

[Return to Page:](#)

Legacy

(Book One)

“The world as we know it is standing on the pivotal edge of change! An evolution is taking shape. This is the climb, my friends! The climb up towards the peak of the Industrial Revolution! I say unto thee, we must contribute to thrive. Contribute to the Age of the Machine!”

—Professor Raphael Brooke

Chapter One

The Thief

England
Spring, 1843

Pierce Landcross truly believed he was bugged.

For the past three days, he'd been riding steadily toward Dover to catch a ferryboat out of England, and he had switched horses at least four times to stay ahead of the Royal guards he knew were chasing him. Only days ago, he'd crossed a line, earning him a hunting party that aimed to bring him back to London. When Pierce reached Kennington, he'd thought everything was hunky-dory. A mistake that nearly cost him.

The district was holding another one of those industrial festivals that had been cropping up in the last few years as the Industrial Age grew and grew. Many people were rather excited about the new machines that inventors were creating. These inventors were dubbed "Contributors," folks who had dedicated their lives to progress.

Pierce had seen his fair share of these sorts of gatherings during the spring and summer months.

After riding all day, Pierce's horse was exhausted. He decided to give the poor animal time to rest before pushing on to Dover. He reckoned he had put enough distance between himself and his pursuers. Besides, he was feeling a tad travel-worn himself.

He hitched the horse on the outskirts of Kennington Park and left to explore the festival.

Contributors stood on low platforms, drawing folks over by telling them about their inventions or what they predicted would happen in the future.

"In the next cycle of the Industrial Revolution, we'll have airships to take us everywhere!" one speaker dressed in a tailcoat and bowler hat announced to a crowd. The mechanical speaking trumpet he held amplified his voice.

Behind him were banners hanging on a wooden frame, and on those banners hand-drawn sketches of these flying ships.

"Imagine traveling across the Channel on a ferryboat that soars over the water," the tosspot went on.

Pierce chuckled, and he wasn't the only one who did. The small audience laughed as well, and many waved the man off as they dispersed. Although flying airships sounded farfetched and Pierce hardly believed such things would ever come about, he couldn't escape the strong feeling that he'd seen them before, perhaps in another life—or in another time.

You're going mental, ol' boy.

Shaking it off, Pierce continued his stroll through the park.

He came across a puppet show with five-foot-tall marionettes. They weren't created to look like humans. Instead, they had mechanical bodies with glass eyes. The puppeteers stood on the platform over a stage. The stage itself was adorned with shiny gold curtains and a smoggy city backdrop. Below, a musician played the organ while the speakers—hiding behind the curtains—recited lines. One of them mentioned The Age of the Machine.

Pierce had heard the phrase for many years. It was said to be the next epoch after the Industrial

Revolution—the peak of it, as it were. And it wasn't supposed to encompass only Great Britain. Contributors from all over the known world were inventing new gadgets. They wanted to bring about The Age of the Machine Era in their lifetimes. Pierce wondered if he'd ever see it in his.

Leaving the puppet show behind, Pierce moved on.

In the center of the park was a rather large tent with all sorts of wonders. A very large, tear-shape terrarium, housing soil and colorful plant life, rested on a tall stand with steel octopus arms supporting it. People could walk underneath the terrarium and see earthworms and plant roots through the glass underbelly.

Further on, a Contributor wearing a stovepipe hat and tacky checkered britches was showing off his mechanical, life-sized horse. The machine was impressive, especially when the inventor pulled a bumper knob located just under the throat, causing the horse to buck. It happened so fast and with such force that people jumped in surprise.

There were strange typing machines, gadgets that brewed coffee, and a motorized carriage prototype. Most, if not all, worked poorly or not at all, but people were fascinated, nonetheless.

Outside the tent, Contributors rode on large, round, steam-powered contraptions shaped like gears with three wheels pushing them along. There was also a slender house with a tall, pointed roof and a convex, glass bottom that hovered close to the ground. A similar building, only smaller, was attached to the house by a pair of exterior corridors. The house was supported by a very large wrought iron stand that cradled the structure like a Fabergé egg. Three large round balloons were tethered to the house like those on the basket of a hot-air balloon. A wide propeller spun slowly at the rear of the place. Folks were going up a flight of metal stairs to the second level, where a sign read "Funhouse" above the entrance. Screaming came from the glass dome where Pierce could see there was a spiral slide that sent people down to the very bottom. There, they were led to an exit. The ones who had ridden the slide were laughing as they descended another staircase that led to the field.

