

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 could 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."

"Aye." He 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 Crossover. 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 Crossover 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 Crossover. 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 a 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 was abruptly cut off 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.

One

Everything suddenly became bloody confusing and downright frightening. The push that carried Pierce right off his feet surprised him. Not the lack of gravity, but the *feel* of it. But he wasn't able to relish the sensation for long before something went wrong. There was a strange clicking like the tapping of a telegraph machine all around him. He searched for the source until he realized it was coming from within his own mind.

What is this? A second later, the push forward switched to a pull backward.

He wasn't even sure if he was still holding onto Taisia. His gut told him no. The darkness soon left and what he saw next couldn't have been real. Below was the roof of a sizeable house with healthy green algae clinging to the shingles. He plunged through and into an area where he caught a glance at a contraption he scarcely recognized. Part of it swallowed him up and kept him locked in its glass chamber before he swirled round and round and traveled through a spiraling tube of sorts. It all happened so fast, there was no time to think, to question. His voice was no longer there, yet what good would it have done him?

After passing through the twisted pipe, he entered another chamber that was larger than the last, with an oval-shaped porthole above. There, lying on his back, Pierce saw himself. His hair was lengthy, and he sported a shabby beard and mustache, but it was clearly him. The bizarre viewing lasted seconds before he was pulled into his own form.

Bugger me!

The moment he rejoined his body, his insides were charged up. A beat of his heart, which followed many rapid knockings against his ribcage, and then blood flowed through his veins like newly formed streams.

Pierce Landcross took his first breath of life.

The air bloomed within his lungs. He gasped and his eyes snapped open. Things were blurry. He smacked his hands against the iron coffin he was trapped in, and then started beating his fist on the glass porthole. As he did, he felt his muscles working—the tendons shifting beneath his skin. His entire body was letting him know it was functional, even his pecker, which stood fully erect.

What was happening? Where was Taisia?

Tai, love. Where are you?

He started to panic. He banged with both fists on the porthole, aiming to break it. His heart was now slamming against his sternum. He was on the brink of experiencing a nervous breakdown when the lid suddenly rose. Blurry figures stood over him. Someone gently pushed him down when he tried to sit up.

“Be still,” another person commanded soothingly.

It was a male voice, one Pierce somewhat recognized. A cloth, saturated in chloroform,

was pressed against Pierce's face, and the hazy world flickered out.

“Dance my sorrowful . . . no. Hmmm. To my sorrowful love, dance the, erm . . . dammit.”

The mumbling from the unknown person was followed by the crumpling of paper. The sound of scratching came next.

Pierce took in a deep breath before touching his forehead. His body was no longer alerting him of its every movement. He wanted to believe it was a dream and that this was some strange passage his mind was taking him through as he was crossing over. Yet, he knew it wasn't. His instincts had warned him that something was terribly wrong as he was being yanked out of the In-Between. He hadn't been taken into another life; he had returned to his old one.

He blinked lazily, cleared his vision, and saw the wood framed ceiling above. He felt weak. Very weak. A horrible, stinging ache ran down the center of his chest. A linen bandage was wrapped around his upper torso and over the cause of the pain.

“She came to me like night comes after the day . . .? No.”

Pierce slowly rolled his head over to the other person in the room with him. The man was sitting at a small table beside a window that allowed in bright sunlight, which made it difficult to see the fellow. The scratching Pierce heard earlier came from a quill the bloke was using to write with. Pierce threw the blanket and sheet off and eased himself up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. His back faced the man. Pierce had on only bottom undergarments reaching near his knees. He no longer had a stiff dobber, and for that he was thankful. He again touched his chest.

“Christ. Was I cut open?” he asked himself softly.

“Stings, doesn't it?” the man spoke up.

Pierce gritted his teeth.

“How was it done? How did you bring me here?”

“Oh, it wasn't my doing, young fellow. I'm just as much of a victim as you are.”

