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Legacy

The Underground

“What I’ve created—it’s unlike anything that has been attempted before. “What I’ve created—it’s unlike anything that has been attempted before. What I’ve been able to accomplish—it will reshape the entire world more so than you can ever imagine.”

—Javier Saints

The Demon & the Babe

Teruel, Spain
Autumn, 1640

Thooranu crossed the streets of Teruel with his mistress's newborn cradled comfortably in his arms. The night air was cool and clear. The streets were vacant, like a newly abandoned city where time had not yet taken its toll on the infrastructure. It made for a nice stroll. If Thooranu wanted, he could simply appear at the doorstep of his destination, but he wanted this time to himself—even if he did have to carry the thing. The child, who had come into the world only a few hours ago, slept peacefully, wrapped in the blanket his Pegaeae nymph mother had kindly given him.

Although the boy wasn't technically human, he would be raised as one and live as a human until his death. The nymph had also decided to deliver the child in Spain, which made him a Spaniard, Thooranu supposed. Apparently, motherhood wasn't part of the bargain she had made with that bastard Trickster, Jack Pack. She had decided to get rid of her child immediately after his birth.

Temenitis had refused to let her sisters know she was with child. Too ashamed, Thooranu gathered—especially after sensing she was having a boy—so she had decided to give birth secretly. The inn she had chosen was a high-class establishment, well furnished and accommodating toward wealthy high society. Thooranu was there, of course. Her enslaved Cambion demon that she had used her body to buy from the Trickster. He had stood by the bed as she labored to push out this new life. He watched her naked form fondly. Her face twisted in anguish, bright red hair draped over her face, sweat sticking some of it to her smooth skin. Those long, perfect legs, spread open, her back arched, breasts aimed high. The muscles of her arms flexed and strained as they held her up. Thooranu had drunk the sight in with his eyes. Despite the disgusting act of childbearing, his mistress was an intensely beautiful creature. Sometimes, he would get lost in those violet eyes of hers.

Thooranu understood why Jack Pack had refused offers made by others for his possession just so he could fuck Temenitis. Jack Pack had enslaved Thooranu for a full year, during which time the Trickster searched for anyone willing to pay a high price for a demon. He could have gotten just about anything he wanted, but then came the day Jack Pack met a pretty little Pegaeae nymph while passing through her realm, and his lustful

nature had taken over. The Trickster made a deal with the pretty little Pegaeae nymph. She would lay with him in exchange for her very own slave demon.

Needless to say, she accepted.

Perhaps, if he behaved himself and pleased his mistress in every way she so desired, she'd release him at the end of the year when the contract expired.

With a final cry of pain, the babe crowned. Temenitis pushed hard and then pulled the baby from her body like a beast drawing a fish from the river. She held the naked babe away from her while breathing heavily.

"C-cut it, Thooranu."

He gripped the cord connecting mother to child and with his blade, severed it like a blood-filled noodle. Red liquid sprayed from it, but there was already blood and other bodily fluids soaking the bed. In the morning, a horrified hotel servant would get an unpleasant surprise.

Even with the cord cut, her arms stayed locked in place, holding the child away from her swollen breasts.

"Wrap him up and discard him out there, among the humans," she viciously ordered.

Thooranu did as he was told. He swaddled the newborn and left the hotel.

To stop the babe's belly from aching for lack of nourishment, Thooranu brought the infant to the one formerly known as the goddess of fertility. These days, she owned a brothel in Japan. He asked if she could spare some milk. Once the babe had had his fill, he fell fast asleep. The retired goddess had even cleaned the placenta still clinging to his tiny body and cut short the umbilical cord attached to his navel. Thooranu had offered the thing to her, but she merely sent the demon on his way.

Since he was the slave of a perfect being like Temenitis, he had admired her insatiably even as her belly grew with Jack Pack's offspring. Having a nymph as a mistress wasn't so bad. Mostly, he told her stories, though there were a few he hadn't wanted to share. Still, under her command, he had no choice. One secret tale he told was about the time he'd stolen a book from some very old gods, along with the death masks of three other deceased deities. At the time, young Thooranu was curious about a spell that was said to be designed to capture the Fates using the death masks as binding tools. However, after obtaining the objects, Thooranu grew bored with them and handed the book off to a scribe in Egypt, and then hid the masks away to avoid being caught with them by the gods.

