



CHAPTER 12

The ground vibrated beneath our feet. Sand shifting like a living thing. Rippling in ways solid ground couldn't. Beside me, Tweet chirped in irritation as worms slid over her claws, smelling the blood from her previous kill. They began to wrap around her ankles, their mouths latching onto her scales. Snapping her jaws, Tweet bit a handful of sandworms in two, their mangled bodies dropping into the sand and writhing beneath the sand. But sandworms weren't that easy to kill. The halves would grow new parts. Multiply. The sand began to boil.

Samantha's eyes met mine. "Run," I barely managed to choke out before the ground began to boil.

Grabbing Sam's arm, I turned on my heel, but the shifting sand gave out under me, and I slipped, bringing her down with me. *Shit!*

The earth shuddered, and with an explosive spray of sand, the mama earthworm emerged, rearing her sightless head. Her body was the width of two men, and at least ten times that length, from what I could tell from the partially exposed sandworm writhing above me. The worm's face was ringed with tentacles that writhed through the air above us. In the centre of the fleshy appendages, there was a beak that opened to reveal a circle of teeth. Sharp and black. They were worth a fortune on the black market, but I didn't know what for.

Didn't care.

We needed to get the hell out of here.

Cilia spluttered a stream of curses, most of them directed at me as her usually composed demeanour shattered, she fumbled for her gun, pointing it at the monster.

The worm's great jaws clicked and grated as its teeth rotated in its gaping mouth. Long, sharp spikes lined its body, flailing in the open air like an agitated centipede's legs. Tweet whistled and chirped, jumping from side to side to get a better grip on the shifting sand. The sandworm sensed Tweet's movements and plunged downwards; its gaping mouth aimed at the skaali.

Sam cried out, but Tweet jumped out of reach. Her tail lashing the sand in a spray of rust. The sandworm dove into the ground, burrowing. Sand buckled and pitched as the worm shot back up into the open air a few feet away, emitting a high-pitched squeal.

“Shit,” I croaked, helping Sam to her feet. We clutched each other, trying to regain our balance.

Bang! Bang!

Cilia had her gun trained on the agitated worm, firing round after round. The bullets glanced off the worm’s thick skin, barely making a mark. The spiny-demon, however, coiled and turned towards the noise of the gun. It reared up to spring.

Cilia had time to fire one last round into its gaping maw before it sprang, spikes bristling, tentacles writhing. A burst of sand showered the air, and I blinked it away, sure Cilia was done for. But I caught sight of her rolling away, narrowly escaping the worm’s jaws. The worm dove into the sand and re-emerged again. Opening its beak, it screeched a challenge.

It was pissed.

Before it could take another dive at Cilia, Tweet leapt onto its head, digging her claws into the worm’s flesh. The sun glinted off her metal teeth and nails as she tore into the worm, shredding and slicing. The worm snapped its head back, letting out a shrill shriek, tentacles undulating. The rest of its lengthy body wound out of the sand, revealing its twisting bulk, the tapered tail ended in another set of lacey limbs, smaller but still just as nasty to look at.

“What the hell are these worms made of?” Sam yelled, watching as Tweet was thrown off the worms. The raptor rolled in the sand, then leapt back to her feet with a hiss, unharmed but angry as all hell.

Furious, the worm lunged for Tweet again, tentacles writhing towards her but Tweet was ready with a new tactic. Opening her jaws wide, she released her nostril mini-cannons. They streaked right to their target.

Smoke and fire trailed through the air, smashing into the worm’s face. The creature whipped back and coiled its body in defence, but it was far from immobilised.

Now it was really pissed.

A piercing shriek emitted from its undulating body as it swung its head around, tying itself into a knot like an earthworm. Uncoiling, it lunged at Tweet, its tentacles twitching and beak clicking as it rotated in deadly circles.

