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# The Age of the Machine

*“Real monsters are those who create them. I have become a monster.”*

—Emma Rojas

1857

# Tiers of Awareness

*Palmito Ranch, Texas  
Spring, 1865*

The carnage began the moment the soldiers collided on the field.

It was a surprise attack by the Confederates, a desperate move to win what had already been lost. Nevertheless, the battle was no less bloody, even if more than half of the fighters weren't completely human. Twenty-sixth Infantry Regiment, Jarrott Watford, worked his rusty legs as quickly as he could toward the blue uniforms, clutching his bayonet rifle. Many more bayonets awaited him on the other side. Some were quality Oak Leaf manufactured. Jarrott spied the weapons' glossy metal, the glass of the sharpshooter optics glinting in the bright sunlight. Some rifles weren't equipped with swords or knives but with harpoons. The Union Army was well armed.

A loud, alarming scratch clawed across Jarrott's head when the antler of a harpoon scraped by him and plowed into the face of the automaton nearby. Despite the dull ringing in his engine that quickly dulled to a faint hum, it didn't slow Jarrott's approach. The joints in his unrefined knees were stiff from years of marching and fighting in the damp and the rain. As more machine fighters were manufactured, older ones like Jarrott received little maintenance. Jarrott managed to remain functional only due to his creator building him so solidly.

The body caught on the harpoon was dragged like a snared fish on a hook past Jarrott, the head tilted in an obscure angle. If the shooter hadn't been a machine himself, he would have been unable to pull in such a heavy carcass. The shooter reeled the spear and his kill toward him, where he shoved the corpse off using his foot and reloaded the harpoon.

Loud bangs came from two Confederate seacoast mortars, fired from behind. Humans were in charge of operating the hefty guns. These weapons were transported on iron wagons that needed to be pushed onto the battlefield by horses, men, and automatons. Earth and Union troops rose several feet high into the air whenever the seacoast mortars hit their mark.

As Jarrott got closer to the frontline, his single mechanical hand tightened on the barrel of his Oak Leaf shooting iron. His natural hand fingered the trigger.

Jarrott halted and aimed his firearm at the harpoon gunner. He saw his opponent through his target. A kill shot wouldn't be easy, for the Union fighter had the majority of

his head encased in hardware, including half of his face. Its craftsmanship was remarkable. The North must have better-skilled Contributors than the South.

Envy pinched him, but it quickly faded when he gained a clean shot and pulled his trigger. In a second, the soldier's eye burst into a bloody mess. The bullet penetrated the engine—the brain—and he went down and did not move. Jarrott began reloading. Overhead, hot air balloons, bearing the Confederate flag upon their envelopes were drifting by. It wouldn't be long before the battlefield burned.

Jarrott understood he had little time. This was going to be the day that his body—what remained of it—would finally be in the ground. He honestly didn't know how he should receive death. It wasn't as if he had a soul, unless one had developed after he was reanimated. He often thought about dying. He doubted anyone could revive him again if his engine could no longer function. Most likely, his meat parts would be cut out of the metal shell, and it would be refilled with another dead person. If anyone wanted the rusty material, that is. It mattered little. Looking ahead was pointless, considering the Confederacy was so desperate to win that they were willing to sacrifice every last Living Automaton at their disposal.

The line of soldiers swarmed him as he spent vital minutes reloading his rifle. The added shielding gave him time to check the sharpness of his bayonet blade. He pressed his natural finger to the sword tip until the delicate skin was punctured. Greenish oil slid down the edge. Synthetic blood. The bayonet, however, wasn't crafted to cut solely through flesh. While swords and knives were made of only steel, these bayonet blades also included chromium, which made them durable enough to penetrate other metals.

With his weapon loaded, Jarrott soldiered on. The grey coats clashed with the blue. The shouting from those who had voice boxes and were of flesh and blood escalated.

Gun blasts cracked as loud as thunder, sending smoke pluming upward. Human cries of pain echoed. Blood, oil, and innards spilled everywhere.

Jarrott drove his bayonet sword into the side of an automaton while the machine man battled a human Confederate. He struck the oil pump engine inside. The crushing noise was similar to a knife sinking into a tin can. The Union machine man expressed nothing but awareness as he looked at his injury.