Pierce smelled something tasty and eyed vendors selling meats they were cooking on a grill that resembled a locomotive.

He hadn't but a few pence on him, but if he could pick a few pockets . . .

While he thought such things, he caught sight of a group of red uniformed Royal guards over yonder. One of them was showing a handful of people what Pierce reckoned was a wanted poster. As sure as his luck was rotten, someone recognized him and pointed in his general direction.

"Bloody hell," Pierce muttered.

As the guards looked his way, Pierce turned on his heel, pulled down the brim of his shabby old Quaker hat, and walked the other way. He was too far from the hitching posts to retrieve his horse. But it hardly mattered. Trying to ride away would do him little good if they were following him. Blast it all, why did he have to linger for so long? He thought for sure he had a decent head start on his hunters. Now, he was buggered.

As he headed back to the tent, a sinking feeling that he was being watched crept up his spine.

"You there! Stop in the name of the Queen!"

Shite!

Pierce glanced behind him and saw the guard now clearly chasing after him. He then picked up his pace and ran into the tent.

Seconds later, the guards also entered, calling for him to halt. Instead, Pierce unholstered his flintlock pistol and headed for the large terrarium. The guards were quick to close the gap, and Pierce only hoped they wouldn't open fire. None did, and so he directed his gun upward and shot

into the underbelly of the terrarium as he ran under it. Shooting at such a close-range, the blast was enough to shatter the glass wide open, and pounds and pounds of dirt dropped straight down upon his pursuers—earthworms and all! The impact sent all three guards to the ground but spared two others, and they kept up the chase.

“Stop, you!”

Pierce holstered his now empty weapon and ran faster through the frantic crowd, who were now rushing to get out of the tent after hearing the gunshot. He weaved through them and spied the mechanical horse on his way to the exit. When he reached it, Pierce hurried around to the front and pulled the bumper knob as the guards were about to come around. The poor sods had no idea what was about to happen. The machine animal bucked, striking the two in the chest and knocking them right on their arses. Pierce honestly couldn't believe his split-second plan worked as well as it did.

Rather than relish his good fortune, Pierce left the tent, ready to head to the hitching posts, when he stopped short. Another guard was charging him from beside the tent.

“Stay where you are, Landcross!” he ordered.

This one wasn't a pale English wanker like the others. He was tall and dark-skinned. Persian, perhaps?

Pierce turned and ran off. Despite the throng, he knew he wouldn't be able to hide or lose the guard so easily out in the open. His only chance was to make for the Funhouse. He pushed past people going up the stairs, the guard only yards away and shouting at him. A git at the entrance asked if he had a ticket, to which Pierce gave a tsk and rushed on inside.

“Hey!” the ninny hollered.

Pierce entered a round room with a railing corralling a section of wooden flooring that rotated. This carousel rose some feet up and slanted sideways. It slowly moved one way while the flat middle section circled in the opposite direction. Children were sitting in both sections, waving at parents who were watching from behind the railing. The walkway was packed, so Pierce jumped the barrier and cut through the revolving floors. Leaping over wee ones, who were now screaming as the floor moved in two different directions, was most challenging. He needed to pinwheel his arms to keep from losing his balance.

Eventually, Pierce made it across to an opening and ran past parents who were quite sore at him. Beyond the threshold was an upper corridor that turned out to be another spinning nightmare. The entire section spun like a moving cave. A lad managed to plant his hands and feet on the cylinder of doom and spun around with it. He then lost his balance and fell over while laughing.

The moment Pierce stepped in, he found himself fighting to stay on his feet. He darted across it, feeling as though he was running across a lake of ice as his feet kept slipping.

“Landcross!” the Persian yelled from the other room.

Pierce again pushed past folks and entered the smaller house. What greeted him was a wall of mirrors that either stretched out his reflection or shrank it so he looked like a short, pudgy gnome. He went through another doorway and thundered down crooked and slanted stairs that had far too many switchbacks. He entered the second outer corridor that led to what he hoped was the final room. Inside the round room, a target was painted on the wooden floor. Light shone in through a couple of windows. A colorfully dressed man stood near the center of the painted floor.

“You made it to the end,” he said to Pierce. “Good for you, young man. Come here and see what's next.”

