of the relic and Liath Luacra beside him, he is a dangerous foe.”

“Easy to punch, though.”

“He may be mortal still, but he has access to power that you cannot begin to comprehend, Clay Filinger.”

“You are very reassuring, you know that?”

As I returned to the logging camp to reunite with Patrick and Bunyan, I had much to think about. My days of thinking of nothing but myself were long gone, and for a time I thought that maybe I would have been better off finding that ship to China like I'd planned. This situation was not something I would have wanted to be involved in if I'd had a choice. And I was scared. Hell, I was downright terrified. I'd asked the Pooka to come with me, and maybe lend a hand if Jefferson showed up, but he'd refused, not wanting to be immersed in "mortals." He claimed he'd be watching us, and would lend a hand if things got hairy, but I liked to see my allies, not hope they'd come screaming out of the forest in a flash of blue light.

Chapter 12

When I saw Patrick and Bunyan, I didn't tell them about any of my conversation with the Pooka. I figured it would have made things worse. I don't suspect Patrick would have found the idea of the Sidhe living in the hills of Ireland compatible with his notions of Heaven and Hell. Besides, he was doing just fine at his task, which was to provide for Paul and the rest of us.

That night, the three of us did discuss our further plans. "I have used our time here to redraw Great-Grandfather Kidd's map." Mr. Patrick held it up proudly, his ink of parchment shining in the candlelight.

"I say that we should be on our way," Bunyan coughed. The cough was wet and heavy, but not the cough of a man gravely ill. Rather, the cough of a man recovering from sickness, his body wanting to expel the phlegm in his lungs in one fell swoop. His coughing made his body convulse briefly, making the milk that he was carefully dripping into Baby Paul's open mouth sprinkle on the boy's forehead. Paul smiled.

"You're ready?" I asked him.

Bunyan held his head up, firm and steady." I have the cough, but I am nearly recovered. The sooner we find this treasure and can leave this wilderness, the better."

"Yes, the treasure. Soon I shall be able to redeem my family and spread the joy of Christ to the heathen!"

My mind always wandered when he started in on his plan to evangelize the Indians, so I decided to interrupt him. "I'm worried that Jefferson will find it first. We need to be prepared for that. We were ahead of him, but we've lost a week waiting here."

"I'm sorry." Bunyan lowered his head in shame.

I looked at him." Not your fault. But we need to be ready to kill Jefferson if and when we ever see him again. And we need to keep Paul from him."

Patrick looked at me. "He would hurt an innocent? The man's a devil!"

"Yes, and it's best if you treat him like one, should we happen on him. He wants to hurt Paul just as much as he wants that treasure, I reckon."

Patrick and Bunyan nodded in agreement. "So, we head for Aroostook at once?"

Patrick's question still held the fire of his zeal, but it was diminished somewhat with the talk of Jefferson.

"Aroostook it is," I answered.

The air was getting frigid as we left the camp, at least by my standards, but the bearded Maine lumbermen laughed at my shivering and remarked that it hadn't even begun to snow yet. I didn't care much for snow and especially didn't want to travel about in it, not with a baby. By this time I knew that Paul wouldn't be subject to the normal illnesses and weakness of a human baby, but all the same, I worried about him.

Our journey to Aroostook didn't take a long time, for which I was grateful. We'd gotten most of the way before Bunyan fell ill and the ground was hard, cold, and easy to travel upon as we made our journey. I looked as we went and now that I knew he was with us, I could see occasionally the telltale prick of blue light in the dark of night.

That did make me sleep easier as we settled down each night. I figured the Pooka would alert me if I need to be alerted, and I had always enjoyed sleep. There's nothing like burrowing into a warm blanket, closing your eyes and dreaming about the girls you hadn't had time to get to know proper in the waking world.

Our entry to the Aroostook Valley was quiet and there was nothing to indicate to us that there might be danger to us there. It was a sunny afternoon, in early October and there was a definite chill to the air, even with the sun shining. The valley was becoming more and more populated at the time and we saw people, merchants, farmers, and mostly lumbermen on the road, travelling back and forth. We stopped one man, a monster with an axe at his side that seemed like it could deforest the whole area in a few hours.

"You want lodging? Well that depends," he mused, "on whether you're going to the American side or the Canadian side?"

I remembered one of my reasons for not wanting to come to Aroostook in the first place. "We're Americans, friend. It was my understanding that the whole of Aroostook is American."

The man snorted. "I'd agree with you, but them damn Canadians say otherwise and tensions are high, so I'd recommend that you stay on the American side."

"Where's the boundary?" Asked Patrick. I suddenly hoped that we wouldn't have to cross into a fight to find his treasure.

“The St. John River,” said the man, pointing to a thin ribbon of blue in the distance. “It divides Madawska, the town, there.” Patrick didn’t say anything, merely looked thoughtful and I thanked him for it.

“We’re obliged for your advice,” I said, shook the man’s hand and headed down into the valley.

It was beautiful. The valley, not the handshake. And, although it was cold, there were warm smells, like wood smoke. Madawska wasn’t a large town by any means, but it was slightly bigger than a lumber camp, and offered a few of the amenities I’d gotten accustomed to in Bangor.

I let Patrick and Bunyan secure a place for us to sleep, also leaving Paul with them, and I made my way to the nearest tavern. The sign out front indicated that the place was called the “Thundershack.” I didn’t know what that meant, but harbored a few guesses that it either had something to do with whores, drink, or a combination of the two. The building itself was large, but made of rough hewn logs, seemingly thrown up in a quick manner. Whereas Bangor had many buildings like this, some, like the Penobscot Bay Tavern, were built of boards and other cut timber.

The interior of the Thundershack was filled with a large crowd of loud, angry lumbermen, hoisting their tankards and cheering at the words of a tall man in a long coat. His voice carried over the usual noises of the tavern, yelling, cursing and so on. “Are we going to let those foreign bastards tell us what country we are going to live in? I’ll tell you, that we are not! These damned Dutchmen think they can waltz in here and order us around? Hell no they can’t!” The crowd roared their approval of his words. It seemed I’d entered in on a political discussion of sorts. I tried to back out of the place, having no interest in politics

A hand grabbed hold of me before I could, though, and forced me against the wall. A drunk, hairy man, with three gold teeth left held me against the wall with one beefy arm. His breath reeked of stale beer and rotten meat as his angry, pig-like eyes gazed over my clothing. “You American?” He asked.

“Sure as hell I am. Born and raised in Fingal, Kentucky.”

His eyes tracked over my body once more, as if he didn’t believe me. “You here to make trouble?”

“No. Just wanting to ease my thirst a bit. If the place is busy. I’ll gladly do my drinking somewhere else.”

The man grunted. Hell, he could have given a pig lessons. “We want folk who’s wanting to make trouble. If you plan to stay in this town, you’d best be making trouble. Trouble with them damn Canadians and Frenchies.”

“Frenchies?” I’d heard about the British subjects descended from the French.

The man grunted again, sending his breath into my nostrils, where it decided to make a nice nest for itself. “Them folk from Quebec way. Frenchies.”

I took his word for it. My education in Fingal hadn’t taught me much about what sort of folk lived in places like this. “I hate Frenchies, and Canadians. Damn them to hell!”

The man smiled, his few teeth wiggling in his gums as he did so. “Now that’s what I like to hear. You can drink with us now.”

A tankard was placed in my hand. It looked like I was going to be a part of the political meeting after all.

When I do my drinking, I like to do it privately. I’ve never been one to enjoy the rousing company of other drunk men. I had too much of that living with Pappy. No, I prefer to sip my

whisky in a quiet corner where I can feel the warmth sliding down my gullet and watch other people, see which of them might be more inclined to part with a few of their looser valuables.

So, when I tell you that I did not like the political meeting held in the Thundershack the night we arrived in Madawska, you can believe me. I wasn't allowed a dark corner, I was forced to bleat and cheer as loudly for the Americanization of the whole of Aroostook as I was encouraged to hiss at every mention of the Canadians and Frenchies. Tensions were running very high in Aroostook and I figured that the sooner we got our money and got out, the happier I'd be.

When I staggered out of the Thundershack...hell, I think the sun was coming up, I managed to find my way somehow to Bunyan and Patrick. The two of them, along with Paul had managed to rent a one room cabin near the river. When I got in, I threw myself upon my pile of blankets and let sleep wash over me like a cattle stampede. I was out for hours, and my sleep was troubled by ungodly visions of Liath Luacra chasing me, relentlessly. In my dream he had amassed an army of Canadians who were trying to drown me in beer.

I woke up with a loud, long belch that eased the discomfort in my belly that I hadn't known was there. Looking around the cabin, I could see Bunyan feeding Paul in a corner, sitting on a thick log that had been recruited into service as a rough stool. "Where's Patrick?" I asked, my words coming out muffled as my mouth was filled with cottony stickiness. My memory was just as sticky. I couldn't remember much of the previous night's events.

Bunyan looked me over and rolled his eyes disdainfully. The man had come a long way. Time was, he'd have preached to me for a good while about the evils of drink. As it was he just said, "He's outside negotiating the use of a boat to get on the other side of the river."

"The other side?" I belched again. Amazing how much better that can make you feel.

"He reckons that the treasure is on the other side, where Captain Kidd buried it."

“Right. The other side.” I rolled off my pile of blankets and tried to stand. Hangover pain lanced through my head, hurting my eyes something fierce. “Why didn’t they let my drink in peace? Bastards.”

Sorting through the various sensations currently calling my attention: pain, remorse, stickiness, I was able to isolate one that seemed more urgent. I stumbled my way out the door and was able to hold out until I was outside. That was a favor, at least. I didn’t like the idea of indoor urination, but if I needed to, I would have let loose inside. Living with Bunyan and Patrick, however, had taught me something of their prejudices and this was one of the things that they would hound me about till the day I died if they could have.

So consumed was I with the relief of my bladder’s agony and the splash of yellow against the bark of the logs making up the cabin walls that I hadn’t noticed the conversation going on just around the corner from my position. I looked around me. I was instantly grateful that this cabin wasn’t on a busy street. From what I could tell, only a few people had seen me, and none of them women. Thank God for small favors.

The conversation that I had noticed was one between Mr. Patrick and a small, thin man, with a nice suit and spectacles over his eyes. He looked to be well over thirty, and balding. In other words, he looked like a clerk in some office in Philadelphia or Baltimore or some such place, not the sort of man suited to life in Madawska, Maine. I made my way over to them just as Patrick noticed my presence.

Ah,” he said, “Clay. Here you are, awake and alert.” He gestured to the clerk. “This is Heer Van Valkenburg, an agent of the Dutch envoy.”

I took the man’s hand and greeted him. Then I sidled up to Patrick and whispered in a low tone, “Damn you Patrick. You want to get us killed?”

Patrick looked at me in utter bafflement. “Heer Van Valkenburg has offered to pay us for our help protecting him while he does his business here.”

“Do you know what his business is?”

Patrick blinked at me. “Of course, he has been sent by his king to resolve a border dispute between the State of Maine and British North America.”

I sighed and pulled Patrick to one side, nodding an apology to Van Valkenburg. “The folk here do not take kindly to the notion that the Dutch King is nosing his snout into American affairs,” I said to Patrick. I started to think about what had happened the previous night and my memory came back in a clear flood. “Last night, I saw some downright livid men who are very comfortable with violence. The last thing we want is to make them upset.”

Patrick laughed. “Heer Van Valkenburg is a respected servant of a foreign power. Who would dare interfere with his work? We shall be safe as long as we are with him.” With that, Patrick left my side and returned to an earnest conversation with his Dutch friend. Seeing no more room for my wise advice, I strolled quickly back into the cabin, hoping none of the Thundershack patrons had seen me with them.