The babe jerked. Thooranu looked down at the sleeping child. He almost felt sorry for the squishy brat. At least Thooranu's own human mother had raised him until she died of old age when he was only sixty—the equivalent of two in Cambion years. After her death, his Incubus father took him in.

The demon passed a music shop where stringed instruments hung upside down behind the storefront display window. He admired a violin.

Music was the universal language. A song possessed the ability to be understood by people of all different cultures and nationalities. Even ethereal beings couldn't deny the power that music held. It had existed longer than anyone knew. Songs set people's

emotions loose. It connected them, uplifted their spirits, brought out their tears, even encouraged them to kill.

With the babe's inherited bloodlines, learning to play an instrument such as the violin would be easy enough for him. Perhaps it was the human side of Thooranu, but he had the need to give this tiny, gassy being this gift.

He reached the *Esperanza y Milagros Orphanage* and knocked vigorously until a nun answered. When she spied the babe, she knew exactly the reason for his late-night visit.

"Is the child yours?" she asked.

"Take him," he said, holding the babe out to her.

"Children raised by a parent are happier ones," she noted before her expression turned cross. "Even if they are a bad parent."

Her words did nothing to curb his mood, although it helped him understand why so many people simply left their abandoned children on the doorstep rather than wait for the nuns to answer the door.

"Take the brat or he can stay out here in the cold until he falls ill and dies."

She considered him, perhaps to determine just how serious he was. She also seemed to sense something else about Thooranu. He could taste it. As a dedicated servant of the newest deity to have claimed the beliefs of so many—even more so than the ones who had come before—she was sensitive to Thooranu's demonic side, no matter how human he was allowing himself to appear at the moment. He could tell she was questioning whether what she felt was true, and after a brief debate, dismissed it altogether.

"I was mistaken," she said, raising her arms to accept the babe.

"This belongs to him," Thooranu added, holding up the violin case that he had taken from the shop. "It is for this child, and this child alone."

She took the case by its handle and studied it.

"What is it?"

"A violin. When the time comes, he shall play it. And if he is adopted, his surrogate parents will give the violin to him."

Using his ability to manipulate minds, he stared her in the eye, instilling his desire for the boy to have this instrument. It was easy enough.

"I will make sure nothing happens to the violin, and I will give it only to this child when he is ready to have it."

"Splendid," he said with a tip of his hat. "Good evening, *señorita*."

Glad to have passed the thing onto someone else, he turned to leave when she called to him. "Does the child have a name?"

He halted and thought on the question. Strangely, a name came to mind. "Joaquin."

Thooranu left, never to be seen again by anyone at the orphanage.

That night, he returned to Temenitis and his hopes for a short-lived imprisonment.

Chapter One

November

*Leeds, England,
Autumn, 1833*

When he heard the gunshot blast, Pierce realized they weren't alone.

"I'll kill every one of you wretched thieves!" a man bellowed from the darkness.

The house the group had broken into was thought to be vacant—at least, according to Luca Smith, who had supposedly staked out the place. It turned out that the owner of the house was not only there, but also his teenage sons—every one of them armed.

After a brief shootout in the pitch-blackness, Joaquin grabbed Pierce by the wrist and pulled him along.

"Get out!" he ordered, pushing him toward the open window they'd come in through.

Pierce didn't want to leave without his brother, yet Joaquin nearly shoved him out. When Pierce landed on the lawn outside, he sprang to his feet and helped Joaquin as he clambered out.

"Let me go!" one of their group shouted from inside.

"John!" Pierce cried.

"C'mon," Joaquin said, again snatching Pierce by the arm and yanking him toward the horses, waiting at the forest's edge.

He had no time to decide for himself whether he wanted to return for John or not. Within seconds, he was saddled up on his mount.

"Go!" Joaquin demanded, smacking Pierce's horse on its hindquarters.

The animal charged off into the darkness, and soon, Joaquin rode up alongside him. "Keep going."

A tiny bead of light eventually appeared—a single lit lantern hanging in a tree to mark the meeting point. Luca Smith, and his cousin, Giles Summerfield, were already there.

"Jesus, we were just about done for back there," Luca said.

"What the bloody hell?" Pierce spouted off at him. "You fuckin' told us the house was clear!"

"It was supposed to be," Luca returned hotly.

