

# **The Age of the Machine Other World**



**Michelle E. Lowe**

# One

A bright light flashed a few times before swirling winds of grit came into focus.

Pierce Landcross hit the ground and rolled over and over. The powerful gusts shoved him until he dug in his heels, anchoring himself. He eventually stopped sliding and rose. The battering gale forced him to step back until the ground left him. The fall was steep, but the shock of everything happening numbed him and he never felt the pain of impact. Once he landed, he went tumbling down a rocky, sandy slope. Again, he sank his fingers in and pushed his feet into the earth to halt himself. Without the gusts bullying him, Pierce could stand upright.

“Fuckin’ hell,” he cursed, catching his breath.

The air was very thin.

The bedroll tumbled on by him. He leaped after it and caught it. Once he’d collected his rifle and a knife, Pierce stared out yonder. Lifting his goggles to his hairline, he gaped at the endless foreign wasteland before him.

“Bugger.”

He paused at the cliff’s edge. It was overlooking miles of dry ocean floor. A sickly fog hovered under a rust-colored sky. Tall mountains jutted up in the distance. Smaller peaks were visible near the landmass he was standing on.

“Unbelievable,” he uttered, unable to stop looking at it all.

As he gazed at the grim and dead scene, he thought about how different 2026 looked compared to what the 1927 movie *Metropolis* had portrayed. No pleasure gardens here.

Acacia, the Broken Fairy, had urged him to travel to Brazil, where she had waited on a shore for him with what she referred to as a “Doorway” that opened a portal into this place. She explained that he had to help her colleagues, who had also traveled to this future. Pierce’s grandmother told him he needed to locate the city that the automatons built. According to what little he had read about the Machine Wars in a twentieth-century New York Public Library, the Second Machine War had aimed to wipe out one of the strongest armies in the world—the British Army.

“*How did they do it?*” he’d asked Acacia before plunging into the portal. “*How did the machine people destroy the world?*”

“*They burned away the oceans.*”

Judging by the desolate scene, the Living Automatons had succeeded, but what did they use to do such a thing?

There were all sorts of questions stomping about inside his brain. One of them was where to start. He pulled out the journal Acacia had given him and opened it to the map she had copied from her colleague Jehy. There was a town located on the seafloor.

From where he stood that was once a beach, there was a very tall cliffside leading to the

bottom. Fortunately, the way down was more or less diagonal and covered with dead coral and large rocks. It would be a day's climb, Pierce reckoned, and if he was to accomplish this insane mission Grandmother Fey had gotten him involved in, then he needed to crack on.

Pierce was a skillful climber. As a child, he'd scaled plenty of trees, and living on the island of Maui, he'd done his fair share of conquering steep mountainous inclines. Regardless, this trek would be one for the bloody books!

He started his long descent. The leather, fingerless gauntlet he wore, as well as the shorter glove, protected his hands from the rough terrain. The dry coral crumbled in his grasp and crunched underfoot. After hours of climbing, the straps of his heavy rucksack hugged his shoulders tighter and tighter, making them ache. The thick, salty scent was all he could smell. Layers of it covered everything, and plumes of salt dust rose whenever he crushed the coral.

It was dark by the time he neared the bottom. The distance between the surface and the seafloor stretched two miles by his estimation. His muscles hurt so badly he thought he was about to go mad. To measure the distance that remained, he shucked off the rucksack and dropped it.

He listened.

"Five seconds?" He sighed dishearteningly. "Fuckin' brilliant."

Regardless, he took in a breath and leaped. The hard landing shook both his natural and steel bones. He collapsed upon the salty earth and rolled onto his back, where he stayed for a spell, recuperating. The chill was a pleasant change from the heat above. Now that he wasn't climbing anymore, he had the chance to enjoy the cool air. When it grew too cold, he retrieved his black dapper coat from the rucksack and put it on, as well as his top hat. After seeing the dreaded landscape, Pierce was grateful for all the gear Acacia had supplied. What resources he carried was everything he was going to receive in this barebones world—this *other* world.

Acacia never told Pierce much about what he was getting himself into, not even what her companion Jehy discovered. He was certain the fairy knew plenty, judging by the equipment she had provided him. She had hurried him through the portal, scared out her wits that they would be found by those who hunted for her, Jehy, and Sarthad.

Regardless, he fully understood the mission: Find the women and help them to Metal Metropolis so they could locate the city's weaknesses. Also, the lasses possessed the means of returning him to his own era, which highly interested Pierce. Grandmother Fey had informed him that the city was near Africa, which was on the other side of the mountain ridge he'd seen. The journey was going to be challenging, no doubt.

