

"No one knows how they obtained their powers. Some speculated that they came from another plane of existence, perhaps one that no longer exists. One in which they may have destroyed themselves. They were destructive creatures and were in need of a new home. They found it here where they declared themselves gods . . ."

—The Teller of Forgotten Tales

Finding a Place to Call Home

Off the Shores of England, Summer, 1652

Only when the coarse grains of sand touched his lips, did the boy feel safe again.

Joaquin's travels led him nonstop from Teruel, Spain and then through France. He snuck aboard a ferryboat in Calais to cross over into England. An abrupt storm had nearly brought the vessel down. The boat landed miles from Dover, but it anchored nonetheless.

When Joaquin's feet touched shore, he dropped to his knees, cupped sand into his hands and kissed it.

Reluctant to travel by sea anymore, the twelve-year-old set off inland. Joaquin ventured for many lengths on foot, taking in the beauty of this new country.

On the night he ran away from the *Esperanza y Milagros* Orphanage, he had journeyed until morning. He found the freedom invigorating. His first experience being on his own changed him. He was no longer the little boy trapped behind the walls of abandoned children. He had set himself free in the big wide world and he wanted nothing more than to continue moving in it.

In England, he hitched rides or traveled on foot, feeding off muskrats or chicken eggs he stole from chicken coops. Joaquin roamed aimlessly through the countryside. The orphanage was stock full of short-tempered nuns who demanded absolute obeisance. Out here, though, he could scream, laugh, dance and even play his violin whenever he pleased.

The stringed instrument, crafted by the Amati family, had been left by the man who'd brought him to the orphanage when Joaquin was only a newborn. Sister Paula, the nun who had answered the door that night, described him as only being a handsome young gringo that spoke Spanish. The violin prompted Joaquin believe that his parents were musicians.

Joaquin often asked himself if he had been his father and always hoped he'd someday come back for him. He also wondered why he had abandoned him at the orphanage. Had his mother died while giving birth and his father refused to raise the child alone? Or had it been his own mother who gave him up? Such questions used to angrier him because no one could answer them. No note was left for Joaquin like some of the other orphaned children. To keep these answerless questions from tearing him apart, he put his woes into his music.

He practiced every chance he got, which wasn't often inside the orphanage unless he performed for the nuns, songs like *Jesu Corona Virginum* or other religious hymns. Yet, despite the limited time given, he played remarkably well. In fact, he caused those hard-hearted women to weep. How he orchestrated so elegantly at such a young age with minimal practice? No one knew. The nuns believed it was a gift from God.

His only belongings comprised the violin and the clothes he wore. During the choppy journey across the Channel, the instrument had gotten damaged. The tailpiece had cracked, snapping a string. Before it broke, he had, what the British called, busk, to earn

money in the towns he passed. Even so, the damage hadn't prevented him from playing when alone. The music helped cope with his loneliness. By leaving, Joaquin had granted his freedom, but it also left him unaided, especially during the night.

He wished for a family.

At dusk, Joaquin made camp underneath an ancient arch bridge. Joaquin had learned to build a fire by using a bow drill he made from the broken string of his violin.

Rain fell by the time he got the fire going. He brought out the instrument. The soothing melody also kept his mind off his hunger. He became lost in the harmonious sounds coming from the strings humming by his ear as it took him to a wondrous world of magic and life.

As he sank into this pleasant region, a voice said, "*¿Puedo unirme a ustedes?*"

Joaquin jumped right out of his fantasy and yanked back into reality. His heart halted when seeing a woman standing under the edge of the bridge. She was dressed in a dark green cape with a black scarf wrapped around her neck. Her pale face glowed and her lengthily curly hair draped past her waist.

She seemed untouched by the downpour.

She repeated her request to join him.

"Um . . . um . . ." he mumbled, unable to thread together a complete sentence.

"*Gracias,*" she thanked regardless and approached the campfire. She sat on her haunches by the flame and folded her hands on her lap. "What a lovely fire you have built."

She didn't look Spanish, but she spoke the language.

When he kept silent, she tilted her head sideways.

"Are you a mute?"

Joaquin strained to recover from the shock of her presence.

He cleared his throat. "No. I speak. I . . . I wasn't expecting company."

"I'm surprised, considering this welcoming fire." She raised her hands to it. "It warms you up rather nicely."

