

Chapter Twenty

The Fire Field

The ride to the Fire Field took hours. According to the map they picked up in Guaymas, El Parral was southeast. The group decided to cut straight through the Fire Field and head for the town on the other side. Chances were high they would have to make camp, but it wouldn't be possible to do so until they reached the hills, still miles off.

They never stopped moving. They even ate while riding—burritos wrapped in soft flour tortillas, compliments of Emma and Jaxton. Their forward thinking made Pierce realize how ill prepared he was. He'd been focusing on the bigger task without assessing the little necessities required to accomplish it.

There was a sign sticking out of the ground. Soon, they came upon another, and then another. Eventually, there were hundreds of signs posted along what Pierce reckoned was the Fire Field border. Each had writing painted on them in Spanish, some far too weatherworn and rusted to be read.

"I take it we're here," Pierce announced to the group.

The land where the border began never changed. He expected to see scorched land, maybe some old hermit warning them not to go on. Perhaps another Toll Man.

Pierce removed his tinted eyewear, brought out the spyglass he had gotten at the doohickey store, and scouted out what the naked eye couldn't see. He adjusted the diopter lens, pulling the distance closer. He saw rocky hills peeking up from the dusty old earth. It was the only safe place to camp.

"What are you searching for, mate?" Jaxton asked, riding abreast of him.

Pierce lowered the spyglass and folded it down to put inside his coat pocket.

"Dunno. S'pose I was expecting something a little more ominous." He put his dark spectacles back on. "I've experienced more danger at a bloody breakfast nook."

"You haven't seen the dangers yet," Itza-chu pointed out.

"Neither have you," Pierce threw at him.

Itza-chu looked away. "I was too young to remember. Let's hope it stays that way."

They traveled on. Pierce checked his compass. It was embedded into the top of his fingerless, brown leather glove. Everyone had a compass in case they became separated, in which case, they would meet up at an old cemetery just outside the Fire Field. Pierce had wanted this particular one, for he reckoned it'd be harder to lose in a sandstorm.

After some time of steady riding, Emma rode up alongside him.

"Do you not like them?" she asked, catching his attention.

Until she'd spoken, he hadn't noticed her. Mainly due to the annoying throb that thumped at a heartbeat rhythm behind the left side of his skull right above his eye. The food he ate had helped with the hunger pangs, but it arrived too late to ease his headache. He'd stayed up too bloody long and drunk too damn much.

He slowly turned to her. "Pardon?"

In her hand was one of the masks she'd made for the horses. He realized he hadn't gotten one and took it from her.

"Oh, this? Aye, they're grand. Why do you ask?"

Her frown deepened. "Are you all right? You seem, um . . . sad?"

Though he knew he shouldn't, he took a moment to gaze at her. His eyes, hidden by the dark glasses, traveled down to where the leather of her overbust was tightened over her breasts, pushing them pleasantly together. He realized what he was doing and shifted his sights to safer ground—her face. Emma also wore tinted spectacles with shiny brass rims, and she had on a short, light green jacket. They all wore their jackets and coats. Sandstorms came up fast, and they needed to be prepared. Pierce had on his black dapper coat and was sweltering in it. That and the oxygen tanks strapped to him began weighing on his shoulders. The goggles and mask hung loosely around his neck.

"What is it?" Emma asked sympathetically.

Her tone melted his heart. He couldn't resist answering. "Taisia and I are having a bit of trouble."

"Oh?" Emma said. "Is everything all right between you two?"

He'd allowed this flirtation to go far enough. Pierce needed to put a stop to this. Part of it was his fault. He understood that. The playful glances, the bashful reactions whenever she did something he found cute. Even the quick look at her breasts had to cease. He decided to stick with the decision he had made at the hotel to distance himself from her. He just needed to do so delicately.

"Aye. We're fine. We're always fine in the end. Have been through thick and thin, her and I. Taisia is my soulmate."