Pierce set up camp, stoked up a fire, and laid out his bedroll. He ate little, only a single can of food. He wasn't too hungry. He studied the map. The town would take a couple of days to reach. Other than its location, Pierce knew nothing about the settlement, but he reckoned it was a start.

The night was cold and very quiet. It was eerie when he woke to take a piss sometime

after the fire had died out. Nothing stirred up any sound. No insects chirped, no critters scampered about, and no breeze rustled through vegetation, for there was none. The thunder from a raging storm miles up boomed once in a while. The aggressive weather was a queer thing. Why was it only up there and not below? Perhaps it had something to do with the temperature. He remembered how damn hot it was up there before the winds kindly booted him off.

In the morning, Pierce did some practice shooting.

He unholstered his Oak Leaf pistol and slowly thumbed back the hammer. The chamber rotated. He listened to each click for the first time in many years. Pierce lined the barrel up with the empty food tin can and pulled the trigger. The kickback was just as he remembered. The can jumped from the bullet slicing through it.

He set off and passed the shorter mountains near the mainland, his boots dusty white with salt. He came across a bottomless hole the size of a village that he needed to make his way around.

At the end of the day, he felt his hips and legs popping. He was glad for it, though. Ever since he had badly broken his leg in his previous life, his mobility had become very limited. He was confined to using a cane for the rest of his days.

Pierce huffed. He hated to admit it, especially after what that prick did, but if it wasn't for Dr. Duncan Hackett, Pierce would've most likely have lost his leg. Then when Duncan returned Pierce from the dead, he replaced the shattered bone with a metal rod, the same as the smaller bones in his hands and feet after the real ones were lost from a year of his corpse being underground. Being pulled from the In-Between to live as his former self wouldn't have even been all that bad if he hadn't been separated from his wife, Taisia. While Pierce had been reunited with his old body, Tai had crossed over to be reincarnated into a new one. What made matters worse was he couldn't simply end his life and crossover himself, for he was meant to help save the planet from global destruction.

Bloody hell, why did it have to be *him*? The heartache of losing his beloved would always be part of him. He would never stop mourning until the day he was able to return to the In-Between and crossover. Yet, Grandmother Fey told him he was not supposed to live as another person.

*Rubbish*, he thought.

In the meantime, there was this shite to deal with.

Taisia would want him to push on for the sake of their family.

So, he did just that. The following day, he passed the stubby mountains, using the compass embedded in his leather gauntlet to guide him. For days, he'd seen nothing other than the skeletons of marine life, lifeless coral beds, and a whole lot of salty ground. The ridge of the Atlantic was ever-present. Eventually, he would need to make his way there; he only had to figure out where to start. The map only showed him how to reach the town and after climbing down more coral-covered hills and traveling alongside tall sand dunes, he finally reached it.

Instead of waltzing in like a daft bugger, Pierce stood a good distance off amongst

thousands of rock piles and surveyed the scene using his field glasses. The remnants of large, broken hinges within the wall that surrounded the whole town suggested there was once a gate, but that it had since been taken off. Beyond the giant threshold, there wasn't much activity. Only strange, mismatched buildings and one or two folks walking about.

"Guess I'll go have a look-see," he uttered to himself, lowering the field glasses.

A pathway had been cut through the stacked rock piles and led to the gateless opening. The people Pierce saw wandering about beyond the walls didn't appear to be heading to any particular place. None of them seemed to see him, yet his presence hadn't gone unnoticed.

"Greetings, young man," someone announced from behind him.

Pierce snatched his Oak Leaf pistol from its holster and whipped around, snapping the hammer back sharply. The person raised his hands.

"Steady now," the bloke pleaded. "I'll not harm you."

The soft-spoken chap was tall with long grey and brown hair. His facial features were as sharp as his pointed ears.

An elf, which explained his sudden appearance.

His clothing was dark, dirty, and stitched in various places like scars. His green eyes were dull and nearly lifeless.

In this new life, Pierce had gained the gift of insight. He could sense certain things about people, and he even knew when they were lying or when danger was near. A strong feeling of familiarity came off the stranger.

"Pierce?" the elf man guessed, lowering his hands.

A couple of ticks went by before Pierce recognized him, as well.

"Bloody hell. *Foster?*"

His nephew? Pierce couldn't believe it! The first time he met Foster was when Pierce had been a young bootlegger in New York. Now, Foster was a geezer in the twenty-first century.

Foster approached, utterly bewildered.

"I—I thought I felt a connection, so I came out to see who it could be." He stopped and looked at his uncle with amazement. "How is it possible?"