While the man tried to wave him over, Pierce eyed the bullseye on the floor and noticed something dodgy. He instantly pulled his pistol and aimed it at him.

“What is that? A trapdoor?”

The tosser lost his cheery grin. He threw up his hands and stuttered out, “Y-yes. It’s meant to surprise guests. It’s quite safe. I assure you, sir.”

The heavy sound of rapid footsteps came from the corridor. Pierce rushed to the man and shoved him away while holstering his pistol. Behind the idiot was the lever.

“Don’t move!” the Persian commanded while entering.

His rifle was trained right on Pierce, who raised his hands. “You bloody well caught me, mate.”

The Persian advanced, breathing heavily.

“Pierce Landcross, you’re under arrest by order of the—”

He got no farther when Pierce quickly twisted around, gripped the lever hidden behind him, and pulled it down while falling to his knee to keep from being shot. Sure enough, a blast burst from the guard’s rifle as the trapdoor opened. The bullet crashed through one of the windows. The guard vanished but cried out as he began his spiral journey down the slide.

“You’re right, chum,” Pierce said to the petrified man, crouching near the wall, “he was surprised outta his wits.”

“Down there! Hurry!” an assertive sounding voice yelled just beyond the corridor.

Pierce only assumed it was the rest of the guards. He raced to the damaged window and shattered it with the handle of his flintlock. With only moments to spare, he climbed through and came out onto the wrong iron stand that encircled the upper part of the glass dome where the Persian was now trapped inside. He’d had no plan other than to not be in that room when the guards arrived. With his back against the outer wall, Pierce balanced on the wrought iron, hoping to find some means of escape.

“Stay where you are, thief!” a soldier hollered, aiming his pistol out the broken window.

A crack of gunfire, and then a bullet smacked against the metal propeller.

“Fuckin’ hell!” Pierce shrieked.

He followed the path of the iron frame while he listened to the guard shouting at him. Just as he rounded the house and came behind the propeller, he spied ropes hanging down, perhaps from the lines holding the massive balloons in place. To reach it, he needed to walk over a narrow walkway that stretched over the propeller shaft, and he had to be careful not to be struck by a network of large turning gears. The smell of oil hit his senses as he nestled deep within this winding mechanism. Below, the Persian had left the Funhouse and was heading back up the stairs, seemingly unaware that Pierce was now outside the place.

Bloody think I’m trapped inside, eh?

Between a couple of gears, a rope hung just within range. He reached for it, but he was unable to hold onto anything to keep himself from falling to his death. The coarse line barely touched his fingertips when shots fired and sparked off near him.

“We said stop!” the same guard who’d taken a shot at him exclaimed as he and another rounded the house.

Both held smoking pistols. With no more time left, Pierce huffed and jumped. He almost believed he’d miss the rope, but he managed to grab hold and then proceeded to slide down until the rope ended halfway past the domed bottom. The drop could have easily broken his ankle or leg, but Pierce hit the ground and was able to pick himself up at once. He then ran like mad out of the park and to the hitching posts, where he mounted his horse and rode south toward Dover.

Legacy

The Reunion

(Book Two)

“Consider this not farewell, little brother, but rather, I’ll see you around.”

—Joaquin Landcross

Chapter One

To London

London, Spring, 1843

Hundreds of buyers and sellers packed Spitalfields Market. Customers and vendors alike worked to elevate their voices over the loud auctioneers. Some auctioneers were extremely audible as they spoke into their mechanical speaking trumpets. Animal dung and meats left out in the sun too long tainted April's sweet air.

The bustling marketplace was the perfect hunting grounds for Jasper. His wife, Nona, and their companion, a young black woman named Taisia Kuzentsov, had arrived in London that very morning. The journey from Newcastle had been exhausting. Traveling without the rest of the nomadic clan had proven more daunting than expected. Halfway through the trip, food had become scarce. They had sold trinkets and told fortunes, but it wasn't enough to pay for meals.

The sight of fresh fish sitting on slow melting ice, as well the thick cuts of beef and lamb, made Jasper's stomach growl

"We should go to the lawyer," Nona urged.

"The market will close at noon," he argued.

His wife looked at him scornfully. "This is not what we came here for."

He should have listened.

"Perhaps we could sell the horse," Taisia suggested in her Russian accent.

She held the reins to their only transport, an old mare on her last legs. The mangy animal looked half dead just standing there.

