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Legacy

The Underground

(Book Three)

“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

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 reput-ation 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, Land-cross,” 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 en-danger 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 strange 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 over 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 split-ting 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 down-stairs. 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 form 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 over-sized 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 side-ways 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 his head 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 qui se passe, 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. Tu m'a taunt manqué,*" she mur-mured 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 whisper-ed 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 te 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.”

Legacy

Bounty Hunter

(Book Four)

“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 of 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 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 Land-cross, 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 carried 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 Grand-mother 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.

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