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# Legacy

# Bounty Hunter

*“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 there, where they declared themselves gods. . .”*

—The Teller of Forgotten Tales

# Chapter One

## Sonora, Mexico

*Autumn, 1843*

Pierce Landcross couldn't remain here in this cave. Not if he wanted to live. He worked on supporting himself against the rock. The arrow in his shoulder made it difficult to move or to breathe. Darkness surrounded him. Blood slid down his arm and back.

He feared he would never see his wife again.

Perhaps his enemies wouldn't search for long, and by nightfall, he could escape. It was his only chance. He only hoped he wouldn't bleed to death first. He caught sight of something, and it made him shake. Thankfully, he had managed to maintain his hold on his gun the entire time. 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 the city and up the coast for another mile, where the vessel at last turned and went over a waterway path cutting between tall rocky cliffs. A cavern waited at the end, and it was there that the *Ekta* dropped anchor. The crew took longboats into the long cave tunnel.

Before the darkness slid completely over the boats, Pierce looked over at his wife, Taisia Landcross. He held her hand and placed his 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 had experienced very little sickness and was maintaining 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 her as everything went dark, 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."

Through the dim glow of the lantern, she smiled lovingly at him. "You are a poet, Pierce Landcross."

He glanced behind him, where the silhouettes of his folks and grandmother followed them in another longboat.

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 from the formation was a path that started at the very back of the pool where a few natives waited on a boulder. The lead 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 Strength stepped out onto the 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 it 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 was joined together once more, they, too, headed upslope on the well-worn path created solely by the feet of those who had climbed the rocks for years.

The sun was brutally burning in the cloudless sky. There was nowhere else on Earth that Pierce had traveled to where he'd experienced such a dry, relentless heat. He feared for his pregnant wife.

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

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. In the distance stood tall, jagged mountains.

They walked a mile or so to the Apache village. Chief Sea Wind had already explained to Pierce about the type of lodgings the Apache lived in—dome-like structures constructed right from the dirt, called hogans. The Apache village had many hogans. There was also a herd of horses by a river. 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 put what Chief Sea Wind called "acorn cakes" into rounded mud horno ovens.

The first one to greet the approaching party was a young boy who rushed toward them while yelling 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 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.

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 band around his head with eagle feather hanging down the side, tunic pants, a white shirt, and a dark vest. He appeared older than time itself, with deep creases carved into his dark, hardwood face. His eyes were squinted so narrowly that Pierce could barely see them. The woman standing beside him—her pigment a shade 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 the faces after the 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 on 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 bowed to them both in a humble greeting.

Like most native tribes in the Sonora area, this tribe was multilingual, speaking both French and Spanish, as well as their native tongues. Since Pierce and the rest of his family were fluent 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’d had gotten beforehand. After shooting their daughter in the arse, Pierce wondered just how welcomed he would be in the village.

After the pleasantries were done, they were brought to Chief Victorio’s hut for food and much-needed water. It was stifling inside. The only improvement was that the sun wasn’t beating down directly on them. Everyone took a seat around a fire pit under an open space directly above them. Pierce sat beside Taisia, who was next to his father. 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 any trouble.”

“That is good to hear, Ela,” her mother said.

“I am no longer Ela,” Waves of Strength bleated. “Not for many years now.”

Nascha pinched her daughter’s cheek. “Ela is such a beautiful name.”

Waves of Strength flushed red with embarrassment. Pierce snickered, which caused Waves of Strength’s face to burn even hotter. Her irritated look was sharp 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 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 at Taisia, wondering if she'd feel like eating. He'd seen pregnant women become 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 could hear. Confidant she was fine, he began eating.

“Pierce Landcross,” Chief Victorio said as the people who had carried in the food left.

“Sir,” Pierce responded, straightening his spine as much as his vertebrae would allow.

Normally, Pierce was the informal sort who referred to people by their first name. Chief Victorio struck Pierce as a man who didn't necessarily demand respect but received it nonetheless.

“We have heard much about you, young man,” Chief Victorio said. “We've been told you're an outlaw in Europe.”

