

Chapter Twenty-Four

The Heist

When Callum told that half-crazed German he already had the supplies for the heist, he wasn't only talking about guns. He used to be a sailor on board a bomb vessel. There, he was not only taught how to handle explosives, but also how to assemble small bombs such as hand grenades. Explosives fascinated him, and in later years, he learned about a new discovery called Nitroglycerin, a chemical far more powerful than any black powder bomb.

He couldn't figure it out, but his instincts told him to bring his specially made Nitroglycerin grenades. He'd interpreted it as a sign that he needed to rob the train.

His plan for the heist was simple and effective. While the brothers, Ryan and Joe, went up to the engine room, the rest of the gang, Charlie, Ethan, and Finley waited by the money carriage. Callum's job was the most dangerous.

Callum left the passenger carriage and climbed the ladder up to the roof. The cold air numbed his face and made his eyes tear up. Once he'd hoisted himself atop it, he paused a moment to adjust to the wind pushing against him and the weaving floor beneath him as the locomotive traveled at forty-five miles per hour. Once he had his bearings, Callum pulled a lit gas lantern from his bag and used it to guide his way over each carriage roof. He was glad it wasn't raining. Otherwise, the surface would have been too slick, and that would have jeopardized the bombs.

If Volker was willing to go up against a goddamn vampire to get to Pierce Landcross, that suited him just fine. After Landcross received his Royal pardon, he became worthless to bounty hunters—unless they were willing to drag his ass to a country where he was still wanted. The only reason Callum had tagged along with Volker was to obtain the eight thousand. Callum hadn't been part of the lot that chased the cuckoo clock workshop thief to Nottingham years ago, but he had heard the stories, which had prompted him to try his luck in finding the loot.

Then Landcross magically found it in Sherwood-bloody-Forest. Callum had washed his hands of it. As long as his plan worked, he'd come out of this a far richer man.

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After God knew how many shots of Kräuterlikör, Pierce found himself weaving. He was impressed by how much Kolt could drink. Even Pierce hadn't been able to hold down that much liquor at that age. Then again, Pierce was usually too busy focusing on not getting killed or captured to spend the time building up such a tolerance. However, Pierce refused to be bested by the boy and so swallowed down another shot.

"The bottle's empty," Kolt observed after trying to pour.

Clearly, the drink swam blissfully in the lad's head. His words slid slowly out of his mouth while he used the bar to stay on his feet.

"Order a second bottle," Pierce suggested as steadily as he could. "I'm going to the loo."

After relieving himself, Pierce cleaned his hands in the decorative porcelain sink. Running water inside the train amazed him to no end. He turned the brass tap and checked himself in the mirror. The weight of his exhaustion had him feeling as if he was about to collapse and fall asleep right there, and it wasn't merely due to the drink. He simply didn't have the vigor he once possessed. He wasn't out of shape; he just wasn't the same youth who'd lived constantly on the move. Retiring

as a fugitive had come at no better time for him, for he could not imagine a life on the run at his age.

He pulled down his scarf and checked the deep bruises on his throat where Volker's machine fingers had nearly crushed it. Only he and Robin knew what happened, and Pierce wanted to keep it that way. With any luck, they would reach Reading with ease and the group would part ways before any more trouble arose.

He dried his hands and left the lavatory.

"I think your friend is on this train," reported Robin.

Whether it was the liquor or the history between him and ol' Rob, but having the vampire suddenly there made Pierce's body seize up with fear.

"Fuckin' hell, Rob! Are you trying to stop my heart?"

"You need to return to the room while I search," Robin urged.

Pierce may not have been completely sober, but he became serious quickly. "We checked the last train. Do you reckon he boarded back in Leicester?"

"It would appear so. Come."

They returned to the bar where Kolt was about to twist the cap off another bottle of Kräuterlikör.

"*Hallo, Herr Locksley*," he greeted. "Care to join us? Can you drink alcohol? I do not think they serve blood here."