That nag isn't worth piss. Jasper thought grimly. *No one would buy or barter for her.*

He didn't see the marketplace as an obstacle, merely a short stop to gaining easy money. He eyed a dark-skinned Persian man in decent clothing who was buying cuts of meat and a pound of cheese. Jasper studied his target and his leather coin purse. After the man placed the purse in his right pocket, he grabbed his sack of goods and left.

"Wait here," he told both women.

"Jasper, no," Nona whispered.

He ignored her and pressed on. He snaked his way between the people, doing his best not to be distracted by the sights and smells of the food surrounding him. The act of pocket-picking was far less dangerous than stealing from vendors directly. Constables were everywhere, keeping watch.

The target headed for a horse. Jasper assumed the mount belonged to him. He needed to act quickly.

It had been ages since he'd done this, yet his hand slipped into the man's pocket like it was a comfortable old glove. He grabbed the purse and slid it out flawlessly. Once the coin

purse was his, Jasper spun on his heel and went in the opposite direction.

“Hold it right there,” someone laden with a thick foreign accent commanded from behind.

Jasper stopped cold. A voice inside his mind told him those four words were meant for him. He craned his neck, only to find the person he had just robbed pointing a pistol at him.

“I saw you eyeing me, thief. You’re not as clever as you think.”

“Neither are you, *monsieur*,” Nona said, coming up behind the Persian. “Lower your gun.”

Jasper couldn’t see it, but he knew she was holding her knife against the man’s spine, the same blade she used for skinning prey. For a moment, Jasper believed they’d make it out of this. Then the Persian jerked his elbow back, hitting her in the stomach. He quickly turned and shoved her hard to the ground. He moved with such speed and precision that, in the blink of an eye, Jasper’s wife was down.

“Nona!” Jasper yelled.

He almost ran to her, except the revolver was trained on him.

“Don’t,” the foreigner warned.

Nona clutched her belly. To Jasper’s dismay, Taisia appeared and took her into her arms.

“Nona,” she asked. “Are you all right?”

“Guards!” the dark-skinned man yelled. “Thieves!”

Taisia grabbed Nona’s knife and leaped to her feet. “Bastard!”

She charged and sliced at him. He jumped back from the swooshing dagger, barely avoiding having it slice open his belly. He could have shot her, but he threw a tight fist instead. She ducked and went at him again. He cried out when she carved the blade across his arm. He caught her wrist as she made another attempt to cut him and struck her across the cheek with his gun. Jasper rushed at him, but the Persian was quicker. He swung the weapon, striking Jasper across the face with it. By then, guards had arrived and surrounded the group with their rifles aimed at the threesome.

“Arrest them!” the Persian shouted. “Do it before I shoot them dead!”

The constables grabbed Jasper, his wife, and Taisia, who was yelling angrily in Russian.

“Did these people attempt to steal from you, Lieutenant?” a constable asked.

Jasper was stunned. “Lieutenant?” he repeated and then swallowed thickly.

“Yes,” he confirmed vehemently. “I am Lieutenant Darius Javan. I come to the market every Saturday. These officers know me here.”

As the officers hauled the prisoners off, the lieutenant ordered, “Hold up.”

Lieutenant Javan approached Jasper. He yanked down his unbuttoned shirt lapel and read off the tattoos imprinted above his breast.

“Joaquin, August 4, 1810. Pierce, June 18, 1817.” He eyed Jasper. “Landcross, is it?”

Jasper gave no answer.

The lieutenant snorted. "It appears we have caught the father of a pair of famous outlaws."

"Do you know what has happened to them?" Nona asked while being held by the constables.

The lieutenant grinned at her. "And you must be the mother."

Jasper cringed.

Lieutenant Javan could've been cruel and given her no reply, yet he displayed the same courtesy, and answered, "Word drifts through once in a while, but nothing recent."

To the constables, he ordered, "Take them to Newgate."

Jasper forgot his hunger pangs as his stomach shriveled up with utter dread. He had made a critical error, one that would cost his family everything.

* * *

One month later . . .

Pierce Landcross rode silently with manacles clamped to his wrists. The shackles secured his biceps with a chain that stretched across his back and kept his arms hugged tightly against his sides. It almost surprised him they hadn't chained him to his blasted horse.