Tweet managed to limp away, but when the worm lashed its head back, it caught her in the side and sent her flying. Gunshots rang out once again as Cilia gave her weapon another go on the creature. I grit my teeth, stabilising myself as the sand once again shifted beneath my feet, threatening to pitch Sam and me forward. *What the fuck is she thinking? If a skaali couldn’t take the worm down with its cannons, did she really believe fucking bullets made any difference?*

Sam clutched my hand, shouting in my ear, “Quick, let’s grab Tweet and get out of here while it’s distracted!”

We raced across the sand, swaying on our feet as we tried to keep our balance. Tweet shook her head, trying to steady herself as she flipped back onto her belly and hopped to her feet, lids clicking over her eyes to clear the sand. Sam leapt up onto Tweet’s back and looked expectantly at me, reaching a hand out.

The worm roared.

Cilia screamed.

Twisting to look back, I saw Cilia’s body go flying as the enormous worm charged into her, sending her body through the air to roll across the ground. She collapsed in a heap, her gun out of reach.

She was out cold.

The worm arched its back, staring down its prey as the tentacles peeling back to reveal the sharp beak that clicked open and closed in anticipation.

Cilia would become worm shit, and we'd be next if we didn't get the hell out of there.

I stood deliberating.

I couldn't do it.

"Ah, fuck. Give me a minute," I said, slapping my hat onto Sam's head; I rolled my shoulders and bolted back towards the worm and the unconscious woman. I hoped I didn't regret this. But I was already pretty sure I would. *Damn conscious.*

"Christopher!" Sam screamed.

I grabbed the rune-gun from my back, painfully aware of the last bullet sitting inside my pocket. Fishing it out I loaded the rune-gun and hastily dropped to one knee. Gritting my teeth, I aimed at the worm's head. Breathed in, breathed out, and squeezed the trigger, ignoring Sam's protests.

An explosion of ice hurtled towards the worm. I looked away as a flash of blinding light obliterated the creature, the sound ear-splitting. My shoulder already aching from the recoil. For a moment everything went white. My ears were ringing. Blinking, I stared at the spot where the worm had been. The back half of its body twitched. The sand in front of my position was coated in a thick sheet of ice that was already starting to melt. Flakes of snow gently fell to the ground, instantly melting against the hot sand.

I frowned when a block of ice pelted me in the shoulder. I jumped, startled and squinted at it and grinned when I realised it was a chunk of worm flesh. More frozen tissue rained down on us. I tossed my arms over my head to protect myself from the onslaught, but none of the pieces was big enough to do any damage beyond general disgust.

When everything had settled, I let out a breath and stood. Slinging the gun over my shoulder, I turned to Sam as she rode Tweet to meet me, "Well, that outta do it," I said with a smile of satisfaction on my face as I sauntered over to Sam. She scowled at me, "That was our last spell bullet."

"I'm aware."

Rolling her eyes, she patted the back of Tweet's saddle. "You coming, or what?" I hesitated, looking back at Cilia. She was still lying prone in the sand and even though the mama sandworm was dead that didn't keep the babies from coming up. The sand was covered in the young wormlings that convulsed across the sand, stopping to devour bits of mama worm. They were non-discriminatory eaters. *Nice.* A few picked up the scent of Cilia and began to inch their way towards her.

"Come on, Chris," Sam groaned, "She was going to arrest us or worse. We don't owe her anything. *You*, don't owe her anything," she emphasised.

She was right.

I know.

But still. I couldn't leave someone behind like that.

The stench of the worm's flesh defrosting in the intense heat reached my nostrils. The back of my throat was itching as bile threatened to come up.

I fished my bandana out of my shirt and pulled it higher up on my nose to block out the stench, but it did little to help.

“We can ditch her in town,” I said. Without waiting for Sam’s protests, I picked my way past the chunks of thawing worm flesh until I stood beside Cilia. Her arm was slung out, her legs twisted under her. The baby worms squealed in protest as I kicked them aside, sending one flying through the air. With mamma out of the way, the babies weren’t a concern. Or at least they wouldn’t be for a few more seasons.

