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Legacy

“The world as we know it is standing on the pivotal edge of change! An evolution is taking shape. This is the climb, my friends! The climb up towards the peak of the Industrial Revolution! I say unto thee, we must contribute to thrive. Contribute to the Age of the Machine!”

—Professor Raphael Brooke

The Contract

Sinai Peninsula, Spring, 1636

Thooranu had arrived in the Blue Desert late that evening, but already he'd slain many jackals. After his last kill, he built two fire pits in the sand and gutted the beast. He always ate his final kill, or at least the one that proved hardest to bring down. This particular jackal had been both.

He'd taken the beast with bare hands, wrestling the animal until he'd broken its neck. The jackal had gotten in a few good bites, rending deep gashes into his back and crushing sharp teeth through his arm. But the jackal had sensed its attacker was otherworldly and had known it would eventually fail. Nonetheless, that hadn't prevented it from putting up a good fight.

After tossing the lungs, liver, brain, eyes, tongue, balls and heart into a blackened iron cauldron to boil, Thooranu skinned and beheaded the animal, then put the carcass on a skewer to rotate over a second fire.

With most of the work done, he sat and wiped his hands clean. His wounds had already healed. From a rough hessian sack, he brought out a bottle of wine, pulling the cork free with his teeth. He breathed in deeply, the wine's earthy aroma giving clues to its origins. It was old, bottled before his birth. Italian. He poured some into a glass and sipped. It tasted like the beginning of everything.

He leaned back, eying the heavens and the myriad stars, a smile flickering over his lips. Then it vanished. Someone was nearby.

"Mind if I join you?" a male voice asked.

The stranger's abrupt approach startled him, which was difficult to do. It must be the human part of him, he thought. But the stranger could not be human. No mortal could survive this far into the desert without a camel. He wasn't even dressed for the harsh conditions.

The man appeared to be teetering between wealth and poverty. His slashed doublet was a shiny red, embroidered with black skeletons, but his cape was ragged along the hem. The boots were the most sensible thing he was wearing, although they were still too heavy for the day's heat, and a ridiculous hat sat upon his head.

Thooranu breathed deeply, trying to sniff the stranger out. There were many scents. Was he a demon too? A punk? Or perhaps a ghost? Whatever he was, Thooranu sensed no threat.

"Please," he said, gesturing for the stranger to join him.

The flamboyantly dressed man took a seat by one of the fires and poked at it with a shiny black cane. He removed his rabbit fur hat, sporting lively ostrich feathers, and set it down beside him. He was handsome, if a little on the feminine side, with dark hair, a carefully trimmed mustache and beard, along with a charming smile and perfectly shaped eyes that captured the flickering firelight like jewels.

"You've built a couple of nice fires here," the stranger complimented, stroking his beard. He sniffed the cauldron. "Is there a heart in there? I do rather enjoy a good, tasty

heart.”

“Would you care for some?” Thooranu asked.

“I would, indeed, and perhaps a glass of wine? If you don’t mind, that is.”

Thooranu did not, for he could obtain wine anywhere with little effort. He poured his guest a glass that he manifested with a gesture of his hand from the sand and fire.

“Ah,” the stranger said, accepting the drink. “Thank you kindly. You are a good host.”

The stranger didn’t speak with any accent, as though he belonged to no particular region. Then again, neither did Thooranu.

“I’m Jack Pack,” the man said, extending his hand.

“Thooranu.”

They shook hands then Jack Pack settled back, taking another sip of wine.

“I knew a Thooranu once,” Jack Pack admitted. “He was an incubus.”

“My father.”

“I see.” Jack Pack looked him up and down. “It appears that you took after your mother. Human?”

Thooranu smiled. “I suppose I did. And yes.”

“That’s good for you; for as I said, I’ve met your father, and I wouldn’t curse my worst enemy to inherit his looks.”

Thooranu laughed, for he couldn’t agree more. “And what of you?”

“Oh, I’m no one special, really. Just a wanderer. A lost soul, if you will. I journey around the universe, seeing what’s out there, what trouble I can get myself into, that sort of thing.”

“Sounds a bit like me,” Thooranu said, looking up again at the star-glittered sky. “Have you ever visited the outer planes?”

The wanderer shrugged. “Sure, a few times. The worlds beyond are interesting enough, but not like this one. Even the best miss the little things that complete this world. I like it here more than most places.”

Thooranu nodded. “I concur.”

They sat in silence like old friends. Steam curled up from the cauldron. Thooranu glanced at the stranger. Jack Pack had made an impression on him. He hoped the man wouldn’t take his leave too soon. It had been a while since he’d had any company.

Thooranu noticed a coil of braided hair pinned by a jeweled brooch onto Jack Pack’s doublet. “Whose hair is that?”

Jack Pack raised the braid and looked at it, a wistful smile forming. “It was a gift. It’s Guinevere’s hair. Fascinating creature.”

“Lancelot’s Guinevere?”

“The very same. Those two were a good example of how fun mortals are to toy with.”

“Oh?”

“Indeed.” A shrug. “It passes the time.”

“How so?”

“Many years ago, a Trickster, a Dökkálfar and an Adlet beast made a bet on who could find a certain relic that had been hidden; the Holy Grail.”

Thooranu’s eyes narrowed. “The Grail, huh?”

“Yes, yes, I know; we’ve all heard stories about the fruitless quests to find it. Not many know how the whole thing got started, though. It’s a story wrapped within a story.”

“All right.”

“Contrary to what many believe, the Grail started out as nothing more than a fallen star. A servant of the Fisher King found it and brought the stone to a craftsman, who carved it into a dish. The humble servant then brought the dish to the Fisher King. The king declared the dish to be a grail and kept it for many years until he could no longer carry on with his duties as king. As his kingdom fell into ruin, the Grail passed on to Joseph of Arimathea, who had it made into a cup; and shortly thereafter, it became known as the *Holy* Grail after Christ’s crucifixion. Later, the elderly and dying Joseph passed it on to Elaine of Corbenic, and she became the Grail’s keeper.”

Jack Pack stared into the fire, a wistful look on his face. “Elaine of Corbenic fell in love with poor ole Lancelot. To get him to sleep with her, she twice tricked him into thinking she was Guinevere. She even gave birth to his child, one Galahad by name. When Guinevere discovered this, she cursed Lancelot and he went mad with grief.”

“I know the story,” Thooranu said. “Later, Elaine finds Lancelot in shambles in her garden. To cure him of his insanity, she lets him drink from the Grail.”

“Indeed. Rumors of that spread. In order for Elaine and Lancelot to have a life together without being badgered by those wanting the Grail, Elaine handed it over to a holy court, who hid it away.”

“And that’s when the Trickster, the elf, and the beast bet on who could find it first?”

“They made the bet long before any of this happened. Each of them was aware of the relic, and when the three attended the funeral of the Fisher King, it became a conversation piece. They knew the Grail would eventually become hidden or lost, as most relics do, and decided that when it did, they would race to find it. The challenge was, however, that they had to only use mortals in their search.”

“Interesting,” Thooranu admitted. “I am intrigued. What happened?”

“When he became a young man, Galahad went to King Arthur, offering to serve him. The king put him to the test.”

“The old sword in the stone, eh?”

“Indeed, another legend. Now, here is the reason the stories cross paths. A wizard came to Arthur years before and showed him the stone, which was nothing more than a simple boulder by a river. The wizard then presented a sword made from steel that had come from another world. The hilt was wrapped in the hide of a creature that no longer existed, and set inside the pommel was a jewel that once resided far within the earth’s heart. The wizard claimed the sword had come from God.” Jack Pack took a deep draught of his wine, sighing in appreciation of the vintage.

The wizard sheathed the sword in the stone and said that only the worthiest knight would be able to pull it free, and that knight would serve Arthur well. Arthur, believing that the sword was indeed a holy relic, held an annual ceremony to find that worthy. Once a year, knights would come to pull the sword free. Legend of the sword spread throughout the lands. No one, however, could get the sword out, and after a while, Arthur stopped holding the ceremony.”