"S'posed to be?" Pierce seethed, dismounting. "I think you got your bloody days mixed up." He yanked Luca off his mount and pushed him to the ground. "You nearly got us killed!"

Pierce wasn't exaggerating. Luca had a tarnished reputation for misleading the group. This time, it cost Pierce a dear friend.

Pierce punched him and although Luca got in a few good licks of his own, Pierce's boosted anger earned him the upper hand. Before Pierce could bash his face into dust, someone hoisted him back.

"Get off 'im!" Giles yelled, pinning Pierce's arms under his own.

With his torso left vulnerable, Pierce reckoned that once Luca got up, he'd either shoot him or jab him with a knife. As Luca staggered to his feet, Pierce threw his head back, slamming the base of his skull against Giles's face.

"Ouch!"

Pierce wiggled out of his grasp, but not before Luca had reached for his gun. Pierce pulled his own weapon.

"Enough!" Joaquin commanded, jumping into the middle of the two. "Stand down, Luca."

Luca relaxed, but not completely until Pierce lowered his gun.

"We need to go back for John." Pierce holstered his weapon and rubbed the sore spot behind his head.

"Most likely dead by now." Giles touched his forehead.

"Aye," Luca agreed. "We ought to clear out."

Pierce narrowed his eyes at the pair.

"There's a chance he's being held by the homeowner. We can't leave him behind to be picked up by the authorities. He'll be hanged."

"Better him than us," Giles returned.

"We don't leave family behind," Pierce argued.

"We're not the bloody Gypsies you grew up with, Landcross," Luca pointed out. "Each of us needs to look after our own skin."

Luca and Pierce had butted heads ever since he and Giles joined up with him and Joaquin. Luca had no seniority and thus, it wasn't his decision to make.

"John is *my* mate, and we're going back for him. Right, Joaquin?"

"We can't!" Giles hollered in a panic. "We'll be shot dead or captured."

"He's right, Joaquin," Luca concurred. "Going back is suicide. There's three of them inside the house, with who knows how many guns."

"We're going." Pierce grabbed his brother by the arm. "C'mon, let's go."

"Don't do this, Joaquin," Luca exclaimed. "You'll endanger us all!"

Pierce again tugged on Joaquin's arm. "Let's go."

He found it odd that Joaquin wasn't doing more to support him. Perhaps he wasn't too keen on the idea, himself, but even so, the Landcross brothers had always stuck together, no matter what. However, Joaquin had been acting strangely ever since they had left Lepe a few weeks ago.

Pierce yanked hard on Joaquin's arm, and it was the last thing he did before a fist crashed across his face. The impact sent him to the ground. It happened so fast. His teeth rattled like broken pebbles inside his mouth.

He glared at Luca, but when he sat up, ready for a fight, Joaquin yelled, "Stay down!"

Pierce froze in place, utterly gobsmacked by his brother's command. "Joaquin?"

Joaquin stood over him with fists clenched. In the low light of the lantern, Pierce noticed something strange about his brother's eyes. Perhaps it was simply a trick of the firelight, but it seemed like red oil was spilling from them. Luca and Giles stood, gawking, for they were just as astonished by Joaquin's actions as Pierce was.

"Joaquin, what are you doing?" Pierce asked.

He gave no response, only loomed over his brother with murder in his oily eyes. Things only got worse when Luca and Giles finally recovered from their shocked stupor, and joined Joaquin at his side like his loyal soldiers.

"Take care of 'im," Luca said forebodingly.

"Steady now, Joaquin," Pierce said, raising his hand. "It's me, your brother, remember?"

Joaquin didn't seem to recognize him anymore, and Pierce saw it when he unsheathed his knife.

It was a moment Pierce Landcross would never escape from, not even in dreams. Joaquin snatched the gun from him before Pierce pulled it, and then placed the knife against the soft tissue of his throat before moving it across. The treachery tore at him more than the skin that ripped away. Luca and Giles laughed wickedly like greeters at the entrance of Purgatory. The brother's bond was severed. Joaquin was no longer there, only a sinister stranger splitting apart his flesh with his dull, jagged blade.

Who are you?