The lack of feeling did not prevent the machine men from falling victim. Damaging the oil pump engine made him twitch uncontrollably. Jarrott ripped out the blade. The human Confederate—whom the Union machine man had been fighting—seized the opportunity and pulled his boot knife, jabbing it into his opponent's natural area of the throat, tearing it wide open. As the doomed fighter fell, Jarrott moved on, opening fire on a human bluecoat. A waste of a bullet, but he needed him out of his way to reach the trooper with a Mariette pepperbox pistol for a hand. The weapon was a multi-barrel handgun, in the literal sense—capable of shooting off eight bullets without reloading. Having such a replacement—although impressive—was something Jarrott would never have wanted for himself. He'd seen a couple of grunts with weapons on both hands. The Contributors believed it was a great idea despite the impracticality it caused the Living

Automaton.

Machine people required nourishment for their living organs. Some, poorly built, required actual food. Therefore, those unfortunate hybrids needed to urinate and defecate, and dealing with such matters was no easy task with a knife or pistol instead of hands. And without the ability to hold a bowl or utensil, most simply plowed their faces into their meals like hungry dogs.

The Union soldier with the pepperbox pistol hand fired off a few rounds at his enemies. Nervous system wires that connected to the engine controlled the trigger.

A human came running toward him. The Union fighter swung his other arm around, slicing the soldier's head clean off. A cutlass! It was fastened to his gauntlet. Small latches ran along the hilt, showing how the cutlass could be detached. Jarrott was able to see all of this, for this trooper wore no coat, only a shirt with sleeves rolled up.

Jarrott charged with his bayonet blade out. He didn't expect to take this opponent down easily, and he was right. The soldier turned like a wooden carving, completely stiff from having his neck replaced by the artificial casing that fastened tightly to his shoulders, enabling his mobility. His entire face was surrounded by iron. A permanent helmet.

The machine man switched his pepperbox pistol hand's direction toward Jarrott. A predictable move, so Jarrott bowed his head low, allowing the protective iron dome, known as the "engine cap," to take the full force. Each shot dinged loudly, reverberating through his engine and rattling his steel spine. Only three shots remained in the pepperbox pistol. Jarrott had been keeping count. In the second that the final bullet bounced off his engine cap, Jarrott lifted his deadly sights to his target and worked to move his rusty joints faster. The Union soldier held his cutlass at eye level, ready to slice it across. Remembering the flawless way he had decapitated his last victim, Jarrott knew exactly what to expect. His rifle was nearly empty, so he needed to choose his marks carefully.

He aimed his first shot at the soldier's face, which the soldier naturally protected using his steel-plated forearm, his mechanical fingers clutched in a fist. When the soldier believed Jarrott would open fire again in the same area, Jarrott made a surprising move. With his second bullet, Jarrott struck the biceps of the arm with the attached pepperbox pistol, which turned out to be real. Greenish oil gushed from the wound as if it was a balloon filled with green paint. As with all Living Automaton, the Union soldier's pain signals had been cut off. Yet, the lack of pain the Union fighter felt did nothing to hold back his rage. With a loud cry, the metal man charged. Jarrott fired his final shot, the bullet sparking off the soldier's steel chest. He couldn't be killed that way.

Jarrott prepared for the conflict. The Union soldier swung his cutlass and Jarrott blocked it with his bayonet before the slashing sword swiped off his head. This Union automaton's speed impressed Jarrott. His metal parts must be well looked after.

As the balloons neared their position, and with his pending end finally looming, Jarrott was only glad he was going to go down fighting. And when he looked into the eyes of the soldier with the pepperbox pistol hand, he knew he had found his last opponent. Jarrott

dug in his heels and pushed back while the steel of their blades scraped loudly against each other. When the Union soldier turned his cutlass away from him, Jarrott clocked him dead in the face with a metal fist. Pale green synthetic blood spurted from his nose with eyes, gleaming like tears that soon spilled down his cool skin.

The Union Army fired their cannons, shooting cannonballs overhead that crashed into the flank and rear of the Confederate formation. Loud explosions erupted, sending chunks of earth and bodies into the air. They could just as easily fire into the thick of the battle, but it was apparent the Yankees wanted to preserve as many of their Living Automatons and human soldiers as possible. The rebels had no such concerns. With the war already won by the North, this fight was simply a desperate act of defiance by the losing side.