“Then one day, Sir Galahad showed up,” Thooranu surmised.

“Yes, but he wasn’t a knight then, not until he pulled the sword free.”

“What made him worthy?”

“Ah-ah, wait,” Jack Pack said, wagging his finger. “The king proclaimed that Galahad would become one of the Knights of the Round Table. Shortly afterwards, Arthur had a vision about the Grail and ordered a search for it. The king sent three knights: Galahad of course, Sir Bors, and Sir Perceval. The Trickster, the elf, and the Adlet beast had to choose which of the knights would find the Grail. Whoever’s knight found the relic would win the wager. The elf chose Sir Perceval; the Adlet beast chose Sir Bors, and the Trickster chose Galahad.”

“How did they determine who got which knight?” Thooranu inquired.

“They went by rank. The Trickster was a god, you see, and being the most powerful, he chose first. The Dökkálfar went next and then the Adlet beast.”

Thooranu nodded. It made sense.

Jack Pack continued. “The knights went on with their quest and spent years searching. Then one day, the Trickster became distressed when Sir Bors saved Galahad’s life. To show his gratitude, Galahad traded the sword he’d pulled from the stone with Bors.”

Thooranu leaned over to pour more wine into his guest’s glass. “So what? After the sword had proven Galahad to Arthur, what other purpose did the thing serve?”

“Don’t be impatient,” Jack Pack said, holding out his glass until it was full. “The Trickster needed the sword returned to Galahad and he found an opportunity for that to happen. After some time apart, the knights reunited when they came across Perceval’s sister. She brought them to a ship bound for the Wasteland. When they landed, they continued on their journey together. On the way, the Trickster came to them, masquerading as a holy man and said that in order for them to cross the Wasteland, they first needed the blessing of the sick lady. They went to the sick lady’s castle, where the custom was for one of her choosing to drink her blood from a silver dish.” Jack Pack paused for a moment, savoring more of the fragrant wine.

“What the knights did not know was that anyone who drank the blood would die. The woman chose Bors. Perceval’s sister, who was aware of this custom, offered to drink the blood in his stead. The sick lady allowed it, and when the sister drank, the lady revealed that Perceval’s sister would die and that Bors now owed her for her sacrifice. Bors took it upon himself to uphold the dying sister’s request to be brought back to the city of Sarras. The sick lady then said that because he had allowed this to happen—even though he’d been unaware of the fatal consequences—he no longer was deemed worthy to hold onto the sword from the stone. Guilt drove him to give the sword back to Galahad.”

“You’re saying that this Trickster had a hand in her death?” Thooranu asked, amazed. “How could he do that? Did he make a bargain with the Fates?”

“He didn’t. Only if the Fates are absent from their realm can the laws of death and life be changed. However, the Trickster was one of the gifted few who had the ability to bend rules.”

“I see. If that is so, then why kill Perceval’s sister? Why not let Bors drink the blood?”

“It would have suited the Trickster just fine except that Bors might have been buried with the sword that had been given to him. It was customary for knights to be buried with their swords and shields. The Trickster had to make certain Galahad got his sword

back.”

“What if the sick lady hadn’t chosen Bors?”

“She didn’t *choose* at all. The Trickster had made a deal with her.”

“And the sister couldn’t just warn Bors?”

“They had been forbidden to leave until a sacrifice was made—a payment, if you will. Until then, they were bound within the castle walls forever.”

Thooranu nodded cautiously and gestured for Jack to continue.

“The sword was returned to its rightful owner and Bors left to take Perceval’s sister’s body back to her homeland,” Jack Pack went on, “leaving only Galahad and Perceval to continue the search for the Grail. After years of adventures, the pair finally came to the court of King Pelles and his son, Eliazar. These two holy men were the Grail’s keepers. They told the knights that only a blessed man, a man of pure heart, could see the Holy Grail. Galahad then presented the sword he had pulled from the stone.”

“Wait, I thought it was the Sword of David, the one given to him on the ship of faith.”

“That’s one version of the story, but it’s not true. It was really the sword that proved his salt to King Arthur. The Trickster then won the contest the moment Galahad showed the king and his son the sword.”

“What?” Thooranu said. “How is that?”

“It was rather simple, actually,” Jack Pack said with a mischievous smirk. “It was the Trickster who had come to King Arthur with the sword. The wizard presented the sword that he, himself, had forged. In telling the lie that it had come from God, it helped to get the tale out into the world, where it was eventually brought to the attention of the holy court.”

“Why go through the trouble with the sword?”

“Well, because of the love affair between Lancelot and Guinevere, Arthur was reluctant to allow the son of the man who stole his woman’s heart to join his circle of knights. The sword convinced the King that Galahad was the knight he needed.”

“Why did the Trickster want Galahad to be chosen to look for the Grail? Wouldn’t any knight do?”

“No. Even with the sword, no mere human could be allowed to even see the Grail, which had become so much more than just a fallen star. The sword was designed to release itself from the stone only by someone with a special bloodline, which Galahad had.”

“Did this Trickster have a hand in Galahad’s birth?” Thooranu asked, sensing a deeper history to this god’s involvement.

“Very good guess, young man,” the wanderer praised. “He most certainly did. To win the bet, the Trickster needed a mortal with an edge over the other two knights. He decided to use the love that Elaine had for Lancelot as a means to bring forth said mortal. He’d portrayed himself as a servant girl and told Elaine that if she wanted Lancelot to lay with her, she needed to give him wine and to wear a certain ring. The wine and ring were utterly useless, merely a ruse that gave her the confidence to go forth with the plan. It was the Trickster who’d led Lancelot to believe that it was Guinevere he was laying with. When their son was born, the Trickster made the sword and presented it to King Arthur.”

“Then the Trickster was pulling the strings the entire time? Why?”

“To win the bet, my boy.”

Thooranu snorted. “Not much of a challenge if he was going to cheat.”

“Oh, but it was. The bet wasn’t just about winning; it was a way for the Trickster to test his scheming skills, and what better way to do that than with a fixed wager?”

“Huh. So Galahad saw the Grail for himself. What happened then?”

“Not much; he died.”

“And who gave Arthur the vision?”

Jack Pack smiled. “The Trickster, of course.”

“And the Dökkálfar and the Adlet beast never suspected?”

“*That* was the real challenge, being able to do all of that trickery without getting caught.”

“You mean all that backstabbing, it seems.”

The wanderer shrugged. “No one said that Tricksters were honest.”

Thooranu raised his glass, and gave a wry smile. “Well played.”

They both drank.

“Who gave you Guinevere’s hair?” Thooranu asked.

“The Trickster. It was the only thing he requested of her when she asked him to convince Elaine to kill herself, which wasn’t hard seeing how she was utterly heartbroken. Lancelot never stopped loving Guinevere, you know.”

“So you met the Trickster?”

“I did, indeed.” Jack Pack took a long drink of wine and turned to Thooranu. “Now, let’s have some of that heart.”

They spoke for hours on many topics: the places they’d seen, women they’d seduced, and mischievous deeds committed. Several bottles of wine and one jackal later, they were conversing on matters that Thooranu had never discussed with anyone. As the sun began to rise over the sandy hills, Jack Pack told him that he was going to explore the moons of Jupiter and invited him along.

For the next few years, the two were inseparable. They traveled together, sharing adventures that Thooranu hoped would never end. He felt he’d found a true friend in Jack Pack.

One hot summer’s day in Greece, they were enjoying coffee at a café when Jack Pack offered a proposal. “Have you ever thought about running a business?”

“Pardon?” Thooranu said, setting his cup on its saucer. “A business?”

“I’ve been flirting with the idea for quite some time now. I was once an architect, you know.”

“An architect?” he chuckled. “Why?”

“Sometimes I like to grow roots. It’s a change of pace. I like to keep myself busy, and what better way than running a business, eh?”