Nearby folks glanced at them questionably. Pierce slapped a hand over the lad's mouth and flashed a fake grin to everyone. "Oh, what a dark sense of humor you have, my boy. Come along now."

"Where are we going?" Kolt asked when Pierce removed his hand.

Pierce paid for the drinks and gave Kolt the unopened bottle. "To the room. Let's go have a drink with your mum and Clover, eh?"

That got the lad moving. "*Ja!* Clover. What a marvelous idea."

As the youth staggered away, Robin shook his head at Pierce and tutted.

Pierce shrugged. "What? He's his own man. Sort of."

They began following Kolt out of the café when Pierce whispered over his shoulder, "How do you know Volker is onboard?"

"My intuition. It's telling me something is about to happen."

* * *

The brothers, Ryan and Joe, had managed to infiltrate the engine room and hold the engineers at gunpoint.

He and Joe had two jobs. First, take the engineers hostage and then, after the *second* explosion, force them to stop the train. Once the locomotive came to a complete halt, they were to shoot them dead and fetch horses from the horse car. An easy bit, compared to what Callum was doing with the bombs. After the explosions, the rest of their party, Charlie, Finley, and Ethan, would take out any guards left alive inside the money carriage and load up the bags with loot.

One engineer, a young tosser that looked to be Ryan's age, maybe younger, stared at him hotly. The older feller also had fire in his eyes. Ryan kept a sharp eye on them both.

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Callum reached the money carriage and took out the jar of coal-tar creosote that he'd stolen from the maintenance coach. With a gloved hand, he scooped some out. He slapped it down and worked to pry his hand away. When he couldn't get the sticky substance off his glove, Callum slipped his

hand out. He brought out his next tool, a clay shell grenade filled with Nitroglycerin. A long safety fuse, wrapped around a small spindle, was attached. Once he blew the roof off, Callum would quickly light the second grenade and toss it into the coach, killing the guards inside. Granted, some money would be damaged, but there would be plenty more left over, he figured.

He pressed the bomb down into the thick, black goo, holding it there until he was certain it wouldn't move. He slowly let it go and when he was confident enough that the grenade would stay in place, he unwound the fuse from the spindle and he moved to the other end of the rooftop. The only threat would be the blast itself before the wind carried the debris away.

Now, for the tricky part of lighting the fuse. He sat on his legs and set the lantern between his knees. Shielding the flame from the wind with his body, he opened the tiny window of the lantern and stuck in the end of the fuse. The moment the fire and fuse kissed, the wick sparked to life. A tiny sparkle ran up the fuse. The spark resisted the wind even as it whipped the fuse around. He could see the bright sparkle racing toward the grenade. Callum watched it a moment before leaping over and onto the carriage behind him. When he reached the end, he dropped to his belly and covered his head.

* * *

“What are you waiting for?” Keith, the engineer, demanded of the men holding pistols on him and Walter, the senior engineer.

Ever since the gunmen took them hostage, they had said very little, only giving a strict order to not try anything.

“Shut your mouth, wanker!” ordered a bandit.

The only thing Keith was worried about was how his wife and children would get by without him. If he had no family to provide for, he'd have pounced on one of these men in an attempt to seize the gun. And he knew ol' Walter would jump in to help him. The old goat was an ex-soldier, and he'd be damned if he didn't get in on the fight.

The sound of the explosion was deafening.

Apparently, that was what the bandits were waiting for, but still they gave no order. The blast made them all jump, and then curiosity got the gunmen to look out the window. The move created just enough room for an opportunity to act.

Everyone was flung forward when Walter yanked the brake back. The wheels squealed agonizingly loud. Before Keith knew it, Walter was shoving him out of the engine room which forced him to jump to the tender.

“Go, lad!” Walter yelled. “Flee to the next station and alert the authorities!”

Keith wanted to stay with his coworker, especially when Walter began fighting the gunmen. Then he remembered his wife and children and realized that if he tried to reenter the engine room, the bandits would likely shoot him down. He had to listen to Walter and, so, leaped off.