Since his capture in France, Pierce hadn't said much. Not that the soldiers were striking up conversations with him, anyway. Usually, Pierce was a chatterbox. The weight of despair he felt, however, when he thought about how close he'd come to freedom had killed all his liveliness. He had nearly made it to Chief Sea Wind's ship, the *Ekta*. That vessel was supposed to sail him off to the Hawaiian Islands, where Pierce had planned to start anew. Instead, he had missed the ship and watched as she sailed away just before Lieutenant Darius Javan and his troops found him.

His sorrow had accompanied him from Le Havre and over the English Channel, where a nasty spring storm had forced their ferryboat to make port in Dover. The rains had stopped the following day, although the winds continued. Instead of waiting for the choppy sea to calm, Darius decided to press on to London on horseback.

Pierce admired the countryside. Despite his bad luck here, he had to admit England was a beautiful old country. The lush green scenery offered a pleasant distraction. He would let himself become lost in it until a guard or two glared at him, breaking his trance.

Darius eventually came up alongside him. "You're not an easy man to catch, Mr. Landcross."

"Is that so?" Pierce grumbled.

"It is. I can actually understand how you've remained alive all these years."

"Fortunate, I s'pose."

"Fortunate? Perhaps. As I mentioned before, you were not an easy catch. Your parents, however . . ."

From under the brim of his black hat, Pierce raised his sights to meet the man's gaze.

The lieutenant was smirking, blatantly waiting to see his expression.

“Pardon?” Pierce asked at length.

The Persian snorted. “I was at the market last month when your father picked my pocket. Your mother foolishly attempted to save him, which only resulted in getting herself arrested, as well.”

Pierce absolutely couldn’t believe it.

“You’re lying,” he managed to say in the midst of his shock.

Predicting this response, Darius set his sights forward, still holding his blasted smirk. “Your father is six-foot tall, black hair, brown eyes, and very lanky. He has tattoos of your and your brother’s names. Your mother is a young-looking Frenchwoman with dark hair.” He returned his focus on Pierce. “You have her green eyes.”

Pierce slumped and nearly slid right off his damn mount. His breath fell heavy and his heart quickened in its beats. His next question hurt him to ask. “Are they dead?”

Darius’s grin vanished. He almost seemed surprised Pierce expressed such concern.

“No. They’re in Newgate, awaiting trial.”

Pierce sucked in a breath, allowing air to flow back into his lungs. He breathed in deeply and sighed out with relief. What blasted luck the Landcross family had!

In a tone drenched with desperation, he asked, “Can you help them? Set them free?”

The lieutenant again snorted. “No, Mr. Landcross. Once they are tried, they shall serve out their sentence. They did attack an officer of the law, and that, alone, will earn them a lengthy sentence, if not death.”

His answer did anything but offer surprise.

“Picked your pocket, you say? Damn,” Pierce muttered to himself. To Darius, he asked, “So they have been imprisoned in that shithole for the past month without any funds?”

Darius only looked at him, and Pierce grimaced. How things operated inside Newgate Prison was common knowledge, for it had been that way for centuries. Several years ago, London reckoned it was time to reform the prison, which only consisted of remodeling the interior with new cellblocks and installing some up-to-date technologies, yet the unfair practices remained more or less the same. The prison guards worked for little or no wages, so the guards taxed prisoners or their loved ones for whatever they could weasel out of them in exchange for meals, water, and even a place to sleep. If there was nothing with which to pay for these necessities, sex was also an option, resulting in countless childbirths behind the prison walls.

“The loot you found on me,” Pierce said.

“What about it?” the lieutenant demanded.

“Will you pay the sheriff with it for their food and clean water?”

Darius considered him.

“You want to give it to your parents, leaving yourself penniless?”

Pierce tilted his head sideways and arched an eyebrow. “Were you planning on using the money for *my* benefit?”

The lieutenant’s smirk returned. “Perhaps. If you begged.”

Pierce huffed vexingly. "I see."

"In truth," the lieutenant went on, "I've been paying for them all along.

Pierce leaned forward with a wide expression. "Come again?"

"I knew they wouldn't survive a week in the state they were in, so I've made sure they were well-fed until their sentencing. When the Leeds Prison in West Yorkshire is complete, I may have them transferred."

Pierce didn't appreciate what he was saying.

"Do you get your jollies from tormenting the unfortunate? Why are you lying to me, Darius?"

"That's *Lieutenant* Javan to you," he retorted. "And I'm quite serious."