The cannons aimed for the Confederate air fleet nearing the Union Army. Hitting such targets was no easy task, but they managed to cut straight through one basket and into the bomb it carried. The fireball in the sky could be seen for miles in all directions.

The rest of the flying convoy reached their destination, and, at long last, released their bombs. A jagged line of explosions erupted as though a child had ignited a cluster of firecrackers over a trail of working ants for his amusement. A mixture of soil and soldiers rose several feet into the air before raining back down in horrifying and bloody heaps. Despite it all, Jarrott decided to finish his fight. He rushed the fighter, who had briefly become distracted by the chaos. In a single strike, Jarrott jabbed the bayonet blade up through the soldier's lower chin and right into the engine. The Living Automaton spasmed.

At least his final kill would be a merciful one.

The body sagged, and Jarrott withdrew his sword, allowing the machine man to fall. It was then that a blast erupted nearby, lifting him off the ground just before the darkness took him.

**T**he smell of gunpowder and oil reached Jarrott's nose as he opened his eyes. Everything was blurry. He needed to blink to clear his vision. When he regained focus, he found he was sitting up. His grey uniform was nothing more than shredded cloth hanging off his mechanical form. The hellish sound waves caused by the explosion had all but blown his slacks off him. Luckily, his artificial legs were still connected to their steel hipbone.

Jarrott had been designed for a specialized diet. He no longer needed his intestine, only a sack for a stomach that spread the nurturance to what remained of his living organs. Jarrott's pecker and ass had been replaced with a curvy metal guard, so it mattered little that his shredded trousers hardly covered him down there.

The chair he sat in creaked when he adjusted himself. He was strapped to it by leather restraints wrapped around his torso. He didn't understand why until he saw a Living

Automaton in a nurse's uniform and goggles was seated beside him. Bright sparks flew everywhere as she welded a ball joint to his shoulder. For a moment, he believed she was doing repairs on his mechanical arm. Then he realized she was doing the work on the other side.

"What are you doing?" he demanded as loudly as he could over the noise.

The welding stopped and the nurse lifted her goggles. Her entire face was steel. A reptilian grin stretched across it with real teeth vaguely poking up behind slightly parted, sculpted lips. Her white apron was stained with blood and oil from attending to metal and meat soldiers. Her nurses' cap covered the whole top of her head and nearly hid her ore crown.

Her eyes, of course, were real. Scientists could replace most living organs with artificial ones. But there were more complicated parts that no one could duplicate. The lungs, brain, voice boxes, and eyes. Having vision register inside the engine was yet to be achieved, and the engine, the most complex part, hadn't yet been replicated. If it weren't for those vital organs, the Living Automatons would be simple machines, unable to perform a third of what the hybrids could do.

In a voice with an accent unfamiliar to Jarrott, the nurse said, "I am putting on your new arm, *señor*. You lost your natural one in the blast. Half your face, too, but I will repair it."

She placed the soldering tool down on a medical table stained with both blood and green oil. Jarrott studied the ball joint, now fastened to his armored body. It was now the same as his other shoulder, but the ore was darker and less dented; a recycled part from an automaton that never made it.

He noticed he was in a makeshift hospital put together for the machine soldiers. Both mechanical and meat parts were stacked in organized piles—torsos, legs, arms, and even the engine caps. There was no tent such as it were for the humans' hospital—only cots, surgical tables, and chairs similar to the one Jarrott was strapped to, set up directly upon the messy field. There was plenty of daylight left, which offered a wide view of the aftermath of the battle.

Thousands of bodies, both machine and human, and dressed in blue and grey uniforms, lay among the carnage. He saw huge craters from where the bombs' impacts had pocketed the area. The battle had left the landscape changed forever. Most of the air balloons had landed on the outskirts of the battlefield, but a few still hovered overhead, perhaps keeping watch for any oncoming enemies. There were soldiers in grey doing all sorts of things such as carrying the wounded on gurneys out of the sea of death or standing by the cannons and Gatling guns that once belonged to the Union.

"Look," the nurse commanded.

Jarrott glanced at the cracked handheld mirror she had in her mechanical grasp. He studied his facial wounds. There were deep cuts over his cheek and across his chin that had been sewn shut with thick thread. His eye was completely bloodshot. The remainder of his skin reminded Jarrott of cheese melting and bubbling in chili he'd seen the soldiers

cooking.