It seemed strange to him how dry she was. Even if she had a parasol—which she hadn't—there would've still been a few droplets on her.

The rain fell harder, pounding the ground and cascading down into the rising brook that the overpass arched over.

The lady reached into a sack that suddenly appeared. "You look hungry."

His curiously of where the bag came from left the moment she brought out bread with cuts of meat and cheese wedged in between them. She handed the food over.

"Here you go."

"*Muchas gracias!*" he exclaimed, accepting it.

He could not eat it fast enough. The taste danced over his tongue better than anything he had before. Everything from the tender meat, to cheese, to the sesame seeds embedded in the soft sweet bread, seemed as if it was prepared by the best baker, butcher, and cheese maker, who ever lived.

It was the most he'd eaten at one sitting. The orphanage always served enough to keep bellies half full and not a scrap more. Finding food on his own hadn't been like dining at a banquet, either. With such a small stomach, it surprised him that he ate the entire sandwich.

"My, my," the woman observed, "you *were* hungry. Drink this."

From a bottle, she poured red liquid into a cup. More items that just appeared.

He took it and gulped it down. Wine. He recognized the flavor from Sunday Mass, though this wine exceeded in quality far more.

"Not so fast," she advised, reclaiming the cup. "You will end up falling asleep before playing me your violin."

"Play my violin?"

"Sí. I heard you a little while ago."

He picked up the instrument. "I suppose I do owe you for feeding me."

"You owe me nothing, child," she stated. "I only wish to hear your song. If you're too tired—"

"No, *señorita*," he blurted, propping the instrument onto his shoulder. "I would love to play for you."

He met the bow with the remaining strings and glided it over them.

The universe of warmth engulfed him. The wet and the chill melted, his chest filling with a pleasant sensation he could only distinguish as love. The sound—although incomplete by the missing string—whisked away the corrosiveness of the nun faces that stained his memory and filled the emptiness of abandonment with a passion for propose. His melody lifted him to another level of living that he could only experience through his violin.

The song ended when it needed to. The real world watered out his fairytale land like slashes of water washing paint from a perfect portrait. He opened his eyes to the cool moist air. To his relief, the woman remained.

"That was the most beautiful melody I have ever heard," she praised with genuine affection in her tone.

"*Gracias, señorita.*" Joaquin returned the violin to its case. "It would sound much better if all the strings worked."

"It still took you to your special little world, did it not?"

He snapped his head to her.

"How do you know that? Who are you?"

She offered a wide smile.

"Like most living creatures, I've evolved from being one thing to another. When I first existed, I was just a tiny drop of water that once nourished a seed. Then I grew into a cherry tree. When the tree died, I became a cherry. After I was eaten by a bird, I, too, was reborn as a bird. I will not bore you with *everything* I have been, but instead, I'll tell you what I am now."

"What?"

“I am here. With you.”

He didn’t know what to make of that.

“Um. Do you have a name?”

“Orenda. My name is Orenda. What is yours?”

“Joaquin. At least, it is what the man who took me to the orphanage said. I may have another.”

“No. You look like a Joaquin.”

He became drowsy and yawned deeply.

“I told you not to drink so fast. Before you fall asleep, let me tell you where to go, special boy.”

“Special boy? What is special about an abandoned nobody such as me?”

Orenda frowned.

“Your parents were fools to give you up and are still foolish for not coming to claim you now.”

“Qué? Do you know my parents?”

“I do. And most likely, *you* may never, for it is not my place to get involved in family affairs.”

“You won’t tell me? Then why come?”

Although unsure what Orenda was, it became clear he wasn’t in the presence of another human.

“I already explained about my reason for my visit. Your fire and beautiful music caught my attention. And since you have played for me, I shall, in turn, help you. At dawn, go east until you reach the woodland, and keep going. Within the thicket, you’ll find people who will repair your violin.”

“What people?”

“You shall see when you meet them.”

“And they’ll fix it?” he asked, looking down at the case. “What if they want money? I have none.”

“Rest now, child.”

She placed her hand on his cheek and he nestled into her warm palm. He closed his eyes and fell fast asleep.

The morning chill got him stirring. He lifted his stiff body, smelling the soot of last night’s fire, mixing in with the moisture in the air. He wrapped himself tight in his ratty coat and was about to stand when he noticed something resting upon his violin case. Coins. Two farthings to be exact.