Pierce considered him.

Darius had the physical qualities of a true soldier. He stood six feet tall and was built like a gladiator. His rich umber skin was darker than any bark on the trees surrounding them. It was uncertain when he had immigrated to Britain, but his British brogue skimmed the surface of his Middle Eastern accent. Darius struck Pierce as the firm but fair sort. Even after Pierce had escaped him twice, extending his exhaustive manhunt, the lieutenant treated him with humanity. Pierce was fed, not left too uncomfortable, and granted modest privacy when he needed to use the lavatory. Considering how things could have been in this situation, Pierce found comfort in those small blessings.

When looking into the Persian's ochre eyes, he saw no fraud in them.

Pierce finally blinked. "Why would you do that?"

"Believe it or not, I pitied them. They ought to be punished for their crime, but I also understand why they tried robbing me. Hunger can push people to their limits."

"So, you'll keep paying their way, then?"

Darius thought that amusing, and it showed in his returning smile.

"Not now since you have kindly offered to give your own money."

Pierce grimaced and narrowed his eyes. "You're too kind."

The lieutenant turned away. "I do believe I am."

* * *

They traveled a few more hours before night caught up to them. They decided to make camp on the edge of the forest beside the road. After tying Pierce to a tree trunk, Darius had sent a pair of guards off to hunt for dinner while the rest set up the encampment. When the soldiers returned with the hares they'd killed, they cooked rabbit stew. Pierce was given a bowl. He had no idea what they had done to the stew, but it tasted the same as sewage water.

While he ate, Pierce sized up the troops. If he did manage to escape his chains and make a break for it, it would only take minutes for them to catch up. Accepting the situation was a bitter poison to drink. He'd always hoped that when he died, it would happen either in the blink of an eye or he would drift away peacefully in his old age, perhaps beside

someone he loved. Not this prolonged death that had already dragged on for days. A trial lay ahead. Fuckin' hell, he just knew it'd be a highly publicized spectacle, to boot. Pierce also didn't fancy the idea of having an audience watch him hang. His charade of a trial would lead to that, and hanging wasn't an experience he cared to relive, either. When execution day came, perhaps the quick drop and sudden stop would snap his neck, ending him on the spot.

After forcing down the horrible stew, Pierce sat quietly, looking at his shackled hands. Eventually, all but a single watchman went to sleep.

Pierce shifted in his bonds. The tight line tied over his torso irritated the wounds he had received from the beating he took from Ivor Norwich only days ago. His ribs ached, although the pain had become more of a numbing annoyance now. The pain prevented him from falling asleep for any length of time, as did the fire, which was being kept burning by the watchman. Pierce sat too far off to enjoy the warmth, yet close enough to be bothered by its light, forcing him to lower the brim of his hat over his eyes. He wished he could at least lie down.

A rustle in the darkness beyond the firelight snatched Pierce from his delicate slumber. With a snort, he snapped his head up. The soldier warming his hands by the fire perked up and touched the butt of his pistol. Pierce shook his head at him. By a slim chance, it was human—a robber or a bounty hunter wanting to collect on Pierce's head—and they'd be completely daft to try taking on a band of highly trained British soldiers.

It's only an animal, wanker.

Pierce found the soldier's suspicion slightly amusing until he disappeared. Not only vanished, but also snatched away into the dark as if he were an insect on a frog's tongue. Pierce blinked, believing he was hallucinating, but the lad remained missing.

"Bloody hell," Pierce whispered.

Darius, lying asleep nearby, let out a loud snort and sat up. He searched for his absent man. Another rustle got the lieutenant quickly to his feet, holding tight to his pistol. The missing soldier drew instant suspicion, for Darius had given orders for none to leave the campsite, not even to take a piss. His eyes darted everywhere until he pinned them on Pierce.

"Where is he?"

Pierce hadn't the foggiest notion on how to answer, and so only shrugged.

Sensing something amiss, the lieutenant said to his troops, "Look alive, men."

They began rising like Lazarus. Most groaned and were on the verge of complaining before their leader ordered, "Come now. Get up!"

Every soldier jolted to life. They got to their feet, and a moment later, an object appeared in a blur, scooping up another person. His wide, shocked face was the last thing everyone saw.

"Llandudno!" shouted a guard who had stood abreast to his taken comrade. He twisted his body around and fired into the woods.