Flipping Cilia over, I quickly examined her, assessing for injuries. Not seeing anything visibly wrong, I fished inside the first aid kit and found some bandages. I used them to wrap Cilia’s wrists and ankles together. Sand kicked into my face as Tweet trotted over, a disgruntled looking down at me. She dismounted, “I hope you don’t screw us over with your chivalry,” she snapped as she helped me lift the unconscious woman and heave her over Tweet’s flanks.

Tweet couldn’t carry all three of us, not with an injured leg and having run through half the night to escape the raiders. We were forced to continue our journey on foot. Sam remained silent, but I felt her disapproval as we trudged through the sand. There wasn’t a speck of a cloud in the sky, there never was in all the years I’d lived here, and there was no sign of shade. Digging in my pack, I pulled out Kato, looking him over. He was still unresponsive, his wings flapping loosely at his sides, eyes closed. I silently cursed Cilia. *What had she done to you, Kato?* I couldn’t see any physical damage. *So why isn’t he responding?*

Sam glanced over at me. “Cilia must have hit him with an EMP. An Electro-Magnetic Pulse. Some weapons can do that, it disables electronics. He just needs to be recharged,” she said. Sam reached out a hand to brush his feathers with her fingers, rolling him over as she examined him as I had, “He looks intact; otherwise, I can probably fix him.”

Some relief washed over me, “I’ll just recharge him at our next stop, then. Nearest cyborg repair should do,”

Samantha shook her head. “There’ll be more to it than that. It’s not like Kato’s taking a nap. He needs to be resuscitated. Jump started. You have the cables for that? Or the equipment? Do you even know what or how to do it?”

I scowled at Kato’s still form, “No.”

Samantha shrugged, “I’ll see what I can do,” she said and faced the high dunes in front of us.

A few moments of silence passed by, “Where are we, anyway? Are we still on track for Centrum?” she asked. She walked with one hand against Tweets side, keeping track of her gait and making sure the skaali took sips of our water supply. I held her reigns in a fist on the other side. The raptor sent me a wave of relief. She was enjoying this. Just a stroll through the desert.

Nice day. No danger.

Full stomach. Happy.

I, on the other hand, wasn’t feeling any of those things. I put Kato back into the satchel, feeling exposed without my navigator. I glanced at Cilia, still unconscious on Tweet, and noticed her ICO bracelet. Removing it, I turned it over in my fingers, “It’s not Kato, but this might work,” I said, activating it with my own ICO employee code. I found the GPS system and pulled it up, watching as a holograph lit in front of me, mapping out our location.

I groaned. This wasn't good at all. *Fuck*.

"We've been pushed way off track," I said, using my fingers to navigate the hologram's map. I pinched the image in and out again, trying to zoom in on our exact location. And then searched for Centrum. Sam moved beside me for a closer look, and I was suddenly very aware of her exposed stomach slick with sweat, as she pressed up against me, "Here are our options," I said, pointing to the map. "We can either head further northwest towards Tylan or, and this is what I suggest, we keep a northeast track towards Aquaria."

Sam quirked an eyebrow at me and cocked her head, "Aquaria? Really? Why not Tylan? It's practically a direct route back to Centrum," she said as she reached over and began to poke at the hologram.

I made a face, twisting the ends of Tweets reigns between my knotted fists, "Can't go to Tylan, let's just head to Aquaria. I'm already well past my eight-day limit – it won't kill me to take a few extra," I said with a grumble. "Besides, I know a guy. In Aquaria, I mean."

Sam glared at me. "We're adding days onto the trip, facing more raiders, possibly more Tyrant –"

I threw up a finger and wagged it at her, "Nope. Tyrants don't stray this far from Halcyon Road. It's easier pickings up that way with the caravans. Out here there's nothing. We travel at night, sleep by day and we'll be safe. Mostly safe. Maybe."

Sam let out a sigh, rolling her eyes and clenching her fists, "We're risking our lives, again, because you 'know a guy'?"

I turned off the hologram and tucked the bracelet into a pocket. "Trust me, he's worth the trip. He might have those damn jumper cables you were telling me about."

Sam groaned, "Sure, fine. Not like I have a say anyway. I go where you go." She scowled, and we changed course slightly.