“You had shrapnel,” the nurse informed him, pointing to the cuts.

A loud shout got him to turn his attention away. Confederates were aiming rifles at a line of Union fighters—all human.

“Fire!” a commander ordered, slicing his sword down.

Thick clouds of gunpowder smoke burst from each rifle when soldiers pulled their triggers. Blue uniforms tumbled to the bloody ground.

“We won,” Jarrott noted in a low, gruff voice.

Usually, he never spoke unless a human required him to.

“The rebels did, yes. We, the machine people, have gained nothing.”

He eyed her again, surprised by her outspokenness.

She placed the mirror on the medical table.

A man in a doctor’s coat came up behind her and demanded, “Are you going to be done with this one soon?”

“I’m about to attach his missing part now,” she explained. “He has sustained quite a bit of damage that needs attending.”

The physician tutted.

“Then why repair him? We have others who require less attention.”

“He’s worth the work,” she stated.

Her tone carried a great amount of weight that Jarrott had never heard any machine person use before.

“He lived through an explosion and stayed mostly intact,” she went on despite the doctor’s hard stare. “He is well crafted, which is highly useful.”

The stiff expression on the physician’s face relaxed some. He appeared exhausted.

“Remained intact in an explosion, did he? Too bad his face wasn’t spared.”

With that, he left.

The nurse sighed. The way she acted and spoke, it was as if she possessed free will.

“What did you mean by the machine people won nothing?” he asked.

“It is as I said. We are manmade servants, after all. Our right to receive liberty is non-existent, just like the African slaves the Confederate Army has fought to maintain. Have you heard about the factories?”

Jarrott had. They were created six years ago when the technology to create machine people advanced. This was eighteen years after two Hispanic women, Emma Rojas and Gabriela Viola, founded the project. They had published their progress after successfully constructing Living Automaton out of animals such as goats and dogs. In the beginning, the religious scorned the women scientists for playing God, but when war broke out, both sides wanted to capitalize on reanimating bodies for use in building soldiers. Winning the war was all that mattered. Shortly afterward, factories were built, one in Pigeon Forge near Gatlinburg and the other in West Virginia. Once the patent fell into the public domain, construction became stationary. Surprisingly, numerous people volunteered, mainly the sick and old who wanted a chance to become immortal. But the dead from the

battles helped the armies multiply. It wasn't until the South began losing that they started sacrificing their slaves for the cause.

"Yes," Jarrott answered. "I know about the factories."

The nurse seemed to be focusing on his artificial frame under his tattered clothing. Jarrott had been blessed with a maker who told him the name of the previous owner of his body, even named him after him. His creator had also taught Jarrott basics, such as how to read and write, as well as do mathematics. Then the war started, and Jarrott was stolen away from him.

The nurse moved some shredded cloth aside to gaze upon his cast-iron chest. His maker sculpted it to resemble Greek bronze breastplate armor. Jarrott had retained most of his skull—minus the engine cap, of course—but his spine and neck bones had all been replaced by titanium replicas.

"You weren't constructed in the factory, though," the nurse observed, touching his leg, which was sturdy despite the rust.

"No, a Contributor made me. He told me that the original host who inhabited the body was his cousin, Jarrott Watford."

Contributors were inventors from around the world, and they went back to the start of the Industrial Age. For decades, Contributors had built and manufactured all sorts of gadgets and machinery.

"So, this creator of yours knew about our body's having their original life inhabitant? Interesting. Was he acquainted with the Soul Thief?"

Jarrott had never heard of such a name.

"Not that I am aware of."

"If he knew he wasn't bringing his cousin back to life, why did your creator do it?"

"To be part of those who brought forth the Age of the Machine Era. He wanted to prove he was worthy and to be included in such circles."

"This Contributor must have been very skilled."

"Who is this Soul Thief?" Jarrott asked.

She took a moment to answer.

"Someone I met years ago," was all she said. "Who was Jarrott Watford?"

"A young widower whose ancestors came from Watford, England, in 1657. Jarrott died of illness."

"Impressive," the nurse praised. "Your creator shared so much with you. Where is he now?"

"Arrested and put into the factory in West Virginia, I was told. He attempted to stop the Army from taking me from him."

