

Chapter One

The Thief

England
Spring, 1843

Pierce Landcross truly believed he was buggered.

For the past three days, he'd been riding steadily toward Dover to catch a ferryboat out of England, and he had switched horses at least four times to stay ahead of the Royal guards he knew were chasing him. Only days ago, he'd crossed a line, earning him a hunting party that aimed to bring him back to London. When Pierce reached Kennington, he'd thought everything was hunky-dory. A mistake that nearly cost him.

The district was holding another one of those industrial festivals that had been cropping up in the last few years as the Industrial Age grew and grew. Many people were rather excited about the new machines that inventors were creating. These inventors were dubbed "Contributors," folks who had dedicated their lives to progress.

Pierce had seen his fair share of these sorts of gatherings during the spring and summer months.

After riding all day, Pierce's horse was exhausted. He decided to give the poor animal time to rest before pushing on to Dover. He reckoned he had put enough distance between himself and his pursuers. Besides, he was feeling a tad travel-worn himself.

He hitched the horse on the outskirts of Kennington Park and left to explore the festival.

Contributors stood on low platforms, drawing folks over by telling them about their inventions or what they predicted would happen in the future.

"In the next cycle of the Industrial Revolution, we'll have airships to take us everywhere!" one speaker dressed in a tailcoat and bowler hat announced to a crowd. The mechanical speaking trumpet he held amplified his voice.

Behind him were banners hanging on a wooden frame, and on those banners hand-drawn sketches of these flying ships.

"Imagine traveling across the Channel on a ferryboat that soars over the water," the tosspot went on.

Pierce chuckled, and he wasn't the only one who did. The small audience laughed as well, and many waved the man off as they dispersed. Although flying airships sounded farfetched and Pierce hardly believed such things would ever come about, he couldn't escape the strong feeling that he'd seen them before, perhaps in another life—or in another time.

You're going mental, ol' boy.

Shaking it off, Pierce continued his stroll through the park.

He came across a puppet show with five-foot-tall marionettes. They weren't created to look like humans. Instead, they had mechanical bodies with glass eyes. The puppeteers

stood on the platform over a stage. The stage itself was adorned with shiny gold curtains and a smoggy city backdrop. Below, a musician played the organ while the speakers—hiding behind the curtains—recited lines. One of them mentioned The Age of the Machine.

Pierce had heard the phrase for many years. It was said to be the next epoch after the Industrial Revolution—the peak of it, as it were. And it wasn't supposed to encompass only Great Britain. Contributors from all over the known world were inventing new gadgets. They wanted to bring about The Age of the Machine Era in their lifetimes. Pierce wondered if he'd ever see it in his.

Leaving the puppet show behind, Pierce moved on.

In the center of the park was a rather large tent with all sorts of wonders. A very large, tear-shape terrarium, housing soil and colorful plant life, rested on a tall stand with steel octopus arms supporting it. People could walk underneath the terrarium and see earthworms and plant roots through the glass underbelly.

Further on, a Contributor wearing a stovepipe hat and tacky checkered britches was showing off his mechanical, life-sized horse. The machine was impressive, especially when the inventor pulled a bumper knob located just under the throat, causing the horse to buck. It happened so fast and with such force that people jumped in surprise.

There were strange typing machines, gadgets that brewed coffee, and a motorized carriage prototype. Most, if not all, worked poorly or not at all, but people were fascinated, nonetheless.

Outside the tent, Contributors rode on large, round, steam-powered contraptions shaped like gears with three wheels pushing them along. There was also a slender house with a tall, pointed roof and a convex, glass bottom that hovered close to the ground. A similar building, only smaller, was attached to the house by a pair of exterior corridors. The house was supported by a very large wrought iron stand that cradled the structure like a Fabergé egg. Three large round balloons were tethered to the house like those on the basket of a hot-air balloon. A wide propeller spun slowly at the rear of the place. Folks were going up a flight of metal stairs to the second level, where a sign read "Funhouse" above the entrance. Screaming came from the glass dome where Pierce could see there was a spiral slide that sent people down to the very bottom. There, they were led to an exit. The ones who had ridden the slide were laughing as they descended another staircase that led to the field.

Pierce smelled something tasty and eyed vendors selling meats they were cooking on a grill that resembled a locomotive.

He hadn't but a few pence on him, but if he could pick a few pockets . . .

While he thought such things, he caught sight of a group of red uniformed Royal guards over yonder. One of them was showing a handful of people what Pierce reckoned was a wanted poster. As sure as his luck was rotten, someone recognized him and pointed in his general direction.

"Bloody hell," Pierce muttered.

As the guards looked his way, Pierce turned on his heel, pulled down the brim of his shabby old Quaker hat, and walked the other way. He was too far from the hitching posts to retrieve his horse. But it hardly mattered. Trying to ride away would do him little good

if they were following him. Blast it all, why did he have to linger for so long? He thought for sure he had a decent head start on his hunters. Now, he was bugged.

As he headed back to the tent, a sinking feeling that he was being watched crept up his spine.

“You there! Stop in the name of the Queen!”

Shite!

Pierce glanced behind him and saw the guard now clearly chasing after him. He then picked up his pace and ran into the tent.

Seconds later, the guards also entered, calling for him to halt. Instead, Pierce unholstered his flintlock pistol and headed for the large terrarium. The guards were quick to close the gap, and Pierce only hoped they wouldn't open fire. None did, and so he directed his gun upward and shot into the underbelly of the terrarium as he ran under it. Shooting at such a close-range, the blast was enough to shatter the glass wide open, and pounds and pounds of dirt dropped straight down upon his pursuers—earthworms and all! The impact sent all three guards to the ground but spared two others, and they kept up the chase.