"Hold fire!" Darius ordered just before someone else was snatched away.

“What the devil!” a soldier exclaimed.

The men began to buckle. Even Darius strained to maintain his warrior demeanor as he worked to grasp what was happening. A man’s hollering got everyone aiming pistols in a single direction.

“Help me!” the voice cried.

Someone else shouted from a different area in the woods, “Lieutenant! Help!”

“You, men,” Darius instructed to some of his soldiers, “go over there.” He looked to a handful more. “You four, come with me. The rest of you: stay with the prisoner.”

The troops scattered into action and vanished. The others posted at the camp, stood with backs against each other, keeping a panoramic view of their surroundings. Without drawing attention, Pierce tried squeezing free from the manacle. He didn’t fancy the idea of being bound to a tree while people were picked off one by one by an unknown assailant.

“Where are you, Llandudno?” a soldier asked in the dark.

“Up here.”

“There he is, sir,” another guard exclaimed. “He’s bloody well hanging upside down in that tree!”

Amusing, yet when gunshots split the air on the other end of the campsite, followed by shouting, it drove fear into Pierce. He couldn’t say whether the men were being slaughtered or not. On the opposite side, the soldiers’ footsteps crunched toward camp. Then someone again shouted, and a firework show lit up the forest. Their cries prompted the others at the camp into action. They split up and charged into the woods. With them gone, Pierce vigorously strained to slip free. As he struggled, something dropped right between his legs. He leaned forward as far as he could and spied the keys.

“What the fu . . . ?” he started to say as he looked up.

The firelight couldn’t reach high enough to illuminate anything above. No matter. He reached out for the keys. Although his arms were over the rope, getting the keys proved difficult.

More shouting from the guards ensued, their voices echoing like frightened creatures emerging from hell itself. It certainly sped Pierce up into freeing himself. He pushed against his restraints, scratching at the ground until he hooked his finger into the iron ring.

“Brilliant!”

He dragged the set of keys to him and began unlocking his chains. Once all the irons were unclamped, he lifted the rope up to where he could wiggle himself out from under it. He clambered to his feet and dashed over to the horses hitched near the road. He was about to mount up when he was suddenly grabbed and flung around. It happened so fast, his brain kept twirling seconds after he stopped. When his vision settled, he saw none other than the vampire, Robin of Locksley.

Smoke fumed from the hand he had touched him with. Pierce had his coin necklace to thank for that. As long as he wore his single coin from Judas’s thirty pieces of silver, no vampire could harm him.

The last time Pierce had seen Robin Hood—known these days as The Magician, Robin the Magnificent—it was on the Isle of Wight when they stormed Norwich Castle to save the girl, Clover. In exchange for the vampire’s help, Pierce had agreed to surrender the coin, but Pierce fooled him with a simple switch. The bloodsucker sure did know how to hold a grudge.

“Still have it, eh?” Robin remarked, shaking his wounded hand.

Pierce touched the coin and said with levity, “Always.”

Pierce’s good spirits vanished the moment Robin raised the gun on him. Pierce realized the vampire didn’t need to use his fangs to fulfill his revenge.

“Robin, wait now.”

Pierce truly believed his face was about to be blown off when someone yelled, “Find it! Find that demon!”

Darius.

Of course, the bugger would still be alive. Robin possessed an insight into people’s true nature, either granted to him when he became a vampire, or an instinct he had carried since he was mortal. Whatever the case, Robin wouldn’t kill anyone who wasn’t evil or hadn’t crossed him as Pierce had done when he tried robbing him some time ago. Robin turned the gun around and held the handle out to him.

“Crack on now,” Robin ordered. “I’ll catch up.”

Pierce arched an eyebrow at him. Did Robin want to drink his blood so badly he was willing to cut him loose until the coin was somehow removed? He decided not to ask, and instead, raised a shaky hand and took hold of his own Oak Leaf revolver. He tucked the gun under his waistband, and when he looked up, Robin was gone. Moments later, more shouting sounded in the forest, along with gunfire. Pierce mounted the horse and steered it toward the nearby road. When he came upon the path, his first instinct was to ride back south toward Dover, for it might be safer than trying to board a ship in the north. Then he remembered his parents. If he ran, he’d be leaving them to a horrible fate. He hadn’t the foggiest idea what he’d do, but he would think of something on the way to London.

[Return to Page:](#)