Thooranu’s curiosity was piqued. He had never tried such an endeavor. “What sort of business?”

“I was thinking of a tavern and brothel.”

“Where?”

“Here, in Athens. I’ve already picked out a place.”

Thooranu leaned back in his chair. “A brothel, eh?” he said, rubbing his chin.

“We’ll only employ the finest women,” Jack Pack added slyly.

Both the human and incubus side of Thooranu liked that idea and he grinned. “Where is it?”

Jack Pack took him to an abandoned brick building in Piraeus. Fragments of pottery lay everywhere, and a couple of amphora stood against one wall.

“It used to be a warehouse,” Jack Pack explained, walking farther inside. “Until last year, when the owner committed suicide after he lost two of his ships.”

Thooranu imagined how it might be, not as the hollow forgotten place it now was, but as a fully stocked tavern, filled with people drinking and singing. He smelled cigar smoke and heard music. There would be blood on his face from a fight. Once in a while, he’d sneak off with one of the whores for a good fucking. Seeing everything so clearly got him excited. What did he have to lose?

“What say you?” Jack Pack asked. “Are you game?”

“Sure. Why the hell not. We can just walk away from it when we’re bored.”

“Ah,” Jack Pack said, coming back. “That is so, but we need a signed contract for the building.”

Thooranu’s eyebrows knitted together. “Why?”

“To make it legal, of course.” He reached into his inside coat pocket.

“I don’t understand. It isn’t as if it matters if we lose money. I sure as hell don’t care. Why sign a contract?”

“As you pointed out, we can leave the business anytime we wish. The contract is simply a formality to the owner of the property. It’s meaningless to us, but the mortal I leased the building from needs it.” Jack Pack brought out a rolled up piece of paper. “Have a look and see.”

Thooranu took the paper and unrolled it. He had never read a legal document before. The single sheet was indeed a lease for the building, the price paid for it each month, and other legal jargon that bored him. Jack’s name was already scrawled in black.

“How come you’ve already signed it?”

“I want it,” Jack Pack said. “Do you?”

Thooranu thought on that for a moment, then turned his eyes back to the contract and to the blank line next to Jack’s signature.

“You can sign it later, if you want,” Jack said. “I don’t want us to be late for the matinee.”

Seven against Thebes. Thooranu had nearly forgotten about the play. He checked his pocket watch. It was already one-twenty-three.

“Got a pen?” he asked.

Jack Pack smirked and handed over a quill. Thooranu took it and carefully signed his name. Instantly he felt woozy, suddenly weak.

“What is it?” Jack asked.

“I’m not sure,” he muttered, almost falling, catching himself against a support beam at the last second. “I feel off somehow.”

“Oh?” Jack crossed his arms. “Do you feel a bit hollow, as if you’ve just lost

something?”

Thooranu did not like the tone in his friend’s voice. Nevertheless, what Jack Pack had said captured his attention. Something was terribly wrong. He felt a sense of loss.

“What have you done?” he asked fretfully.

“It’s not what *I’ve* done, per se; it’s what you just did.”

“What?”

“Look at the contract.”

Thooranu did so—immediately—as if obeying Jack Pack’s command. He read the contract again, only it wasn’t a deed to the ownership of the building they stood in, but a deed to ownership of *him*! Thooranu’s name was printed before a statement that he had surrendered his freedom to whoever’s name was on the deed. The other name was none other than Jack Pack.

“I . . . I don’t understand,” Thooranu stammered. “This isn’t what I just read.”

Jack began jumping up and down, clapping his hands while laughing. “I got you! I did it! I caught a demon!”

Reeling from what was happening, Thooranu shifted his wide eyes up to him. “Why have you done this?”

“Why?” Jack said, stopping his excited jumping. “Because I wanted to. Because I’ve never done it before. You’re my property now, for an entire year. Until the contract expires.”

Thooranu’s face was stone. He looked at Jack Pack through slitted eyes. When the deed finally expired, he would tear his betrayer to bits.

“Oh, but you won’t,” Jack Pack said, catching his thoughts. “All I need to do is sign my name again.”

Thooranu was still holding the contact. He tried to rip it to shreds, but his arms locked up. No matter how hard he struggled, he couldn’t tear up the piece of paper.

“You’re not allowed to do that,” Jack Pack said with a wagging finger. “If you read on, you’ll see why. Also, if the deed is destroyed, you will be forced to destroy yourself in the most painful way that a demon can die.”

Thooranu lowered the paper. His whole body was numb with shock. “How did you do this?”

“Well, first I had to gain your trust,” Jack Pack said, taking the paper from Thooranu’s hand. “Then, when the time came, I drew this deed up and put an illusion over it that kept you from seeing the real meaning.”

“An illusion?”

Jack Pack winked. “Yes, just like Elaine and Lancelot.”

“Fiend! *You’re* the Trickster!”

“Indeed. And I have succeeded in my scheme.”

Being a demon, emotions usually didn’t penetrate Thooranu’s cerebral cortex. Yet the human side of him felt the sting of betrayal that this *thing*, this petty god, had inflicted upon him.

The Trickster lost his smile. He leaned in closer, his face now only inches from the demon’s.

“I have you, Thooranu, you’re mine. Until I sell you to the highest bidder.”

Chapter One

Mother of Craft

Spring, 1843

Mother of Craft's garden smelled like new life in the fresh afternoon air, growing everything from local to exotic plants; from peas to poppies, orchids to onions, daisies to dwarf apples. The plot was vibrant with its variety of colors, a wonderful little spot in the world overlooking the sea. Her garden was a place where life began. And sometimes where it ended.

Tarquin Norwich rode up the lane toward the modest cottage. For years, he had come to Mother of Craft, seeking guidance. Today, he'd come with a special request.

He dismounted. The roan was shiny with sweat. He started for the front door when he spied Mother of Craft on her knees, at work amongst the flowers. She didn't greet him, continuing to weed. Norwich was allergic to pollen, a fact she knew, and no doubt was why she was waiting for him in the garden. She smirked as he approached, as if she sensed his discomfort.

"Mother of Craft," he said, clearing his throat loudly.

"I'm not deaf, Tarquin Norwich," she retorted, pulling weeds from amongst the chamomile.

Norwich sighed, then sneezed. "Mother of Craft, *please*." His tone hardened.

She rose and examined him. Norwich's eyes were red and glossy, like freshly spilled blood. But despite his sniffing and heavy breathing, he stood arrow straight, head high like a proud, albeit sick, lion.

"Let's go inside," she said, heading for the back door, a bouquet of white chamomile in her hand. "The water will be boiling by now."

As she knew he would, he hurried to follow.

Her home felt like an ancient memory, an echo of a past life. A few glass plated daguerreotypes of her and her daughter hung on the dark blue wall, along with oil paintings of forested landscapes and abstracts of cities. Twisted vines cradled glass lamps in their green fingers. Inside, living plants thrived, nurturing in the low glow of the lamps' light.

Norwich hung his coat and hat on a rack, then went to the kitchen and sat at his usual chair. It was the most inviting room in the small cottage. Freshly baked biscuits sat within a small wicker basket, giving it a homey aroma. Through a wide window above the counter was a view of an endless ocean.

While she removed her sun hat and loosened the ribbon around her long coquelicot colored hair, Norwich took out a handkerchief and blew his nose.

"Tell me, Tarquin," Mother of Craft said, tearing flower pedals from their stems, dropping them into a small bowl, "what is it you seek?"

"The Toymaker," he said, his voice clear now. "Can you help me find him?"

"Indigo Peachtree, eh? Has he gone missing?"

“Yes,” Norwich admitted. “In truth, he escaped from me last night.”

The iron kettle hanging over the range began to whistle sharply. It was sculpted like a short twisted tree with roots snaking its body, with a branch for a handle. It was half covered by small tesserae with tea-leaves painted on. She dumped the bowl of petals into a matching teapot, then grabbed the kettle with a cloth and poured in the steaming water. She smiled wistfully, breathing the heady aroma as she stirred the brew.