Chapter 13

Once inside, I sat myself on another improvised log stool and leaned my head against the wall of the cabin. The bark was rough on my scalp, and I pulled a few pieces of it free, so as to make myself more comfortable. While I did, Bunyan sat quietly and rocked Paul to sleep, having evidently fed him to satisfaction.

“What troubles you, Clay?” Bunyan asked, once I had settled myself and closed my eyes in weary resignation.

“I just wonder what we are doing here. I don’t like being shanghaied into bad situations. I just want to be my own man again.”

“I don’t think you realize just how much your return meant to Muirenn before she...” He voice trailed off into sadness.

I laughed, a sad snort of a laugh. “I didn’t want to come back, Randolph. I just wanted to run and hide, like I always do. I was forced to come back.”

Bunyan looked at me, his voice quiet. “Regardless, you did come back. She was in terrible pain at the end, but when she saw you, she smiled, only for an instant. She was glad of your return.”

“I thank you, kindly, Randolph.” I paused. It seemed that talking of Muirenn had brought her presence into the cabin with us. “She loved you, you know.”

“And I her,” he said. His eyes began to give off a watery sheen.

“I ain’t never felt such a thing. I’ve spent time with women, sure enough, but none of them ever loved me for it. I never loved them back.”

“I had always suspected that I would come back to Boston after travelling with Uncle to settle down with a nice girl, a daughter of a respectable merchant family. We’d wed, have a gaggle of children, and I’d be content. I never thought, not even once, that there would be such a power in love, the power to make a man do things he would have thought impossible mere months before.” He was now weeping, not wiping the tears away or hiding his face in shame. Truth be told, it made me more than a little uncomfortable. We’d shared plenty of time together, but our conversations had usually been simple, and to the point.

“Muirenn lit a fire in my soul, Clay. It burns still. Not a moment goes by when I do not think on her.” He turned his gaze to Baby Paul. “I know that this child is not mine, but I feel that

he was nurtured in the cradle of our love, and that makes me his father, no matter what man or beast may say.”

“Hopefully no beasts will try to say otherwise, “I muttered. That ended the conversation and, for a time, the two of us sat in companionable silence. I’d never had a friend before. I didn’t have much of an inkling as to what friends talked about or what they did, but I figured silence was good enough for now.

Patrick entered an hour or so later, just as I was dozing, my head against the wall. Bunyan had gotten Paul to sleep and he was quietly reading in his personal Bible.”It is good to see some godly behaviors in our midst,” Patrick said as he nodded approvingly at Bunyan. He went on, “I have concluded negotiations with Heer Van Valkenburg. We are to accompany him to the other side of the river tomorrow at noon.”

I perked up at that. “So, your plan was to get us across the river in plain sight with the man the whole valley resents?”

Patrick looked at me calmly, “I do not care what others may think of me. I know where the treasure lies and if we act quickly, we might be able to secure it and leave this place before we are discovered or before any trouble happens.”

“I suppose it may not be a bad plan in that, but I do not want to anger these lumbermen. They are proud folk and proud folk are never stable.”

“What is most important is finding the treasure. If God wills it, we shall not fail.” His voice rose as it always did when he spoke of God. I myself wasn’t sure what God willed or if he even had us in mind. I might be willing to befriend Bunyan and grant him some measure of trust, but I sure as hell wasn’t going to do nothing and accept what came as God’s will.

The next morning I disguised myself as best I could by borrowing a fine coat that belonged to Bunyan. The coat had seen better days, and I pulled my hat out of my saddlebag. I hadn't worn it since the rain had tapered off. It wasn't much, but I hoped that as many of the men I'd met that night in the Thundershack had been drunk as hell, they wouldn't recognize me. Bunyan elected to stay in the cabin with Paul and read his Bible. "Be careful," I warned him. "This is dangerous. I feel like we're locked in a cage with a sleeping bear. And when that bear wakes up, we'll be torn all to hell."

"I will stay indoors and not speak to anyone," replied Bunyan. I nodded gratefully.

Van Valkenburg was waiting for us when we arrived, promptly at noon on the banks of the St. John River. The river itself was wide and clear and the chill in the air increased as we drew closer to that water. Van Valkenburg had hired a boat to take us across to the other side, where he could survey the area and report his findings to the Dutch King's arbitrator. I didn't say much of anything, just kept my head down.

I didn't know what it was supposed to feel like crossing a national border, but I grew more and more uneasy as we got farther from the American side. The crossing itself was uneventful, as the weather was clear and the water was flowing quickly and cleanly. I've not spent much time in boats, but the idea of travelling across water was always intrigued me. For the first time in a long while I thought about finding that ship to China. When we stepped ashore on the Canadian side of Aroostook, I waited for Van Valkenburg and Patrick to tell me what to do. There wasn't a horde of angry townsfolk like I'd anticipated, and I relaxed slightly for the first time all day.

Van Valkenburg, for his part, didn't say much; rather, he simply began walking, as if he'd been there before strolling for the center of the village, called Edmonston on the Canadian

side. We followed, Patrick and I sharing some glances of confusion. We didn't know what he was up to, but this did not seem like a survey mission to me.

The village itself mirrored the one of the other bank of the river. Cabins and buildings made of timber, dwellings built by and filled with lumbermen. One cabin, in particular stood out from the rest, it was some distance from the few ramshackle buildings that could be called a village and there was a distinct air of solitude. The few people on the dirt streets carefully avoided looking at it. And somehow, before we ever got there, I knew that was where we were going.

Van Valkenburg strolled firmly up the door of the cabin and gave a knock consisting of three sharp taps. It quickly swung open to reveal a busty redheaded woman wearing a very thin dress that clung to her in a way that made the whore's clothing I'd seen in Bangor look modest by comparison. As soon as her eyes lit upon the Dutchman, she pulled him to her in a firm, passionate kiss. I looked at Patrick. He seemed as surprised as I was. Well, maybe more. I don't think my face can get that red, or my eyes that wide.

The woman pulled Van Valkenburg into the cabin with her and closed the door. The door opened again shortly thereafter to allow for the ejection of another woman, younger and thinner than the other. I judged her to be a sister, not a daughter. The two women didn't look far enough apart in age for that. Her hair was the same color, however, and her body, while not quite as voluptuous, was pretty enough. Adjusting her skirts after being flung out of the cabin, the girl looked around her warily, like a cat tossed in a room full of dogs. Seeing me and Patrick standing there, she gave us a cold, hard glare and backed away from us, stopping far enough away to avoid us while staying close to the cabin.

I ignored her and looked to Patrick. “What the hell is this? I didn’t think you likely to be paid for escort service for this man and his whore.”

Patrick looked pained. “I assumed he was honest about his purpose here.”

I sighed. “Well, we’re here. Where’s your damned treasure?”

Patrick peered around him in terror. “Don’t speak of it here, you fool! Others might hear you and then we’d lose our chance!” he hissed.

“What do you suggest we do about it?” I asked.

Patrick composed himself. “I know more or less where the treasure is. I will find it; you wait here.”

“More or less?!” I was about ready to knock his head onto the ground and pound away with my fists. Maybe my feet, for variety’s sake.

Patrick saw the anger in my eyes. “I know where to look, but not how deep to dig. Fear not. I will find it.” He didn’t say another word, just left me standing there.

If I hadn’t been filled with so much rage, I would have thought to follow him, but I was afraid I’d kill him if I were too close. “Hellfire and damnation!” I yelled, to no one in particular. I stomped circles around the outside of the cabin for a time, cooling down before I sit myself down on the dirt in weary resignation. I sat in idle silence for a while before I realized I was tapping my foot to the rhythm of the noises coming from within the cabin. Not wanting that memory seared in my soul I looked to where the girl sat, her back to the cabin.

“You look just about as angry as I feel right now,” I said.

She looked at me, and brushed some of her long red hair out of her face. “My sister!” she spat. She then proceeded to utter forth a long string of words that didn’t make the smallest lick of sense to me. Her accent was one I couldn’t place for a moment, but then I remembered hearing

some French sailors during my time in Boston. Her voice was much softer than theirs, and what would have sounded like garbage in their mouths sounded like roses in hers.

I guessed that she must be one of the “Frenchies” I’d heard about in the Thundershack. Folk come down to settle in Aroostook from Quebec or some such place. I listened to her rant in her native tongue for a while before I said anything. “I don’t speak your French, miss. But I suspect that you’re here like me, against your will and not liking it very much.”

She looked at me consideringly. “You are not like those other men. The tree cutters on the other side of the river.”

I laughed. “Hell no. I’m a...” I paused to think of the right words. “Well, I guess I’m a merchant guard. And I’m from down south aways. In more civilized parts. Kentucky.”

I looked to her for some acknowledgement of that, but she looked at me blankly.

“Kentucky? I do not know this place.”

I laughed. “Well, most folk down in America would probably prefer to say that themselves.”

“So you are American.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Hell yes, I am. That don’t make me a part of your conflict, though. I just go where I’m told. Or, now I do,” I amended.

“And you work now for this pig?” She jerked a thumb behind her to the cabin, indicating Van Valkenburg.

“Looks like. Don’t make me any happier to be here than you are to have me, I’m sure.”

She growled in frustration. “My parents, my father and mother. They move us here from Quebec two years ago. We are to make a new life. New land, new riches, he says. But then do you know what happens?” She threw her arms in the air at the question.”

“They left you?” I ventured.

“They died! They died and left me alone with my sister, Violette. We have no money, we have nothing. So, my sister, she becomes a whore. A whore!” Her rage was growing.

“What’s your name?” I asked, hoping to distract her before she offered me or herself bodily harm.

The question confused her, threw her off, like a horse losing a shoe midstride. I gathered that the girl had very few opportunities to rant like that, and she had been using the opportunity to build up a head of steam for a good one. I didn’t want to be caught in it.

“Marie,” she said, adding nothing else.

“Mine’s Clay, Marie. Clay Filinger from Fingal Kentucky.”

She nodded and started to calm down. “You work for the Dutchman, but your friend, the old man. He goes to look for treasure? Here?”

I was surprised. “How did you hear that?”

“I can hear very well, a skill that I find to be a problem when my sister is being the whore.”

“I understand that,” I said, as I grimaced at another round of pleasure sounds from the cabin.

Chapter 14

Marie and I spent the remainder of the day in conversation designed to shield us from the noises. We talked about my life in Fingal, her life in Quebec, our travels, things like that. I of course, refrained from saying anything about Muirenn, Paul, Jefferson, or angry Pookas. I did keep looking toward the cabin, expecting Van Valkenburg to exit at any time, but damn if the man didn’t either have extraordinary stamina, or a hell of a lot to converse with Violette about.

The time, surprisingly, passed quickly. With nothing else to do, talking to a pretty redhead is not a bad alternative. That ended of course, as all good things do with the arrival of a gang of three round headed, well muscled, Canadian lumbermen. They all had beards, thick and bushy, and their clothes were designed to be worn in cooler weather.

“Looks like we got a stray from the other side of the river!” One said as they approached.

“He should go back,” said another.

“We should make him go back,” added the third.

“He spends his time here with these whores.” The second man had spoken again, casting a dark look to Marie and gesturing toward the cabin.

I could see that these men were not much for polite conversation, so I settled for polite fisticuffs instead. I stood and drove my boot into the groin of the first man before he even realized what was happening. He went down in the kind of agony that most men will spend their whole lives avoiding. That left the other two still standing. I punched the second man in the face, hard. There was a crunch, like a dog snapping into a chicken bone. I’ve never liked that sound. But I’d broken his nose. Blood, red, and thick poured down the front of the man’s face. There was a good bit of it on my hand as well, and I’d gotten a bloody imprint of my fist on his shirt. He was dazed from the broken nose, but that would only last a second. I didn’t stop to admire my handiwork; rather, I ducked around him and introduced myself to the third man with a punch in his belly. That usually floors the drunken tavern crowd I usually fight with, but I hadn’t counted on these lumbermen being towers of muscle. It was like punching a slab of fresh beef. He grabbed my wrist and held it, firmly, like he would have held a saw or an axe.