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 upon the Africans for the past two hundred years was still being carrying on in the American southlands.

“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. The men stayed behind.

“Our daughter told us your wife is expecting. How far along is she?” Chief Victorio asked, 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 bowed his head. His expression was somber.

“What is the matter, Captain Sea Wind?” Jasper asked.

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. A cruel irony.

“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 that ignited a certain pleasure. This was the first time Pierce had 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, he hadn't experienced this reaction. 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 enough mule deer 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 was sitting nearby.

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

"I am now that the day has ended," she said, leaning 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 climate.

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

She looked over at him. "You are such a good man, Pierce Landcross."

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

They kissed and Taisia nestled against him.

"Besides," he went on, "if I don't get Mum some tea to drink in the morning, I doubt we'll survive 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, the two women were 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 children came up to them. Among them was Sees Beyond's son, Tarak.

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

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

A proud 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 enthusiastically. Pierce didn’t fancy the idea of showing off the scar that a vengeful woman had given him.

“Go on,” Taisia urged unhelpfully. “Show them.”

He gave her disapproving glare, but it did nothing to shrink her grin.

“Please, Mr. Landcross,” Tarak pleaded again.

Pierce felt he was being backed into 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 this tribe’s 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. Afterward, she’d stated he was now Apache property.

“Grand,” he grunted.

## Chapter Two

### Guaymas

The following morning, Chief Sea Wind gave him pesos and a horse.

Pierce pocketed the money. “Cheers, Chief. Can I get you anything while I’m in town?”

“Tobacco. For my father-in-law.”

“No worries.”

“I found you a guide,” Chief Sea Wind informed him, pointing his chin up toward someone behind Pierce.

Pierce turned to face the approaching horseman. He was a younger looking feller, perhaps Pierce’s age, wearing buckskin chaps, a breechcloth, and a white shirt with an unbuttoned vest. A bandana, lined with thin rope, was wrapped around his head, with a few feathers fluttering behind him. As it was with most Apache people, he had a very dark complexion and high cheekbones. When he reached them, Pierce noticed he had clear eyes, sharp and full of spirit. Pierce recognized him as one of the hunters from the night before.

“Itza-chu,” Chief Sea Wind said, “This is my dear friend, Pierce Landcross. Landcross, this is Itza-chu, my brother-in-law.”

“Brother-in-law?” Pierce asked. “Erm, as in . . . ?”

“He is Waves of Strength’s youngest brother,” the chief explained.

Pierce grimaced.

“Hello, *Ligai Thii*,” Itza-chu greeted with levity.

Chief Sea Wind laughed loudly. Pierce frowned. Apparently, the children had spread their little nickname around.

“The name’s *Pierce*,” he retorted.

Pierce noticed that holstered under the cheeky native’s belt was another Oak Leaf revolver pistol. It resembled his own in every way except for the color, which was sterling silver. It was the only other Oak Leaf pistol Pierce had ever seen. He had found his own copper-plated model down in the hull of the *Ekta*. He reckoned Chief Sea Wind must’ve given it to him.

“Itza-chu will take care of you,” the chief promised. “And he will help keep you from wandering into Shawnee territory.”

Pierce turned to his horse and saw the figure eight brand on its hindquarters. “Right,” he grumbled.

With a huff, he mounted. It proved a tad difficult without a saddle. He needed to grab the lower end of the mane and hoist himself off the ground.

It was a quiet ride, for the most part—mainly because of his uncomfortable need to rely on the brother of the woman he’d shot. The revolver Itza-chu carried didn’t help matters.

“So, you’re the one who shot my sister,” Itza-chu spoke up suddenly.



If there was ever a time he truly wished he hadn't shot Waves of Strength—other than when she had branded him—it was right then.

Pierce slowly turned to him. “Accidentally, mind you.”

Itza-chu snorted. “When she told me she was shot in the ass, I laughed very hard.” He rolled up his sleeve and slid his fingers over a scar along his forearm. “And in return, she sliced my arm with a knife.”