“No,” she said, pouring the tea into a cup.

“No?” he exclaimed, his face reddening. He slapped his hand down on the table.

“Don’t you be hitting anything that belongs to me, Tarquin Norwich!” she admonished fiercely. Although her anger was feigned, it was enough to put him in his place.

Norwich was deemed an important man. He was also power hungry, ambitious, cruel, and deadly. Mother of Craft helped him because he played a vital role in her plans.

Norwich’s face softened and he looked away, not meeting her gaze. He cleared his throat as if to say something, but no words were forthcoming.

“I don’t know where to find Indigo Peachtree,” Mother of Craft said. It was a lie, but he could not know that. She placed the teacup down before him. “But”—she hesitated, relishing the little torment it gave him—“there are those who do.”

Norwich leaned over his cup, wafting the steam up with his hands, breathing deeply. He spoke in a casual tone, that barely masked his profound interest. “And who might they be?”

“The Landcross brothers.”

Norwich sat bolt upright. “Landcross,” he gasped. “How can that be?”

“The two have crossed paths with Indigo.”

“I see,” Norwich said, nodding solemnly. He took a sip of tea. “Do you know how to find them? Either, I don’t care which.”

The sun vanished behind a mass of grey clouds, a warning of oncoming rain. Mother of Craft lit candles inside several yellowing glass lanterns that she placed upon the table. “Not just one, but *both* of them.”

“I only need one,” he replied, taking a biscuit from the basket. “The one who will best cooperate, that is.”

“You’ll find that both will cooperate in their own way,” she said.

“Why do I need both?” He chewed the soft biscuit, letting its sweet taste lighten his mood.

“The oldest knows where to find the Toymaker. However, the younger knows where to find an important item you seek.”

She looked him in the eye, but he turned away. Her unusual violet eyes unnerved him.

“The journal?” Norwich asked in a whisper. “He knows where it is?”

“Indeed. As well as the masks. You’ll need those, too, Tarquin. Do not misjudge their importance.”

Norwich could not hide his excitement. “And you can locate them?”

“Yes, I believe I can.”

She left the kitchen with the teacup in hand, walking over to a bookshelf in the other

room. “They’re many miles distant, but not for long.” She stopped in front of a map of England painted on a burlap canvas that hung on the wall like a ragged curtain.

“Are they together?” Norwich asked.

“No,” she said, planting her finger on the map. “One is here.”

He stood up and came over to her. “Bristol? It’ll take me a week to get there and back.”

“That’s why you’ll wait a week until he arrives here,” Mother of Craft said, sliding her finger down to the forest area of Ampfield. “On this road, at Pagan Tree Dressing Church, you’ll be able to capture him when he and his gang of highwaymen try to rob you.”

“Which brother is it?”

“The oldest.”

“Right,” he huffed. “Where’s the other one?”

She sipped her tea, then turned to face him. Just mentioning the younger brother boiled her blood. The years she’d invested in that boy! It kept her awake at nights.

“He’s in France, on his way to Le Havre. You’ll find him in an inn by the sea.”

“How is it that you can tell me exactly where those two are, but not Peachtree?” His tone conveyed more than simply suspicion; there was a threat there too.

“The brothers were touched by the supernatural many years ago, and that allows me—and any good witch or warlock—to sense them. I have an insight into their futures.”

What she told him was only half of the truth. Indeed, the Landcross brothers had the cloak of craft over them. Like most enchanters, she was able to look into the kaleidoscope of someone’s future and see the many different outcomes in their life. Contrary to what many believed, there was no such thing as destiny, only random acts that kept the future constantly shifting. Consequently, one’s future could not be told in a single path. The only certainty was death, the time of which was determined before birth.

Mother of Craft was a talented witch. Like most with magical blessings, she did not need a lot of paraphernalia to use her power. It simply resided within her like a vital organ.

And she didn’t mind the term witch. She was who she was, and she had no quarrel with that. After all, she had let herself die in order to become an enchantress. After that, other concerns seemed petty.

“How will I know him?” Norwich asked. “The one in France.”

“He has a scar across his throat. This is common knowledge so he will try to hide it, concealed under an old scarf. He also wears a Greek coin on a chain around his neck; a stater. When you find him, he’ll be eating soup.”

“Eating soup?”

She nodded.

“Is he not in Le Havre now?” Norwich asked with a dash of impatience in his tone.

“No, Calais. He arrived after a narrow escape from the royal guards. He will be heading south to Le Havre.” She went back to the kitchen and poured herself more tea. He followed slowly, with a last lingering look at the map.

“These are the closest locations that the brothers will be to you. Try not to be

impatient. Let them draw themselves in on their own.” She turned her eyes up to him. “Besides, do you not have business at your summer estate?”

His look betrayed his thoughts as he frowned. “Ah, yes. I do, indeed.”

Norwich drained his last drops of tea, and Mother of Craft poured more for him. “Another shipment coming in, yes?”

He snorted. “I confide too much in you.”

He was obviously feeling better now.

“And for good reason,” she replied. “If you had not confided in me about what Indigo told you, I could not have explained what I knew—and the power that could be gained from what he has. You’re crossing dangerous ground, dove, and you need all the help you can get.”

“I’ll be fine.”

She raised her chin. “Just in case, I will give you something.”

She headed to the spice rack, with him following closely. She could feel his strength whenever he was near, and not just his physical might. His willpower was an unbreakable force. His stony grey eyes matching his salt and pepper hair, set within his majestic warrior’s face. Physically, he was a handsome man, yet he was a hardened soul who had not even mourned the death of his lovely wife when she’d taken her own life.

But, however strong, Tarquin Norwich was an automaton, a mindless machine for her to use.

She took a small, pink vial from the rack. She popped the tiny cork and poured out the fine anise seeds. She moved over to the counter near the window and lifted the lid of the largest of the matryoshka nesting dolls lining the wall. From it, she brought out a round, midnight blue jar. After twisting the cap off, she poured what looked to be black oil into the vial. She pressed the cork back and placed the pink container in front of Norwich. “Use it well.”

Norwich picked it up, studying it, his face scrunching in distaste. “What is it?”

“Demon’s blood.”

He laughed, thinking it was a joke. But when she didn’t join him, he fell silent.

“Mix this into something when you give it to someone. It’ll be easier for the individual to drink it if they don’t know what it is. Afterwards you have complete control over them.”

He nodded. “The color of the bottle makes me half believe it’s a love potion.”

She snorted. “*That* doesn’t exist. Otherwise, I would have sold you some to use on your wife.”

He grimaced and placed his cup on the counter. “I must go. It’s a long ride to Southampton.” He set a coin purse down next to his teacup and headed for the coat rack.

“One more thing,” Mother of Craft said, paying no mind to the purse. “It would be best to send all three of your children out to find the brothers.”

Norwich turned to her as he donned his coat. “Archie? He’s a weak imbecile. Useless on all fronts. And Clover? She’s a ten-year-old girl. Just as useless.”

“Trust me,” she said earnestly. “You’ll need them. And if you think so poorly of them, send them after the easiest one to catch.”

He didn't seem convinced, yet she knew that his trust in her would outweigh his doubt.

She saw him out and watched him ride down the lane through the sprinkling rain. As she did every time he'd come to seek guidance, she thought it was funny that he never asked if he would succeed in his plan. It wasn't fear that kept him from inquiring. Tarquin Norwich simply had too much damn self-confidence. A flaw, for that blinding buoyancy would be his undoing.

Vela, Mother of Craft's daughter, emerged from the woods in time to see him leave. She carried two limp, dangling hares. The mirror image of Mother of Craft, but at only eleven, she still had a lot of growing to do. She also shared some of her father's features, like his wild heart and slender build. Mother of Craft had to admit she missed him sometimes.

"Was that Norwich again?" Vela asked.

"Aye."

"What did he want this time?"

"He wants many things, as most men do. None of which concern you."

"Yes, Mother."