I didn’t like it. I do not like being trapped, and my usual brawl technique consists of hitting hard, fast, and then running away. Being trapped and pummeled is not part of any plan

that I want to be a part of. I tried to pull back, but my wrist was caught fast. I attempted to break this man's nose as I had the nose of his companion, but as my punching hand was incapacitated, I missed. Soon, this hand was trapped as well, the big man holding me in some perverse and deadly dance.

The man whose groin I'd assailed stood, a sickly look on his face. Broken Nose's eyes refocused and he began wiping the blood off of his beard with his sleeve. It did little to stop or slow the flow of red into his moustaches. Groin stumbled closer, walking like a greenhorn horse tamer. His mouth was curled in a snarl. Belly held me, and as I struggled, he began to laugh. It was a rich, throaty laugh. Loud, like a cannon, and deep, like a cavern.

My hands being held, I didn't have much choice but to use my feet and head. I tried my feet first, kicking Belly in the legs. I didn't do much. I didn't have a fighting position, and a man needs distance to build up any force into a kick. After my boots connected to his legs and after getting no response from the man other than more laughter, I did the only thing that I had left to do.

I've never liked a headbutt. It hurts, it's dangerous, and usually, you have to smell another man's breath. Pappy, in one of his sober minutes, had told me something of the rules of a headbutt. First, you hit with the top of your forehead. Hitting with your face is, well, pretty damn stupid. Second, you hit them in *their* face. A man might work hard to develop a hardness of muscle in their arms and trunk, but I don't know of any activities that can harden a man's face muscle. If you can smash a nose, or knock out a few teeth, you can get away. Third, hit hard and fast. Finally, If you can fight a man smaller than you, that's even better. Belly and I were of a height, so that last didn't apply.

My head pulled back to gather speed, then I drove my head forward into his. I hadn't counted on his knowing and understanding the technique of the headbutt. He must have seen me pull back and in that split second, decided to do likewise. Our skulls crashed together with a sound like one large river stone being dropped on another.

Pain, a lot of pain, and what felt like light lanced through my body, starting from my head and burying itself somewhere in my shoulders. It hurt like hell.

"Holy Mother of God!" screamed Belly as he too, felt the pain. I took some satisfaction in knowing that at least one thing I'd done had caused him agony.

"I want to kill him! I want to kill him!" This was Broken Nose, although with his nose in the shape it was, his voice sounded rather more comical than frightening.

Groin said nothing, just continued his slow painful walk to where I had fallen on the ground when Belly had dropped me. I didn't say anything either. I didn't suspect that anything I could say would make a difference at this point. When Groin reached me, he clamped his hands on my right leg, turned around and started to drag me. Where, I had no idea. Broken Nose took hold of my other leg.

"We will kill him and show the rest of those damn Americans that they are not good enough even to touch our whores!" he said.

He must have thought that I was in a more dire state because he was very surprised when I twisted violently and lashed out with my free leg. Kicking him solidly in the chest and freeing myself from his grasp. The momentum of my kick knocked him back, and, as he was standing in the mud outside of Marie's cabin, his feet went out from under him and he fell backward.

If I hadn't been in so much pain, I would have laughed and kicked him again while he was down. As it was, with my head feeling like it had been used for target practice by a group of

rock-throwing apes, I scrambled to my feet and lurched toward Marie. I slipped in the mud more than a few times as I made my way toward her.

With Broken Nose down and the others in pain, I had a few seconds to get to higher ground. "Come!" I called to Marie, thinking that if these Canadians managed to beat me to death, they'd come back for her. Men always find whores to be easy to beat upon, something I've never understood. Beating a fellow who can't fight back as a way from preventing him from attacking you is perfect sense and not at all unmanly. But a woman...especially one who has debased herself to sate the lusts of the lowest of men, should be accorded some measure of respect. Or, if not respect, some amount of indifference.

The fact that Marie was not a whore at all made me more upset at the possibilities for ravishment and violence that these men could do to her. Mud clinging to my boots and blood running down my forehead into my eyes from a gash I hadn't noticed, I found Marie, pressed with her back against the rough wall of her home, shaking with fear.

The sounds of Van Valkenburg and Violette enjoying each other came through the cracks in the wall. I had to take a moment to admire their thoroughness before I took Marie by the arm and ran, dragging her behind me.

When I run from danger, I always find myself surprised at how quickly I can cover ground. And before I knew it, Marie and I reached the outlying trees, panting and gasping for air. My chest hurt something fierce and it was all I could do to keep standing. It'd been a while since I'd fought a sober man and remembered why I preferred my opponents to be drunks. Bar fights are always more satisfying because a smart man can win more easily.

Marie caught her breath faster than I had and when I glanced at her to see how she was feeling, I saw that she was a woman in her prime, young, fit, and...with a hell of a lot of lung

capacity. I'd seen pretty girls before. I'd seen women try to make themselves pretty with powders and pastes and such things, but I had not, in my life up to that point, seen a *beautiful* woman before. When she saw me admiring her, she gave me a considering look back. I hadn't had a woman look at me like that, with the exception of Constance Jefferson. On Constance it made me want to take a bath. On Marie...well, it made me want something else.

Leaving that thought behind for a moment, I peered around a big fir tree and looked back toward Marie's cabin. The three rough men lay in a rough tumble on the ground. I supposed that I'd overestimated their abilities, although I guessed that if I went back down to Edmonston, I'd not be very welcome. I felt finally like I could relax for a spell. I wordlessly took Marie and guided her further into the woods, just to be safe. I didn't doubt that the New Brunswick lumbermen had enough woodcraft to find us if they wanted to, but I didn't want them seeing us from a long distance away, either.

When we stopped, Marie finally spoke. "Are you going to ravish me?"

I was surprised by the question. "Hell no! I just saved your life!"

Marie laughed bitterly. "Those men, they come often to visit Violette. They talk, and they bluster, but they were impatient, nothing more."

"I didn't find them impatient," I said, rubbing my forehead. I'd have a sizeable bruise there soon, I was sure.

"They didn't want an American going before them. It was all bluster. But you..." She grew quiet. "So violent. So aggressive."

"We live in an aggressive age, Marie. Men must be "aggressive" as you put it, if they want to survive."

“Are you going to ravish me?” As she said this, Marie sat herself down gracefully, on the forest floor. Her skirt billowed for just a moment, showing a flash of pretty leg. She caught me looking and the look in her big green eyes made me wonder if her question was a question, or an invitation.

“I’m not that aggressive.” Was my only reply as I put my hat over my eyes, lay back against a tree, and pretended to sleep. I watched Marie glance around for danger before settling in as well. There was no going back to Endmonston, at least not at the moment.

Four hours passed by, I think, before I wandered back to the edge of the wood and took another peek at Marie’s cabin. John Patrick was there, dismounted, his horse standing nearby nibbling a clump of grass. Judging by the expression on his face, and his posture, things hadn’t gone well in his search for the treasure. I sighed. Nothing is ever easy.

Guessing that any angry lumbermen had long ago gone to a local tavern to drown their sorrows and bodily hurts, I took Marie and we headed back down. When Patrick saw me, he tried to keep a serene look on his face, like nothing was wrong, but his eyes betrayed his sorrow and disappointment.

“You didn’t find the treasure,” I said.

He looked relaxed until he found a more natural state, stricken with grief. “I found it, or rather, I found where it should be.”

“And?”

“There is a mill atop it.”

I laughed. “A mill? Someone happened to build a mill on the very spot where your Captain Kidd buried his fabulous wealth?” I laughed again. This was a fine end to a fine adventure.

He ignored my laughter. "I will find a way to extract it. I offered to purchase the mill, even at twice its value, but the man claimed he could not sell anything to an American. He said, 'seeing as how this will all be British North America in a few months time, I have more money to make keeping my mill.'"

I rolled my eyes. "Damn Canadians."

Just then, the honorable Heer Van Valkenburg strolled out of Marie's cabin looking like a man with no cares in the world. I couldn't blame him. Judging by the sounds I'd heard emanating from the cabin, he'd moaned all his cares away in the arms of the lusty Violette.

He didn't say anything to us, merely gathered his horse, mounted and began riding away, expecting us to follow. Patrick did. I took longer.

"Will you be safe?" I asked Marie.

"A safe as a whore can ever be." The words came out of her mouth sounding as bitter as a long drink of vinegar.

I didn't know what to say to that, so I spurred my horse and rode away. I didn't want to be too far away from the dubious protection of Van Valkenburg's station. I caught up to them quickly enough, and we rode to the ferry without incident. Once there, however, it appeared that the boat that had brought us across from the American side had left without us. I didn't blame the fellow. If I'd had a choice, I would have left as well.

Van Valkenburg stomped and snorted as he tried to rouse up some help from one of the boats on the Canadian side. He wasn't pleased that his orders had been disobeyed. His yelling and making a general nuisance of himself is what did the job, I think. A man, a sleepy-eyed fellow with long flowing, moustaches pulled himself up from where he was sitting. He made it look like it took huge amounts of effort to get his lanky body moving. He asked Van Valkenburg

for a large amount of cash to take us across the river, to which the angry Dutchman agreed. I made a mental note to charge the man more for my services than had been arranged with Patrick.

The crossing was as eventful but far less stressful than had been the first. When we stepped ashore on the American side, there was no one to greet us, although I had half expected an angry mob. Instead, we got a dozen sullen looks from the townsfolk and lumbermen we passed as we rode back to our lodgings.

Once there, Van Valkenburg dismissed us from his service. I laughed out loud when he did. “We didn’t perform much of a service, if you ask me. You should be thanking the French girl.”

“Quiet your man, Mr. Patrick, or I will no longer have you in my employ.”

“Of course,” said Mr. Patrick. “We are your servants.” He shot me a look that told me in no uncertain terms to keep quiet.

I said nothing. Simply dismounted, took care of my horse, and entered the cabin while Patrick settled accounts with the Dutchman. When I opened the door and entered, I saw Bunyan asleep on one of the makeshift beds we’d made. Little Paul was bundled up and sleeping as well, his little fists stuck into his mouth. Guessing that Bunyan was tired as hell and that waking either of them up wouldn’t do any of us a lot of good, I went back to the Thundershack.

Chapter 15

I was worried that the American versions of Belly, Broken Nose and Groin would try to rough me up, but I was equally afraid that staying cooped up in our cabin would make us seem like strange outsiders.

We were strange outsiders, but I didn’t want anyone thinking that but me. Returning to the Thundershack wasn’t as hard as I thought it would be. After a few rounds with the local

lumbermen, and a few insults against the British, the French, and everyone else who wasn't a Maine lumberman, I was back in their good graces. I repeated this process every night, as our days in Maine turned into weeks, and our weeks became months.

Patrick went across the river each day alongside Van Valkenburg. I didn't go, knowing that all I would do is anger the men on the other side and put Patrick in danger. For his part, he spent each day examining the mill that sat atop his alleged treasure. It was a lumbermill, cutting up logs into boards, making building materials for the folk coming into Aroostook from the north. Edmonston, it seemed, was growing. I didn't envy Mr. Patrick's obsession. I wanted riches, sure enough, but I didn't want to exert myself unduly seeking them. I was tempted to cross myself, not just for the pay from Van Valkenburg, but to visit a certain redhead. The more I didn't see her, the more my curiosity grew.