“Fuckin’ hell,” he gasped out in English before converting back to French. “She cut you?”

He rolled down his sleeve. “My sister has quite the temper.”

Pierce glanced down at his own brand. “*Oui*, I cannot argue with that.”

“I’m sure, White Horse.”

“Don’t call me that,” Pierce quickly retorted.

Again, Itza-chu laughed. “I understand English, by the way. I just don’t care to speak it.”

He and Itza-chu went off the path to join a road leading to the city. Soon after, a strange clicking noise came from behind them. Pierce twisted around upon his horse and spotted something approaching them. It wasn’t a horse or even a carriage, but some other sort of transportation.

“What the hell is that?” Pierce asked as he moved his horse to the edge of the road.

Itza-chu went to the other side and waited. What slowly passed them was a giant metal koi fish. Wavy gashes were carved over its metallic body, exposing the gears turning inside. Wooden wheels, one in the front center and two in the rear, rolled over the sandy road.

“It’s a bloody hybrid,” Pierce said as it went by.

An Asian man and woman manned the hybrid. The woman wore a sleeveless sundress, tan calfskin gloves, and white-framed goggles with blue lenses. The gent also wore goggles. He was fashionable in western-style clothing—a white shirt, vest, and slacks with spats over his brown boots. The lass sat in the front, holding a parasol despite wearing a wide-brimmed sun hat. They both pedaled the contraption like a bicycle, the man steering it by brass handlebars.

They seemed to be hardly putting any effort into their work over the rocky road. The woman ignored them as if Pierce and the Apache did not exist. The gent, though, lifted his bowler hat to them.

“*Ano? ii o-tenki desu ne?*” he said with a cheery smile.

Pierce waved as he stared perplexedly at the queer hybrid machine. As the koi fish and its riders journeyed on, Pierce and his guide returned to the road.

“They are here for the Industrial Race,” Itza-chu explained.

“Industrial Race?”

Itza-chu nodded. “It is a yearly event. It brings people here from our neighboring lands, mainly from the north, but other parts of the world, as well. Since the rise of the Industrial Age, Guaymas has held this celebration for men to display their engineering achievements.”

“Is that so?”

“It is. And it is a shame, for these machines are powered by coal and fire, harming our great planet. It will haunt us someday.”

When Guaymas appeared, Itza-chu refused to go any farther.

“When you return, stay on the path and you should be safe,” he instructed Pierce before turning his mount in the other direction.

*Should be? Brilliant.*

Pierce rode on alone into the city. It was highly decorated for the festival. Posters advertising different events and functions were posted everywhere. The neoclassical and Moorish-style buildings were white to reflect the powerful desert sun. The buildings looked charming next to the bright blue of the nearby ocean. Many ships were docked at the piers.

Guaymas was a busy city, largely due to the visitors coming in for the races. Hundreds packed the square where a variety of marvelous machines were on display around a large fountain in the town square. Most were far more extravagant than the koi fish.

There was a display area for machines that, when he asked, Pierce was told weren't going to be in the races. These included a small, steam-powered submarine that rolled on iron wheels and air machines such as floating hot air balloons steered by propellers. The most impressive one, however, was the forty-foot-tall black dragon marionette made from pipes and sheets of copper, steel, brass, and wood, all bolted and welded together. It slowly swiveled its head as if observing the people below. When the operators tossed coal into the boiler located in the base of its head, fire ripped through its nostrils.

Although most of these machines were crude patchworks of metal, clusters of wires, and leaky engines, Pierce was very much impressed with their advanced ingenuity. He wondered if any of these people were Contributors for the good of the upcoming Age of the Machine Era.

Another floating machine caught his eye. A ship hovered several feet off the ground, anchored in place to a very large wooden cart he surmised was used to haul the thing around. Additional ropes were spiked into the ground to keep the vessel from swaying too much in the breeze. Pierce wasn't quite sure what sort of vessel it was, but it appeared it had been commissioned somewhere in the Orient. The frame was sleek and thin, painted blue with three tall dorsal fin sails. There were five fully inflated, medium-sized hot air balloon envelopes that kept the ship airborne—one on the bow and stern, and two on both the starboard and portside. The balloons were dark green and yellow and tethered by large rope nets draped over them. Sticking out at the bow of the ship was a pair of cylinder-shaped brass cones. Curiosity drove Pierce to walk up the ramp to have a look.