"I will say this, child," she added. "This may well be the last you'll ever see of him."

Chapter Two

Let it Begin

Seven days later

Archie Norwich lay in bed, his chest heaving from the love making with the beautiful woman beside him. He adored moments like these. Being with Eilidh took his mind off the bruised eye and equally bruised ego.

“Archie?” Eilidh whispered from beside him, “have you made plans for us to leave, yet?”

It was a question that jabbed a thorn into his side and he frowned. “I have to map it out, but I thought we would start in Paris.”

“Paris?”

“We’ll go to Rome from there, then to Venice.”

“Then where?” she asked, sitting up.

He turned to look at her naked body glowing in the afternoon light, examining her greedily, feasting on her perfection. A smile flit across his lips. She had a face like a pixie, with large royal blue eyes and a small but vibrant mouth that offered the most charming smiles. He pulled her to him, the fingers of his right hand interlacing with hers.

“Umm, the Netherlands. Then to Prague.”

“Prague? That dreadful city?”

“It’s interesting.”

“Have you ever been to Prague?” she challenged.

“No.”

“Then how do you know it’s interesting?”

“You haven’t been there, either. How do you know it’s dreadful?”

She laughed, a chuckle low in her throat. “Fair enough. After we’ve traveled to Paris, Rome, Venice, the Netherlands, and . . . Prague, what’s next?”

He knew where this was going and dreaded it. “Where else would you like to go?” he asked to prolong the conversation.

“Someplace where you and I can have a life together.” She pulled away, then roll onto him, propping herself up with arms on either side of him, her long hair brushing his face. “You know, start a family.” She leaned in and kissed his chest. “Like we discussed, remember?”

He had no plan and she saw it in his hesitation.

“You promised!” she accused, slapping him hard on the chest. “You said that after we got married, you’d find a way to get us away from here so we could start a life together!” She flung herself out of bed and began dressing. “We should have left while your father and brother were gone.”

“There were two reasons why we couldn’t,” he said, sitting up. “One, I’m not going

anywhere without Clover; and she's just gotten over an illness."

Eilidh's expression softened. "I know you'd never leave your sister behind, Archie. I adore her as much as you do, and I would never ask you to abandon her."

"Thank you." He sighed. "Also, my father told me that he has an important mission for me when he returns. If we were gone when he needed me, he would undoubtedly send a hunting party after us." And he knew exactly what he was talking about. "I need time to get enough money so we can get as far away as possible. I must have the means to provide for us."

"We don't need a lot of money," she said, putting on her black long-sleeve blouse. "We only need each other. Even if we end up living in a quaint little farm cottage, it doesn't matter as long as we're together."

That was one reason he loved her. Despite seeing the luxurious life and all the benefits of being a Norwich, Eilidh had never wanted any of it. All she wanted was love, family, and honesty.

She had been a maid in his father's household for five years, since she was sixteen. When she'd arrived, it had been love at first sight and they had become lovers, marrying each other in secret. Even now, she wasn't fully aware of what his father was capable of. Just learning about their secret marriage would spark a merciless reaction in Tarquin Norwich.

Archie had been frightened of his father his entire life. If he and Eilidh ran away together and his father caught up to them, he'd kill Eilidh, perhaps them both, and bury them in shallow graves. He knew his father could do such things; he'd done it before.

"It won't be long before he finds out about us, Archie," Eilidh said, slipping her wedding ring off its proper place and setting it on her index finger. She glanced out the window as she tied her white apron around her waist. "Your father and brother are back."

Struck with panic, Archie jumped from the bed and ran to the window. His father and older brother, Ivor, were riding up the gravel lane toward the house. The sound of a servant announcing their return made his stomach twist.

"Goodbye, my lord," Eilidh said in her servant tone.

"Eilidh, wait."

But she had already left the room. Being naked, he couldn't very well go after her. Yet even if he did, what could he say?

He cleaned up and got dressed then hurried downstairs with his shotgun. He went out back, to the shooting range. He needed to appear as if he was doing something, anything, other than making love with his secret bride, as well as make it easy for his father to find him.

He stood near a hand-crank machine with eight brass cylinders that could send clay disks sailing into the air. A servant was at the crank, waiting for his command.

Archie raised his shotgun. "Loose!"

The servant turned the metal crank several times until a disk was hurled into the sky. Archie fired and the disk shattered. The servant turned a wheel attached to the side of the machine and rotated the brass cylinders as Archie reloaded.

Archie hoped that the gun smoke would mask his fear.

He fired another shot before he heard his father calling. Tarquin Norwich was

standing on the stone steps leading up to the back entrance of the house. When his father beckoned him forward, Archie raced up the steps with the shotgun in hand and stood before him, almost at attention.

He hated being face-to-face with the man but he plastered on a smile. “Welcome home, Father. I hope your time at the castle was restful.”

Tarquin had been going to Norwich Castle on the Isle of Wight more often these days. Archie didn’t know why, and he’d been forbidden to go himself, which suited him just fine.

“I want you to go to Le Havre and apprehend Pierce Landcross,” his father ordered. “Tell the Harbormaster to have one of his captains take you across on my personal ferry.”

Archie thought he must have heard him wrong. “Pierce Landcross? The thief who—”

“Yes, the one and the same,” his father said. “He’s going to help find the Toymaker’s journal. Once you have him in custody, bring him here, where he can be interrogated. Understood?”

“Father, what if I can get him to talk?”

“Absolutely not! He may try fooling you, boy; and knowing how gullible you are, you’ll fall head first for his lies. Besides, you don’t have the stomach for what I have in mind if he refuses to cooperate.”

His father’s words washed over him as they normally did. Tarquin Norwich had said far worse things to him in the past. Yet he was curious about this journal that Pierce Landcross was supposed to find, although he knew better than to ask. Why had Indigo Peachtree, the Toymaker, been invited to the mansion to begin with?

Peachtree had seemed nervous when he’d been at the estate, especially around Archie’s father. Something Archie could well understand. His father had had a special feast prepared for Peachtree, which the Toymaker had attended dressed in an old, cheap tweed suit, his hair wildly disheveled. Clover thought he was amusing and wanted to stay, but when their father wanted to speak business with Peachtree, Archie had been told to put his sister to bed. Archie hadn’t minded much. He never wanted to be involved in any of his father’s affairs. That was a task best suited for Ivor. Archie much preferred spending his time listening to Clover’s stories than listening to his father.

Peachtree had left the mansion sometime during the night. The next day, Tarquin had sent a search party out. Archie had asked what had happened and it had earned him a black eye. It wasn’t the first time his father had struck him and it most likely wouldn’t be the last. Therefore, he kept his inquiries about his father’s mission to himself and simply said, “Yes, sir. How shall I find him?”

“Late afternoon tomorrow, Landcross will be in a tavern near the sea. He has a scar across his throat, hidden under a scarf. And he will be wearing a silver coin, a stater, on a chain.”

Archie furrowed his brow. His father saw his confusion. “It’s an ancient coin from Greece,” he explained.

Archie knew what a stater was and that Landcross was scarred. What puzzled him was how his father knew the man’s location.

“Oh, and apparently he will be eating soup,” his father added, deepening Archie’s curiosity.

“Yes, sir. I will bring him here to you.”

“Good. Take some of my soldiers with you, as well as your sister.”

“Clover?” he asked before he could stop himself. “Why?”

“Don’t question me!” his father bellowed. “Just do as I say.”

Archie looked down at the ground. “Yes, sir.”

“Your brother and I will be traveling north. We will most likely not be back by the time you arrive with Landcross, so make sure he’s well secured until our return.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Leave before nightfall,” his father ordered. “And don’t fail me or I shall have you severely punished. Understood?”

Archie understood all too well.

As his father left the yard, Archie headed for his sister’s room. He found her at her writing desk, scribbling in her journal.