Keith landed hard on the cold, moist ground. He rolled a few times while the squealing of the brakes pierced his ears as the train screeched by. The train was still moving on down the tracks on halted wheels that threw sparks out like firecrackers.

When he stopped rolling, his heart launched straight up into his throat.

The coaches at the rear were derailing and tumbling off sideways. Two of them were set ablaze, burning as bright as the sun, as they plowed through the ground. Keith shot up and ran as the railway carriages came barreling toward him, pushing up mounds of earth as the iron beast worked to stop itself. Keith darted into the field beyond and kept going until he could no longer run.

* * *

The first detonation went off like a charm. It tore open the roof, and the debris was blown away by the wind as Callum had predicted. A few moments after that explosion, he sat up and took out the next grenade. He lit the wick in the lantern as he had before, and stood up, ready to run and toss it into the money coach, but he was thrust forward as the train jerked violently. The grenade flew out of his grasp and bounced right off the roof. Callum rolled sideways and caught the edge before he fell completely over. The brake's high-pitched squealing and the bright blue and white sparks snapping below terrified him to no end. The second explosion detonated three carriages down. Apparently, the bomb had fallen between the cars, landing on the track, and had gone off beneath the undercarriage. The force of the blast lifted the coach up and off the track. Callum doubted he would survive when it and the others tipped over and off the track.

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Pierce was itching to return to the room. He should have assumed Volker wouldn't give up so easily. If they had checked the second train, Robin could have eradicated the threat before departure. Now, the threat was here, hidden amongst the passengers and biding his time. It may have been the Kräuterlikör talking, but he was optimistic and kept his chin up while hoping that perhaps Robin was wrong.

A passenger in a tweed jacket walked down the aisle, moving aside to let Kolt pass. The semi-polite young man thanked him as he pressed on.

When the gent's eye fell on Pierce, he looked utterly gobsmacked. "Ain't you Pierce Landcross?" he asked in a thick northern drawl.

Pierce raised his hand and shook his head as he went by. "No. We just look similar."

"Nah. Nah," contested the passenger. "You're 'im, for sure. I read the books. And I've seen the daguerreotypes of you." To the other three dozen passengers in the carriage, the man kindly announced loud and clear, "Oi! Everyone. Look who it is! It's none other than Pierce Landcross, himself."

Pierce couldn't remember the last time he'd had so many eyes on him.

"It is him," said a young woman, holding an infant. She stood up. "Oh, Mr. Landcross, I've read all your books."

Instead of fighting it, Pierce tried to explain. "Actually, I'm not the author. I—"

A bang louder than thunder lit up every window, rattling them.

"Fuckin' hell!" Pierce screamed.

Moments later, the passengers standing in the aisle were knocked to the floor when the train jerked hard and began screeching down the track. The locomotive shook violently as it worked to come to a complete halt. Another blast broke through the night, causing the floor to vibrate. The vibrations soon turned into a violent jolt that bounced everyone about. Someone seized Pierce by the coat collar and hoisted him to a sitting position.

"I told you," Robin said.

Pierce gripped Robin's arms tightly to steady himself and looked him dead in the eye. "Whatever happens, make sure the money reaches my mates in France."

When the train finally stopped, people stuck their heads out the windows to survey the damage. Pierce thought it fortunate the entire locomotive hadn't derailed. The inspectors and guards told the passengers to vacate the train. After the explosions and on seeing the fire, it didn't take much convincing. Nobody knew if there would be a follow-up explosion, and if there was. . . where?

As travelers scrambled to gather their belongings and file out, Pierce, Robin, and Kolt made their way through to the private rooms.

Sitting next to the aisle was a passenger with his head bowed low enough that his hat covered all but the cream-colored facial hair on his chin. It appeared as if he was sleeping. Pierce gave him a quick glance as he walked by.