He remembered the woman.

The woman named Orenda.

She told him to head east and so east was where he went. He traveled for a while under England’s grey sky until reaching the wooded area. He pushed on and eventually smelt meat cooking before he saw them—a man and woman. A buggy stood off to the side of the narrow road that cut through the forest. The corpse of a recently dead horse laid in front

of the cart. Bright greying hair covered the animal's face and muzzle. Joaquin assumed it died of old age.

A shaggy dog with long matted fur, barked at him. The man looked up from the Dutch oven where he stood, stirring. The woman turned away from the shirt she held up to a clothesline. The Englishman conveyed something to Joaquin that he couldn't comprehend. He only spoke a little French and even less English.

"*Yo soy Joaquín*," he introduced himself. "*Yo soy de España*."

The man arched an eyebrow curiously and approached.

He stopped in the middle of the road and uttered, "English?"

Joaquin surmised he wanted to know if he spoke English and so shook his head. The woman joined the man. She, like him, was dressed in rags, her face smooth, and a bit dirty. The couple was young, in their late teens, early twenties perhaps.

She smiled at the boy and asked him a question he again couldn't understand save for a single word: *help*.

He brought out his violin from its case and held it up. The man expressed more confusion. He glanced at the woman and then stepped over to Joaquin. He gripped the instrument and studied it.

"Fix," Joaquin guessed at the right word.

"Fix?"

Joaquin reached into his pocket and presented the farthings.

"Fix," he repeated, holding out the coins.

When they saw, their mouths gaped with surprise.

"Oh, Harvey," the woman said.

They didn't take the money, instead, the man named Harvey nodded.

"I will fix," Harvey promised in three rare words Joaquin understood.

While Harvey worked to repair the violin, Joaquin played with the bushy dog. He never engaged with an animal before in this fashion. Both boy and canine shared a lot of energy. They ran together and wrestled. Joaquin never had so much fun. The couple watched him from time to time, seemingly amused.

When the food was ready, they invited him to join them. The stew they had cooked comprised chopped carrots, cabbage, and chunks of horse meat.

After they ate, Joaquin helped clean up while Harvey resumed repairing his violin. By evening, he had finished the job. The instrument appeared new again. It turned out Harvey was a born craftsman who utilized his talents to support him and his young wife, Cerys. Then their mount died, leaving them stuck with no means to buy another one. All this, Joaquin gathered as they used different techniques to communicate.

It was getting late, and so, they offered him to stay overnight. He accepted. After dinner, he played them his violin. It sounded like its true self again, *better*, in fact. Harvey had tuned the new string just right, filling in the emptiness that the missing string once provided.

They allowed him to sleep in the buggy with them. Cerys even tucked him in. The dog settled down beside him and Joaquin slept with his arm draped over the mutt. It was the best night of his life.

Morning came too soon for Joaquin. He rather liked these people and didn't want to leave them. With his violin repaired, however, he fingered they wanted their money.

He handed over the farthings. They accepted it, but their faces were anything but pleased. Joaquin wondered if it was enough.

When he began leaving, Cerys called to him, "Joaquin, wait!"

He stopped as she and Harvey rushed to him.

In one word, Harvey told him, "Stay."

That took Joaquin aback.

"*Qué?*"

"Aye," Cerys said. "With us."

The lines of commutations were thin between them, yet he saw it in their longing expressions their desired for him to be with them.

A family? he thought.

Yes. And being in a family meant he needed to contribute. Joaquin suggested leaving the buggy behind and travel on foot to nearby towns and villages where he would play for money. Harvey offered the villagers any repair work needed. It also turned out that Cerys was a marvelous dancer and she would dance to Joaquin's violin in the street. In a few weeks' time, they had earned enough for a proper carriage horse.

With their home mobilized once again, the family traveled throughout England, using their talents to get them by. After crossing over miles of land, Joaquin came up with a last name for himself. Soon after, the trio joined up with a Gypsy troupe, and from there they built their own community.

Harvey and Cerys had children of their own, and as time passed, Joaquin fell in love with a girl. They married and had many children together.

Joaquin gave up wondering who his parents were or why they had left him, for he no longer cared. He had found the love and warmth that his music brought him to.

