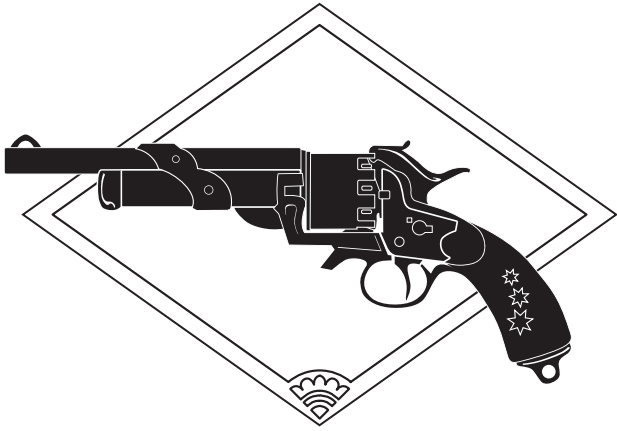


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The wagon settled to a stop with a sway and jingle of harness. The muffled rumble of many voices and much activity could be heard by Blackie and Magpie deep inside the wagon. "We're here. Please don't shoot."

"Very well, Mr. Shupe. Now, we'll see about changing places. I think you'll find our little cave in the cargo bales snug, but comfortable."

Cargo straps served well enough for trussing the two men up. The ample waistlines of both men made the cave more than snug. Blackie felt a twinge of sympathy as Magpie gave a sinister salute with the revolver and dropped a tarp over the bound and gagged forms.

As soon as the thick canvas tarp fell, she set the gun on the driver's seat and clambered down the spokes of the tall wheel to the ground. She held her arms up to assist Blackie's painfully awkward descent as best she could.

"Don't we want to take that?" She hissed as she caught her breath, leaning against the wheel rim. Blackie gave a half gesture up towards the gun.

"I used up the last bullet setting the fire on the back steps."

Blackie blinked and shook her head. "When I get over being damned impressed, I think I'll have a small nervous breakdown."

Magpie tucked her hair up tighter to support Shupe's over-

sized hat, and then tugged the brim lower to hide her face. The fine quality of the scoundrel merchant's coat would only attract attention. Blackie mimicked the preparation, securing the teamster's rougher hat and coat around herself. Even with the heavy jacket and the noontime sun, she gave a small shiver.

Magpie peered into her twin's eyes. "You've got to do this, Blackie. You have to. I must get my new information to Saskatoon. I can't stop for you, anyone or anything."

Blackie nodded and gave a mock salute. "Just a touch of shock, is all, ma'am. I won't slow you up. Don't shoot me 'cause I'm lame."

"Don't give me any back talk and I'll think about it." Magpie pasted a fake smile on her face as Blackie took a step, jaw set against wincing. "But since I don't have a gun, you probably aren't in too much danger."

Blackie snorted a chuckle. "Okay, okay. Enough mush. Let's get going."

"We have our perpetual problem. Twins will cause comment more than either alone. We make our way separately through the camp to the north side. It looks like they're picketing the animals there before loading them on the barges. I think that's our best chance for horses."

"Race you." Blackie turned and limped off into the camp. Magpie watched a moment, her emotions churning like boiling stew, and went another direction.

Blackie hobbled painfully through the structured confusion. Anyone spotting the sweat running down her face would surely put it down to wearing a coat at high noon. Any final doubts as to the activity here on the canal could be put to rest. She limped through an army on the move. Or, trying to move.

She reckoned no more than three dozen red-faced professionals were trying to herd several hundred amateurs, their gear, animals and a mountain of supplies on to waiting barges. Blackie steered as clear as she could of these loud individuals. Private Abigail Maye Brewster attracted noncoms the way a naked swimmer attracted leeches. Her entire military hitch had laboured under that curse. A curse she had never done a single solitary thing worth mentioning to deserve.

Blackie hissed in pain as sweat, and no small amount of dust, seeped into the lacerations across her cheek. All the crude first aid in the wagon had focused on her leg. It felt like she had been slapped with a cheese grater.

Skirting a line of large tents, Blackie almost stumbled into a queue of soldiers. They stood patiently waiting their turn to dip a ladle into open barrels of water. It was too tempting. She took her place at the end of the line.

Taking care not to slosh bits of brick into the clear drinking water, Blackie rinsed down her face, working her fingers gingerly over the wounds. The tender stinging felt instantly better. She gulped another ladle down, feeling the wonderful cool liquid fight back dehydration and shock.