Paul was growing as well. I hadn't seen any more bursts of the quick, inhuman sprouting that I'd witnessed that day in the forest alongside the road to Aroostook, and I figured that Bunyan would have mentioned something if he'd seen it happen again. Even so, Paul was going to be a tall man. His hands and feet were large, even for a baby, and as he approached the age of eleven months, we'd stand him up. He was strong, his thick, chubby legs held him firmly. Eventually, he'd sidle alongside a chair or propel himself along the wall, moving faster and faster each time he did so.

At the same time, Madawska was growing as well, the two rival towns were each trying to outdo the other by adding as many people as they could. The Maine lumbermen were coming from all corners of the state, and I began to see a few faces that I recognized from Bangor in the Thundershack.

As the tension began to grow, I began to find tension growing in me, as well. Jefferson had Patrick's treasure map. He had Muirenn's bag that would protect him from the monsters sent by Liath Luacra. A man like Jefferson likes to lord his victories over others and he likes to let everyone know when he has an advantage. I had been expecting him to arrive in Aroostook since we'd arrived ourselves.

I could see him in my mind, riding into town, armed with a digging crew, weapons and a grin designed to make me less than him.

When I did see Jefferson, it was not at all in the way I expected. As it turns out, Heer Van Valkenburg was craftier than I gave him credit for. I had assumed that he was lazy, self-serving and only going to the other side of the river for Violette's affections. I was only partially right.

One day, after we'd spent the summer in Madawska, a large party of well-dressed men rode into the town. They rode with an arrogance I hadn't seen much since I came to Maine. Well dressed, and followed by a wagon that, I mused, must contain their extra clothes and hats. There was very little mud splattered on the backs of these fine men, so I guessed that they'd stopped just outside of town and changed. I followed their path, past the new houses and cabins on the periphery of the town, past the new stable, and past the new inn that was giving the Thundershack a bit of competition.

The men rode, stately, dignified, and haughty all the way to the crossing of the two main roads in Madawska, a wide strip of mud surrounded by more buildings than the other wide strips of mud in the area. There, they waited. A crowd of the curious came to watch them, much smaller than the actual portion of the town, and most of the men at that time of day were out, using their saws and axes to provide more lumber for the growing east coast of America.

The men waited, and said nothing. Eventually, Van Valkenburg came out of the hotel he had claimed as his personal residence and strode out to meet them. I hadn't expected him to be in Madawska as Patrick had left that morning like usual and hadn't said that anything was different. I put that thought aside for a moment as I fixated on Van Valkenburg and his visitors. They spoke in a strange, guttural language that was my first exposure to Dutch. I didn't like it. It didn't sound right to me. When they finished, a smile crawled across Van Valkenburg's face, and his eyes lit up. I'd never seen the bastard smile like that, even when he was leaving Violette's embrace.

With a slight skip in his step, Van Valkenburg quickly entered the hotel, found his rooms and was out in a shorter time that it takes a Boston thief to slit your throat and steal everything you own. He loaded his belongings into a wagon, mounted his horse, and the entire group was out of Madawska, out of Aroostok, and I never saw them again.

Of course, it was just a few weeks later when I found out the reason for their hasty departure. I was in the Thundershack, drinking, listening to rumors. The place smelled like it always did, wood, sawdust, axe oil, and stale beer. A man burst in. It was James Colman, a small, tough man, who'd lost a hand in an accident a few years before. I'd never before seen him excited or angry before. He usually slumped in his seat in the Thundershack, cradling his stump, and sipping a mug with his other hand.

He made a living running messages and supplies back and forth from Aroostook to Bangor. Without his hand he couldn't manage a saw anymore, but he could handle a team fairly well, and over ground that he knew well, he was damn good. It's no wonder, then, that he was the first to hear the news.

“The Dutch King decided the boundary!”

As soon as he said this, the whole place was in an uproar. “Bastard Dutch!”

“We’ll never accept it! Never!”

“This is too much!”

“Them British are never getting my land!”

I myself found it more interesting that the decision had been made only a few weeks after Van Valkenburg had left. It seemed to me that it would take a mite longer to send a message to his homeland, for the king to make a decision, and for that reply to arrive on our shores. Suddenly, I understood why Van Valkenburg had never revealed an inclination to do more than defile Violette every day. He had no intention of making surveys or gathering information. The decision had already been made. It had been made long ago, I figured. A group of pompous bureaucrats making deals.

The shouting and caterwauling about the Dutch lasted for a while before someone thought to ask, “Where is the boundary?”

“That’s just the thing!” said Colman. “The whole of Aroostook goes to British North America!”

The shouting grew, if anything, even louder. I would not have wanted to be an Englishman or a Dutchman at that moment.

“I ain’t no damn New Brunswick man!” Said a burly lumberman with a thin, blonde beard. His accent revealed that he probably wasn’t from Maine, either.

“Maine for Maine!” came another shout. “Maine for Maine!”

At some point, the crowd decided that that was the motto they were going to be using. My natural inclination was to retreat from the angry festivities, but again, I knew that I had best stay and publicly show my support for Maine. This isn’t to say that I didn’t feel upset about

Aroostook being claimed by the British. I was American, and I felt that America had a destiny to make itself better than other nations. I did feel, however, that keeping baby Paul in the area any longer would be trouble. I stayed the course of the night, trying not to drink every tankard foisted on me, and managed to stagger back to our cabin only partially drunk.

Paul had been finicky about sleep lately. He'd wake in the early morning hours, well before dawn and someone would have to get up and calm him down, quiet his cries. I didn't begrudge him that. He was a baby, after all, and babies cry. Bunyan, however, felt guilty when the boy cried, like if Paul wasn't happy, he was letting down Muirenn somehow. I didn't try to correct him about it. The man needed to remember her in his own way, and sometimes guilt connects people in ways that other things can't.

I slept in the stable on the edge of town. It was soft, the horses didn't bother me, and if I bothered them, they didn't say so. I crawled up into the rafters, and nested myself in a pile of hay that wasn't too dirty, too poky, or have too many insects. Yes, a night on a bed of hay is much better than many of the alternatives for a man sleeping off a drunk.

Chapter 16

Inasmuch as I was sleeping in a stable, and not in my own cabin, I was able to spy a new party of men riding into town. These weren't dandies like the Dutchmen who came for Van Valkenburg, rather, these were fighting men, soldiers. They rode well, their horses moving under them like they were of a single mind. Each of them wore a curved sword at his side, clattering slightly against their saddles. They each wore a pistol on their other side, ready to draw at a moment's notice. A rife was slung on each of their backs. They wore no uniforms, but the grim looks on their faces were uniform enough. These men were part of a unit. They'd fought together, and they'd lived.

There was one man who rode at their head. He was their leader, I could tell, but his face was obscured by a large, expensive hat. He didn't carry himself like the others, didn't seem to be part of their group, there was no sense of camaraderie between him and them. But they followed him. Money. That was the only reason I could see for it. Men will do a lot of things for money. Hell, I myself have been known to compromise my values a time or two for pay, but why a man with money would need a small army in the ass-end of Maine was beyond me.

I had no idea why men such as these would be finding their way to Aroostook. As they rode into the stable, dismounted and saw that their horses would be cared for, I managed to make myself invisible up in the rafters. They weren't looking for a threat, so they didn't check for danger like they should have. They figured they could stand up to anything that Aroostook had to offer, and they'd be right.

It wasn't until their leader took off his hat and stowed it in a saddlebag that I discovered who it was.

"Jefferson." I muttered to myself. I wished I were a good distance off, a long Kentucky rifle in my hands. I could rid the world of Jefferson in one shot. Well, I'd probably have three or four guns loaded and ready, for good measure. I'm not more than an average shot.

Jefferson sat his horse and watched as his men readied themselves. Then, he dismounted and handed his reins to one of them. The man quietly took them and attended to Jefferson's horse. The rest of the soldiers gathered in a small, close formation that I assumed meant they were waiting to be attacked, or awaiting orders.

Jefferson didn't wait too long, he removed his riding gloves, slung them over his belt, and turned to his men. "Gentlemen," he said, his soft Georgia accent drifting through the room. It felt like gravel being flung at my ears. I hated him. I wanted to leap down from my perch and

strangle him with my bare hands. Jefferson had stolen from Muirenn. He's threatened her and Paul at the moment of his birth. He'd made some kind of deal with Liath Luacra and he'd had a hand in slaughtering a family in Heaven's Landing. He deserved to die. He deserved to die painfully, slowly, and filled with guilt and regret for his crimes.

I was so focused on the rage building inside me that I hadn't been paying attention to the speech he was giving his men. "...Each of you will have a fair portion of the treasure to reward you for your hard work. That being said, I expect complete obedience. If even one of you is unable to complete a task assigned, he will be shot. Am I clear?"

"Yes!" The men looked well trained and completely obedient to Jefferson. I chuckled to myself in spite of my anger. Who the hell would want to follow orders all day long? A man should do as he pleases.

"We have enemies here. There are three men, caring for an infant. Their names are Randolph Bunyan, John Patrick, and Clay Filinger. We must remove these men as an obstacle before we cross the river and recover the gold. When we find them, kill the men, take the infant."

One man, a young fellow, maybe my age or slightly older, raised his voice. "If anyone asks why we're here?"

"We're a private militia here to protect American interests against the British," said Jefferson.

The men all nodded their understanding of the situation. Cold sweat began running down my back as I realized mine. It wouldn't be hard for these fellows to find Bunyan and Patrick. They were known to the folk in town, if more by circumstance than by name. If any of them were asked about three men and an infant, they'd have no reason not to say anything.

As terrifying as this new development was, what frightened me even more was the news that Jefferson wanted Paul. I knew he'd colluded with Liath Luacra in some way or form, but to know that this evil man was planning on taking Paul from our dead hands... I was afraid for the boy, and afraid for myself. I'd seen what had tried to get into the cabin during the rainstorm that surrounded Paul's birth. I'd seen it, and the memory of its screams echoed in my bones.

I didn't want to face it again, and I knew that if I did, I wouldn't be surviving. It's one thing to risk your life when you might get killed just as easily as you might live. It's another thing to ride into certain death.

I'm not proud to say this, but as Jefferson and his men left the stable, splitting up in to twos and threes to scope out the town, and find Paul and the others, I spent several long minutes thinking about riding south, out of this nightmare, and out of this story. Then, the reality of my situation came back to me. I'd ridden south from Heaven's Landing not knowing the stakes well enough and I'd been forced back by Uncle Nathan. This time, I knew full well that I was confronting something truly hellish.

But I couldn't run. Sure, I'd live a long, comfortable life if I did, but I'd be haunted by the memories I should have had. Memories of Paul, the boy growing, learning. Even then, I had a sense of what destiny the boy would have, the legend he would grow into. I wanted to be a part of it. I wanted to shape it in my own way, if I could. But more than that, I wanted to give the boy a chance to grow into a man.

While I'd been agonizing over what to do, Jefferson and his men were getting closer and closer to Paul. Madawska wasn't big, not by a long shot. I had maybe a quarter of an hour, no more. I dropped down from my perch in the upper rafter of the stable. I landed well, missing most of the dung on the floor by a fair margin.

All of Jefferson's men were gone, but the horses were there. I walked to the door, avoiding any dung I could before I had a notion. The notion came upon me quickly, and I must say it was one of my better ones. I'd have to use a few of my precious minutes, but if I could get to Paul in time, I'd have a better chance of escaping.

When I was done, I actually found myself grinning in spite of my fear and anger. I quickly quashed it as I looked down the few dirt streets of Madawska. Jefferson's men were making an organized search. As most of the men in town were out cutting timber, I'd stand out in any attempt to walk openly to where Bunyan and Patrick were. I guessed that I had maybe ten minutes left before they found their way to our cabin on the other end of town, but I was stymied. I couldn't leave the stable, not without being seen.