Clover loved writing, especially fantasy stories about dragons and lost worlds, where she cast herself as the protagonist, traveling from one adventure to another. He envied her imagination. The stories set her free to live in other places and took her away from the harsh world she actually inhabited. Although their father had never laid a hand on her, he ignored her. Clover’s only parental affection had come from their mother, but Archie doubted if his sister even remembered her.

When their mother died, Archie tried to fill the void the best he could by buying her books, getting her journals and listening to her stories. It had kept them both sane. He only hoped that he could soon work up enough courage to take her and Eilidh away from all this.

“Writing your adventures again?” he asked, standing within the doorway.

Clover raised her head and twisted around to look at him.

She was beautiful, just like their late mother, with large dark eyes and hair like red wine, tied back in a striped ribbon that matched her dress.

With a smile, she said, “I just started a new story. This time, I’m a mermaid and will explore the depths of the ocean.”

“Is that so?” he said with unfeigned interest, stepping into the room. He wanted to hear more, as he always did. She would get animated and act out her ideas as they came to her. But there was no time, not if they were to be off before sundown.

“How would you like to go on a real adventure?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

Archie took a seat by the window. “Father wants us to go to Le Havre.”

“Why?”

He’d rehearsed his answer before coming to the room. If only he didn’t have to bring her with him. Aside from fearing the worst to happen to her during the mission, she had just gotten over a bad cold. Even the color of her face had yet to return in full. Crossing the Channel could bring back her illness.

He cleared his throat and said, “Um, to catch a man who Father wishes to question.”

“What sort of questions?”

“He wants to ask him about Indigo Peachtree.”

She giggled. “Mr. Peachtree? He was so funny. Remember when he gave me this?”

Archie looked at the mechanical rabbit on her desk. When wound, it would bounce straight up in the air and flip backwards. The amazing automaton was an example of the Toymaker’s talent.

“Too bad Father scared him away,” she said. “Why does he want to find him?”

“You know he doesn’t confide in me.”

“What else does Father want to ask this man?”

“He wants to know about Peachtree’s journal.”

“A journal? What’s in it?”

Archie shrugged.

“Right.” She sighed. “And this man knows where Mr. Peachtree and his journal are?”

“I’m not sure if he knows the whereabouts of Peachtree, but Father believes that he knows where to find the book.”

“And I’m sure that Father told you where to find this man. Have you ever wondered how he acquires such information?”

“I do. If I were to ask him, though . . .” He trailed off, looking away. The bruise around his eye began to throb.

“Why does he hate us so much?” Clover asked.

It was a simple question but Archie found it difficult to answer. He shrugged. “I think it’s because we remind him too much of her.”

“Mother?”

“Aye. We are a reminder of the one person in his miserable life that he could never fully control.” He stood and headed for the door. “Take only what you need. We leave within the hour.”

Back in his own room, he began packing his things into a small rucksack when a movement from the corner caught his eye.

“Eilidh,” he said, “you shouldn’t be in here.”

“I’ll only be a moment,” she whispered, rushing up to him. She hugged him tightly, and although it was dangerous, he embraced her in return.

“I’m sorry about earlier,” she said, pulling him tighter.

“For what?”

She pulled away and looked him in the eye.

“I saw you and your father speaking in the yard. I heard him yelling. It reminded me who he really is. We shouldn’t take the chance of him finding us when we leave.”

Her understanding thrilled him, yet the pressure to come up with a plan still weighed heavily. Then he recalled what his father had said.

“Eilidh,” — he spoke urgently — “pack your things and be ready to leave when I come back.”

“What?”

“My father told me that he and Ivor won’t return until after I bring back a prisoner.”

“A prisoner?”

“Yes, I am to travel to Le Havre and capture Pierce Landcross, and bring him here.”

“Landcross? Is your father planning to take him to the Queen? I’m sure she’d love to get her hands on him after what he pulled.”

“No, he wants to question him about Indigo Peachtree. Listen, after I return with Landcross and he’s securely under lock and key, you, Clover, and I will leave.”

“To where?”

“Dublin. From there, we’ll board an Atlantic steamer.”

“America?”

“Yes. And if we hurry, we can be in Ireland by the time Father and Ivor get here. Who knows; perhaps he’ll be so preoccupied with Landcross and what he wants with Peachtree that he won’t bother with us.”

He felt an electric charge surge through him. It was a good plan. As long as he could deliver what his father desired, there stood a chance they could make it.

“Do you really think so?” Eilidh asked, eyes wide.

“You were right before, my love. It won’t be long before my father finds out about us.” His mouth went dry and the words rasped. “I don’t want to imagine what he’d do if that happened.”

She placed a hand on his shoulder. “I’m not afraid of your father.”

He took her hand and held it over his heart. *If you knew what he has done, you would be*, he thought gravely. He kissed her hand.

“You should go. I’ll see you in a few days.”

She took the bedpan and as she left, Ivor entered the room after her. For a moment, Archie feared that his brother had heard their conversation.

“Ah, little brother wants his room nice and tidy when he returns?” Ivor finally said.

“Shut it,” Archie seethed, shoving a folded shirt into his bag, relieved that his and Eilidh’s conversation hadn’t been overheard.

“Father told me that you are going after Pierce Landcross,” Ivor said. “Think you can handle it?”

Archie glared at him through narrowed eyes. He never wanted to, but he’d grown to loathe his older brother. Ever since Ivor had become their father’s lapdog.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Ivor said, approaching him. “I only ask.”

His brother smelled of brandy. It only took a couple of drinks to prompt Ivor to badger him.

“The maid who just left,” Ivor said. “Are you fucking her?”

Archie continued packing, trying desperately not to betray any emotion, when all he wanted was to slam his fist into his brother’s face and break his skull wide open. Instead, he replied with a smirk, “What if I am?”

Ivor chuckled. “Bedding the help, eh? Maybe you’re more like Father than you think.” He leaned against the bedpost. “If she’s that willing, perhaps I’ll have a go at her.”

Archie’s fists clenched involuntarily. *One more word . . . just one*. He swallowed thickly and said, “When do you and Father depart?”

“This evening, same as you. He’s in quite a hurry.”

“I see.”

Ivor’s lips tended to loosen with drink. Archie wondered if he could get anything out

of him that his father had refused to share. “He ordered that I bring Clover.”

Ivor snorted. “I know. What good she’ll do is beyond me.”

“Then why do I have to take her?”

“That isn’t the question you ought to be asking.”

“Really?” Archie said, tying off his rucksack. “What should I be asking? What is Father’s business with the Toymaker, anyway? What’s in this journal that Landcross is supposed to help Father find?”

Ivor smirked. “It just kills you that Father entrusts me with his plans and not you, doesn’t it?”

Damn it, Ivor hadn’t drunk enough to spill secrets, just enough to be obnoxious. It was no secret that their father favored Ivor more than his other children, but Archie could not care less.

“I need to get going,” Archie said, slinging the pack over his shoulder.

He started for the door when Ivor stepped in his way.

“What Father has built, I will inherit after his death. What will you receive, little brother?”

“If I’m a thousand miles away from you, then I’ll have just about everything I could ever ask for.”

Archie pushed past him and didn’t look back.

After retrieving Clover, he and his sister went outside to be met by four house guards. Everyone saddled up. Clover rode beside him with two guards in front and two behind. Archie twisted in the saddle, looking back towards the house. Was that his father? He turned back to the road, falling quickly into the familiar rhythm of his horse’s gait as they began their journey south, towards the coast.

* * *

Tarquin Norwich watched from his bedroom balcony as the group made their way along the gravel lane.

“You think he’ll succeed?” Ivor asked, stepping up next to him with a glass of brandy in his hand.

Norwich had never approved of his son’s excessive drinking, but he also didn’t condemn it. Whenever he looked at his eldest child, he saw his own father; a strong, chiseled featured man with eyes like black glass. He’d admired his father and had adored his mother, whom Ivor had inherited his wheat-colored hair from. Both had been strong and intelligent people who’d taught their only son to take whatever he wanted.