The gunshot, followed by an agonizing scream, got him to whip around. Robin hollered and arched his back. As he was about to turn, Volker backhanded him across the face with a silver chain wrapped around his fist. Smoke fumed from the burns on Robin's face. Volker grabbed Robin and threw him sideways between the seats, his head cracking the window. Pierce was reaching for his gun when Volker seized his arm. He had his dreadful mechanical arm concealed under his clothes, but it did nothing to soften the bone-crushing squeeze that snapped Pierce to sobriety.

"Let's go, Landcross," he said.

Kolt appeared beside Pierce and chopped Volker in the jugular with the side of his hand. The strike didn't seem hard enough to bring him down, yet it left Volker gasping. Kolt pushed Pierce away when Volker released him and did a high kick to the man's chest.

The impact sent the gasping bastard down on his back. Pierce was impressed, to say the least. The lad may not have been a master at the art of kung fu, but what skill he had mastered was certainly effective. Pierce drew his gun, ready to put a bullet in Volker, when Robin jumped on top of the albino and proceeded to drink. Dark blood oozed out from the gunshot wound in Robin's People screamed at the sight. Pierce took it as a good sign to vacate.

Pierce grabbed Kolt by the arm. "C'mon, lad. We need to get to your mum."

Realizing that his mother could be in danger, Kolt rushed down the aisle.

Pierce turned when he heard Robin say something to Volker in an appalling tone. "What kind of blood is this?"

His question was followed by another gunshot. Robin staggered to his feet and rushed at Pierce, clutching the bullet wound in his stomach.

"Go! Go!" he ordered, blood sliding down the corners of his mouth.

Robin looked paler than usual as though he'd encountered every fear a vampire could. Whatever had gotten Robin spooked, it sure as hell prompted Pierce to move his arse.

They reached the private room, where Frederica greeted them. "What is happening?"

"Gather your things. We have to clear out," Pierce ordered.

They exited the train and stood in the dark, chilly night. The fire continued burning, showing the silhouettes of confused and chatty passengers. Theories, such as an accident with a carriage carrying explosives, or even a robbery attempt, floated about. Whatever was going on, Pierce was sure Volker had had something to do with it.

"Pierce," said Clover. "Kolt told me what happened. What's going on? Who attacked you and Robin?"

Pierce didn't want to explain while surrounded by curious onlookers. "I'll explain later." He then noticed they were missing someone. "Where's Robin?"

Moments later, Robin appeared on horseback, leading two other mounts with cloths tied over their eyes. "Come. We must flee."

Pierce shouldered his rucksack and grabbed the reins of one of the horses. "Where did you get the animals?"

"They were inside the train. I blindfolded them to keep them from being spooked by the flames," Robin answered. "Mount up, Landcross. I will guide you through the dark to shelter for the night."

"Pierce?" Frederica said fretfully.

"It all right, Mother," Kolt consoled her. "Come."

Clover mounted up with Pierce while Frederica saddled up with her son. Together, they rode away. Pierce asked Clover and Frederica to wait for explanations until they'd reached somewhere safe.

After an hour of riding, they reached Abingdon. As soon as they had booked rooms, both women came knocking at Pierce's door.

"Well?" Frederica demanded, hands on her hips.

"Bloody hell, I *just* walked in through the door," Pierce complained, stepping aside.

As they entered, Robin and Kolt appeared. "Right," Pierce huffed, closing the door. "Glad you all could make it."

Robin stood with his hands clasped behind him. He had changed out of his messy clothes. He seemed to have recovered from the gunshots, yet the blisters on his face from the silver chain were still visible.

"You all right, Rob?" Pierce asked.

The vampire nodded while sliding a finger down his cheek. "Aye. It takes longer to recover from silver than from bullets. This will heal in time."

"Really? It won't scar you like the coins from the thirty pieces of silver?"

"No. The coins are the reason why silver is deadly to vampires. Thus, they leave an everlasting mark on us."

"Oh."

"What is happening, Pierce?" Frederica demanded.

Pierce sighed. "Volker Jäger was on the train."

Frederica nearly fell over. "Volker? Was he the one Kolt saved you from?"

Pierce looked to Kolt. He was still in awe of him. He wondered what the lad could accomplish while sober.

