

The Age of the
Machine
Other World

The Fight

The gunfight began just before daybreak.

Neither the dwarf faun nor the Dökkálfar elf knew who had started it, only that it appeared things had come to a head between the two colonies.

When Jehy and Sarthad arrived in the mountainous village of Falk, they had asked the inhabitants if they could stay the night inside an unoccupied home. There were many, considering the living were dying off. Everyone in this year of 2026 was on their way out, even if some of them were in denial about it. Some still fought for things that didn't matter anymore—or, in this case, never really did.

The village had been feuding with the neighboring settlement of Arch Stone for fifty years. The rivalry had been going on for so long that no one remembered what initiated it. Some surmised the Falk folk stole livestock from Arch Stone. Others claimed someone from Arch Stone murdered a child of the Falk family. At least, that's what the Falk tribe told Jehy and Sarthad. In any case, Arch Stone decided to act after the oldest son of the chief returned from searching for water, completely beaten. He claimed someone from Falk beat him and stole what water he'd found in the old mines. Whether it was true or not, it was enough to start an attack.

When the firing began, Jehy and Sarthad became trapped inside the small house, with bullets cutting straight through the walls like they were paper. The population was less than a couple of hundred, all that remained of the thousands who once lived in the area.

After today, it would be much less.

"How many damn bullets do these people have?" Jehy screamed over the constant blasts.

"More than us, which is *none*," Sarthad answered sarcastically.

Jehy wished they had brought guns. She never thought when entering this dead world that they would require such weaponry. Their colleague, Acacia—also called the Broken Fairy—advised them to arm themselves with more than just knives and Sarthad's crossbow. She warned them that they needed to take all precautions. Yet, after being in this world and seeing the dismal conditions for herself, Jehy felt they didn't need such artillery. Now that she and Sarthad were in the middle of a goddamn gun battle, Jehy regretted not listening to Acacia.

A bullet pierced the wall and hit the opposite wall across the way. Jehy felt her hair ripple when it shot past her scalp.

"Vanish us out of here!" she yelled, checking her temple for blood.

"You know we can't. You're still recovering from last time!"

The damn elf was right. When they traveled through the Doorway and entered the

hellish storm, Sarthad got struck by lightning. Actually got *struck*! It came as little surprise, though, for elves carried an abundance of strong energy, and energy generally attracts other energies. The strike had left Sarthad badly wounded. Jehy had had to drag her down the hillside and away from the danger. Jehy had mended the burn on Sarthad's back and shoulder the best she could, and when the elf was able, the two steadily climbed down the rest of the way to the dry ocean floor.

Jehy was heavily disappointed. The plan was for them to enter and vanish over the mountainous ridge known to the locals as the Spine of the Atlantic. Now, with Sarthad injured, she could not vanish them nearly so far, forcing them to journey through what was known as the "Narrows" across the ridge. Only once had they disappeared when they encountered hostiles while going through a tunnel carved straight through a mountain. The pain of it still gave Jehy headaches. The sharp agony that swelled in her stomach and the crushing, grinding torture as her body pieced itself back together reminded her of how much she hated such means of travel. If they were to vanish again so soon, it could damage her beyond repair.

They couldn't disappear together and Sarthad wouldn't leave her friend behind, so the two needed to find another way out of this mess.

Just then, a gunman with the scent of troll, human, and pixie bloodline in him kicked in the door and aimed his rifle at them. Like everyone else living at the bottom of the seafloor, he wore whatever clothing he could find or make from any material available.

The hut Jehy and Sarthad were hiding in was by no means a large place—merely a one-room place—so hiding was next to impossible. Jehy thought they were done for until Sarthad suddenly appeared behind the intruder, wrapped her arms around him, and in a blink, were gone.

Jehy rushed to the open door when a loud scream echoed outside. The gunman was falling from the sky. The sight of it captured everyone's attention.

The village sat nestled between two mountains with rocky cliffs surrounding it. There was a single pathway leading in and out of the small settlement. The village square, where the heat of the gun battle was taking place, was where the gunman was falling. When he hit, his body splattered upon the gravel road.

Someone from Arch Stone, armed with a rifle, cried out and hurried to the dead man. Her shock seemed to have diminished her fear of being fired upon since she'd broken cover. To her good fortune, the falling man had caused a ceasefire.

"Come on," Sarthad commanded from behind Jehy, making the faun jump right off the ground.

"Don't do that!" Jehy seethed.

The elf ran past her and out the doorway, the gunman's weapon in her hand. "Follow me."

Jehy stuck close to her friend as they dashed into the village square.

"You!" the woman hollered angrily at them. "You killed my mate!"

Jehy briefly wondered how she could have known Sarthad had killed him and then

surmised that it was most likely the rifle that had given her away.

The woman tried firing on them when Sarthad shot first, striking her in the upper arm. The only thing that saved her from a kill shot was the fact that Sarthad was not accustomed to the weapon—plus, she was badly wounded.

The shooting caused more cracks of gunfire to explode all around. The ceasefire ended when both sides started up their onslaught again. Windows crashed, blood was spilled, and the echoes of death cries ensued. Sarthad shot someone in her path, then swung the rifle around, bringing it crashing down on the head of another attacker.

Jehy rammed her horns into anyone who tried to stop her, knocking them right off their feet. She might have only been four feet tall, but her might outmatched any of these folks. After all, these creatures were weedy and unhealthy. They lived in a dying world that had nothing left to give. These dwellers had lived off the corpse of the planet for decades and had, at last—and despite all their crossbreeding—reached the last stretch of their existence.