I looked back into the cabin, looking for something, anything that might help. Horses. Tack. Hay. Shit. Damn.

I still smelled like whisky and beer from the night before, having had liberal amounts of each splashed on me by careless lumbermen upset by politics. I hadn't paid much attention to it, but now I was thankful. It would help, unpleasant as it was. It was the next part that would be even more unpleasant. Grimacing, bracing myself for the awful feel of it, I gathered in my right hand a large quantity of horse shit. It was soft, it was warm, it was clumpy. I tried to tell myself that it had been nothing but hay and grass only a few hours before. It didn't help. When I first dabbed it on my face, I nearly threw the handful aside and stormed out of the stable, visibility be damned.

I didn't though. I smeared the foulness on my face, and on the sleeves of my shirt. I needed to give myself the appearance of a drunk who had fallen asleep in a ditch alongside the

road. It didn't actually take long. My clothes were rumpled, my hair a mess, and the shit just helped give me a smell that would drive the curious away.

Staggering quickly, while looking like you aren't staggering quickly is an art I knew I had to master in a short amount of time. I'd never given much thought on how to stagger before. It had always come naturally when I needed it to, which was always when I was drunk.

My first challenge was a trio of Jefferson's men, three young, eager, yet professional men. They'd seen death in their time, I was sure. Just because a man is young, that doesn't mean he's safe from the hardships of life. They were systematically moving from cabin to cabin asking the old, injured or women of Madawska about me and mine.

I knew they'd notice me sooner or later, and if they were as professional as they looked, I'd be asked a question or two.

"You there!" It came later than I expected, but not late enough to remove my opinion of them as professionals.

"Yessssh?" I did my best to make my voice as slurred and drunk sounding as possible.

"Do you know this town well?" The speaker was the leader of the group, the same man who'd taken care of Jefferson's horse. He was short, shorter than the others, with long strips of muddy brown hair running down the sides of the face to where they stopped, just above his mouth. He had a pompous attitude about him, which I suspected meant he came from a moneyed family. Nobody talks like that unless they have the funds to back it up. The other two stepped back a bit, wrinkling their noses in disgust at the smell coming off of me in great, putrid waves.

"I've lived here, near three year!" Damn, the slur was hard to manage when I was in a hurry and afraid for my life. It was too many things to manage all at once.

“We’re looking for three men. One of them is father to an infant. They’ve been here since late spring.”

“Oh. Aye.”

“You know them?” The man’s voice became sharp, and his eyes hard and focused.

“Aye.”

“Can you tell us where they are?”

I managed a vague point toward the way I way come. “Them folk live out there a waysh. Outside of town. No one much likesh them.” I hiccupped.

The man nodded in satisfaction. “Let’s move.” This last part was directed as his compatriots, not myself.

Seeing that I was in the clear, I hurried faster than I had before. I resumed my stagger only once, when I saw another group the men, but they said nothing to me, barely even acknowledged me. I was glad I hadn’t run into Jefferson. He was shrewd enough that he wouldn’t hesitate to investigate me, smell or no.

I barged into our cabin and began talking without missing a step. “Get up, get moving.”

As it was late morning, Patrick had left for the other side of the river, for which I was glad. The man wasn’t quick to react to new situations. He’d have bogged us down with questions. Bunyan, on the other hand, was sitting at our rough table, writing in his journal. He’d started keeping it once Paul was big enough to not need minding every second.

“Silas?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said as I gathered Paul in my arms and exited the cabin.

Bunyan was right behind me, he’d only taken the briefest of moments to snatch the most necessary of our items. Patrick’s rifle, Paul’s food, and Bunyan’s jacket.

“Do you realize that you stink of manure?”

“I do. I needed it to get past Jefferson’s men.”

We were walking now, briskly, toward the river and our only possibility for safety: crossing the river and hiding on the other side. I filled Bunyan in on what I had seen and heard that morning. His face became grave. Well, graver than usual, which, on a serious man like Bunyan was grave indeed. I think Paul was picking up on the somber nature of our task. He was usually a jubilant boy, full of smiles and infant laughter whenever I spent time with him, but as we fled for our lives, and most of all, his life, he was subdued and quiet.

I didn’t know what we would do once we got to the river. Patrick carried all of our money on him when he crossed. I had some on me, but not enough to pay for a ferryman. Bunyan, as usual, hadn’t thought to bring any. He had brought his journal, I noticed.

I tried to move as fast as possible. We were so exposed that I knew that at any moment we’d be spotted. For this reason, I resisted looking behind me, knowing that if I did, somehow, Jefferson would be right there.

Not turning around didn’t help, however. Soon, I heard a shout of, “There!”

Bunyan quietly said, “Clay. They’re after us. What shall we do?”

“Run!”

Chapter 17

We ran. The river was getting close. There was the crack of a gunshot. The sound of a bullet striking the ground ten yards in front of Bunyan.

“Don’t strike the child!” That was Jefferson’s voice. I had thought that his aim was to kill Paul, do what Liath Luacra had failed to do the night he was born. The knowledge that he wanted

Paul alive filled me with sinister dread. Either Liath Luacra had changed his plans, or Jefferson thought he could negotiate with that evil being. I didn't much care for either option.

Another bullet sang past my ear. "Hell!" I said.

"Not in front of Paul, Clay," said Bunyan. Even then, the man was godly.

"Filinger! Stop, or I will kill you, and the boy too if need be." Jefferson again. His voice was like poison in my mind. It filled me with black, sickening rage. Rage was not what I needed. I needed cleverness, I needed to think my way out of this situation.

At my left, Bunyan began muttering a prayer. I didn't listen. Divine intervention wasn't going to happen. Not that day, not to me. At least, that's what I thought.

One more bullet, one more miss.

"Clay! I'll let you go. Just give me the babe!"

One more bullet, one more miss.

"I won't kill the boy. He'll be given to one who understands his power!"

We ran, we ran, panting, and huffing. My chest burned like I had downed a barrel of pure grain alcohol. We ran and we ran. Finally, we reached the river. It was right in front of us, clear, clean, fast flowing. If we could cross, maybe we'd have a chance. If we could cross. My eyes searched in vain for a way to cross. Usually, there were one or two boats for hire, but not that day. Everyone was gone. I would have sworn, but I could barely breathe, let alone speak.

I looked to Bunyan, who was in the same state. With a nod, we both turned to face what I guessed were our deaths. When I turned around and faced Madawska, I saw Jefferson, sword drawn, walking toward us. A dozen of his men were behind him, some favoring guns, others, the blade, just like Jefferson. They'd been running, but had stopped when they had seen we had no other choice.

“You bastard!” I wheezed.

Jefferson smiled. “Come now, Clay, you surely didn’t think that I’d never come after you? You should have been long gone. The treasure wasn’t worth it.”

I spat a glob of phlegm that had bubbled out of my lungs. I wished I had the power to strike Jefferson with it. As it was, it struck the ground in a sad fashion, like it was our only hope of escape, now dead.

“You will not take my son!” Bunyan spoke, his quiet nature now coming through as quiet resolve. He was no coward, was Randolph Bunyan. “You will not take my son.”

Jefferson’s smile grew colder. “You can’t stop me. You can’t stop my patron either. His power is immeasurable. You have nothing. No one.”

“Not true.” This was a new voice, loud and coming from the forest alongside the trail we’d ran down. It was a voice I knew. The voice was followed by a form. The glowing blue horse I’d seen devour Stoke stepped out of the trees. It walked at a slow canter, picking up speed very slowly.

Jefferson sneered. “I’ve heard of you. You can’t stop me. Not while I wear this.” He patted the leather pouch that hung at his belt. Muirenn’s pouch.

“Perhaps,” said the Pooka, closing in on Jefferson and his men. For their part, the soldiers, professional as they were, were looking at each other in confusion. I doubted they’d seen anything like this before. Bunyan at my side drew in a breath of surprise when he saw the Pooka. Even his conversations with Muirenn hadn’t prepared him for this.

Jefferson took a step back. Evidently his faith in the pouch wasn’t complete. “Kill it!” He said to his men, falling in behind them. The soldiers looked at each other, but trained as they

were, they didn't disobey. That's one more reason you won't see me joining any armies. I'm not going to fight anything that I don't understand unless I absolutely have to.

Jefferson's men surrounded the blue horse. Once they were in place, a looked passed between them, and they attacked. The men with guns tried first, of course, and the bullets struck, but they had no effect on the hide of the Pooka. Rather, they sank in and were covered by new flesh just as soon as they hit.

Those with swords and knives fared better. One of them sliced at the horse, and glowing blue blood welled up from the wound. I dimly recalled a memory of my mother, telling me a story about the fair folk, saying that only the touch of cold iron could harm them. Those swords were iron. Well, steel, but steel had iron in it. Damn.

Almost as soon as it happened, the form of the Pooka changed. From a horse, it became that of a great bear, huge, powerful and damn frightening. With a swipe of a great paw, it knocked aside the man who'd hurt it. His face, arms and most of his chest were crushed by the sheer power in the blow.

His fellows stepped back. The bear was a hell of a lot scarier and deadlier than a horse. I would have argued otherwise, as I'd seen the creature eat Stokes in one bite. They bear roared, and the earth shook. One of the soldiers dropped his sword and ran, ran toward the stable and his own horse. Jefferson shot him as he passed by. The rest, knowing it was choice between death and dishonor or just death, chose to stay fighting the bear.

The battle was short and brutal. The bear bit and clawed its way through those dozen men like they were made of butter. True, it took many wounds, but the mass of blood, pulped organs and bone fragments that littered the ground showed how powerful the creature was. Soon it was the only thing between Bunyan, Paul, myself and Jefferson.

Paul had watched this with fascination. I can't say that it was healthy for the boy to witness such carnage, but as the fight was over him, I'd say he was entitled to look. His blue eyes reflected the light of the blue bear to the extent that they seemed to glow themselves.

When I myself looked at the Pooka, I could see that it had been more gravely wounded than I thought. The rage that had moved the bear with such force and power now seemed to be drained from the creature. It was panting, weakly and there was a gurgle to its breath that revealed some wound to the lungs.

Jefferson merely looked with contempt at the remains of his little army. The sneer returned to his face. "You can't stop me, Pooka. You would have killed me already if you could have." He pulled an unused rifle from the ground where one of his men had dropped it. He checked the powder and aimed, right at the boy in my arms. "If I can't take him alive, I'll just kill him now."

"No!" screamed Bunyan, as he rushed the place himself between the eventual bullet and myself. I appreciated the gesture, but knew that it would do little good.

"You don't understand your place in all of this, do you?" This was the Pooka speaking to Jefferson. "Liath Luacra is not a fair master to serve. He will betray you in the end."

"I don't serve Liath Luacra, Pooka. We are equal partners. I will be granted power and magics of my own once I deliver the boy to him." Jefferson smiled at the thought.

"I will stop you." The Pooka said with total conviction. As he did, his form changed again, from that of a bear, to that of a huge ox. It was unlike any ox that I had ever seen. It was shaggy, blue like always, but with a lean, fierce look to its face. Its horns spread, from point to point, longer than the spread of my arms. The beast itself stood almost twice as tall as I did. Still bleeding from the injuries inflicted by the steel swords, it charged.

Jefferson stood, stunned for a moment. The rampaging beast bearing down on him defied description. The moment passed, and Jefferson reacted. He scrambled to open the pouch at his side. He did, and from it he drew a small, dull stone. To me, it looked like any ordinary river rock, round and worn. As the blue behemoth bore down on him, He braced himself and raised the stone.

When the light that emanated from the Pooka hit the stone, the stone itself began to glow with a blue light as well. I noticed this in the fraction of a second between Jefferson holding aloft the stone and him being knocked twenty feet into the air.