* * *

Pierce shot up, gasping, holding his throat with a hand that trembled uncontrollably. The scar pressed against his fingers. He rose from the blanket he and Taisia were lying upon inside Indigo Peachtree's attic and slipped out from underneath the other blanket that covered them. Unable to return to sleep, he left the attic and crept barefoot downstairs. The ache in his leg from falling through the floor inside the stone mill, kicked up, forcing him to limp. Despite the pain, his skills as a thief had made him as silent as a cat. He made it through the house without disturbing Indigo in his room, his grandmother in the guest bedroom, or anyone else sound asleep in the small living room.

He left through the back door. The sight of the tall man standing in the backyard, gazing toward the meadow beyond the brook, stopped Pierce at the doorway.

"I had this dream a few days ago," the man said, keeping his back to Pierce. "At least, I think it was a dream. A voice told me to come here."

He turned around and Pierce gasped at the sight of him.

"Joaquin?" he said softly.

"I . . . I think I'm dying, little brother."

Morning light had yet to make a full appearance. Pierce could see him, though—or, rather, what was left of him. Joaquin appeared to be a shell of his former self, as if the real Joaquin had shed his old shell like a cicada beetle. His face appeared heavily bruised, as if he'd taken a good whupping, with black veins showing like twisted tree branches just beneath his discolored complexion. The brightness of his eyes had paled to a sickly green. The eyes themselves had sunken deep within their sockets. But what alarmed Pierce the most was how thin Joaquin was. He had wasted away to nothing more than a scrap of meat clinging to bone, with no real muscle or fat in between. His grey leather uniform, the same one he'd worn the last time Pierce had seen him, now hung off his body like an oversized sack.

"Dying? Christ, Joaquin, what's happening to you?"

Pierce honestly couldn't think of what he should do. Joaquin needed help, but the fear Pierce held toward him remained. What was to stop him from trying something should Pierce get too close?

The shuffling of feet came up behind him. From a sideways glance, Pierce spied Grandmother Fey.

"Are you speaking to someone?" she asked as he moved aside from the doorway.

"Aye. It's . . ."

"Joaquin," she cut in, her face aglow. "You came!"

Pierce tilted his head sideways. "Eh? You were expecting him?"

"*Oui*. I summoned him here through the passageway of dreams."

What Joaquin had said about the voice suddenly became clear. Grandmother Fey had called him.

She rushed over and instantly placed her hands upon Joaquin's face. Pierce took a cautious step forward, worried about what he might do to her.

"Do I know you?" Joaquin asked her.

She looked at him with great concern. In a voice drenched with love, she said, "*Oui, petit-fils*. I'm Élie Fey, your grandmother."

"Grandmother Fey? I . . . I thought you died."

His legs wobbled. Grandmother Fey needed to hold him up.

"Let's get you inside."

She walked him toward the back door. If his fear hadn't kept him at bay, Pierce would have helped. It seemed, though, it didn't matter either way, for his grandmother held him just fine on her own. It was a complete change from the frail old woman he had first encountered in the Netherlands.

Pierce moved aside, keeping his eyes on Joaquin before following them both into the dimly lit kitchen. Grand-mother Fey led Joaquin to the breakfast nook in the corner of the room. By the time he took a seat, Joaquin was drenched with sweat. Cold sweat, judging by his shivers.

Grandmother Fey walked by Pierce, heading for the stove.

“What’s wrong with him?” he whispered.

She shook her head worriedly. “I’m not sure, yet. It’s not good, though.”

While Grandmother Fey fired up a burner and put the kettle on, Pierce moved to the doorway across the way and leaned on the wall beside it with his arms crossed. Joaquin sat upright a moment before stretching his arm across the table and laying his head down. Despite himself, Pierce worried for him.

Even when Joaquin didn’t look like the walking undead, the two brothers had shared little resemblance. Pierce stood a couple of inches shorter, and his hair was multi-colored in shades of auburn, golden brown, and black with highlights of red, just like his mother’s, while Joaquin favored their father in height as well as his blackish-brown hair color. Pierce also appeared a tad younger than he actually was, unlike Joaquin, who looked his age . . . when not so sickly.

“What’s going on?” Archie inquired with a deep yawn.

Pierce turned to his friend as he appeared in the doorway. “My brother is here.”

Archie went from sleepy eyes to wide eyes. He peered into the kitchen.

“What’s happened to him?” he whispered.

Pierce shrugged. “Dunno.”

Grandmother Fey poured water from a jug into the kettle and placed the kettle over the fire. She glanced over at Pierce. “Go wake Nona and Jasper.”