Pierce knitted his eyebrows together and was about to turn to get an actual look at the cocker when another cocker entered.

Pierce gaped. “Dr. Duncan Hackett?”

He couldn't believe it, although he reckoned he should. After all, the doctor had admitted to him and Taisia that he was once a colleague to the late Professor Raphael Brooke, the old coot who claimed he could capture spirits from the afterlife.

“You told us you were Raphael's assistant,” Pierce began weakly. “You mentioned nothing about actually being able to bring people back from the dead.”

“Because, at the time when you and I met, Mr. Landcross, I couldn't.”

Pierce's jaw dropped when he heard the man say his real surname. Even though Pierce

considered Duncan a mate, he'd never disclosed who he and Taisia really were.

"Let me spare you the breath in asking," Duncan snorted. "I discovered your true identity shortly after Chief Ailani's death. You and your whole family attended the wake and funeral, remember? I simply snuck into your home and did a bit of investigating. To be honest, I hadn't the foggiest idea what I would find, but I had a strong suspicion about you, Mr. Landcross, and when I saw your photographs in your bedroom and the series of books on the shelf, I realized who it was that I had befriended."

The books Duncan was referring to were the entire set of *The Adventures of Pierce Landcross*, written by Clover Norwich, who had used the pen name Jessamine Fairchild. They were on a bookshelf inside the living room with dozens of other tomes when Duncan discovered them. Bloody hell, if he had gone into his house, then he must have snooped through his old luggage trunk where Pierce kept his black dapper coat and Oak Leaf pistol. Items he was known to have.

Duncan remained standing at the threshold with hands clasped behind him. He wore a white shirt, an ascot, wool britches, and a red vest. He was twenty-two years younger than Pierce, yet the grey in his light brown hair and thick muttonchops was coming in. He had a plain face, strong chin, a narrow nose, and dark, aggressive eyes.

"Why did you do this?" Pierce demanded with as much force as he could muster.

"Why shall the fly catch the eye of the spider that aims to devour its body?" the man by the window broke in.

Pierce twisted around, ready to tell him to stow it, when the sight of the bloke nearly caused him to fall right off the bloody bed.

"Edgar Allan Poe?" Pierce gasped.

The poet had a litter of crumpled up paper balls surrounding a short stack of sheets on the table. He wore a black suit, and his notable face was unsmiling and his eyes sulky. Pierce recognized him from the daguerreotypes he'd seen of him. He looked to be in his early forties, with dark hair and a mustache.

Poe only stared at Pierce with those sad peepers of his before saying drily, "I think I finally have the first suitable opening line to my new poem."

He began writing again, the tip of his quill scratching the paper.

"Mr. Poe was stationed in here so to inform me when you woke up," Duncan explained, pointing to the button on the wall that rang the servant bell.

"Aside from you, Mr. Landcross, Mr. Poe is the latest addition to my collection."

"Collection?" Pierce noticed a standing mirror in the corner.

"Indeed," said Duncan as Pierce slowly stood and approached the mirror. "There are others."

Pierce studied his reflection. Other than the shaggy beard and mustache, he appeared to be his youthful self again. Perhaps a touch older than he let himself be in the In-Between. Because he had always appeared younger than he was, he had no idea how old he was supposed to be now. Late twenties, early thirties? His busted leg seemed to be in good working order, although there was a queer feeling to it, along with his hands and

feet. His green eyes were just as bright and lively as ever before, and his smooth skin had no signs of wrinkles or age spots, and there were no grey strands in his multi-colored hair, which was also very long and shabby. In his previous life, he'd been often told he was a very handsome man—beautiful, even. Such gifts had been restored. The scar across his throat, given to him by his older brother, Joaquin, and the branded figure-eight, along with the mark where he'd been stabbed, were thankfully not included.

“Others?” he questioned. “How did you do this, Duncan?”

The bastard grinned at him.

“Allow me to show you.”