Yes, Aquaria was a bit off-track, but we were so far out any way that it wouldn't matter. Besides, if we left Cilia in Aquaria, it would be a long trip for her back to Centrum as well. In her condition, the longer, the better. Besides, I needed to get Kato fixed, and we needed supplies. We'd find what we needed in Aquaria.

We travelled another two hours before finding a small ledge of rocks jutting from the sand. It was late in the afternoon, and if we were going to travel by night, we'd need to get a few hours of sleep. I sipped at what little water I had left in my canteen before settling against a pair of small boulders, hoping they would give me enough protection from the blistering sun.

Sam settled on the sand, coaxing Tweet to lay down so she could use her as a headrest. Tweet glanced around, nostrils flaring, before finally lowering herself down, no doubt confused about the sudden midday rest. Cilia shifted on her back with a low groan and rolled off the raptors back as Tweet settled down. "Uh-oh," Sam said, glaring at the ICO Reaper. "What are we going to do about this extra problem you dragged along?"

Cilia was an inconvenience, there was no doubt about it, but I couldn't leave her. It'd be wrong to do so. "I guess we'll have to set watches," I said. If Kato were still conscious, he'd have been able to keep an eye on things while we slept. But for now, we'd have to do things the old-fashioned way.

Sam nestled against Tweet's side. "You're taking the first watch," she said, and closed her eyes, curling her knees up to her chest. She was in the sun but didn't seem bothered by it at all. They both lay there, Tweet and Samantha, like a couple of lounge lizards soaking up the sunshine.

I couldn't help but notice how smooth her back looked, her tanned skin peeking through her cropped shirt, sand sticking to it in a light dusting. My fingers itched to brush the sand off, to caress her exposed skin, press my lips to it. My body craved another night with her. I could live that night over again and again, and it'd never be enough. *Preferably without the Reaper showing up.*

I looked to Cilia, who was now acutely conscious and staring at me, her eyes flaming with anger, "You'll pay for what you've done, Grey," she spat.

I rolled my eyes as I knelt to sit her up, "Shut up, Cilia. Be grateful I didn't leave you behind for the worms," I said and crossed my arms and ankles as I leaned back against the rock. Cilia spat again, narrowing her eyes at me. I sighed, crossing my hands behind my head, "You might wanna save your spit. We're out of water rations, just saying."

Her glare hardened, "You're a failure, Grey,"

I laughed, "So I've been told many times and yet, I always come out on top in the end."

"After this, ICO will never give you another chance. You're a laughing stock. You disgust me, Grey."

I narrowed my eyes at her and set my jaw, "Pray, go on and see if I don't leave you here."

Cilia chuckled, her voice full of acid, "No one takes you seriously. You're a miserable little back island boy that got lucky. Nothing more. And when I get my hands on you –"

She continued sporting a slew of curses as I stood, ignoring her threats, and crossed the sand. Kneeling down in front of her, I reached into my pocket. Pulling out the remaining ball of gauze. I wrapped my fingers in her hair and pulled her head back roughly, she cursed again, using words I didn't even know the meaning of. Kit'th most likely. And stuffed the wad in her mouth, "Please, just...shut. The. Fuck. Up," I enunciated, and returned to my spot in the shade beneath the boulders. It was just as hot in the shade as it was in the sun. There was no escaping the goddamned heat.

As I watched Sam drift to sleep, I wondered if I had been wrong in bringing Cilia with us. Samantha was right. Cilia was an additional burden, and Aquaria was still at least two days away at our slow pace.

But now that Cilia was here, we couldn't abandon her in the desert. I'd be cut from the ICO immediately. I couldn't risk that, not after everything I'd been through.

I liked Sam. I liked her a lot.

But I liked my job too.

I owed it to someone.



It was nearly impossible to sleep in the oppressive desert heat, but it made travelling in the cooler nights bearable. We hit the road again, keeping Cilia bound and gagged over Tweets back. Sam and I agreed that there was no telling what she would do to collect Sam as her own bounty after her two Kit'th had been killed.