"Aye. He whooped 'im good, he did."

Kolt smiled, but his mother wasn't amused.

"Volker Jäger?" Clover recalled. "The general who searched for you in Germany?"

"Aye. He's found me and is looking for revenge."

"Revenge?" Frederica repeated. "For what? Because he was unable to find you?"

"I'm afraid our history runs deeper than that." He gave Robin a big smile and clasped him on the shoulder. "No worries, though, 'cause ol' Rob took care of him."

"No, ol' Rob did not," Robin contested, shaking his head.

Pierce slid his hand off him. "What do you mean? I saw you sink your teeth into the cocker's neck."

"And I would have drunk until he died, but I couldn't."

"Why? Because he shot you?"

Again, Robin shook his head. After a moment of silence, Pierce became impatient. "Speak up, man! Why couldn't you kill the bastard?"

"His blood. It was tainted with something. Like a chemical. It tasted strange to me."

"I'm sorry. You were unable to kill the bloke because his fucking blood tasted funny?"

"Pierce!" Frederica scolded. "There is a young woman present. Mind your language."

"I've fed off people like this before," Robin went on. "Addicts. Believe it or not, it does make vampires ill."

"Wonderful," Pierce grunted.

"How did Volker find you?" Frederica asked.

"The witch," he explained simply. "She sent him after me."

Frederica gaped. "You mean this witch can track you?"

"Aye."

“I shouldn’t have let him live,” Robin rejoined dolefully. “If I hadn’t been shot, I would have snapped his neck in half.”

“Oh, my,” Frederica gasped, covering her mouth.

This wasn’t the sort of world she was accustomed to.

“Oi,” whispered Pierce to the vampire. “Ease up on the whole blood drinking and neck snapping stuff, eh?”

“What are we to do now?” asked Clover.

Pierce slipped his rucksack off and carried it to the bed. “First things first. I gotta get this loot to the Sea Warriors.”

He rummaged through his clean undergarments, socks, box of ammo, and the book he’d bought at the station. Eventually he pulled out the strongbox. “Here we are.” He held it out to Robin. “Can you take it to them? I’m sure you can reach Southampton much quicker than I.”

Robin curled his gloved fingers around the dirty metal box. The dragonfly key was still stuck in the lock, with the leather strap hanging from it.

“The ship’s name is the *Ekta*,” Pierce explained. “She’s an old, broken down Spanish galleon docked near the end of Le Havre pier. You can’t miss her. Ask for Chief Sea Wind and my cousin, Nico. Tell them what’s happened.”

Frederica began fidgeting with the sleeve of her gown. “What if Volker tracks us down before we reach Reading? Robin could protect us.”

Pierce snorted. “I doubt the bloke will do much tracking after the beating he took. By the time he’s done licking his wounds, you’ll be on your way to London, and I’ll be crossing the Channel. Everything will be fine.”

* * *

Joaquin broke through the darkness once or twice before falling back into it. Something had happened to him. He just couldn’t remember what. The last memory he had was asking his mother if she wanted to go papaya picking with him. When she sent him off to ask his grandparents, he decided to go off on his own, instead. The papaya trees weren’t far, and he never got to venture anywhere by himself.

Now, he was somewhere dark and scary.

He wanted his mommy and daddy. Why did Daddy have to leave?

He began opening his eyes again. At last, he was coming around. Perhaps his family would be there waiting for him to wake up.

A soft light, like a candle flame, burned away the lonely darkness. Everything was so blurry. He heard a voice. It sounded like a woman.

“Mommy?” Joaquin managed to mutter out weakly.

He felt sharp stabbing pains in his leg, both arms, and in his spine. It made him whimper. A voice that wasn’t his mother’s, uttered something he was unable to understand. Her blurry silhouette appeared, nearly eclipsing the light.

A warm hand rested on his forehead. “Sleep.”

He wanted to wake up and find out where he was and what had happened. The dreaded darkness, though, slowly swallowed up the firelight as his eyes closed.

“Sleep.”

And so, he did.