He landed hard. And when I say hard, I mean he landed with a crunch that I'm sure was heard back in his native Georgia. This was in addition to the power of the impact from the Pooka, which, I'm sure had crushed his insides like a bag of rotten peaches.

Jefferson lay still on the ground, so I turned my attention to the Pooka. It was still bleeding, but now the blood was red. It looked far more real than it had when it was glowing blue, but seeing the Pooka's blood as red as mine was a shock to me. The gigantic ox had settled down on its haunches, breathing hard. I handed Paul to Bunyan and I approached it, cautiously.

"That was fair bit of destruction there, Uncle Nathan. Couldn't have thought of a finer end for Jefferson myself."

The ox snorted dismissively. "If you hadn't gotten the boy in such danger, I wouldn't have had to do this." Then, the beast grunted, and I could see that it was in considerable pain. "He had better be worth it."

It was then that I noticed that the Pooka was no longer glowing. It was blue, yes, but it was a sort of natural blue. Not that oxen are blue, ever, but the blue didn't come from the light

shed by the beast, rather, its fur and skin were now a shade of blue usually reserved for the afternoon sky.

“What happened to you?” I asked.

The Pooka let out a long, slow exhale, like all the air from his lungs were going past his mouth, looking for the right words, and not finding any. Finally, it whispered, “I am done. Finished. Even if these wounds don’t finish me off, I am no longer immortal. His stone saw to that. Mortal now, and trapped in this form.”

“You mean...”

“The aurochs is a fearsome creature, although not the suit I’d have chosen to wear for the rest of my days.”

I didn’t know what an aurochs was. It looked like a hairy ox to me, so I glanced back to where Jefferson lay, arms and legs sprawled about like he was made of string and scraps, not flesh and bone. His hand still clutched something. I could see a thin trickle of blue light come from the gaps between his fingers. I walked over to him, thinking that I could retrieve the stone and aid the Pooka in some way.

As I approached I could more clearly see Silas Jefferson’s face, still fixed with his trademark sneer. The man was an utter bastard, even in death. I considered kicking the sneer off his face, but I didn’t want to get his blood on my boots. Besides, I figured the creatures of the forest and passage of time would remove it soon enough.

I was wrong. As I stood over him, trying to pry his fist apart with my hands, his sneer changed to a smile. “Fool!” he said. His voice was quiet. So quiet that it bordered on the edge of not being audible at all.

I jumped backward as fast as I possibly could. “Satan’s filthy nethers! What the hell was that?”

Both Bunyan and the Pooka were looking at me in concern. “What is it, Clay?” asked Bunyan, as he attempted to use river mud to staunch the Pooka’s bleeding.

I gathered my wits and walked around Jefferson’s body, looking for any sign of life. He looked dead to me. “Nothing. Forgive me.” I resumed my attempt to wrest the stone from his grasp. I finally managed to pull it away by breaking a few of Jefferson’s fingers. The snap of them was satisfying, in a morbid sort of way.

“Fool,” came the voice again, this time much stronger. This time, I jumped back and scrambled for one of the swords dropped by a member of Jefferson’s company. The hilt felt very reassuring in my hand. I looked back at Bunyan and the Pooka, but they were paying no mind to me, one being consumed with pain, and the other with charity.

I stepped once more back to Jefferson’s body and raised the sword high above my head, planning to remove his head, thus preventing me from hearing any more insults from the hereafter. Just as I was about to bring the sword down, his leg lashed out, knocking mine out from under me and driving me to the ground in an undignified clatter. I pushed myself back for a third time, using my now scraped hands. I was driving more gravel and dirt into my bloody hands with every push, but I didn’t care.

Jefferson’s corpse stood, and flexed its muscles, flexing and stretching. I didn’t know why, but my questions were used up at that particular moment with those wondering how an obviously dead man could stand at all.

“Fool,” it said, for a third time. “This man, Silas Jefferson was clever, but not clever enough. He made a deal with me, a pact. He would serve me, and I would ensure that he would

rise again, after he was killed.” Then, the thing smiled at me, a grin filled with blood and bloody teeth. “He just didn’t specify who would be inhabiting it.”

I threw my sword at the thing. It struck his chest, flat side first, doing nothing but make me look like an idiot. “Who are you?” I yelled, as I pulled myself to my feet and backed quickly toward the river.

Jefferson’s body laughed. “Do you not know? We have met once before, you and I.”

“Liath Luacra?”

“Your accent is abominable, but yes, it is I, Liath Luacra. In the flesh, so to speak.”

“You were that beast. That thing that tried to slay Muirenn.”

“Of course. I couldn’t have my rival fathering children left and right. What would the world come to if I did?”

“And you’re here to kill Paul?”

“Kill or enslave. Either way, I will gain more power. Soon, I can challenge the Lord of Sliabh Bladhma himself!”

I backed away, even faster now, hoping to reach Paul and Bunyan before Liath Luacra did. As I moved, I began stumbling over the bits that had once been parts of Jefferson’s soldiers. I tripped over an arm and went down, sprawling in the gore. I was disgusted, and when I stood again, I was covered in it. My clothes, my face, all covered in blood. I’d lost the stone, but I had no time for that now.

I was now facing the river. Behind me, Liath Luacra began laughing, a soul-wrenching, ugly laugh. “Run, fool, as long as you can. I will have that boy!”

I ran, it was not far to where Bunyan and the Pooka lay. When I got there, I could see stress and worry turning Bunyan’s face into a pale mask. He was still tending to the Pooka, but

his hands were working automatically, his thoughts were elsewhere. Paul gurgled happily as he saw my bloody face.

“What do we do?” he asked.

“Swim for it,” I said. “That’s our only chance.”

“Paul will drown, and you know it.”

“Damn it, man, we have to try. I’d rather Paul drown in the river than at the hands of that...thing.”

Bunyan didn’t have a good response to that. The Pooka did. “Help me to my feet,” he commanded. Without thinking much about it, Bunyan and I aided the massive beast in rising. Once he stood, he said, “Climb atop my back. I shall take you across the river.”

Bunyan and I looked at each other, He nodded his agreement in an instant. I helped him atop the huge ox, and handed Paul to him once he was there. Then, I slapped the beast on the rump and yelled, “There! Go!”

I suppose I wished that the Pooka would ask for me, tell me that I was too important to leave behind. He didn’t. Rather, as soon as I slapped him, his hooves churned the mud into froth and he was into the water. I didn’t watch them go, rather I turned and faced Liath Luacra, a monster, wearing the skin and flesh of a monster. I cannot express in words how much I wished for them both to die.

The ghoulish thing slowly walked toward me. I could see that the damage done to Jefferson’s body, while not incapacitating it, did hobble it. That was why I’d had time to help Bunyan mount the ox.

I tried to slow my breathing but my fear and anxiety made my breath come out in short, panicked bursts. “You won’t get the boy. I do not care what kind of power you have in Ireland. Here, you don’t have any.”

Liath Luacra laughed. “You have a warrior’s heart, Clay Filinger. It is no wonder that this one feared you so.” I guessed he was talking about Jefferson.

“He feared me because I could beat him in a fair fight. You, on the other hand, don’t fight fair.” I was hoping that he didn’t know about my own penchant for never fighting fair if I could help it.

“You wish for a contest? You and I? I will crush you!”

“Try me.” I didn’t know where this bluster came from. I really didn’t want to engage this creature in a fight of any kind, fair or not.

“Enough! I have no time for this foolishness. I will kill you and be done with it.” The thing that had once been Jefferson stalked toward me, slowly, but with purpose.

I leaped forward and snatched yet another dropped sword from the battlefield. Holding it aloft, I charged and took a swipe at his leg, using all my strength. My cut was deep, but as soon as my steel was clear, the wound healed back up.

“Fool!” said Liath Luacra. “Iron no longer harms me. Why do you think I wear this body? It was freely given, under the bounds of our pact. It cannot be harmed by the likes of you.”

“Well, damn you to Hell.” I ran. Again. This time, I ran for the river, and seeing no other options, dove in, headfirst. I entered the water cleanly, but as soon as I had, the swift current began carrying me downriver, toward the sea that was some miles distant.

Chapter 18

I've never been a swimmer. Growing up in Fingal, Kentucky, a man has no use for swimming if he's mainly fixated on liberating others of their possessions and avoiding beatings. I knew how it was done, but I couldn't fight the current, even if I'd have been at the top of my strength. As it was, I managed to avoid drowning and tried to move to the other side as quick as I could.

The water was cold, and it sapped my strength, even as I fought to use them against the power of the raging water. At the very least, I thought, the blood and gore from the dead soldiers was washing away. I'd be clean again.

A roving preacher had once tried to baptize me when I was a boy. Pappy didn't believe in that sort of baptism, so he'd declined, saying I wasn't worth saving anyway. I had wondered what it was like. Somehow, I didn't think being cleansed of all your sins would feel like my life being ripped away, drop by drop.

Everything, my memories, my worries about Paul and Bunyan, my fondness for good whisky, all of it was soon gone, and all I was was a frantic attempt to survive, nothing more.

I don't know how long I was in the water, I just remember coming to my senses on the bank of the St. John River. I didn't know where I was for a good long while, but judging by the position of the sun, it was maybe an hour later. I wasn't sure how, but I had made it to the New Brunswick side of the river. I spent a hefty amount of time scanning the far side of the river, looking for any sign of anything.

I saw nothing that indicated the presence of Liath Luacra. On my own side of the river, I saw nothing that indicated the presence of a large, blue ox. I sighed and began walking west.

The river had carried me a little more than a mile west, so it wasn't too long before I found myself on the outskirts of Edmonston. The town looked just the same as it had the last time I had been to it. It had grown, just like Madawska, but not enough to make a visual difference. I hoped that it had been long enough since my last visit that any residents would think me a vagabond from their side of the river.

My mile walk had dried some of the water from my clothing, but I still looked a mess. My hair was wild, my body was sore, and I was still terrified, a ball of fear sitting in my gut like a bad meal. Being terrified would do nothing to help me, so I did my best to push the fear away.

Edmonston was mostly abandoned as, like in Madawska, the residents were mostly out cutting timber. As it was, I didn't see many other people as I strolled through the town, and no one challenged me, which was quite the relief. I was afraid that I'd run into my three assailants from before.

I hadn't thought much on a destination, but as my feet carried me onward, I realized where I was headed: back to the house of the only folk I knew on the Canadian side of the river.

When I arrived at Marie's cabin, I was about to knock, announce myself, and ask for her help when I heard a sharp piercing whistle from the woods where we'd fled to from the three lumbermen. I looked, but didn't see anyone. I raised my hand to knock again, and the whistle was repeated. I looked, and saw Marie, beckoning me.

Feeling more excitement than I had a right to, I moved my weary body up the hillside to where the town ended and the forest began.

Marie attacked me with her words as soon as I arrived. "Clay Filinger, what the hell have you brought on our heads? What devilish things have you been doing?"

"You've seen the ox? You know where they are?"

Ox? What is this?” Marie was genuinely confused. Then, so was I. If she hadn’t seen Bunyan and the Pooka, what was she going on about?

“Marie, I am in trouble, but I do not believe it involves you in any way.”

“She came looking for you! She has them prisoner!” She? Them? Marie’s face showed a world of worry. I didn’t know what was happening in Edmonston, but I could see in her eyes that it was serious.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Go, and get rid of her!”

“Where? Who?”

“The woman!” Marie pointed back toward her cabin. I still had no idea what I was supposed to do, or how this was connected to me, but I dutifully turned and walked back toward it. Marie followed.

When we reached the cabin, I raised my hand to knock once more, like I had planned to before, but decided against it and instead, slammed my body against it, bashing my way through and into the cabin.