Pierce snorted. "What a tale I have to tell you."

Pierce explained the story about the doctor who snatched him out of the afterlife and restored his body to its youthful form, thanks to help from Grandmother Fey, concluding with how he met the fairy, Acacia, who had convinced him to enter a portal to find her colleagues.

When he mentioned the Broken Fairy, Foster appeared sicklier than he already looked. "Acacia. Yes, I remember her."

Pierce arched an eyebrow. "You do?"

The elf nodded and with a slow blink, explained, "After I learned of Durothil's death, I and some of the other elves were told to flee to the jungle where the healthy could safely live as the sickness ravaged our tribe. We searched for the ones responsible for bringing

the diseased into our domain.”

Pierce’s heart grew heavy with mourning. It may have been over a hundred years since Durothil’s passing, but for Pierce, the loss of his grandfather was still very fresh.

“The beach you spoke of,” Foster continued, “it was where we found Acacia. And it was there that we killed her.”

Pierce’s eyes widened. “Come again?”

“We tried to get her to tell us where the others were. She pointed to an opening in the air surrounded by a strange metal frame, saying that’s where they went to save our world. She then begged us to go through, for we would be more helpful than the human male who just went through it.”

More *helpful? Cheers, Acacia.*

“She told us how to open the portal and how the locator worked, but we believed her not, nor did we listen. I slit her throat while she pleaded, and we destroyed the Doorway.”

Pierce bowed his head and rubbed his forehead. “Jesus, Foster.”

“I was but a foolish child then, barely a young man. It appears, though, it has all come full circle. Beluar, who was with me when I killed the fairy, brought a wanderer to our town. A faun named Jehy. Beluar overheard the two of us speaking, and on that night, he stole her equipment and used it to assemble the pieces of the Doorway she carried to return to her own time. Because of what Acacia disclosed years before, he knew how to locate the portal using the locator.”

Pierce sighed, crestfallen. It was apparent that at the moment he had gone through the portal, Foster and his lot showed up and slaughtered the poor old fairy for doing what they were responsible for actually doing themselves.

“Why did this bugger Beluar do it? Didn’t he know what was going to happen by letting everyone through?”

“After the incident, Beluar took his own life. But before he did, he confessed that he was weak and wanted out of here, the same as the others who followed him that night.”

Foster shifted on his feet.

“When Jehy arrived, initially, I had no idea that she was the faun I had sought. Not until we spoke about her coming from another era. Instead of treading into matters that she was unaware of, we discussed—”

“Finding Metal Metropolis,” Pierce interposed. “Aye. That’s why I’m here, remember? To see to it that these lasses get there.”

Foster stared off, his eyes shifting slightly as if he were trying to recall. It was a look similar to what his father used to do. If Pierce’s older brother, Joaquin, was still alive, he would’ve thought so, too.

Foster began to speak when he stopped himself and eyed the entrance to the town. Folks had gathered and were staring at them.

“The equipment you carry,” he said softly to Pierce. “You have food, yes?”

“Aye. S’pose they might be thinking the same thing, eh?”

“That and perhaps they can smell it, even from this distance. If you wish to maintain

what you have, give it to me.”

Pierce reckoned he did want to hold on to his supplies and gear, considering the journey he was about to undergo.

He slipped the heavy rucksack off, feeling weightless without it, and handed it to Foster, who vanished the moment he had it. Pierce was then left to stand awkwardly about with the curious town folks watching him. Their attention was finally drawn away from him when a motorized carriage slowly rode toward the group. At least, it appeared to be some sort of vehicle. The small contraption was a cluster of scrap metal and wood bolted together on four tall rubber wheels. A single driver operated the thing.

Behind the car, a trail of gloomy faces followed on foot. Once past the open entrance, the vehicle slowly turned off into the field of endless rock stacks. When it did, the body it was carrying was visible. It was lying in the back on a wooden board. A ratty cover was wrapped around the corpse. The procession followed.

“That was Chay,” Foster suddenly said, standing abreast of Pierce.

Pierce jumped with fright. “Christ!”

“Shush,” Foster scorned. “Be respectful.” He turned his attention to the funeral in progress. “Chay passed away an hour ago.”

Pierce huffed and dropped his hand from his pounding chest. For a time, they watched as the vehicle and the mourners made their way through what Pierce now saw was a vast graveyard.

“Your belongings are safe,” Foster assured him. “Come with me. But first . . .”

He scooped dirt in both hands and patted it against Pierce’s coat. The floating dust instantly irritated his eyes and tickled his throat.

“What the bloody hell!” Pierce cursed angrily, waving away the cloud.