Regardless of his love for his own son, he dared not to fill him in on the most vital part of his plan, mostly because of Ivor’s talkative nature when drunk.

“He better. Too much is at stake,” he replied, taking Ivor’s brandy glass. “Do not allow drink to compromise our goal.”

“I won’t, Father,” Ivor promised.

“Go downstairs. Be ready to leave when I come down. We’ll rest at the inn at North Baddesley.”

“Yes, Father.”

As Ivor left, Norwich turned back to watch the group now on the thoroughfare.

If everything goes as planned, I'll become much more than any mortal monarch.
Norwich's lips twitched into a leering smile as he knocked back Ivor's brandy in one swallow.

Chapter Three

To Catch a Thief

Archie had devised a plan to catch Landcross before they'd crossed the Channel. They stayed the night in Southampton, where Archie had explained his idea. He'd brought common clothing for himself and Clover, for she too was a necessary part of the plan. The soldiers had been instructed to leave behind their grey leather uniforms and wear their own clothing instead. The following morning, the group left for the harbor and boarded a steam powered ferryboat.

The day was fine, the ferry gliding across the flat of the English Channel with ease. Still, Archie was nervous for Clover. She hadn't been out at sea in years, and he feared that the brisk, wet air would cause her to fall ill again.

But Clover was unaffected by the climate and her excitement appeared to grow as they drew closer to Le Havre. The port was full of ships, a forest of tall masts rising like pikes. Sailors bustled about, loading and unloading cargo. Black smokestacks jutted up from both buildings and steamships. The air smelled of the sea and its myriad creatures.

The ferryboat reached the dock and a crewman threw a line to a dockhand to tie off.

"Where do you think Landcross is?" Clover asked Archie.

"This is one of the largest commercial harbors in France," he said, scanning the marina while taking her hand as they crossed the gangplank. "There are a lot of inns, but most likely he'll be here, by the docks. I'm thinking that he's going to try boarding a ship, so he will want to be close."

His soldiers joined them on the dock, and Sergeant Arran Derby nodded. "Right," he said. "Let's scout the dockside inns."

Sergeant Derby was a tall burly man with stark black hair and thick muttonchops.

"Good," Archie said. "Remember, we're looking for a man in his mid-twenties with a scarf hiding a scar across his throat. He'll also have a coin on a chain around his neck."

"And he'll be eating soup," Clover threw in.

Archie smiled down at her. "Aye, that he will. Don't get anxious if you spot him," he said to his men. "Let's keep this capture discreet to prevent any unwanted attention."

"Aye, sir," the sergeant replied.

"Right then, let's get on with it."

Clover tugged his arm and pointed. "Archie, look."

He followed her finger to a ship docked a little ways down from them. Black-skinned people—men, women, and children—trailed down a ramp to the pier. Awaiting them were several others; French humanitarians, unless he missed his mark.

Archie studied the ship. It was a late 1700s Spanish galleon with many feathers and animal bones tied everywhere along the gunwales. Large brass piping ran down the ship's sides, and the engine from a steam locomotive was mounted on deck. But what caught Archie's attention was the ship's flag; three wavy lines, the ancient symbol for water, with two arrows crossing each other.

Some Indian tribes had been drafted into the colonial defense, and they had fought the British Royal Navy at sea. After the Seven Years War ended, some of them kept their

ships, dubbing themselves the Sea Warriors, attacking European settlers sailing to the New World. Yet on their own, they were no match for the strongest naval fleet in the world, and the number of Sea Warriors had dwindled over the course of the last hundred years. Now only a handful remained, with a new battle to fight—attacking slave ships and freeing people who'd been kidnapped from their homeland. Instead of fighting against the English, they helped uphold the loosely followed Slave Trade Act that had been put into law in 1788.

Sometimes the Sea Warriors brought people back to their homeland, risking being taken themselves; but most often they were taken to a country where they would remain free.

“Were those people going to be slaves?” Clover asked.

“Yes,” Archie said with heaviness in his throat.

“Bloody hell,” one of the men said. “I wonder if that’s ole Captain Sea Wind, himself.”

The soldier indicated a man with skin the color of coffee, sporting long black hair, wearing a large brimmed hat adorned with feathers. His clothing was an outdated French great coat and buckskin breeches. He stood by the railing, observing his crew help the Africans to the pier.

Captain Sea Wind, an Apache, was the most infamous of the Sea Warriors. Tales of him and his wife were printed in novelty pamphlets almost every year. Their ship, the *Ekta*, which meant Unity, was known to have successfully attacked over forty slave ships throughout the course of her thirty-five years under Captain Sea Wind’s control.

Archie and the others headed into the city on foot. He was prepared to search every tavern along the coast until he found his quarry. Landcross was his ticket to freedom. Once he had the outlaw safely in his father’s mansion, he, Eilidh, and Clover would leave and make a new life.

* * *

Pierce Landcross had dreamt again of strange flying machines. He tried to hold onto the images, yet they slipped away. As his eyes reluctantly opened, he remembered nothing.

He’d awakened in his chambers after a full day’s sleep. With a groan and a deep yawn, he got out of bed, stretched, and went over to the washbasin. After scrubbing his face and the rest of the sleep away, he looked at himself in the mirror. The room glowed with the afternoon light, and his scar stood out, livid white, a brutal reminder of betrayal and heartbreak. Every detail of that night played out in significant fragments; the punch that had brought him down, the knife, the look on his assailant’s face, and then the abandonment when it was all over. Every time he touched the scar, he could almost feel the jagged blade tearing across his skin.

He shook off the memory and splashed more water on his face. A pang in his stomach reminded him that he needed food. He also needed to find a ship willing to let him board before the royal guards caught up with him. He was willing to take passage anywhere so long as it was hundreds, or even thousands of miles away.

A week and a half ago, he’d crossed a line, earning him a hunting party on his tail, aiming to bring him back to London. He’d managed a razor-thin escape in Aylesham, before crossing the Channel, where he’d traveled down the coast, only stopping to steal a

horse to keep up a steady getaway.

The only issue looming over him was money. Without money for passage, he would have to offer to work his way. He hadn't even paid for his chambers. He'd simply entered the hotel, gone up to the rooms and picked a lock. After establishing that the room wasn't occupied, he'd spent nearly the rest of his cash on a meal and gone back up to sleep.

He went downstairs and found a small table in the back room. On the way there, he picked the pocket of a guest, which gave him enough money for one drink. After he'd taken a seat at the table, he ordered a cup of clam soup and a pint of ale.

He'd always been a good thief. He'd been stealing since childhood after he and his brother had been separated from their parents and the gypsy family they'd been traveling with. Such nimble fingered skill had served him well over the years, but he'd taken it too far.

He kept his old Quaker hat low over his face while he was sitting at the table, his scarf wrapped snugly around his throat. Another problem with the scar was that it had become a permanent tag, like a tattoo or a brand, one that Queen Victoria had noticed when he'd stood face-to-face with her.

His popularity had become widespread in England and other parts of Europe throughout the years, especially after his unexpected return from having been sent to a notorious penal colony. But after what he'd just done, that popularity would undoubtedly increase ten-fold.

* * *

Clover's eyes watered as she crossed the smoky room. No one paid her any mind as she weaved between tables. She could no longer stand the cigars and loud, drunken laughter, so she headed for an archway leading into a back room. The moment she crossed the threshold, she stopped dead in her tracks.

Sitting at a small table in the corner was a man eating soup and reading a book. He wore a linen shirt with copper buttons and a grey paisley vest. He also wore a dapper black coat with slender sleeves and wide cuffs, dark pinstriped breeches with the suspenders hanging down on either side, and scuffed boots with spats. The brim of his well-worn Quaker hat hovered low over bright-green eyes, yet she saw his face clearly when he took a drink from his ale. He had a smooth, youthful face, sculpted in all the right places. His hair had many shades, from golden brown to auburn, with some locks as dark as coal.

And just below his ratty scarf hung a silver coin on a chain.