I entered the cabin in a shower of splinters, so it took a second to see what was inside. My first impression was that I was interrupting something very private as I saw Violette in her bed. Nude, and unconcerned. There was a man, also nude, but thankfully covering his modesty with a blanket. He hurriedly scrambled into his clothing, his face a bright red. I was distracted for a moment by Violette slowly putting on her own clothing before I realized that the man was John Patrick.

“Mr. Patrick!” was all I could say. I was stunned, I had thought the man a man of faith, like Bunyan, but what I saw before my eyes countered that idea quite well.

For his part, Patrick began sobbing, great tears rolling down his face. “I’m sorry, Clay, I truly am.”

“It’s your soul, not mine. You’re the man with the close relationship with Jesus.” I didn’t like what I saw, but I wasn’t about to condemn the man. Seems I remembered something about casting stones.

He didn’t respond, merely sobbed even harder. I suddenly suspected that there was something else he was upset about.

“It’s so nice to see you again, Clay.” The voice was one I’d heard only once before. A Georgia accent, soft like silk, and deadly, like snake venom. I turned, and saw Constance Jefferson posed behind the door, wearing a red dress better suited to decorating a wealthy carriage than to be worn as clothing. It was small, tight, and gaudy as hell.

“Constance Jefferson. What brings you to British North America?”

“Him,” she said as she gestured at Patrick. It was then that I noticed that she was holding a gun. A nice, new pistol, loaded and ready.

“What the hell are you looking for Patrick for?”

Constance smiled and breathed. Her dress risked bursting at the seams. “My brother sent me ahead of his little army. He figured you might try to escape to this side of the river. I was to await you. I came here a few days ago, asked a few questions, and to my everlasting joy, discovered my brother’s former employer, John Patrick had been spending his days with this, ah, young lady every day.”

Patrick made a sobbing noise again. I turned my head away from him in contempt. “Your brother is dead, you know.”

Constance’s eyes widened. “Impossible. He made a pact.”

I laughed, in spite of myself. “Yes, yes he did. And yes, his body is still walking about, but old Silas isn’t inside anymore.”

“You lie!” Her voice had lost all traces of silk and was now pure venom: cold, sharp, and unpleasant.

“No man alive calls me a liar, Constance.” I turned away from her. “Now, Mr. Patrick, if you’re able, I need your help. Your nephew and the boy are here, on this side of the river. Jefferson came after us, and they escaped. I don’t know where they are, and we need to find them, now. They’re in danger.”

I moved back to the opening I had made where the door had been.

“Stop!” screeched Constance. “If my brother is truly dead, he’ll take it kindly if I avenge him.” There was the click of a pistol being readied to fire.

“I didn’t kill him, Constance. It was a blue ox, believe it or not.” I took one step toward the door. “Are you coming Patrick?”

“I just want all of you out of this house.” Violette’s voice was sweet and attractive. It was all I could do to not turn and examine her once again. She could have been injured, after all.

I just kept walking. I went out the door, back into the New Brunswick sunlight. From inside the cabin, Constance screamed, “Come back, Clay Filinger! Come back! I’ve killed men before! I’ll kill you!”

“Kill me” I said as I walked even farther from the cabin. Constance turned and stepped through the shattered door. One second later, a large, stout stick, no doubt from the forest, smashed into her face. At the other end was Marie, a crazed look in her eyes.

Constance, her face bloody and broken fell backward. I rushed toward her and wasted no time in relieving her of her pistol, tucking it into my belt.

Marie dropped the stick and said, "You do not threaten my sister! You stay away from her." Then, she rushed in and gave Violette a sisterly embrace. It was a beautiful sight, and not just because Violette was not wearing a stitch of clothing.

Mr. Patrick slowly gathered his clothing and finished dressing, apparently not caring that Marie could see his less than pleasing nudity. Constance moaned and tried to move, but Violette brought one of Patrick's heavy boots down on her face, dazing her again.

"Thank you, Marie," I said.

The beautiful redhead turned. "It was your fault that this happened at all, Clay Filinger!"

"Not really," I said. "I'm just involved in something that comes from Ireland."

I didn't respond to her confused look. Instead, I turned to Mr. Patrick. "John," I said. "I need your help. Where is your horse? We need to find Paul and Randolph."

Patrick nodded. "He is stabled nearby. I'll take you to him." I waited for him to finish dressing, and we set out to find a horse.

We hadn't gone more than a few yards when Marie ran up alongside me. "I will come with you," she said. "These people threatened the only family I have. I wish to see harm come to them."

"And your sister? You can't leave her alone with Constance. She'll be killed!"

"Violette is going to the house of a male acquaintance. She will be happy. And busy."

Patrick swallowed and blushed. "Did she say anything? About..."

"You? No. Why would she?"

Patrick nodded. I turned to Marie. "And Constance? She'll wake up eventually."

Marie held up something red. It was a moment before I realized that it was the dress Constance had been wearing. “She’s won’t go anywhere without clothing. And Violette is taking our few rags with her.”

“Constance just might,” I said. My arguments had been neutralized, but I was damn concerned. I didn’t want Marie getting killed for my sake. Then again, I didn’t want me getting killed for my sake and for a moment an idea flashed through my mind. I could take Marie and run away. We could forget that all of this had happened. True, I’d have to convince her to come with me, and I’d have to find a way to drive away the guilt, but I’d be alive.

I dismissed my idea as a passing fancy. I’d never escape this, even if I wanted to. Patrick’s horse was stabled nearby, as he had said. So were several others. If Marie were coming along, we’d need at least one other horse. I thought about having her ride behind me, her small, soft hands holding onto my chest. I liked that idea, so I selected a horse that looked like it could carry the both of us easily. There was one that looked as if it could do the job. I loosed the ropes that tied it in the crude stable and began saddling it. Meanwhile, Marie did the same with a mare in the corner.

“We don’t have time for that! You’ll ride with me!” My sense of urgency was very real, so, why should I not use it to accomplish more than one task?

“I’ll have her saddled more quickly than you!” And she turned in earnest to her work.

The girl was true to her word. Fully two minutes before I was ready to mount, she was atop her horse, red hair streaming behind her. She didn’t say anything, merely looked at me and shook her head disappointingly.

Chapter 19

Patrick, Marie, and I made our way from Marie's cabin to the riverbank, across from where I'd seen Bunyan and the Pooka set off for the other side. I'm not much of a tracker, and I wasn't sure if there were signs of their passing or not. When Marie saw what I was doing, she snorted in derision and set about examining the ground herself.

"Here," she said, pointing. "They came ashore here." Then, she measured out something by pacing and began muttering under her breath. Eventually, she approached me and said, "How big did you say this ox was?"

"Big," was all I said. I'd told her my tale as we walked to the river, but I wasn't sure she believed me. Constance Jefferson was one thing, but she was a human threat. The idea of a Pooka and a fairy tale creature possessing her brother was something else.

"The tracks lead west. That's where they headed," she said.

"The mill!" Patrick's eyes lit up. "I told Randolph where it was, and that, if anything should happen to me, he should go there. The treasure does belong to him in part, you know."

"You told Bunyan? Not me?" I asked.

"You might have stolen it and left." Patrick said this with total sincerity, as if my moral standards were simply accepted and tolerated. I would have been hurt, maybe offended, but I had to acknowledge that Patrick had gotten to be a rich man by being observant and shrewd. I remembered seeing him in bed with Violette. Well, he was shrewd about some things, at least.

The revelation that Bunyan and Paul had headed for Patrick's Mill seemed to energize the old man. At last, he could atone for his sinful behavior by helping us to save his nephew and the boy. I readied my weary body for the ride ahead.

I was happy that I wouldn't have to walk, but I had taken a beating in the river. I was sore all over and I really wanted nothing more than to sleep the whole day away. I looked at the position of the sun and realized it was only noon. Everything that had happened that day had happened only within a few short hours. Only that morning, I had been sleeping off a drunk in a nice bed of hay. I took a moment to wonder where my hangover had gone. Most likely, it was buried underneath the pain, anger, and fear I'd been struggling with all morning.

Patrick rode in front, taking the role of the triumphant leader. He knew where the Mill was, and even if he hadn't been visiting every day like he'd claimed, he'd at least been enough to find it from anywhere in the area. Although he rode in front, we all rode quickly, my anxiety building. I didn't know that Liath Luacra had crossed the river, but I was sure he'd find a way. After my own experience in the water, I didn't think he'd be able to swim very well, not with the broken arms and legs that had belonged to Jefferson. He might be able to stand with them, but he'd not be able to withstand the fierce rush of the cold water. If he had gone for a swim, he'd hopefully end up in the Atlantic Ocean before reaching the other side.

I thought for a minute about Baby Paul. If the boy did have some mighty destiny before him, I'd sure like to give him a chance to earn it. I didn't think that would happen. I didn't know how to kill Liath Luacra, or even if we could. My best plan was to distract him long enough for Bunyan and Paul to go into hiding somewhere. Maybe somewhere out West. They could join some Injun tribe, maybe hunt the Buffalo I'd heard so much about. I wondered for a moment if they were bigger than the Pooka now was.

It was perhaps an hour's ride to the Mill that allegedly sat atop William Kidd's legendary treasure. The entire time, Marie rode beside me, saying nothing. I questioned again why she would want to come with us, why she had inserted herself into this act of suicide. But damn! She

was a sight for the eyes. I couldn't help but glance at her every few seconds, drinking in her face. If she noticed, she didn't say anything.

When we arrived at the Mill, it was quiet. I would think that a lumber mill in lumber country would be working all day long, but the place was quiet. There was a long rain of logs heading upstream from the Mill. I realized for a moment that I hadn't seen any logs floating in the river all day. Usually, they'd drift down the river, one or two at a time, the few that didn't get made into lumber. The rest were sawed, and finished before they were loaded onto rafts, the rafts that I hadn't seen all day either.

Normally, I suspected, the area was teeming with men, guiding the logs down the river and into the Mill. Now, nothing.

Marie noticed this as well. "Where are they? The men who work here?"

"I don't know." I said, truthfully.

"Mayhap...mayhap now I can recover the treasure!" Patrick was almost shouting, a religious glee filling his face. I suspected he thought that a mission in Indian Territory would absolve him not just of his ancestor's sins, but his own as well.

I ignored him and turned to Marie, my only companion with any bit of sense. "It might be best if you went back home. I'd feel damn ashamed if I got you killed."

Marie smiled at me. "I would rather see, and know, than wait, and worry."

"You'd worry about me?"

Her face was confused. "I would worry that this Liath Luacra would come to find me in my sleep and kill me."

"Of course." I turned to hide my blush. Damn, this woman was getting under my skin.

We dismounted and left our horses untied. If we were killed in the Mill, I figured it'd be a crime to leave the horses tied. Better they should run and be wild, than be food for the slaughter.

I had never seen a lumber mill before. Truthfully, I'd had no interest in lumber during my life. Not one bit. Even living in Maine for so long, spending time in taverns listening to stories from lumbermen, I didn't much care for it. Sure, lumber was useful for buildings and such, but I had no plans to build anything in the near future. That struck me as signing a devil's bargain with the land. What if there were a flood, or drought, storm, or attack? If you could pick up and leave when you needed to, you were a happier man. Pappy had been tied to his land, and I saw where that had left him.

The mill itself was a more a large, fenced off area than a structure. There were a few small buildings here and there, but nothing much to speak about. As we walked in, Patrick ran forward, his hand clutching greedily at something he'd never actually seen.

"Randolph!" I called. "Bunyan! Uncle Nathan!" There was no reply. I couldn't see the huge blue ox, which dampened my spirits a considerable bit.