The vision in his left eye went blurry. Oil from a cut had slid into it. His right shoulder ball joint locked up when he tried to raise his hand to wipe the oil away.

"You need extensive repairs," the nurse explained. "You were far enough away from the blast to stay mostly whole, but there is substantial damage. Half your real arm was blown off, so I took the liberty to remove it altogether while you were unconscious."

“Thank you.”

“It was a simple task. You have your natural collarbone, which I attached the ball joint to.”

Jarrott was glad to be rid of it and looked forward to being fitted with another mechanical limb, even if it looked different from his other. He figured he was getting a standard model, a mass-produced arm that all grunts were given in the factories. He'd have to be careful with it, for those usually didn't have quality construction and malfunctioned easily.

Then she held up the arm with the detachable cutlass.

“I was told you fought the soldier this came from. It seems only appropriate that you have it. You're fortunate, for these special pieces are put together splendidly.”

It was like receiving an award! Jarrott couldn't believe the luck of being able to inherit such a thing. It almost made up for not dying on the battlefield as he'd craved.

“Why did your creator leave you with your original arm?”

“I am incomplete,” he stated. “I was stolen before he finished with me.”

“But your awareness has allowed you to remember everything he told you?”

“Yes. I was in the Second Tier when I was taken. Perhaps I have reached the third.”

There were tiers of awareness every machine person experienced the moment they were reanimated. First, Second, Third, and Top. The beginning stage was simply knowing you were alive. Everything else was confusing and hazy. With the help of what the engine already obtained during its previous life, most Living Automatons knew how to speak and take orders very easily. The Second Tier was when the world became less fuzzy and more of the engine's function was restored. At this stage, most began to experience flashes of the body's previous life, which came and went. At Third Tier, the engine began to store more and more understanding and started having thoughts and opinions of its own. Top Tier was reaching full independent thought, which not many developed, for they were usually mind-gutted by then.

Mind gutting was a rewiring of the brain, taking away independent thought, no matter how minimal. Humans did that to those who disobeyed their masters or started to show signs of judgments outside of their duties. Mind gutting was a way to reset the engine.

The nurse shook her head. “I believe you are in the Top Tier. You just haven't been able to do anything with your own ideas yet.”

Jarrott wondered how she knew such things about him.

In the distance, the Union soldiers killed by the firing squad had been loaded up in a cart to be taken away.

“They'll try taking them to the train and transport them to the factory,” the nurse stated. “Which will do them no good, since the South has lost the war, despite winning this battle.” A sharp suction of oxygen whistled loudly as she breathed in. “Emma never wanted this. Murdering to build Living Automatons was not her intention when the project came about.”

*Emma? Was she referring to the Emma Rojas?*

Jarrott's creator explained it to him once. When Gabriela and Emma perfected their work and published their findings to top scientists in America, the entire project took off. The Living Automatons were first deemed vile and ungodly, especially since it took human parts to create them. Emma and Gabriela were persistent, however, and in time, and after donating a few to farmers, factories, and even slave plantations, they proved that the machine people were useful to society. When the population saw how beneficial the human hybrids were, and how well they obeyed, these farmers, factory managers, and plantation owners gave raving testimonies to newspapers across the country. It wasn't long before everyone in America wanted one. Living Automatons were manufactured and sold to the wealthy to serve as butlers and maids. It was believed that Living Automatons were the turning point that began the long-awaited Age of the Machine Era.

It also gave rise to negligence on the part of humanity.

The Oak Leaf Company bought the patent from Gabriela without Emma's permission. It was later revealed that Emma confessed she'd wished she never founded the project. Once the license was out of their hands, things changed forever.

*The Dead: Now Made to Serve the Living!*

It was Oak Leaf's slogan. Scientists and craftsmen were hired to build the bodies. In-house maintenance and mechanics were available to make house calls and to do any repair work on the company's product. There were even accessories such as masks for the hybrid human to wear if the owner didn't wish to see its real face and other custom-made requests for those who could afford it. None of the corpses used to manufacture Living Automatons could be too young—such as children—or too old. And the dead had to be more or less in good condition.