On deck, there were crewmates operating the burners to each of the ship's balloons, keeping them filled with enough hot air to steady her altitude. Other than the hot air balloons, the aircraft appeared the same as any other ship. Pierce stood at the helm, feeling none too impressed.

“Does *Ame-No-Mi-Kumari* not pique your interest, young man?” came the voice of an Asian man ascending the stairs to the helm.

He was an older man, not yet a geezer, but his long hair and thin, lengthy mustache had noticeable traces of grey in them. He had a tattoo circling his right eye and wore a Chinese court hat of black fur and red thread. A golden pearl sat atop the crown, with multi-colored peacock feathers pinned behind it. He wore a coat with silver buttons, a red silk sash around his waist, and brown trousers that ended just above his scrawny ankles. His feet were nestled in canvas shoes. A trail of smoke came from his pipe and followed him as he approached.

“Pardon?” Pierce said, both surprised and relieved that he spoke English.

The man joined him at the wheel, holding his pipe. It was an elongated copper and brass pipe and decorated with trees and flowers carved out of ivory, as was the pipe’s bowl. He tried taking a hit but didn’t get one. He pressed his thumb down on a button to a built-in lighting mechanism that lit a small fire beside the bowl, which rekindled the tobacco inside.

“Is my *Ame-No-Mi-Kumari* not impressive enough?” he repeated with smoke breezing out from between his lips.

Pierce surmised “Ame-No-Mi-Kumari” was the ship’s name.

“Are you the cap’n?”

“I am. Captain Geming Xiong. I am also her engineer. She is the world’s *first* functional airship.”

Pierce remembered seeing sketches of Leonardo da Vinci’s flying machines, and he often wondered if something like it would ever be achieved. “You don’t say.”

Captain Xiong nodded. “I modeled her after my favorite type of ship, the lorcha.”

“Ah.” Pierce nodded. “I was actually admiring the sails. Are they made from silk?”

“They are, indeed, young man. Woven by the finest silk-makers in China.”

Pierce snorted. “S’pose you really don’t need them much for sailing, eh? How do you elevate her? Even with the help of the balloons, a lorcha is still a pretty hefty vessel to lift.”

“That’s why she’s built out of lightweight materials. Instead of using heavy woods such as white oak or rock elms, *Ame-No-Mi-Kumari* is constructed from balsa and pine. Even the anchor is created out of titanium.”

Pierce studied the wheel in front of him and ran his hand over it. “Huh. That’s some ingenious thinking, Cap’n.”

“Oh,” Captain Xiong said while more smoke whisked through his crooked-toothed grin, “that isn’t the genius part of it. Come. Let me show you.”

Captain Xiong led Pierce down into the hull that was practically empty except for some sort of contraption located at the stern. At first glance, it appeared to be two oversized, hollowed out casks with metal rings bolted around their edges. Something made of brass had been inserted at the other end and stuck out through holes in the wall. Pierce surmised it was the cones he’d spied earlier. In the front and center of these large casks was an engine constructed of iron the color of sage. It was a bulky thing, the size of an actual cask, with an iron turning wheel on its side. A couple of insect-like metal antennae with short glass tubes on their ends poked out of the engine and were stretched over the

lip of the contraption.

Captain Xiong walked over to the engine and placed a long-fingered hand on top of it.

“This engine is very special. It creates energy from the oil it burns and sends currents through these cathodes.” He pointed to the tall, skinny insect antennas.

“Erm, all right,” Pierce said. “What does *that* do?”

“The currents are sent through these ionization chambers.” He pointed with his pipe to the large casks. “And they become positively charged ionization atoms and run through the acceleration grids.”

*What the bloody hell is an acceleration grid?* Pierce wondered.