Pierce obeyed and left to fetch his parents.

“*Qu’est-ce, Pierce?*” his mother grumbled in her usual before morning tea tone.

“*Joaquin est ici, maman,*” he explained.

She knitted her eyebrows together. “*Ouoi?*”

He rose from his crouched position beside the couch and held out his hand to her. “He’s sick, Mum.”

Nona entered the kitchen first, passing Archie, who was still at the doorway, without even a glance. The moment her eyes latched onto her long-lost son, she raced over with a burst of excited energy. “Joaquin!”

He raised his head, and she stopped short with a gasp.

“Hello, Mum,” Joaquin greeted her softly, followed by a slow, tired blink.

She recovered and took a deep breath before continuing her approach. She touched his face, and he leaned into her palm with eyes closed.

“*Mon beau garçon. Je vous ai tant manqué,*” she murmured to him.

“I’ve missed you too, Mum,” Joaquin replied weakly.

The kettle whistled, making Nona jump. Joaquin opened his pale eyes as his father took a seat beside him.

He clasped his son's shoulder with a tearful grin. "Son."

"Father."

Jasper enfolded him in a tight embrace.

Despite everything that had happened between him and Joaquin, Pierce permitted himself a smile. For the first time in years, the Landcross family was together again under the same roof. Pierce could almost taste his parents' joy in the air.

Grandmother Fey finished brewing the tea and whispered something to the teapot. Only Pierce and Archie took notice. She brought the teapot and a teacup over to the nook.

Nona stood. "I'll get more cups."

"*Non*," her mother said sternly. "This tea is not for you."

Nona looked cross. Pierce knew that look all too well and braced for a mother-daughter showdown. His mum backed down, though, and took her seat.

Take that, Mum, Pierce thought amusingly.

"Drink," Grandmother Fey said to Joaquin while she poured.

Joaquin's skeletal hand resurfaced from under the table and took hold of the cup. He drank. The morning light came over the horizon and burned through the front house windows. When the sunlight reached the kitchen, it seemed to bring a healthier color back into Joaquin's face.

Or, was it the tea?

With every drink, he seemed to get a little better.

"Are you seeing this?" Archie asked Pierce in astonishment.

"Aye," he whispered back. When his grandmother approached, he asked, "Grandma, what—?"

"He's very ill," she interjected softly. "Something is eating out his insides. Bring some tea over for your mother before she goes mad."

Pierce snorted and headed for the stove. As he reached into the cabinet for another teacup, the sound of screaming echoed loud enough to wake the world up.

It was Clover, who was looking right at Joaquin.

"Bloody hell!" Pierce shouted irritably. "Arch!"

Archie took his sister by the hand and quickly led her through the short hallway.

"What is it?" Eilidh asked in alarm from the living room.

"Why was Clover screaming?" Nona asked.

"Because I kidnapped her once," Joaquin admitted surprisingly.

"What?" their father said.

Pierce brought a teacup down from the cabinet. "Erm. It's a long story."

"You know about this?" his mum demanded.

Pierce rubbed the back of his neck nervously, wishing he hadn't intervened. "I . . . er . . . well . . ."

His father stood with a gawking, wide-eyed expression. "Where on Earth did you get that scar?"

Pierce suddenly realized he wasn't wearing his scarf.

He slapped a hand over his throat. "This? It's, erm . . . just something that happened a while ago."

"I did that to him," Joaquin again confessed, taking another casual sip of tea. "I tried to kill him."

Nona's mouth dropped open, and she stood, staring at him in pure shock. Pierce couldn't be sure if it was shame or his sickness, but Joaquin kept his head bowed and his eyes half-closed.

"Why, son?" Jasper asked.

Pierce waited for him to give them an explanation, one he'd been waiting for since he was sixteen.

"Joaquin isn't to blame," Grandmother Fey chimed in.

"Erm," Pierce said crossly, "I beg to differ, Grandma. I was bloody well there."

"Pierce," she retorted. "Pour the tea, *s'il vous plaît*."

He didn't appreciate the tone but said nothing and poured the water from the kettle into the teacup.

"What are you talking about, Mum?" Jasper asked Grandmother Fey.

"There's something inside him. Something in his blood." She turned her focus on Joaquin. "Grandson."

He raised his chin to her.

"Aye, Grandma?"

"Come with me. Bring the tea."

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