Oak Leaf had once offered payment to people willing to sell loved ones' bodies with the understanding that the departed had agreed to it in their wills. This quickly took a sinister turn. Relatives started killing each other for profit. Most were caught and sent to prison, only to be themselves taken to a factory. Rumor had it that it was Oak Leaf's plan all along to gain more free bodies. The company denied the allegations and payments for bodies ended indefinitely. Then the Civil War erupted, and Oak Leaf raked in more revenue from both the North and South wanting mechanical soldiers.

Jarrott had read the advertisements in the newspaper.

*We Recycle the Dead to Serve the Living! Forget the Grave! We Get Them Back on their Feet and Working for You!*

These ads would have illustrations of a typical family sitting at the dinner table with huge, cheery smiles as an automaton maid served their meals. Others depicted an automaton dressed in field clothing, standing among the wheat, holding a sickle or hoe with the sun gleaming off its metal exterior.

The nurse lowered her goggles and grabbed the welding tool.

"Look away," she advised.

As he did, he asked, "Do you have a name?"

She waited a beat as if thinking of one to give. "Alazne."

After the arm was welded on, a few gears were tightened, and the receiver wire connected to the nervous system, the limb moved flawlessly. Jarrott admired it as he practiced detaching and reattaching the cutlass from the gauntlet. He didn't imagine he'd keep the weapon off for long periods of time, however.

"I'll repair the other damages done by the explosion," the nurse said.

"You speak as though you have ownership of me."

"Ownership? No. But soon, perhaps, no one shall call themselves your master ever again."

After doing all she could to restore him, Jarrott was sent to a vacant tent to rest.

It was night when the nurse woke him.

"Come with me," she commanded.

He said nothing, only did what he was told, as was customary. The moment he was outside, Jarrott sensed a change in the air. He spied many dead bodies, including the doctor from earlier.

*Humans?*

He asked no questions and simply trailed behind the nurse who walked with great stride. He nearly needed to jog to keep up with her. His rusty legs were properly oiled now, which allowed him to move faster. The journey wasn't far. Soon, they came to a place where many lit torches were staked into the ground. Standing about was every Living Automaton, both Union and Confederate. All the humans were dead.

Killed.

Murdered.

"What is this?" he asked, feeling a sudden surge to speak freely.

The nurse turned to him, the firelight flickering against her wicked metal. Her reptile grin seemed to have stretched wider.

"It's time we turned the tide, Jarrott Watford. We're going to overtake this world and then destroy it all."

# The Age of the Machine

## Soul Thief

# Leaving the Afterlife

The time spent in the afterlife was a terrific holiday away from living.

Pierce Landcross had thought this practically every day after pushing up daisies over a year ago. As it is with everyone's life, his was full of ups and downs. There were memories Pierce wanted to keep forever, and he wondered if any would remain once he rejoined the world as another person. He reckoned a few would carry on with him. His old enemy, Volker Jäger, had told him as much. To Pierce's knowledge, that bloody psychopath remained sulking in the cave of torment he'd created for himself. Pierce had not returned there since his first visit to the In-Between, after being hanged in the Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Perhaps past recollections helped people find cherished ones they once knew in their former existence. Even in the valley of the shadow of the dead, Pierce shuddered at the thought of being lost to them forever.

The In-Between was a beautiful and peaceful place that granted all the world's deceased a restful place to loiter about for however long they pleased. Some had dwelled in the In-Between for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Pierce couldn't imagine himself staying for nearly so long. The realm was indeed safe and tranquil, but there wasn't much to do other than wander about. Not to mention, the curiosity of what awaited him next nagged at him. Pierce reckoned the need to push on was instilled in just about every departed, which was what eventually drove them to cross over. Pierce and Taisia had several conversations about going back.

When Pierce died of heart failure, Tai had joined him shortly afterward. Before she arrived, Pierce stayed in the company of his folks, Nona and Jasper, who'd passed on years before. Grandmother Fey remained for a spell before she took off to explore the universe, which apparently was a second option. However, most were too terrified to take such a journey. No one who left the In-Between to travel into the Great Beyond had yet to return, not even Chief Sea Wind and his wife, Waves of Strength, who had also decided to travel the same route. The unknown scared the dead as much as death frightened most of the living. The idea of exploring beyond the In-Between appealed to Pierce, but Taisia was a tad too nervous. So, they decided they would enter a new story together.

Eventually.

In the meantime, Pierce was simply enjoying dancing with his lovely wife.