He peeked into the ionization chambers where a pair of metal screens gated the other end. There, the copper cones were connected to it. He figured those were the grids the captain was referring to.

“The grids cause the atoms to accelerate and generate speed,” the captain explained.

“And that makes the ship go faster?”

Captain Xiong took a drag off his pipe while nodding. “It will, *shì*. This invention is called *propulsion*.”

“Did you invent it?”

“*Bù shì wǒ fā míng de,*” he answered, shaking his head. “But only I have made it work.”

Pierce’s interests were now piqued.

“Have you been a captain long?”

Captain Xiong grinned guiltily. “I’ve never sailed a ship in my life,” he confessed.

Pierce’s jaw dropped. “You’re joking.”

“Afraid not. As I told you before, I am captain and engineer. Before I designed *Ame-No-Mi-Kumari*, I was simply a Contributor. I’ve invented many things in my village back home, but I’ve never traveled far until recently. I now live in Mexico—north in Mexicali. This airship has given me my own sense of adventure.”

There was a hint of sadness in the captain’s tone. “I wish I could have experienced more when I was younger. I have chosen this identity to go along with my invention. Captain Geming Xiong, commander of the aircraft, *Ame-No-Mi-Kumari!*”

Pierce was rather surprised. By the looks of the man, Pierce thought he had seen more of the world than he had, but, apparently, that was only a façade.

“You must see her in action,” the captain insisted. “Are you going to the races?”

“Aye, I’ll be there,” he promised. “*Ame-No-Mi-Kumari* is a fine ship, Cap’n.”

Pierce left the airship and ventured farther into the square. He came across other racing machines with racers and engineers nearby, chatting with anyone curious about their machine. One was a giant turtle constructed of wood and metal with two masts jutting out from either side of its shell. Beside it was an egg-shaped racing machine with an open glass top. Inside, he saw a chair, pedals, and a steering wheel, much like a paddle watercraft.

Another machine snagged Pierce’s attention. It was a perfect, upright circle on three metal wheels reassembling carriage wheels. Inside the circle was a burgundy leather

chair, brass iron pedals, and a steering wheel. Pierce was leaning in for a better look when a voice said, "*Hola.*"

He looked up and his sights fell on a vision. She was tall and perfectly shaped in every way. She had a face that held a fascinating beauty. Her honey-colored eyes were small and glimmered with life. Dark eyebrows peeked out from beneath her bangs, which were a blend of deep copper, golden bronze, and rich auburn. The rest of her hair reached her shoulders. Woven into it were gears and sprockets. The sunlight made her caramel-colored skin glow. She wore a short-sleeved grey blouse untucked over snug green slacks. Her simple brown leather overbust fit loosely about her narrow waist, and her matching, fingerless gloves reached her elbows. Her smile charmed him on the spot.

"*Te gusta?*" she asked.

Everything moved in slowed motion for Pierce as if the sheer sight of her had rewired his brain.

"Sorry?" he squeaked out. He cleared his throat. "Pardon?"

She folded her hands behind her and studied him.

"You are an Englishman?" she asked in perfect English.

"Aye," he answered while rubbing the back of his neck nervously. "Erm, and you? Where are you from?"

"Tampico, but I have traveled the world."

Pierce grinned like an awkward adolescent encountering a pretty girl for the first time. "I see. This is your racing machine, I take it?"

"*Sí.*" She slid a finger over the curvy contraption. "This is the Wheel, named after man's first invention."

"Clever," he said, striving to snap out of his stupor and speak to her normally. It was like meeting Taisia all over again. "I'm Pierce Landcross."

She held her hand out to him through the open space of the Wheel. "*Hola*, Pierce. I'm Emma Rojas."

Her gesture suggested they shake, but Pierce did his signature greeting when meeting women and kissed her hand instead. When her exposed fingers touched his lips, a warm shudder ran down his spine and into his loins.

*Easy Pierce*, he thought to himself.

He rose to his full height and his smile froze on his face. Emma was blushing.

"Are you a racer?" he asked.