“You’re too clean. After the incident with Jehy, the townspeople have been hoping for another outsider to come and take them out of here.”

Pierce coughed and rubbed his itchy eye. He swore under his breath as he followed his nephew into the town.

“Appear maimed,” Foster advised.

Pierce started limping and even hunched his spine a tad for added measure. He coughed, which wasn’t difficult since the salty grit was now in his lungs.

“Did the women pass through here?” Pierce asked him. “Jehy and Sarthad?”

“They did, actually. Their initial plan was to vanish across the Spine of the Atlantic and search for the city on the other side, but the elf woman Sarthad was wounded badly when she was struck by lightning, and it depleted her abilities greatly.”

“Elf, eh? And Jehy is a faun? Should be easy to spot them. The Spine of the Atlantic? Is that what the mountains are called?”

“It is. The ridge runs up through the Atlantic past Iceland and all the way down beyond Africa. The women left for it two days ago, I believe. It’s been difficult keeping up with much of anything.”

Pierce understood. He greatly sensed his nephew’s weakened state. He was no longer

the strapping youth Pierce encountered in 1927. Instead, he was a withered shell of his former self, crippled with starvation. He was dry inside and out. His body was breaking down.

“You can have some of my food and water,” Pierce offered.

“Don’t utter such things,” Foster warned. “If anyone here discovers what you have, they will tear you apart to get to it. Besides, even if I accepted, at this stage, it would do me no good, and it would only put you at a disadvantage, for you will need your resources to make it through the Spine of the Atlantic.”

Pierce saw his point. Foster, as well as everyone else, was on the cusp of death, and sacrificing anything would only deprive him of supplies.

“What should I be expecting out there?” Pierce wondered aloud as they followed the wide road through the town. “Are there people I ought to be wary of?”

“Not just people, but crossbreeds. There is only one tribe of full-blooded humans, for the rest died out years ago. Everyone else has been breeding with elves, trolls, fairies, fauns, demons that the Demon King abandoned when he left this world, and vampires.”

Pierce shuddered. “Vampires, eh? Grand. How dangerous are they?”

“Depends on their situation and the state of their community. Most settlements have decayed, others are barely holding on, while some may still be maintaining their stability.”

“I see. You mentioned the Demon King left? Is that an option?”

“For those who can, yes. All the demigods and those who were once gods and goddesses have taken their leave of this world when it was discovered that the Ghost Fire was unstoppable. They fled to other planets. Those of us who are unable to make such journeys are doomed to die here.”

“Ghost Fire?”

“It was a chemical that the Living Automatons produced. It was designed to latch onto any liquid and dissolve it.”

Crikey, as his mate Jaxton would have said.

“Before the surface became too hostile to live on, wars broke out as nature and resources withered away,” Foster explained. “It continued long after we migrated to the ocean floor. War for food, fuel, water. Whatever we found we would fight over. Millions died within a hundred years.”

They came to a tall building located in the center of town. As they entered, Foster noted, “You’re carrying a lot, and where you’re heading, it won’t be wise to travel with all of it. I suggest taking only what you need to sustain you in the days it’ll take for you to get through the ridge. Allow me to store the remaining supplies on the other side. I’ll give you a map that’ll guide you through the Narrows.”

“The Narrows?”

“It’s the shortest route through the mountain ridge. And it’ll be a four-or five-day journey if you travel at a good pace. With Sarthad being wounded, you might be able to catch up to them before you make it out.”

Pierce had to admit that Foster’s offer to stash his gear sounded marvelous. Not having



to haul around several weeks' worth of food and water would certainly move things along. Not to mention, he trusted his nephew, for he could have already stolen his supplies if he wanted.

"S'pose you can't vanish me over the ridge, eh?" Pierce asked as they got into a cage-style lift.

Foster pulled a lever, and they headed up. "Jehy requested the same thing. I explained to her that I could not, for my weakened state has depleted my abilities. Transporting items is a simple task, but living matter—which takes much more strength and energy to accomplish—is impossible. Have you ever experienced what it's like to disappear? It's quite painful for those unable to do it themselves."

Pierce was mindful of the pain. On more than one occasion, he'd had the displeasure of vanishing. Each time, he believed it would kill him. The agonizing journey wasn't something Pierce cared to relive, but it would cut the trip short if it was an option.

The lift jolted to a sudden halt and Foster pushed aside the door. "Come, you must leave for the Narrows before dark."