Patrick, for his part, scampered forward like an eager puppy. His redemption was at hand. The man could think of nothing else. Soon, he reached the far end of the enclosure. "It's here!" he called. He hurriedly took hold of a shovel that had been idly sitting nearby. He began digging with a passion that I suspect he hadn't had before, even when he was with Violette.

"Damn you, Patrick! Liath Luacra could be here at any moment. We need to find Bunyan and Paul!" I was becoming more and more irritated with this man. My fists tightened, readying themselves to punch him in the back of the head.

Before I could act, however, I heard Marie's voice, "Clay! Do you hear that?" I listened. Soon, faintly, and hard to hear over the sound of Patrick's digging, came the sounds of an infant cry.

"Paul!" I yelled, and ran toward the sound. Marie followed.

We found them, all three of them, the ox, Bunyan, and Paul huddled together in a ramshackle building that amounted to little more than an overhang designed to keep any steel tools, saws and such, out of the rain.

The Pooka was asleep, snoring and wheezing as it did so. The savage sword cuts looked as if they were beginning to heal. At the very least, there was no longer blood dripping from them. Bunyan was asleep as well, sleeping the sleep of the utterly exhausted. No wonder. He'd been through a lot. Not as much as myself, but he'd had to worry about Paul, whereas I'd been more concerned for my own hide.

Baby Paul Bunyan was standing on his infant legs, toddling about, crying. Tears running down his cheeks, leaving his face red and unhappy. Marie immediately rushed forward and held him close, making the soothing noises that only women can make. Paul ceased his cries and put his own little arms around her. I was hoping that the boy I'd spent so much time with would acknowledge me, but he didn't, he only had eyes for Marie. I couldn't condemn him for that, though, I had eyes for her myself.

Bunyan awoke with a groan and saw me standing over him. "Clay? You survived?"

"I did."

"Jefferson?"

“I can’t say. I went into the river and washed up downstream from Edmonston.” I proceeded to tell him everything that had happened, only glossing over Patrick’s involvement with Violette. That was a matter for the man to tell Bunyan himself, if he chose to.

“And you found us here. What do we do now?”

I shrugged. “I say that we head west, find some Injun tribe that will take us in. We’ll live well.”

“We’ll live in constant fear, Clay. I won’t raise my son like that.”

“We can’t hope to kill Jefferson, or Liath Luacra, or whatever the hell he’s called. It’s madness!”

“If we die, we die, but I will not run from the beast that wanted to kill my Muirenn!”

“And Paul? You will let this monster kill you and take Paul?”

Bunyan was silent. I didn’t want to argue with the man, I just wanted to go. Marie still held Paul close. The terror and panic of the morning’s events being soothed out of him.

Then, I heard a gunshot. I ran out of the overhang to see Mr. Patrick surrounded by a group of armed men, dressed like British soldiers. Before I could duck back in, they saw me. One of them, a man I figured was their leader, beckoned me with his arm. The guns trained on me meant I couldn’t refuse.

Holding my arms up in the air, I walked toward them. Behind me, Bunyan, Marie, and Paul stayed quiet. The Pooka was still asleep, unaware of the danger that surrounded it. Closer, and closer I came. The men surrounded me as well and drew me into a circle that held a kneeling Mr. Patrick, who was covered in dirt, grime, and sweat from his efforts. In the short amount of time we’d been there, he’d managed to dig a sizeable hole. I could see no treasure, though.

“Who are you?” I asked, even though I could see damn well that they were British soldiers.

“None of your business!” said one of them, right before he drove the butt of his rifle into my kidney.

“Oh, that was fun. Do it again!” It was a familiar voice. One I hated almost as much as I hated Jefferson. I turned around and saw Constance Jefferson, dressed in a uniform just like the other soldiers. I saw how I didn’t notice her before, as her hair was up and under a hat. One thing that did give me pleasure was seeing her face. Marie’s stick had done a thorough job of bruising her. Her nose was swollen and purple, and one eye was almost swollen shut.

“Constance, you look prettier than ever,” I said.

At that, she snatched the man’s rifle and hit me in my other kidney herself. The pain doubled me over. “Good, now where is she?” asked Constance.

“Who?” I barely managed to get the words out, my agony was so great.

“The red-haired strumpet. For what she did to me, I’ll take her dress. Leave her naked. You’d like that, right boys?” Her soldiers cheered.

I took some huge gulps of air to catch my breath. “She’s gone. I sent her to safety in Madawska.”

“I doubt that, Clay. Find her!” This last part was a command to her troops. Several of them broke away and, in twos and threes, began searching the Mill for my companions. The movements looked very like what I had seen that morning on the other side of the river.

“These are more of your brother’s men, I take it?”

“Of course. We don’t leave anything to chance, my brother and I. One unit on this side of the river, one unit on the other. We didn’t know this mill lay above the treasure, and they

proved quite handy in removing the lumbermen.” She laughed. “We didn’t even need to kill them, we just invented a tale about an American militia upstream and they all left to fight for their borders.” Her voice was filled with pride at her own cleverness.

Minutes later, her soldiers brought Bunyan, Marie, and Baby Paul with them. Marie was still holding Paul, but Bunyan was secured, his hands tied behind his back with strong rope. They weren’t resisting, and Bunyan had a look on his face like weary resignation.

“You can take the treasure. All of it. Just free us,” he said.

Patrick looked at his nephew in horror. “Randolph! No! We need this treasure! I need this treasure!” One of the soldiers punched him in the face and he fell from his kneeling position onto his side, where, as his arms were tied, he couldn’t move.

Randolph continued speaking, “Ma’am, we mean no harm to you. Dig up the treasure and take it, we will never bother you again.”

Constance laughed. “With gratitude to your uncle here, I know where the treasure is, and I can eliminate the only other people who know about it. I have no reason to let you go.”

“Killing us would be a grave sin,” Bunyan said quietly.

“I’ve killed before, and I will kill again, Mr. Bunyan. Don’t worry about my soul. It’s yours that will soon go to meet its maker.”

Bunyan saw that nothing he did or said would sway her.

One of Constance’s men saw a moment to interject and did so. “Miss Jefferson, what shall we do with the blue ox?”

Her eyes widened. “Blue ox? I should like to see that. Bring it here.”

The man looked nervous. “Well, it’s asleep. And it’s huge.”

“Shoot it. Skin it, mayhap the hide will fetch a good price.”

I had been listening to this and felt my anger rising. “Damn you Constance, What do you want?”

Constance regarded me calmly. “You know what I want. Money, power and pleasure. Killing you and yours will grant me all three.” She laughed again.

I looked at my companions. Marie clutched Paul to her, fear in her eyes. Bunyan wept silently, defeated. Patrick still lay on his side, trying to breathe with his face half buried in the loose earth he’d brought forth from the ground.

I’d been in bad situations before. Men had wanted to kill me, I’d been in pain more than once. Pappy was seen to that. But never before had I been in a place where I could see such sorrow on the faces of people I cared about. And for once, I didn’t know what to do.

I heard a shot from the west. They were killing the Pooka. But then, there came another shot. And another. Yelling. Screaming. A panicked retreat. Either the Pooka had awoken and fought...or something else was coming.

I craned my head to look to the west but couldn’t see anything. I thought. The logs on the river would make a serviceable bridge for a creature that couldn’t swim. It would be tricky, but possible. Cold terror now gripped me. I didn’t think that the Pooka was fighting anyone.

“Constance, you have to run. You will die otherwise.”

Constance just looked at me. She’d heard the noises too, but she didn’t know what was coming. She took her rifle and aimed it at me. “Clay, what is this? Do you have more allies that you did not tell us about?”

“Ally? Not in hell.”

She examined me warily. Then she looked back toward the river. Her men, what remained of those who had gone to murder the Pooka were now visible, fleeing in all directions.

They wouldn't stop when they got to us, I knew that. They'd seen something that would keep them running all their days.

Finally, Liath Luacra came into view. It was still walking slowly, using Jefferson's crushed body as well as it could. Slowly, yet terrifyingly fast it came, walking on foot in front of the other. A look of joy crossed Constance's face. "Silas?" she marveled.

She approached what had been her brother. Once there, however, her joy turned to something else. Revulsion mixed with sorrow mixed with horror crossed her face. "Silas?"

Liath Luacra laughed his monstrous laugh, and with one hand, knocked Constance to the ground. She landed hard, creating a cloud of dust when she did. She painfully pulled herself up, her face twisted with shock and pain. Then she looked at me. "Silas was all I had, Filinger. You will reap what you sow." With that, she got to her feet, mounted her horse and was gone faster than I would have thought possible. Upon seeing her fleeing, her remaining soldiers ran for their horses, mounted and were gone.

I stood, or tried to, with my hands tied, it was difficult. "Begone, you damned devil creature!" I yelled, not finding any other words to say.

"Once I have the boy, I shall be on my way." Liath Luacra's voice was calm. He knew we didn't stand a chance, not tied up and immobile. As Marie had the baby, he walked slowly to her. His laugh grew richer and deeper, filling the enclosure of the lumber mill.

Marie tried to resist, but Liath Luacra wrested Paul from her with ease. Paul began to cry, a loud, sorrow-filled wail that made my whole being, bones and all, want to cry with him. Liath Luacra laughed once more and turned to walk away with Paul in his arms.

Before he had taken two steps, he stopped, and fell over. Paul hit the ground and cried even harder. I being the only one standing, I ran over to where he was. With my hands tied, I

couldn't do much more than look at him. He seemed to be alright. Paul Bunyan was a tough lad, and his only injury seemed to be to his pride.

After looking Paul over, I looked at Jefferson's body. It looked like it had before, like the corpse of a man I hated with my whole self. I didn't understand what had happened. There he'd been, gloating in his triumph, and then, he'd been dead again. Maybe his power over Jefferson had only been temporary. It could be that his time had run out.

I looked closer, but could see no hint of what had happened. Finally, I looked back at the crying Paul and saw a sparkle of blue from in between his tiny, chubby fingers. I remembered prying the stone from Jefferson's hand...right before Liath Luacra had entered him. Somehow, I mused, the stone must have protected Jefferson from possession while it was near him, and it had been able to cast Liath Luacra out while he held Paul.

While I was thinking, Bunyan had found an axe, one of several nearby and had freed himself, Marie and Patrick from the ropes. I was last, and when he finally cut the ropes, I rubbed my wrists with pleasure.

"What happened?" asked Bunyan.

"Seems that Little Paul saved us and him."

"He's a good boy."

"That he is," I replied. I looked toward Paul and saw that Marie was once more carrying him, making her soothing noises.

The sound of huge, lumbering hooves alerted me to the presence of the Pooka. "The stone? It worked?"

"That it did," I said. "Why didn't you tell us to use it when we were facing him the first time?"

The blue ox looked at me with contempt. "I did not know the nature of the stone. For all I knew, it only worked once. On me."

I nodded. "Do you know where Liath Luacra went? Will he come back?"

"You know to use cold iron against him. He would be a fool to challenge you openly."

"So, he'll be back?"

"I would imagine so."

"You're not a very good preacher, you know. You should be filling me with hope."

The Pooka laughed. "I can't be doing much preaching now. Plow work is all I can hope for now."

I patted the huge beast's shoulder. "Most likely."

The Pooka snorted. I turned to look after my companions. Marie was holding Paul, Bunyan was hovering nearby. I saw a look between them. It was not dissimilar to that which had passed between Bunyan and Muirenn. "Damn," I said. "Hell and damn."

With jealousy welling up in my heart, I looked to see Mr. Patrick once again digging in his hole. The mad gleam in his eyes was back, unaffected, apparently, by the events of the day. "I swear, if he finds that treasure, I'm taking my share and leaving Maine forever."

"I think you'll be here for some time" said the Pooka. "There's nothing beneath him. I can feel it."

"Damn," I said.