Emma's expression went slack, and then her face tightened. Was she mad? Upset? Pierce reckoned it didn't matter so long as he got his point across. He wasn't pushing Emma away solely for his and Taisia's sake, but for hers, as well. Emma needed to understand the reality of their relationship sooner rather than later. Someday, she'd find a suitable man, a far better match than he, and bloody well live happily ever after.

"I only hope the stress on Tai isn't causing our unborn child harm," he added.

His concern was not false. He hadn't met his child, and yet the love he held toward it almost frightened him. He'd be damned if he let anything take it from him.

Emma swallowed thickly. Her lips tightened to the point that they lost their color.

With his point made, he decided to change the subject.

"Itza-chu," he called over his shoulder, "I think we might make it through without a hitch."

"We'll see," he replied. "We're now deep into the territory where the sandstorms occur."

"Wonderful," he grumbled.

Shortly after their brief conversation, Emma chose to ride behind with Jaxton, which suited Pierce just fine. He believed he had dealt with the situation properly by telling Emma just how devoted he was to his wife. She seemed to have taken it well, but he really

couldn't be sure.

They rode on, watching as the rocky hills ahead slowly drew closer. A flame burned nearby. It was a small fire set inside a volcanic puddle of blackened earth. The fire burned brightly, piercing the dull day like a crackling star.

"Huh," Pierce observed. "Would you look at that?"

He almost didn't believe the gas was real. After the long, slow ride through the Fire Field, he'd begun to suspect it was only a spooky story. Then other fires appeared, some burning as small as the first. Low fires nestled inside seared soil. Others were much higher, spiking tall from beneath the ground, flickering and crackling like fire trees. A forest from hell.

And then there was the skull.

It was a human skull, broken on one side and completely blackened. The rest of the bones had vanished, blown away, perhaps, and buried by the sandstorms. Whatever happened to this unfortunate sod—whether he choked on the sand or fell victim to the flame—it sure hadn't been a peaceful demise.

"Bloody bad day for that feller," Jaxton remarked as they rode by it.

They traveled on, drawing ever closer to the safety of the hills. They looked larger than Pierce expected, which posed some concerns about whether they would be able to climb with the horses and gear. Regardless, Pierce remained optimistic.

We're making good time.

* * *

Gog watched from the hills as the travelers steadily made their way toward him. The woman, Emma, was failing to entice Pierce enough to steal him from Gog's precious Taisia. Although Pierce's lustful needs arose strong enough for Gog to sense when he was near Emma, he had chosen to ignore his primal instincts to spread his seed. It mattered little to Gog how much Pierce loved Taisia, for he was unworthy. A woman such as she was, carrying the kind of children she did, deserved a man who was more than mortal. Gog could give her pleasure beyond anything she had ever imagined. There was nothing Gog would deny her, nothing he'd deprive her. He could show her worlds and raise the offspring to be gods!

If only her current husband was a god. He could challenge him to the death for her hand. However, most mortals were under the protection of the Fates and therefore, would live however long their life thread was, no matter what. Some people called it luck or divine intervention when they survived the impossible, but it was only due to the length of their threads. If Gog could not tempt Pierce, perhaps severely maiming him would do the trick. Maybe the man's string ended today. Gog could only hope.

Gog called upon the spirits.

The day would have most likely gone on without any sandstorms. The storms occurred more often naturally than supernaturally, and today, the spirits were at rest. That soon

changed. Gog scorned them, cursed them, telling the departed they had all received what they deserved when crossing the Fire Field. He spoke in all languages, even the dead dialectics, so that each soul could understand his rant.

The winds kicked up, whipping around his long coattail and thick dark hair. The wind touched him—*that* he allowed—but not the sands, nor the ghouls. The shrieking souls appearing within the gusts could do nothing to affect him, either. He watched them a moment as they flew about him in vapors of grey dust that vaguely resembled the human person they once were. There were no eyes in their ghostly faces, and their mouths were hollowed out holes with some teeth visible. Skeletal forms in ragged clothing flew through the storm they had manifested. The fact that they could do nothing to harm him as his cruel mockery continued only boosted their rage. When Gog decided their anger had reached its peak, he pointed down to the travelers below. The spirits wailed loudly and left to turn their aggression on those they *could* hurt.