Foster led Pierce to his bedchamber located at the end of a long hallway with skylights dotting the ceiling overhead. The room was spacious but had little inside it. On the mattress was Pierce's rucksack. He gathered what he felt he needed to sustain him for the next few days and packed them into a large, dusty brown leather satchel Foster provided him. The bedroll was tied to the strap. Foster gave him an old map drawn a long while ago. It showed the way through the Narrows of the Spine of the Atlantic.

"Once you've passed the city of Turn Corner, you will come to a ship resting on a mountain. You cannot miss it. Climb up and go into the captain's quarters. There you'll find your belongings."

"How the bloody hell did a ship end up on a mountain?"

"There are many, actually. Caught in the ridge as the ocean burned away."

"This Ghost Fire you mentioned—it doesn't affect anything else?"

"No. It didn't even hurt to touch it."

*Huh. Interesting.*

"Tell me about the Second Machine War. When exactly did it start?"

Foster was quiet for a spell, remembering.

"June 10th, 1888. The city started an attack that lasted for days after the British forces were annihilated, and then the machine people went on to destroy two other strong European armies before leaving to do the same in America."

He lifted Pierce's rucksack. "Shall I?"

Pierce nodded. "Aye, be my—"

Foster vanished.

"—guest," Pierce finished.

Again, Pierce found himself standing about like a git. He threw the satchel strap over his head and adjusted it to fit.

"You can borrow one of our vehicles," Foster offered from the doorway.

This time, Pierce was prepared for his nephew's sudden appearance.

"You did learn how to drive while in the twentieth century, yes?" his nephew asked.

Pierce huffed, feeling a tad embarrassed.

"I only drove a car once briefly."

Brief and downright terrifying. Pierce had been forced by gunpoint to speed off from the cops that were shooting at him.

Foster frowned. "I cannot take you there. I'm very much needed here."

Pierce sensed Foster's sorrow. "What's happening?"

"My mother. She is about to die. I must be here with her when she passes."

Pierce swallowed thickly. "I see. I'm sorry, Foster."

"We're reaching our end, Uncle. It is why this journey you're on is so vital. If you, Jehy, and Sarthad succeed, then none of this will have ever happened."

Pierce was well aware of that fact, but having it said put more pressure to complete this mission upon his shoulders.

"I'll teach you on the way out of town," Foster said, opening his bedroom door.

They left the building and went into a dimly lit garage of sorts. Inside were a handful of those scrap metal vehicles. Some of them had their whole exterior constructed out of wood. None of them were enclosed. Shabby planks, nailed in place, and some of the construction was sloppy. Others were of different metals slapped together to resemble an automobile. Some had windshields, but most that did were cracked. None resembled what Pierce had seen in the twentieth century.

The vehicle Foster led Pierce to was a mixture of metal and wood, with a pair of wrought iron patio chairs for the front seat.

"It's the only one with a full tank," Foster explained.

"Charming," Pierce remarked.

Pierce placed the satchel and rifle in the back seat, which was simply a board nailed to a rickety crate.

"Inventors and engineers have done what they could over the past 139 years to utilize what resources are available," Foster said. "Much was brought down from the surface until the storms grew too strong. Afterward, it all depended on what could be scavenged."

"Do the storms cover the entire landmass up there?"

"They do. Nature's Wrath, as it's sometimes called. We failed the planet and now we are reaping what we have ignored."

"What do you mean?"

His nephew eyed him gravely. "We supernatural beings should have fought with humans during the Second Machine War. Instead, we stayed out of it, believing the conflict had nothing to do with our kind. By doing nothing, we helped destroy everything."

Foster showed Pierce how to start the engine. Rather than a key and keyhole, there was a small hand crank by the steering wheel that turned until the car geared up. The engine shook and rumbled with smoke billowing thickly from the rear exhaust pipe. Pierce thought he'd set the damn thing on fire!

Then Foster instructed, "Shift it into 'Drive.'"

The gear shift wasn't much different from what he'd used. It still didn't stop him from stalling when he tried to pull forward.

"Shite."

Foster sighed.

"Try again."

It took him a few more tries, but he eventually learned how to ease off the clutch properly and get them moving. He drove out of the garage and slowly headed out of the town. By the time they made it past the wall, Pierce felt he'd gotten the gist of it.

"Stop here, Uncle," Foster ordered.

Pierce eased on the brake and halted halfway through the graveyard.

"Once you drive out of the cemetery, take a left onto the road." He pointed to the car's built-in compass on the dash. "Follow the compass southeast. Soon, you'll see signs leading you to the entrance of the Narrows."

"Cheers, Foster," Pierce thanked him humbly.

His elfin nephew grinned weakly. Those green eyes of his that were once the brightest Pierce had ever seen on someone were now so painfully dim.