"Um," she said, tucking her short hair behind her ear with a bashful half-grin. "*Sí.*"

"How utterly delightful," he responded stupidly. What made it worse was he knew it was stupid. "Do you think you'll win?"

"I hope so. The problem with the machine, though, is the engine itself." She pointed to the voltage pile battery bolted next to the apparatus. "The battery is old, and we haven't been able to buy a new one. Sometimes, simply cranking it up does the trick, but, really, all we can do is charge it before the race and hope for the best. If I do fall behind, I'll have boosters as backup."

“Boosters?”

She patted a pair of tanks fastened above the driver’s seat. They had connecting tubing running to the outer engine. “These are nitrous oxide tanks. All I do is turn these valves here”—Emma touched the silver hatches atop the tanks’ bottleneck ends—“and then I flick this throw switch.” She threw the switch to demonstrate. “And the nitrous is released from the tanks and travels through the tubes.”

Emma slid her hand over the tanks and their connecting tubes in such an alluring display that it made Pierce imagine those fingers traveling over his . . .

*Oi! Stop that!*

“Then the nitrous goes into the engine to burn with the oil and boost engine power.” She looked at him and frowned. “Um, I suppose you don’t care about any of this, do you?”

Trying not to look like some gawking knobhead, he had forced himself to put on a serious expression, which she must’ve interpreted as disinterest. “No, no,” he said quickly. “I do, indeed, love. I think it’s all very fascinating.”

Emma gave him a half-smirk and arched an attractive eyebrow.

“Is that so?” She crossed her arms in a-I’m-about-to-test-you, manner. “What did I say?”

Pierce fixed a wide grin on his face, for his superb memory was about to work in his favor once again.

“You turn these little valves here, releasing the nitrous oxide into the engine, where it burns with the oil, creating that extra *thhhrust*.”

Pierce empathized the word seductively. He was flirting. He couldn’t help himself.

Emma cocked her head sideways with a surprised expression. “You *were* listening.”

“Aye. But I confess, I understood little of what you told me.”

Her smile appeared seconds before she laughed. It was a singsong laughter that sounded like fingers dancing over piano keys. “You’re very interesting, Pierce Landcross. Are you coming to the races?”

God, he loved how his name sounded cloaked in her Mexican brogue. “Aye,” he answered as another woman appeared beside Emma.

She was a tall if average looking lass with glossy hair and deep, shadowy eyes. She had a healthy physique and carried herself with confidence. She was dressed in a low-cut gown with an overbust that propped up her cleavage. She also had on tall, dusty boots. She carried tin plates in both hands with something that smelled like chicken and appeared to be wrapped in corn husks. It looked very tasty.

“*Aqui estan tus tamales*,” she addressed Emma.

“Gabriela,” Emma said in English, “meet Pierce Landcross. Pierce, this is my engineering partner and childhood friend, Gabriela Viola.”

Gabriela raised her chin to him. Pierce thought about kissing her hand, but both were occupied with the plates. Instead, he took off his top hat and placed it behind him, touched his chest, and bowed. He had no idea if she spoke English, so he offered only a charming smile.

“Pierce?” Gabriela said as if she had something annoying caught in her throat. It was far

less welcoming than the way Emma had pronounced his name. “That is an English name, *sí*?”

“It is, darling,” he answered.

Gabriela snorted mockingly. Pierce reckoned she, like most in various parts of the globe, frowned upon the English.

“He was curious about the Wheel,” Emma explained, taking a plate from her.

Pierce spied an opportunity to get into the woman’s good graces.

“Aye. Quite a fine machine you both have built. I can hardly wait to see her run.”

Gabriela beamed and actually smiled at him until Emma chimed in.

“*Sí*, Pierce is coming to the races,” she reported, reaching over to sweep a lock of hair away from his face.

Pierce’s grin couldn’t be broader.

“That’s a lovely wedding band you wear, Señor Landcross,” Gabriela said with her eyes fixed on his wedding ring. “How long have you been married?”

Gabriela had targeted the ring almost immediately. However, Emma’s crestfallen expression suggested she had completely overlooked it.