A thunder of hoofbeats brought her head up inquisitively. People scattered out of the way as a half-dozen riders pulled up hard, flinging up fresh clumps of dirt and dust. Security Command Chou and Major Garrett led the group into the large tent at the end of the row. The Commander sported a swath of rough and quick bandages over his right shoulder and chest. If Garrett had any fresh bullet holes, they weren't obvious. Both scowled in deep focus. Apparently their morning had not gone well.

Blackie hastily scooped up one more face-full of water, ignoring the grumbling from the thirsty troopers behind her. Hiding her face, she slunk out of sight on the far side of the tents, drying her hands on her pants.

"Tunder and fury and ten years of drought!"

Chou's bellow came clearly through the canvas wall. Blackie froze in fright, then realized someone else had the pleasure of the Commander's temper. She clicked her tongue against her teeth and jerked around to gauge her chances for a little loitering and eavesdropping.

"I been trew enough seasons, me, to know dat confusions happen in any campaign, but by damn, de kotak is pilin' high and deep on us. Balloons flyin' overhead, spies runnin' loose, saboteurs lightin' fires, dose mad dog Slades first screwin' de mule royally and den havin' de brass to show their faces..." Commander Chou Kuan's rant ended in a fist slamming a table.

"Perhaps while we're waiting for our ally to arrive, we could

review the deployment of supplies.” Major Garrett’s calm, professional tones came with the rustle of paper. Blackie left. Hearing the discussion without seeing the map wouldn’t be too useful. More importantly, Blackie quite believed Magpie’s claim that she wouldn’t wait around for slowpokes.

The army’s horses, mules and camels waited at the north end of the camp, standing tethered to picket lines and waiting. Well, given water and feed, what did they have to complain about? Magpie wound her way through the animal funk, trying not to look like a browsing shopper in a market. The end of the picket line seemed the obvious place for some thieving. She paused, assessing the movements of the animal wranglers and fighting a nervous twitch in her left eye.

A trio of galloping horses approached from the north. Magpie paid them no extra attention until they stopped at the army paddock with an abrupt pull on the reins, spraying dirt and startling a young hostler so he dropped his rake. Days riding Spot and Bucephalus gave Magpie practical knowledge in immediately spotting the Nation tack and harness worn by the three horses. This intrigued her. She ducked under a rope and patted a camel’s thick hair while peering over the curving neck.

The largest man leapt out his saddle with acrobatic ease. He flung the reins to the lad with imperial disdain and stalked away with the bowed stride of a veteran horseman. He wore ill-fitting euro clothing stretched over a powerful physique, but his bronzed features told anyone with eyes he was Nations-born. Métis therefore, badly dressed, but Métis. He had an excess of jaw and chin that only reinforced the belligerent body language.

Magpie refocused on her original goal of horse stealing. These three horses wouldn’t be part of any quartermaster’s inventory. They might be the best chance she’d have.

The large man’s two companions dismounted with equal expertise and equally mismatched euro clothing. They didn’t come near the size of the leader. In fact, the one looked positively puny in comparison, almost as if...Magpie buried her face in the musty, dusty camel hair. The animal’s throat gurgled and harumphed through her cheek as Silent Storm strode by like an

arrogant young panther.

Fire and drought! What was she doing here? No Métis she, and, by obvious extension, the other two. Disguised Keepache striding into a River Towns military camp? Why?

Magpie ventured a cautious peek and watched the trio's backs as they strode into the tent town. She puffed her cheeks and blew a long breath, frowning hard. She stooped under the tether rope and back into the open.

"Hey, pal!"

Turning, Magpie saw the young man leading the three Keepache horses towards her.

"Do me a favour, will ya? The sarge gave me special orders to pass on to Corporal Ramsey. I ain't got time to water and care for no Métis mules."

Magpie blinked once before nodding and smiling and taking the handful of warm, thick leather straps. "Dahcor! Leave it to me, you bet."

"Thanks a bunch. I won't forget this!" And off he dashed, scooping up his rake and disappearing around the line of animals. Magpie wondered why he needed a rake to deliver a message. Oh, dearie me. I do believe the young flammer has bamboozled me into taking a chore he didn't fancy doing.

She took a fresh grip on the reins. Two of the horses were common enough stock. The leader's horse would catch anyone's eye with her deep auburn coat and a striking white rump blaze surrounding a snowy tail. Fine looking beasts. They regarded her with equine patience.

The grin on her face grew wider. "And it's not even close to my birthday."