"Farewell, Pierce. Best of luck to you."

He then vanished. Returned to be with his mum, Pierce reckoned.

Taking a deep breath, Pierce shifted the gear and headed out.

\* \* \*

Foster reappeared at his mother's door and entered her room. Surrounding her bed were the last of the leaders. In the beginning, there were a dozen of them. Now, only five remained. Soon, there would be only four.

He approached his dying mother. The skylight overhead cast a pale red shadow over the entire room.

She was lying with her hands folded over her stomach. Her long white hair was draped over her shoulders and spread out on the mattress, some of it hanging off the edge. Harsh, raspy breathing escaped her dry lips. Starvation was taking her life.

"Mother," Foster said softly, moving to her bedside and holding her hand in his. "You shall never guess who was just here."

She opened her golden eyes and slowly rolled her head to see him.

"Who?" she asked.

"Uncle Pierce. He has come back from the dead to help prevent this from ever happening."

A faint smile tugged at the corners of her lips. "Then we must hope he will succeed. I . . . I love you, my child."

She slipped away as gentle as a breeze passing through an open window. Foster felt her leaving as it happened. Her golden eyes dimmed as the life left her body. The leaders

sighed mournfully, and a couple of them wept.

Foster kissed her hand.

“Worry not, Mother, for soon I shall be joining you.”

# The Age of the Machine Ghost Fire



Michelle E. Lowe

# One

Pierce had been waiting for his son, Joaquin, to arrive since having his other son, Kolt, wire him at his home.

While he waited for Joaquin to show up, Pierce distracted himself from his nervousness by playing with his great-grandchild, Noah, out in the garden behind Kolt and Clover's estate.

The lad was a ball of endless energy, but Pierce was more than capable of keeping up as he chased him around the hedges.

"Father?"

Pierce froze the second he heard his son. Joaquin shared so much of Taisia's likeness, and he knew it was going to be tough and bloody well heartbreaking to see him, but Pierce buried his sorrow and took a breath before he turned to face him.

"Ello, son."

Joaquin appeared exactly as he had the last time Pierce saw him. Tall—taller than his old man—and broad-shouldered. He was strapping from years of being in the military. His dark brown complexion had even darker freckles dotting the same areas of his face as his mother. He also shared her bright cognac-colored eyes.

Being in his mid-forties, he'd started growing more grey hair, yet he'd managed to hold onto his youthful features well enough.

Pierce's heart knocked madly against his ribcage. Joaquin only stared at him. There was disbelief there, but surprisingly, a sudden expectation came off him. Was Pierce's hyper sense—as his grandfather Durothil called it—wrong?

"It was you, wasn't it?" Joaquin said, stepping toward him. "That night in the sewer tunnels in London."

Last month, when Pierce and his mate, Jaxton Beau, were escaping the city after the section they were in was put on lockdown due to a mysterious mental illness sweeping the city, Joaquin spotted them and laid chase, not knowing who it was at the time. If it weren't for Jaxton's quick thinking, Joaquin would've found his father, who had wanted to avoid such a reunion out of fear of mentally damaging his boy.

"Aye, it was me," Pierce admitted. "And I can explain all that. I—"

Before he could finish, he was being embraced. Joaquin's arms held Pierce so tightly that it made it a tad difficult to breathe. He didn't mind and hugged him in return, relishing the moment, for there wouldn't be many like this.

Joaquin grasped his father by the shoulders and then pulled back. His eyes were shimmering.

"I sensed your presence," Joaquin admitted. "I thought I was going mad."

The family's unique bloodlines—their supernatural heritage, as it were—allowed them

to sense when one of them was around.

“How is it that you’re here?” Joaquin asked.

Pierce was thankful Joaquin was taking this better than his older brother when he showed up at Kolt’s door a few hours ago. Pierce looked to Kolt and Clover at the patio area and reckoned an explanation was in order.

The warm spring day kept everyone outside. It took nearly three hours, a lot of tea, and a couple of bottles of wine for Pierce to tell the whole story starting from the beginning. He left out what had occurred with Taisia, for he would need to discuss that with Joaquin privately. As the tale became more unbelievable, the wine started getting more attention than the tea.

“All of that happened?” Kolt gasped out. “The cryo-chamber? Being brought back from the dead?”

The automaton praying mantis, Marvin, who was sitting on Kolt’s shoulder, cocked his tiny head, seemingly listening as well.

“And you’re the one who discovered the perpetrators who were poisoning people’s minds?” Joaquin interposed.

“You went into the future and found Metal Metropolis at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean?” Clover joined in.