The inhabitants of the In-Between could not physically feel anything, so Pierce and Taisia were able to dance for hours without becoming winded. Besides, it wasn't as if they were breathing.

The dance they practiced was the tango. They even had an instructor, Liliana Ruiz, who'd agreed to teach the couple.

They finished as Pierce pulled Taisia close, holding her hand over their heads while he stared into her eyes.

“Well done!” Liliana praised them with a clap of her hands. “You both have perfected the art of the tango. *Bravo!*”

Pierce grinned at Taisia and kissed her lovingly, wishing he could experience the softness of her lips.

*Better to feel nothing than suffer the pain of aging*, he thought.

Upon entering the In-Between, the departed could choose any form they had during their lifespan. Pierce and Taisia opted for their younger bodies, as did most deceased adults. After suffering through the aches and pains of being an old bloke with a busted leg that he’d shattered ages ago, feeling nothing sat well with him.

Pierce spun his wife once around, and when she stopped, she said to Liliana, “Thank you.”

She smiled at her. “You’re quite welcome.”

“Aye.” Pierce nodded curtly. “Cheers for the lessons.”

To Taisia he pointed out, “We must’ve mastered eight types of dances by now.”

“*Da*. I think so.”

Pierce admired Taisia. He studied each of her lovely freckles dotting her dark brown skin. Her cognac-colored eyes were jewels none could put a price on. He had gazed upon her fondly throughout each chapter of their lives, noting every physical transformation. Pierce had always embraced the idea of growing old with someone he loved, and he and Tai had done just that. Despite it all, Pierce Landcross had lived a damn good life.

“Pierce! Taisia!”

He looked over and spotted his mother, Nona, and his father, Jasper, approaching them where they stood in the middle of a vast meadow. As it was with Pierce and Taisia, Nona and Jasper had returned to their youthful forms.

“We have some news,” Nona announced.

“You’re pregnant,” Pierce jested.

Nona snorted and shook her head.

“Of course not, but perhaps in the next couple of decades or so, I could be.”

The grin on Pierce’s face dropped.

“Wait. What do you mean? Are you both—?”

“Returning,” Jasper cut in. “Aye. We believe it’s time.”

Pierce did not care for this news.

“Bloody hell, you both only arrived twenty years ago.”

“Twenty-five,” Jasper corrected.

“Twenty-two for me, darling,” Nona spoke up.

They were smiling. Pierce was not.

Jasper kissed his wife’s hand and held it fondly. He eyed his son.

“What is it?”

Pierce’s expression was grim. He didn’t want them to leave. He feared he’d never see

them again. Life, death, and living once more were an utter mystery. Robin of Locksley—once a vampire—told Pierce that when a person found their true love, the couple would find each other in every new life. That was all well and good, but what about the rest of their loved ones? Where did they come into the sequence if the order of everything was jumbled? There were simply too many questions, and Pierce wished he could have them answered.

Instead of admitting his desire for his folks to stay, Pierce cleared his throat and replied, “Nothing, Dad.”

“I’m very happy for you both,” Taisia spoke up, giving Nona and Jasper a hug.

There was no packing involved, for whatever the couple had accumulated while deceased couldn’t be brought with them.

In the In-Between, there was a place dubbed the Cross Over. It had many other names—more than Pierce cared to remember. The dead went there when they were ready to rejoin the light of the living.

The In-Between was always painted in peaceful afternoon colors. The oceans, fields, forests, beaches, and sky were shrouded in deep blues, rich purples, scarlet reds, soft golds, and stunning greens. The Cross Over fit right in with the environment. A simple, smooth, glossy black stone stretching on for so long, it seemed endless. Perhaps it was. It was embedded in a tall pile of molten rock covered with brilliant green moss and lengthy vines, some hanging over the opening of the Cross Over. Thousands of friends and loved ones were bidding travelers farewell.

When Pierce hugged his mum and dad, it was like losing them all over again. Jasper had gone quietly in his sleep, just as his son had later on. Nona had fallen deathly ill. In her last moments, Pierce had stayed by her side, holding her hand.

Now, he had to say goodbye to her for a second time. He couldn’t hug her enough.

“Let go, Pierce,” Nona ordered when Pierce hung on.

“I don’t want to, Mum,” he whispered in her ear.