“Stop, you!”

Pierce holstered his now empty weapon and ran faster through the frantic crowd, who were now rushing to get out of the tent after hearing the gunshot. He weaved through them and spied the mechanical horse on his way to the exit. When he reached it, Pierce hurried around to the front and pulled the bumper knob as the guards were about to come around. The poor sods had no idea what was about to happen. The machine animal bucked, striking the two in the chest and knocking them right on their arses. Pierce honestly couldn't believe his split-second plan worked as well as it did.

Rather than relish his good fortune, Pierce left the tent, ready to head to the hitching posts, when he stopped short. Another guard was charging him from beside the tent.

“Stay where you are, Landcross!” he ordered.

This one wasn't a pale English wanker like the others. He was tall and dark-skinned. Persian, perhaps?

Pierce turned and ran off. Despite the throng, he knew he wouldn't be able to hide or lose the guard so easily out in the open. His only chance was to make for the Funhouse. He pushed past people going up the stairs, the guard only yards away and shouting at him. A git at the entrance asked if he had a ticket, to which Pierce gave a tsk and rushed on inside.

“Hey!” the ninny hollered.

Pierce entered a round room with a railing corralling a section of wooden flooring that rotated. This carousel rose some feet up and slanted sideways. It slowly moved one way while the flat middle section circled in the opposite direction. Children were sitting in both sections, waving at parents who were watching from behind the railing. The walkway was packed, so Pierce jumped the barrier and cut through the revolving floors. Leaping over wee ones, who were now screaming as the floor moved in two different directions, was most challenging. He needed to pinwheel his arms to keep from losing his balance.

Eventually, Pierce made it across to an opening and ran past parents who were quite sore at him. Beyond the threshold was an upper corridor that turned out to be another

spinning nightmare. The entire section spun like a moving cave. A lad managed to plant his hands and feet on the cylinder of doom and spun around with it. He then lost his balance and fell over while laughing.

The moment Pierce stepped in, he found himself fighting to stay on his feet. He darted across it, feeling as though he was running across a lake of ice as his feet kept slipping.

“Landcross!” the Persian yelled from the other room.

Pierce again pushed past folks and entered the smaller house. What greeted him was a wall of mirrors that either stretched out his reflection or shrank it so he looked like a short, pudgy gnome. He went through another doorway and thundered down crooked and slanted stairs that had far too many switchbacks. He entered the second outer corridor that led to what he hoped was the final room. Inside the round room, a target was painted on the wooden floor. Light shone in through a couple of windows. A colorfully dressed man stood near the center of the painted floor.

“You made it to the end,” he said to Pierce. “Good for you, young man. Come here and see what’s next.”

While the man tried to wave him over, Pierce eyed the bullseye on the floor and noticed something dodgy. He instantly pulled his pistol and aimed it at him.

“What is that? A trapdoor?”

The tosser lost his cheery grin. He threw up his hands and stuttered out, “Y-yes. It’s meant to surprise guests. It’s quite safe. I assure you, sir.”

The heavy sound of rapid footsteps came from the corridor. Pierce rushed to the man and shoved him away while holstering his pistol. Behind the idiot was the lever.

“Don’t move!” the Persian commanded while entering.

His rifle was trained right on Pierce, who raised his hands. “You bloody well caught me, mate.”

The Persian advanced, breathing heavily.

“Pierce Landcross, you’re under arrest by order of the—”

He got no farther when Pierce quickly twisted around, gripped the lever hidden behind him, and pulled it down while falling to his knee to keep from being shot. Sure enough, a blast burst from the guard’s rifle as the trapdoor opened. The bullet crashed through one of the windows. The guard vanished but cried out as he began his spiral journey down the slide.

“You’re right, chum,” Pierce said to the petrified man, crouching near the wall, “he was surprised outta his wits.”

“Down there! Hurry!” an assertive sounding voice yelled just beyond the corridor.

Pierce only assumed it was the rest of the guards. He raced to the damaged window and shattered it with the handle of his flintlock. With only moments to spare, he climbed through and came out onto the wrong iron stand that encircled the upper part of the glass dome where the Persian was now trapped inside. He’d had no plan other than to not be in that room when the guards arrived. With his back against the outer wall, Pierce balanced on the wrought iron, hoping to find some means of escape.

“Stay where you are, thief!” a soldier hollered, aiming his pistol out the broken window. A crack of gunfire, and then a bullet smacked against the metal propeller.

“Fuckin’ hell!” Pierce shrieked.

He followed the path of the iron frame while he listened to the guard shouting at him. Just as he rounded the house and came behind the propeller, he spied ropes hanging down, perhaps from the lines holding the massive balloons in place. To reach it, he needed to walk over a narrow walkway that stretched over the propeller shaft, and he had to be careful not to be struck by a network of large turning gears. The smell of oil hit his senses as he nestled deep within this winding mechanism. Below, the Persian had left the Funhouse and was heading back up the stairs, seemingly unaware that Pierce was now outside the place.

Bloody think I'm trapped inside, eh?

Between a couple of gears, a rope hung just within range. He reached for it, but he was unable to hold onto anything to keep himself from falling to his death. The coarse line barely touched his fingertips when shots fired and sparked off near him.

“We said stop!” the same guard who’d taken a shot at him exclaimed as he and another rounded the house.

Both held smoking pistols. With no more time left, Pierce huffed and jumped. He almost believed he’d miss the rope, but he managed to grab hold and then proceeded to slide down until the rope ended halfway past the domed bottom. The drop could have easily broken his ankle or leg, but Pierce hit the ground and was able to pick himself up at once. He then ran like mad out of the park and to the hitching posts, where he mounted his horse and rode south toward Dover.

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