It was Pierce’s granddaughter Scarlet who asked the most vital question. “And the machine people killed the planet by drying out all the water?”

“They did,” Pierce responded, pouring himself more wine. “They used what’s called Ghost Fire. The Living Automats have . . . or, erm, *will* create this chemical to devour just about every drop of liquid on Earth.”

He studied each of their shocked expressions. It was a lot for them to accept.

“I believe you boys ought to keep that part to yourselves when you report this.”

A great deal of confusion rose up from his sons. Pierce felt it as strongly as the alcohol in his head. They didn’t understand what he was implying.

Then Clover inquired, “Report to whom? The army?”

“Aye,” Pierce answered. “England needs to be prepared.”

“Even if we do,” Kolt spoke up, “there will be many questions about how we know such things.”

Pierce had also thought of this but was relying on his sons and also Clover—who was always the brilliant planner—to devise a solution.

Marvin raced down Kolt’s arm and scampered over the table to Pierce. He stretched his key shaft arms up, wanting to be picked up. Pierce snorted and laid his hand down to allow the mantis to step onto his palm.

“With the treaty signed between the machine people, Europe, and America, it won’t be easy to convince anyone,” Joaquin explained. “To disrupt the peace would be viewed as a massive risk. For the past twenty-three years, the Living Automats haven’t caused any trouble. In fact, they’re very much welcomed all over the globe. Even *if* the British Army agreed to take some form of action, they’d need evidence.”

“No need for such drastic measures. They only need to be prepared, as I mentioned,” Pierce reminded him.

Scarlet put her teacup down. “What do you mean?”

Pierce took a draught of wine. “I’m going to get on board the city and sink it. Be rid of the blasted place altogether.”

Everyone gaped in surprise.

“If we wait, they’ll not only have started the Second Machine War, but the Ghost Fire will be ready. Once the chemical is created, it’s bloody well over.”

“How are you to sink such a place, Grandfather?” Scarlet asked him.

“While inside Metal Metropolis, Jehy and I managed to locate the Core Engine. We decided that flooding the city’s ballast tanks would do the trick. The keel is plenty thick, but between the tanks and the submarine docking area, it may be thin enough to damage by an explosion. There’s a problem, though.”

“Aside from the hundreds of other issues?” Joaquin kindly threw in.

He was always good at debating, just like his mother.

Even so, Pierce huffed and said, “I only have a rough idea of where the tanks could be. I’m not completely positive that what I was looking at was actually them.”

Pierce rested his elbow on the table and watched as Marvin took a stroll across his fingers, across his palm, under his hand, and back over his fingers again. He then eyed Kolt.

“What do you think about the tanks, given my description?”

Kolt was quiet as he thought. “It sounds about right. The Floating City would need to be built similar to a ship, so it’s very possible that what you saw was the ballast tanks. The thing is, they will most likely be filled when the city isn’t on the move.”

Pierce figured as much.

“That’s why I need explosives that can be detonated from a distance. Give me a chance to escape.”

“Will getting to these tanks be difficult?” Joaquin wondered.

“I spotted a possible entrance, but again, I wasn’t able to investigate due to that blasted automaton, Ozie.”

Pierce hated that his search was cut short when Ozie suddenly showed up and nearly botched his and Jehy’s entire mission. Granted, they needed to hightail it out of there since the demonites were after them, but if they’d had the time, they could have at least seen if the two doors he had spotted down in the training room led to the tanks.

“You can’t possibly do all this alone, Grandfather,” Scarlet said with concern.

“I don’t intend to, darling. What I require is a team and a solid plan, which is what brings me here. I need help and plenty of it.”

“We have no idea where Metal Metropolis is,” Joaquin pointed out. “It could be on the other side of the world.”

“No,” Pierce insisted. “The bastards are close. From what Foster told me, the next machine war begins on 10<sup>th</sup> of June. That’s only days away. Wherever the city is, it’s here



on this continent.”

“Again,” Kolt rejoined, “how can Joaquin and I bring this to the army’s attention with no explanation of how we’re aware of the clankers’ intentions? We can’t exactly tell the truth.”

“Queen Victoria might be helpful,” Clover chimed in. “She can order the prime minister to contact nearby countries to at least find out if the Floating City is visiting anywhere. I’ll phone up the palace and request a visit with the queen tomorrow.”

Pierce nodded with approval. He knew the lass would come up with something.

“Cheers, love.”

“You ought to accompany her, Father,” Joaquin unexpectedly suggested.

The proposal sobered Pierce right up. He froze and just stared at his son. Marvin continued to scamper up and down his whole arm. “Come again? Go to—the *palace*?”