I was grumpy. I didn't get as much rest as I wanted. Thoughts kept toiling over in my head. It was a blow to my pride that Camelia had decided I was inadequate for the job, especially after I'd been explicitly requested for it. But she was right about one thing – my track record needed improvement. Samantha would be that improvement.

Or so I kept telling myself.

Trudging under the light of the rising moons, I used the light of Cilia's display bracelet sparingly. We didn't want to attract anything out here. I could only assume Sam had some form of night vision because she didn't seem to have problems manoeuvring in the dark. An eye augmentation most likely.

Beside me, Sam stifled a yawn, "Three hours was not enough sleep," she said, breaking the silence that had stretched between us for the past few hours.

"You'll get more when the sun comes up," I reminded her, "Trust me, this is the safest way to travel through the Dune Sea."

"I believe you," Sam gave me a sidelong glance. Her emerald eyes glinted in the moonlight. Travelling in the dark made it hard to keep my distance from her – all I could think about was when we were tangled up together under cover of darkness. My mind often wandered to the feel of her skin against mine, the sound of her hitched breathing, her hands as they dug into my hair.

"Chris," Sam's voice broke me out of the memory, and I swallowed, hoping I didn't look guilty. But Sam's eyes weren't on me – they were trained on Cilia's bracelet wrapped around my wrist. I hadn't even been paying attention to it. She wrapped her fingers around my wrist and held it up, pressing her lips into a thin line, "You might want to take a look at this."

I pulled my arm from her, our fingers brushing, and stared at the notification blinking on the tiny screen. I tapped it, and the projection flickered in the air with a memo blinking across its screen. It announced that Cilia was missing, but that wasn't what made my gut wrench. Samantha was wanted – that was old news too, but scrolling next to her name, flashing in bright red with bold lettering with a photo to match, was me,

Name: Christopher Daniel Grey

Age: 30 years **Gender:** Male.

Height: 5'10" **Weight:** 145lbs

Eyes: Brown **Hair:** Blonde

ID Badge: 00234985-IDB

Status: WANTED, DoA

I scrolled through the rest of the information provided. I was wanted for the kidnapping of a fellow ICO member and for failing to turn Sam in. From the way the notification was worded, it sounded like I'd gone rogue.

Sam was wanted alive.

I was wanted DoA. Dead or alive.

I gritted my teeth, a frustrated growl forming at the base of my throat before spitting on the ground in a fury. "Looks like we're both criminals now," Sam teased.

I didn't answer her. My mind raced, trying to find a way out of the situation. It was all a misunderstanding. Once we arrived in Aquaria, I could talk things over with Cilia, get her to help clear my name. She owed me that. I saved her life. I glanced back at the Reaper, who glared at me through the dark, eyes flashing as she grinned. My stomach churned. It was highly unlikely she'd be any help.

My next best bet was clearing my name directly at the head office in Centrum. If I delivered Sam as initially planned, that would count for something. "I'm no criminal," I told her, "There's a misunderstanding. That's all."

Sam snickered, but her voice was cold when she said, "Grey. The ICO have turned their backs on you. You're just too blind to see it."

I ground my teeth together as I glared at Sam. She was maddening. How could I go from wanting to fuck her to wanting to plant her under the sand so quickly?

Knowing that I was wanted DoA changed things. I'd have to watch my back and tread carefully until I reached Centrum. I glanced back at Cilia, still trussed across Tweet's back and looking livid. Damn Cilia and her superiority complex. I wanted to throttle her, but what good would that do? It'd only work against me.

Samantha strode purposefully in front of me, I couldn't help but feel that she was gloating over my sudden switch from active Imperial Dune Buster to a lowly outlawed citizen. Funny that it put her in such a good mood considering her arrest was my ticket to freedom.

The continent of Oceana finally emerged from the sands early the next morning. The incline from dusty dunes to continental shelf was so steady we hadn't even noticed it until we stood on a ridge of rocks, overgrown with brown moss, and looked down at the expanse of sand behind us. The Dune Sea.

We'd survived.