* * *

With every sip of his drink, Pierce scanned the room. He wasn't too worried because he'd put a great distance between himself and his pursuers. By the time his trackers reached Le Havre, he'd be out at sea. So while there should not be any danger, he caught sight of a young girl staring at him. He lowered his pint and stared back from beneath the brim of his hat.

She was a tall and skinny thing, with deep red hair pulled back in a ponytail. She wore a drab dress, black stockings and well-worn shoes.

Does she recognize me?

Then he realized that her eyes weren't on him, but on the stater hanging from his neck, visible just below his scarf. The girl appeared to be an orphan and sickly. Her skin was pale and there were dark circles under her hungry eyes, which were riveted on the coin. Even though it had no value here, he'd never part with it willingly.

She must have wandered in looking for scraps or to beg, so he reached into his pocket for a shilling before she came over to bother him. He flicked the coin into the air toward her. It spun and then descended. She didn't even try to catch it as it fell. Instead, it hit the floor and stayed there. As for her, she turned, vanishing into the crowd and tobacco smoke.

"Unbelievable," he muttered, standing up. He retrieved the shilling and returned to the table to finish his meal. A few minutes later, a young man dropped into the seat in front of him.

"Bloody hell!" Pierce said with a start. He reached for his flintlock pistol when the young girl appeared beside the table.

"Guten Abend," she said to him.

Germans, he reckoned.

"Sir," the young man said in a thick accent, "forgive our intrusion. My name is Hansel and this is . . ."

"Hansel?" he snorted. "Is this your sister, Gretel?"

The youth appeared confused but the girl giggled.

Hansel shook his head. "No, she's my sister, Magdalena. We need help."

The boy's claim that the girl was his sister seemed true enough. They both shared the same eyes and hair color. The lad seemed no more than twenty, a handsome boy whose clean face and healthy glow didn't match his own drab wardrobe. He had a bruise around one eye, faded enough to indicate that he had gotten it a little while back.

His gut warned him to be wary.

"Pardon?" Pierce said. "You need help? How does that concern me, eh?"

"You are British, *ja?*"

"Ja," he answered, *"Ich bin."*

Hansel seemed surprised by his use of their language. In German, Pierce added, "And I am also French on my mother's side."

Hansel and Magdalena looked at one another.

"Welche art von hilfe suchen?" Pierce asked, leaning back in his seat.

The young man replied; "We need a guide to help us escape to England."

"Escape?"

"Ja. We are homeless. Last night, we stole from a dangerous man who is now searching for us. If we can get across the Channel, perhaps he will not find us."

"Board a ferry," Pierce said bluntly. "You don't need help for that."

"We need someone who speaks fluent English," Hansel went on with urgency. "We cannot speak it as well as French and our accents will identify us as Germans. This man is very dangerous, you see. If he finds us, we are dead."

Pierce glanced at the little girl. Her sickly eyes were wide with fear. "Look, chum," he said, reverting back to English. "You got the wrong Brit. I ain't going anywhere near that country ever again."

He began to stand when the lad blurted out in German, "We can pay you!" He threw down a coin purse on the table. "And there is more for you if you can safely get us across the Channel."

Pierce couldn't resist a peek inside the bag, where there were thirty or more francs inside. If he did cross the Channel to Southampton, he could simply exchange the money for British pounds and buy himself a ticket, securing his own escape. Traveling back to England may not be a bad idea, as the guards who were after him weren't likely to suspect such a move. Regardless, he hadn't survived this long by taking chances while under so much pressure.

He opened his mouth to decline the offer when Hansel said in English, "I will get you a drink. Think it over, yes?" The boy shot up from his seat and hurried toward the bar.

Pierce sighed and snatched the coin purse from the table to look inside it again. He took out a gold coin and bit into it.

Magdalena narrowed her eyes at him with a grin. Pierce scowled back at her.

"I picked you out," she said in German. "When I saw you, I told my brother that you'd be perfect."

He almost felt sorry for her. Clearly, she had no one else but her halfwit brother who'd gotten her involved in a dangerous situation. The pair reminded him of himself and his brother when they'd been children. In any case, he had no intention of getting mixed up in their problems, no matter how much money they offered him.

He lowered the coin from his mouth and said, "Is that so? Then you are a poor judge of character, darling."

He shoved the coin purse into his pocket and reached for his bag, ready to leave the tavern when he heard someone say in French, "There you are, you little shit!"

A tall man with thick black muttonchops grabbed the girl by the arm. "Where is the money you stole from me? Tell me, or so help me . . ."

"Stop it! You're hurting me!" she cried.

"I want my money back," the man bellowed, raising a hand to strike her.

The man froze the moment Pierce shot up from his seat, a flintlock pistol pointed unerringly at his face.

"Get your hands off her, *monsieur*."

"This isn't your concern," the man hissed.

Realizing he was drawing attention to himself, he jabbed the muzzle under the man's chin and pushed him back. He slammed him against the nearby wall and struck him on the head with the gun. Then he hit him again and the man fell. To make certain he stayed down, Pierce whacked him a third time.

He grabbed his bag, ready to dart out of the building, when the girl called out to him, "Don't leave me, please!"

He stopped and looked at her. He just needed to get out the door, yet her large eyes held him in place.

"C'mon," he said.

She followed him out, passing her brother on the way.

“What happened?” the lad asked, holding a pint of ale in each hand.

“Let’s go,” Pierce grumbled.

Without argument, Hansel handed the drinks to the man closest to him and followed them out the door.

“All right,” Pierce said, hurrying away from the building, “I’ll help get you across the Channel and into a carriage headed for London. In the city, you’ll be able to blend in.”

“Thank you, sir!” Hansel said. “Thank you!”

Hansel gave Pierce money for tickets to board a ferry bound for England. They then separated while Pierce went to purchase their way across the Channel. After that, he met up with Hansel inside a small alehouse by the docks. Hansel bought a pint and came over to the table where Pierce sat, reading a book.

“The boat will depart in a half hour,” Pierce said without looking up.

“Thank you again for your help,” the young man said, placing the mug in front of him before taking a seat across the table.

“*Bitteschön*,” Pierce said petulantly.

“You speak German very well. Where did you learn it?”

“I spent some time in Germany.” Pierce flipped a page. “I picked up some phrases here and there. Enough to get by. But it was a woman who taught me how to speak it.”

“Was she your paramour?”

“In a way she was, I reckon. But that was years ago.”

Frederica Katz passed through his thoughts. Never could he forget the sanctuary she’d offered him when he’d been a young outlaw and she an aspiring actress. He missed her and hoped she was doing well.

“Really?” Hansel said, shifting his eyes around.

“Aye,” he said before taking notice of the missing girl. “Where’s the other one? We ought to stay together.”

Hansel folded his hands on the table and grinned widely. When Pierce saw the foreboding look on his face, the bad feeling returned.

“You know where I learned German?” the youth asked in an English accent as he stood up. “My mother was German.”

Pierce realized the danger instantly. He shot up from his chair the moment footsteps surrounded him. He grabbed for his pistol, but the gun never left its holster before it was seized from his hand and he was shoved face down on the table, a hand gripping the nape of his neck. Another person took his arms and pulled them behind his back, where cold iron clamped around his wrists. Fingers went through his pockets, finding weapons and whatever else he had. Someone ordered him to stop fidgeting.

Christ, who are these people?

They weren’t royal guards, that was certain. They wouldn’t have set a trap to catch him; they would have simply ambushed him back at the inn. Bounty-hunters, perhaps?

Once he was secured in manacles, he was hoisted up from the table and turned to the tall man with muttonchops who’d attacked the girl. His face was battered from where Pierce had struck him. Pierce really didn’t like that he was the one holding the gun on him.

“Let’s see if you’re really him, eh?” the man said, unwinding the scarf from around Pierce’s neck and tossing it to the floor. “Aye, it’s Landcross for sure.”

“Pierce Landcross,” the young man known as Hansel said. “My name is Archie Norwich and you’re coming with us.”

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