Joaquin nodded. “Regardless of Clover’s relation to royalty and Kolt and mine’s status in the army, it’s doubtful any of us will move the needle much. The queen could raise the alarm if she’s convinced that the threat is real. So, who else is better suited to give her this warning than you?”

“Indeed,” Kolt said, siding with his brother. “The queen knows you.”

“Aye, she knows me as the idiot thief who attempted to steal from her.”

“She forgave you and even granted you a pardon,” Clover reminded him. “Plus, you did save her life and because of it, she knighted you.”

In 1850, there was an assassination attempt against Victoria at the Circle Theater, where she had been watching a play that Kolt’s mother, Frederica Katz, was performing in. It wasn’t the first time someone tried to murder the queen, but on that night, Pierce saved her life from her attackers. For his bravery, he was free to leave England as Sir Landcross.

Clover had a point, but Pierce still wasn’t keen on meeting up with royalty.

She stood and hurried inside the house. “I’ll contact the palace now.”

Pierce sighed and rubbed his forehead. “Grand.”

To Kolt, he said, “My mates that I told you about—Theon, Alura, and their lot. It’s plenty to ask, but could they hole up here?”

“Oh, um, I have to speak to Clover about it, but it shouldn’t be an issue.”

Pierce sensed Joaquin had questions about what had happened with his mother. He plucked Marvin off him and placed the mantis on the table.

“C’mon, son,” Pierce beckoned, standing from his patio seat. “Walk with me.”

The two casually strolled through the garden and between the tall hedges. Butterflies and honeybees buzzed about. The green of the grass shone as brightly as ever. Pierce and Joaquin walked abreast of each other. They shared the same stride, except that Joaquin had his hands clasped behind him while Pierce tucked his inside the pockets of his slacks.

“Why did you run from me that night in the sewer tunnel?”

“I was afraid of what it might’ve done to your state of mind, seeing your dead parent and all,” Pierce explained. “I believed I was protecting you.” He chuckled. “I honestly thought I had sent Kolt plunging into insanity when I first showed up.”

Joaquin snorted then asked bitterly, “And it was Dr. Duncan Hackett who did all this to you?”

A spark of anger flickered within Joaquin. Pierce felt it and knew his boy wanted to find this cocker who had imprisoned and tortured his old man for his own gain.

“If I had known what sort of man he was, I would have never brought him to our home to repair your broken leg. Is he still in Bath?”

Pierce shrugged. “Most likely. But don’t go worrying about that sod. What’s done is done. Besides, there are more important matters to concern ourselves with, eh?”

But Pierce sensed that Joaquin wasn’t going to let it go so easily.

Silence fell between them for a spell.

They neared the wall where a narrow door was located. The same one Pierce had escaped through when his mate Robert Blackbird lived at the château.

Pierce sighed and said, “All right. Ask me.”

Joaquin stopped and turned to him. “Where is Mum?”

Pierce looked down, then raised his eyes. “She’s gone. Crossed over where she’ll start a new life as someone else.”

“Why would she do that?”

“We were both crossing over. I was the one who got snatched back.”

“But *why*, though?” Joaquin pressed. “Did you two not wish to wait for any of us?”

Pierce detected the hurt and disappointment. Joaquin didn’t understand why his own parents decided to push on without seeing him or his siblings first.

He chewed his bottom lip and lied. “It-it was my idea. The thought of having to part from our children again when we decided to cross over was too much for me to bear.”

In truth, Taisia had wanted to rejoin the living world, but she wasn’t there to defend herself, and Pierce didn’t want her child to think ill of her.

Anger arose from Joaquin, and Pierce braced himself for what he would say next.

“You’re the reason why Mum is gone from us?”

“Not forever,” he promised.

“But she’s not here now, and she could have been!”

The remark forced Pierce to take a step back.

“Aye,” he croaked. “It was selfish of me. I won’t dispute that. And I’ll not ask for forgiveness, only perhaps for a bit of understanding.”

A tear rolled down Joaquin’s cheek. He quickly wiped it away. Pierce understood his sorrow, for all the children loved their mother to no end.

“Pierce,” Clover called from the patio area.

He waved to her and then said to his son, “I bugged up. It wasn’t my intention to make you feel that I was aiming to abandon you or your siblings.”

Joaquin nodded, but there was a stew of emotions boiling inside of him.

When they reached Clover, she told Pierce, “Victoria is expecting me and Kolt tomorrow afternoon. You’ll come in Kolt’s stead.”

Pierce ran his fingers through his hair. “Wonderful.”