Joaquin *Cruce de Tierras* lived the rest of his days a happy man.

Chapter One

Sonora Mexico

Autumn, 1843

Pierce Landcross couldn't remain on the ground. Not if he wanted to live. He worked to set himself up against the rock. The wound to his shoulder made it difficult to move or to breathe. Darkness surrounded him. Blood slid down his arm and back.

Thankfully, he had managed to hold on to his gun when he was shot. He needed it more than ever, especially as the light of a fire drew closer.

Days earlier . . .

After a month and two weeks at sea, the *Ekta* had reached the seaside city of Guaymas. The ship sailed on by and up the coast another mile where the vessel turned and went over a waterway path cutting between tall rocky cliffs. A cavern waited at the end and it was where the *Ekta* dropped anchor. The crew took longboats through the cave where other Apaches stood guard inside.

Before the darkness slid completely over the boats, Pierce looked over to his wife, Taisia Landcross. He held her hand in his and placed the other on her slightly protruding belly.

“Are you all right?”

It was a question he asked her daily. That and *how are you feeling and do you need anything?* Taisia had carried her pregnancy well during the voyage. She experienced very little sickness and maintained a normal appetite.

“I am fine,” she said in her Russian accent. “I’m only a bit nervous about meeting the tribe.”

Pierce slowly slid his hand down the side of her soft face and then leaned over to kiss her.

“No worries,” he assured as everything went black save for the lanterns inside the boat. “The chief wouldn’t bring us if it weren’t safe.” He again touched her stomach. “And I’d kill a thousand buggers before I let anyone harm you or our child.”

She smiled lovingly at him through the dim glow of the lantern. “You are a poet, Pierce Landcross.”

He glanced behind him where the silhouettes of his folks and grandmother followed in another longboat. His own life had become richer ever since he found them.

The group drifted onward toward the opening ahead. The longboats entered a large basin, surrounded by tall rocky walls. The Water Bowl was what the Apache called it. The only other way out was a path that started at the very back of the pool where a few natives waited on a boulder. The leading boat that Chief Sea Wind and his wife, Waves of

Strength, traveled in, tossed up their rope to the awaiting tribesmen. Once the boat was steady enough, Waves of the Strength stepped out onto stairs, carved into the side of the boulder. Once everyone was out of the longboat, the greeting party pulled the watercraft alongside the rock to tie off on trees that grew from cracks in the stone.

As the rope to Pierce and Taisia's boat was tossed up, the chief spoke to one of the greeters who then took off up the trail. When everyone joined together, they, too, headed upslope on the well-worn path created solely by the feet of those who climbed the rocks for years.

The sun brutally burned in the cloudless sky. Nowhere on earth had Pierce traveled to had he experienced such dry relentless heart. He feared for his pregnant wife.

"I'm fine," she again reassured him. "Just hold my hand."

And he did, all the way up until they crested the top where the ground leveled off. The flat desert plain stretched for what seemed like forever. It was blanketed by sand with puffs of green shrubbery and in the distance, tall jagged mountains.

They walked a mile or so to the Apache village. Chief Sea Wind had already informed Pierce about the type of lodgings the Apache lived in. Dome structures constructed right from the dirt called Hogan houses. The Apache village had many Hogan huts. There was also a herd of horses by a river where youngsters played in the water while mothers washed clothing. Men and women were making pottery or preparing food. Under the shade of an open wooden structure, people rolled flour patties over flat stones, and putting, what Chief Sea Wind called acorn cakes, into horno ovens.

The first ones to greet the approaching party was a young boy, who rushed toward them while yelling out in Apache.

"Tarak!" Sees Beyond shouted.

She ran to him and lifted the boy into her arms. She twirled him around once as they embraced each other tightly. A young man soon joined her. He was a handsome gent with dark skin and long brown hair. Pierce reckoned he was Sees Beyond's husband, Mohin. He kissed Sees Beyond and the three hugged in a perfect unified moment.

Others approached to greet their returning loved ones or to see the foreigners they had brought with them. Waiting in the center of the village was a man and woman. The man wore a lengthy-feathered headdress, tunic pants, a white shirt and a dark vest. He had lines of red and black ink painted on both his cheeks. He appeared older than time itself, with deep creases carved into his dark hardwood face. His eyes were squinted so narrowly they weren't even seen. The woman standing beside him, whose pigment was a hair lighter than his, had very long gray hair, braided over her shoulder. She wore a beaded buckskin dress.