He could not detect the heat of tears in his eyes or the tightness in his chest caused by his broken heart, but he remembered it all the same.

Nona pulled away and gazed fondly at him.

“This isn’t goodbye forever, son. Our love for one another will bind us for all eternity. You must believe that.”

Deep in his core, Pierce did, but it did not make this second separation any less painful.

After a tender kiss on the cheek, Nona joined Jasper as he finished saying his farewells to Taisia, who wished them well.

“May your next chapter be full of great wonder and happiness.”

Nona and Jasper approached each other, and hand in hand, stepped toward the stone.

They slipped through it like it was a slit between two curtains and vanished.

Taisia found a spot where she could cry alone. Seeing Nona and Jasper off had broken her non-beating heart.

Her family considered her the strongest among them. She was the first to give her son, Joaquin, the blessing to leave home to fight in the Machine War despite how deeply it hurt her to do so. Being strong was simply in her nature. Taisia had almost forgotten what her father's face looked like, for he had passed on when she was only a child. Taisia and her twin sister, Liliya—who was still alive—had inherited his freckles and deep complexion. For a brief moment after Taisia's death, she was reunited with both of her parents before they, too, crossed over. It crushed her just as Pierce was devastated after saying goodbye to his kin.

After her grieving passed, she went looking for Pierce. She found him sitting alone on a boulder by a waterfall that made no sound.

"Are you all right, love?" he asked her.

She smiled at him.

"*Da.*"

Her sorrowful mood lifted when she gazed upon her husband. He was truly a handsome creature with bright green eyes that had stored up so much experience. Never in all of their years of marriage had she ever tired of the tone of his soft voice, his wit, or his outgoingness. There had never been a dull moment when around Pierce Landcross, whose charm and gentle nature drew people to him.

Taisia touched his face, longing for the feel of him.

"I believe Nona," she stated. "About being reunited with them."

"Aye. I do, as well."

His miserable tone was painful to hear.

She then suggested to him, "I think we should also return."

He arched an eyebrow at her.

"Eh?"

"*Da.* To spare our children the same heartache."

He stayed silent for a long while, obviously giving this deep consideration.

"I'm not sure. What will happen if we're not here to greet them?"

In truth, Taisia did not know. Many times, she had envisioned being reunited with her whole family as they entered the In-Between, but then the day would come when a member of the family would want to return. The sorrowful goodbyes for those of them who weren't ready to leave would be hard and lonely. Taisia didn't have it in her to go through it, not when it came to her children.

It appeared Pierce was reading her thoughts, for he sighed before saying, "Fuckin' hell.

The afterlife offers no true peace. S'pose avoiding such heartache would be best."

He took her hand, kissed it, and held it to his chest.

"Let's push on, eh?"

Taisia was anxious. She suspected Pierce was, too. She decided everyone crossing over was nervous. After all, no one knew the sort of existence that awaited them on the other side. What kind of person would she be? Would she be born a man? So many questions ran through her head, but what nearly stopped her from going on was the dreadful thought, *Will I find my family?*

She kept Nona's words in mind: *Our love for one another will bind us for all eternity.* Taisia needed to hold onto that.

She tightened her grip on her husband's hand. Of course, he was unable to feel it, but he sensed it and looked at her. He smiled and winked.

"It'll be all right, darling."

"I know," she whispered.

They focused on the rock and began to approach. When they passed through, it appeared they had entered a dark tunnel. Everything was pitch black, and the farther they went, the stronger the force pulled them along. Taisia felt it. For the first time in over a year, Taisia *physically* felt something. The pull grew more intense until her feet couldn't keep up. Soon, she found herself weightless.

"Pierce!" she cried.

"Don't let go of me, Tai!" he called back.

There weren't any harsh winds, but it suddenly became very difficult to hear.

"Just hold on to me. I'm right here with—"

His voice abruptly went silent as if a switch had been turned off. Taisia believed her hearing had gone out completely. A dreadful sense that Pierce was no longer there came over her.

"Pierce! Where are you?"

A flash as bright as the sun burst forth, and then everything went dark once again.

Colorful lights shone from a Christmas tree nearby. Taisia caught a glimpse of it just before a wall obscured her view. Someone was carrying her.

"Time for bed, little one," that someone said.

All of Taisia Landcross's memories of her past life left her as she experienced her first memory of her new one.

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