“Oh,” Emma said mournfully. “You . . . you’re married?”

Pierce eyed the ring as if he had never seen it before. This playful flirtation needed to end sooner or later.

“Aye. A few months now. We’re expecting our first child.”

“How wonderful for you,” Gabriela stated bluntly. To Emma, she suggested, “Why don’t you get out of the sun while you eat. I’ll stay by the Wheel.”

Emma swallowed thickly and stared down at her tamales as if she’d lost her appetite. “*Sí*, that is a good idea.” To Pierce, Emma said, “*Adiós*, Pierce.”

She quickly marched away, leaving him under Gabriela’s cheeky glare. Pierce acted with as much grace as he could, put his hat on, and tipped it to her. He left the square in search of a general store.

He found a clothing shop and dismounted his horse. Before going in, he spied a flyer advertising a dance occurring that night. He pulled the flyer down and went inside the store.

Pierce bought clothes for his entire family; sensible duds that would serve them better out in the harsh desert conditions. He got parasols and sun hats for his wife, mum, and Grandmother Fey. He bought tea for his mum, water canteens, a pair of tinted spectacles for himself, tobacco for Chief Victorio, and bars of soap.

When he left the store, he loaded the bagged items on his horse. Just before mounting up, he spotted a brightly painted wagon just down the road where a small crowd had gathered. A young, blond-haired feller, dressed in a red-and-black-checkered suit and a stovepipe hat, spoke Spanish to the people. In one hand, he held a bottle, and in the other, a bamboo cane.

Once again, curiosity drove Pierce to go over, leading his horse by the reins as he went. It was blatantly clear that the checkered gent was a traveling salesman. He stood on a

soapbox in front of his one-horse buggy with a banner draped over the side that read: *Magic Tonic Snake Oil!* The text was also written in Spanish.

*Snake oil?* He wondered.

Keeping his grip on the reins, he moved to where he could get a closer look. Bottles sat atop of a large luggage trunk sitting on its end. Each bottle contained a different colored liquid. Pierce grabbed a bright blue one and studied it. As he did, the end of the bamboo cane tapped the bottle.

“*Está usted interesado, amigo?*” the young salesman asked.

“Eh?” Pierce said, confused.

The youth said in English, “American?”

“British,” he answered, holding up the bottle. “What is this stuff?”

“Why, it’s Snake Oil, mate!” he answered in a British accent Pierce had never heard before.

“I can bloody well read the sign, *mate*. I mean, what does this shite do?”

“It’s a remedy. That particular one you hold is for joint pain. The purples are for sore throats and colds, the yellows for headaches, and the green bottles are for fevers. The reds . . .” A mischievous grin creased his young face. “The reds help stimulate the old fella. I see by your wedding band that you’re a married bloke. Need a little extra kick to spice up the bedroom?”

Pierce snorted. “Don’t need any assistance in that area, chum. Why is it called snake oil? Is there snake venom in it?”

“Actually, yes.”

“What other ingredients are there?”

Pierce’s curious nature always prompted him to ask many questions, a habit that tended to annoy some folks.

“Well, mate, that depends on which of those you are referring to.”

“This one,” Pierce said, holding up the bottle again. “What’s in this one?”

“Cinquefoil,” the lad quickly answered. “The main ingredient is cinquefoil.”

“And the yellow?”

“Feverfew.”

The lad knew his herbs. Pierce wondered if he also had a wise woman for a grandmother. Clearly, this wasn’t the first time someone had asked the salesman this question. Still, from his own experience, Pierce knew a con artist when he saw one.

He smiled. “And the red? What herb ignites that certain extra *kick*?”

“Erm . . .” The bright-eyed youth glanced over at the throng that had thinned out while he’d been speaking to the *gringo*. He looked back to Pierce and retorted with a less than salesman attitude, “Why should you care, handsome, eh? You already admitted you have no troubles in that department, right?”

To coin the phrase, Pierce like the cut of his jib.

After wearing out his welcome with the salesman who spoke in an odd accent, Pierce mounted up and left town.



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