Waves of Strength spoke to them before embracing the elderly woman. They parted and kissed each other on both sides of their faces in a European fashion. Chief Sea Wind grasped the older man's forearm and they shook. They spoke amongst themselves in their language for a moment and as they did, Pierce eyed the river, tempted to go take a dip.

"Landcross," called the chief.

Pierce and his family approached the four.

Chief Sea Wind turned his focus to his friend. "Pierce Landcross, this is Chief Victorio and his wife, Nascha."

Pierce took off his top hat and held it behind him as he placed a hand on his chest and slightly bowed to them in a humble greeting.

Pierce was informed that the tribes—like most native tribes in the Sonora area—were bilingual in French and Spanish. Since Pierce, as well as the rest of his family, were flaunted French speakers, communication wasn't going to be an issue.

"*Bonjour. Heureux de vous rencontrer,*" Pierce said.

"Mother, Father," Waves of Strength said to the chief and Nascha. "This is Landcross's wife Taisia, his mother, Nona, father, Jasper, and grandmother, Élie Fey."

Bloody hell, Pierce thought grimly. *Are they her parents? Splendid.*

A bit of information he wished he had beforehand. After shooting their daughter in arse, Pierce wondered just how welcomed they would be in the village.

After the pleasantries ended, they were brought to Chief Victorio's hut for food and much-needed water. It was stifling inside. The only difference from the outside was that the sun wasn't beating down on them. Everyone took a seat around a fire pit under an open circle directly above them. Pierce set himself beside Taisia, who was next to his mother. Nona sat between Jasper and Grandmother Fey. Chief Sea Wind and Waves of Strength took their place with Chief Victorio and Nascha across the way.

"We will keep the conversation in French," Chief Victorio announced to the group.

"*Merci,*" Grandmother Fey said.

"How was your journey?" Nascha asked her daughter.

"The voyage fared well, Mother" Waves of Strength replied. "We made it through the Atlantic and the Gulf without trouble."

"That is good to hear, Ela," her mother said.

"I am no longer Ela," Waves of Strength moaned. "Not for many years now."

Nascha pinched her daughter's cheek. "Ela is such a beautiful name."

Pierce snickered, which caused Waves of Strength's face to burn red. Her sharp irritated look was dangerous enough to slice his head clean off.

Nascha turned her attention to Grandmother Fey. "Are you French?"

"*Oui.* I was born in Le Mans. Were you born here?"

"Arizona, then we traveled to New Mexico and parts of Texas before making our journey to Chihuahua. We arrived here many years ago."

"You have traveled long distances," Grandmother Fey noted.

"We are forced to."

"I see," Grandmother Fey whispered somberly. "I'm sorry."

Nascha smiled warmly at her. "You're a good-natured woman. I can sense that about you."

A handful of natives entered, carrying in food and cups of water. Pierce looked at the stack of acorn cakes. It was a simple dish, and a most welcomed one at that. He looked

over to Taisia, wondering if she'd feel like eating it. He'd seen pregnant women becoming violently ill at the sight of food.

Before he could ask, Taisia had already taken a bite. She closed her eyes as she chewed, letting out a slight moan that only he heard. Confidant, she was fine, he began eating.

"Pierce Landcross," Chief Victorio voiced as the others left.

"Sir," Pierce responded, straightened his spine as much as his vertebrae allowed.

Usually, Pierce was the informal sort who referred to people by their first name. Chief Victorio struck Pierce as one who didn't necessarily demand respect, but rather someone for whom admiration was easily given.

"We have heard much about you, young man," Chief Victorio said. "We've been told you're an outlaw in the Far East."

Pierce eyed Waves of Strength, for he suspected she had told them.

"I was pardoned," Pierce explained.

The chief's attention shifted over to Taisia. "And your wife. Is she a free woman?"

Pierce understood why he wanted to know. The magnitude of inhuman cruelty inflicted on the Africans for the past two hundred years was still carrying on in the American south lands.

"I have always been a free woman, Chief Victorio," Taisia answered for herself. "No one will ever own me."

Pierce grinned widely at her. "Oui. If anything, she owns me."

She slapped him on the arm. "I do not. Stop that!"

Everyone laughed.