Sarthad leaped high onto the rooftop of a house resting up against the cliffside to avoid being gunned down by a group of people blocking her way. Jehy followed suit, jumping on the rocky cliff and climbing quickly like a mountain goat up to the same roof. From there, they leaped from house to house, eventually reuniting their feet with the road when they jumped from the roof of the last home at the edge of the village. They kept running, leaving the rivals to their fighting.

That night, Jehy and Sarthad made camp after an entire day of walking. They were utterly exhausted. For days on end, they'd been traveling through the dangerous and brutal ridge, and with Sarthad healing from her injuries, the trip to reach the other side had become more difficult.

Jehy watched as the elf removed her coat and shirt. The bolt of lightning had roasted her flesh to a cinder. They had brought salve, but it did little good. By the light of the fire, Jehy rifled through her rucksack to retrieve the ointment.

Dammit to all, if it weren't for that blasted lightning strike, they both could have already been across the Spine of the Atlantic and searching for Metal Metropolis. Now, with this unexpected delay, the journey was taking much, much longer. Their supplies would run low soon even though Jehy had packed more than on her previous trip here.

"How are you feeling?" she asked stupidly to her distressed friend and colleague.

Sarthad pulled her long, rope-like hair away from over her shoulder and the blister wound that blazed red against her black skin. She snorted at Jehy's inquiry and kneeled so the faun could reach.

"I feel as though my entire upper half is burning from within."

Jehy rubbed her palms, smearing the ointment on them before applying it. Sarthad sucked in a breath but did not flinch. The damaged area felt rough like hard leather, yet flaky dead flesh fell away. The rest of Sarthad's skin was soft and firm.

"Sorry," Jehy said sympathetically as she finished putting the ointment on.

"Don't be. I shall recover from this."

Elves had the power to repair minor injuries and recovered quickly, depending on the extent of the damage done. Being struck by lightning, however, would require some time to heal fully.

"Do you want the tonic?" Jehy offered.

Sarthad shook her head. "No. It will only affect my mind. With so much danger about, I'd rather not allow anything to hinder my thoughts."

They ate little, saving their rations as much as possible. Afterward, Jehy studied the map, the one that Foster had given her. The Narrows was supposed to be the shortest route of the entire mountain ridge. Many settlements pocketed it. Not many were occupied any longer as populations fizzled out or moved on to try finding a less hostile land.

It had been a long and exhausting journey, and Jehy and Sarthad had a distance to go yet. Jehy wished they could return to their own era to allow Sarthad to recover, but they were being hunted by the tribes infected with diseases brought on by the ones who escaped this time. Returning home would be too risky, and if they were caught and killed before completing their mission, all would be lost. Finding the machine city and locating its weakness—and thereby, gaining the knowledge needed to bring it down in the past before the Living Automatons unleashed the terror of the Ghost Fire—was all that mattered to Jehy and her colleagues.

Sarthad lay down with her bare and wounded back facing the fire. In moments, she was sound asleep.

One

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

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

The air was very thin.

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

“Bugger.”

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

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

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

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

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

“*They burned away the oceans.*”

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

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

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

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

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

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

He listened.

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the morning, Pierce did some practice shooting.

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

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

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

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

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

Rubbish, he thought.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

An elf, which explained his sudden appearance.

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

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

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

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

"Bloody hell. *Foster?*"

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

Foster approached, utterly bewildered.

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

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

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

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

Pierce arched an eyebrow. "You do?"

The elf nodded and with a slow blink, explained, "After I learned of Durothil's death, I and some of the other elves were told to flee to the jungle where the healthy could safely

live as the sickness ravaged our tribe. We searched for the ones responsible for bringing the diseased into our domain.”

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

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

Pierce’s eyes widened. “Come again?”

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

More *helpful? Cheers, Acacia.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

Foster shifted on his feet.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That and perhaps they can smell it, even from this distance. If you wish to maintain what you have, give it to me.”

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

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

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

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

Pierce jumped with fright. “Christ!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Appear maimed,” Foster advised.

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

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

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

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

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

Pierce understood. He greatly sensed his nephew's weakened state. He was no longer the strapping youth Pierce encountered in 1927. Instead, he was a withered shell of his former self, crippled with starvation. He was dry inside and out. His body was breaking down.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ghost Fire?"

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

Crikey, as his mate Jaxton would have said.

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

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

"The Narrows?"

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

Pierce had to admit that Foster's offer to stash his gear sounded marvelous. Not having to haul around several weeks' worth of food and water would certainly move things along. Not to mention, he trusted his nephew, for he could have already stolen his supplies if he wanted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Huh. Interesting.

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

Foster was quiet for a spell, remembering.

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

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

Pierce nodded. "Aye, be my—"

Foster vanished.

"—guest," Pierce finished.

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

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

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

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

Pierce huffed, feeling a tad embarrassed.

“I only drove a car once briefly.”

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

Foster frowned. “I cannot take you there. I’m very much needed here.”

Pierce sensed Foster’s sorrow. “What’s happening?”

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

Pierce swallowed thickly. “I see. I’m sorry, Foster.”

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

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

“I’ll teach you on the way out of town,” Foster said, opening his bedroom door.

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

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

“It’s the only one with a full tank,” Foster explained.

“Charming,” Pierce remarked.

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

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

“Do the storms cover the entire landmass up there?”

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

“What do you mean?”

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

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

thought he'd set the damn thing on fire!

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

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

"Shite."

Foster sighed.

"Try again."

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

"Stop here, Uncle," Foster ordered.

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

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

"Cheers, Foster," Pierce thanked him humbly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Who?" she asked.

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

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

She slipped away as gentle as a breeze passing through an open window. Foster felt her leaving as it happened. Her golden eyes dimmed as the life left her body. The leaders sighed mournfully, and a couple of them wept.

Foster kissed her hand.

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