After dinner, Waves of Strength and Nascha took Taisia, Nona, and Grandmother Fey away to show them where they were going to sleep, while the men stayed behind.

"How far along is your wife?" Chief Victorio queried, stuffing tobacco into a long wooden pipe.

"She's only two months, Chief," Pierce answered.

The old chief's thin lips rose at the corners. "Children are a blessing. Cherish them, Landcross."

"I intend to, sir."

Chief Sea Wind slightly bowed his head. His expression somber.

"What is the matter, Captain Sea Wind?" Jasper inquired.

The chief raised his chin to him. "Not all can have little ones to cherish."

Pierce had known for some time that Chief Sea Wind and Waves of Strength were unable to conceive. Sees Beyond had once told Pierce about how Heals of Nature informed that neither of them could produce children. A cruel coincidence.

"Let us smoke," Chief Victorio said, striking a match.

Nothing much else was discussed as they passed the pipe around. Jasper, not used to smoking, coughed. Pierce expected to do the same, yet strangely when he filled his lungs with smoke there was a familiar sensation which ignited a certain pleasure. This was the first time Pierce ever smoked tobacco, and yet it was as if his body was welcoming an old

friend. When he had partaken in Juan Fan's opium den, it brought no sort of recollection such as this. He ignored it and passed the pipe on.

"We are united as peaceful beings," Chief Victorio announced.

* * *

Night thankfully arrived, taking the sun out of the sky and dropping the temperature as it went. The Apache tribe held a welcoming celebration for their guests. The hunters returned with mule deer, enough to feed the whole village. As the meat and other dishes were being prepared, Pierce helped start up the bonfire before joining Taisia on the blanket where she sat nearby.

"Are you well, love?" he asked, sitting next to her.

"I am now that the day is ended," she said, leaning up against him.

"Aye, it was brutal."

"I fear I shall be spending most days inside our stuffy house when I cannot withstand the heat."

Pierce glanced down at her clothing. Like his, it was tailored with heavy European fabrics. She had changed into a new dress before their voyage across the Atlantic, but it didn't change the fact that the gown wasn't equipped for the desert clement.

"I'll go into Guaymas tomorrow and get us some supplies and new clothing," he told her. "Chief Sea Wind has loads of pesos it turns out."

She lifted away and twisted around to look at him.

"You are such a good man, Pierce Landcross."

"You're my wife, and I, your husband. It's our job to look after each other," he told her tenderly.

They kissed and Taisia nestled back against him.

"Besides," he went on, "if I don't get Mum some tea to drink in the morning, I doubt we'll survive through the week."

Taisia snorted. "I'm sure. It appears Grandmother Fey and Nascha have taken a liking to each other."

Sitting on the other side of the bonfire was the women, chatting and laughing. It was a pleasant sight to see Grandmother Fey enjoying herself with someone other than family.

"Aye," he agreed simply.

A group of kiddies came up to them. Among them was Sees Beyond's son, Tarak.

"Ello, Tarak," Pierce greeted in English, for Sees Beyond had taught him.

"Hello, Mr. Landcross," the lad said politely. "Mother has told me a lot about you."

A prideful smirk played across his face. "Eh? And what did she say?"

"She said you have the same brand symbol we use to mark our horses."

His smirk dropped. "Did she now?"

"Can we see?" Tarak requested in French, so his mates could understand. "*S'il vous plait?*"

The rest of the little sods nodded viciously. Pierce didn't fancy the idea of showing off the scar birthed by a vengeful woman.

"Go on," Taisia urged unhelpfully. "Show them."

He shifted a disapproving glare at her which did nothing to lower her grin.

"Please, Mr. Landcross," Tarak pleaded again.

Pierce felt his back pressing against a corner.

"Right. Fine."

He unbuttoned a couple of his shirt buttons and pulled his lapel away. The children leaned in close to get a better look, some pushing each other.

"It's true!" a girl declared. "He has been branded like our ponies. He's our *Ligai Thii*!"

The children laughed.

"Lig- what?" Pierce asked.

"*Ligai Thii*," repeated Tarak. "It means, white horse. You've been branded by our symbol, so it's almost as if you belong to us."

Pierce remembered when Waves of Strength had fried his flesh with that blasted brander, and afterward, she stated he was now Apache property.

"Grand," he grunted.