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Pierce checked his compass again. Not that he suspected that they had veered off course, but because he was bloody bored. He wished he'd brought a book to read. No one seemed to be in a chatty mood. Emma hung back with Jaxton and once in a while, they'd talk about something, but they were too far behind for him to hear. Whether it was about him or not, Pierce couldn't discern.

"Landcross," Itza-chu said.

His dire tone caught Pierce's attention instantly. "Aye?"

"Look."

Pierce looked to where Itza-chu was pointing. "What the bloody hell?"

A sand cloud had risen from on top of the hills and was making its way down. It almost seemed creature-like. The sand cloud puffed out jaggedly in places, taking hold of rocks and pulling the rest of itself down the rocky slope. The hills were still a good distance off, but Pierce could see the unusual occurrence clearly. When the creature-cloud hit the base of the hills, it gathered in size as more sand was caught up in its fury. What Pierce saw next turned his insides to indescribable goo.

A wall of sand came barreling toward them like a typhoon wave in a desert ocean. A reddish rust color dusted the top of the rapidly approaching wave. Pierce couldn't decide whether to shout or to cry.

"Get your masks on!" he ordered everyone.

They obeyed and slipped their goggles and masks on. The leather of the mask clung to Pierce's cheeks and chin. He already hated wearing the thing. Regardless, he tightened the strap behind his head. Once his mask was secure, oxygen from the tanks flowed through the breathing tubes connected to either side of the mask when he breathed in deeply. The reserve tank was ready to supply needed air in case the primary one malfunctioned. Even so, the tanks were small, and everybody needed to control how much

air they were breathing in to have enough to get them through the storm. The saleswoman at the doohickey shop had instructed them on how to use the tanks. It was easy to control his breathing inside the safety of the store, but not as simple when facing a rapidly approaching wall of death!

“Should we try riding away from it?” Jaxton suggested.

“We can’t run from a sandstorm!” Itza-chu shouted from behind his own mask just before he dismounted and reached into his bag.

Pierce crammed his top hat into his rucksack and dug out the horse mask. The winds were kicking up greatly as the group fastened the masks to their horses. Everyone except Jaxton. He was having trouble steadying his panicked mount. The struggling horse prevented him from grabbing his hat before the winds snatched it away. He held onto the horse’s bit as the animal tried running off.

“Whoa, feller! Easy!” he shouted, his voice muffled by the mask.

There was no time for this. Already the winds were gusting strongly, and visibility was becoming difficult. Pierce finished fastening the strap of his horse’s mask and handed the reins over to Itza-chu in the hopes that he could handle two mounts in the sandstorm.

“If we get separated, meet up at the cemetery!” Pierce yelled to him and Emma.

Pierce raised his goggles up and over his eyes, turning the world a green tint, and then darted off. Jaxton was still struggling with his horse when he got to him.

“Leave it!” Pierce shouted, barely hearing his own voice.

The roar of the winds was fully upon them now, a vacuum of oncoming danger. The horse was in such a state of panic, it wouldn’t allow Jaxton to put the mask on it. Pierce then noticed why Jaxton was holding on. He had on his mask, but not his goggles, which were stored in his rucksack, the strap of which was tangled around the saddle horn.

The sandstorm slammed into them. When it did, Pierce felt he was whizzing through the air after having been shot out of a cannon. The winds were painfully deafening, and the force threatened to steal his footing. Pierce remembered the warning about people going blind and worried about Jaxton. He grabbed hold of the saddle and worked to untie the rucksack from the horn. It was no easy task, for the damn animal wouldn’t stay still. His feet skidded over the gritty ground as the horse moved in a circle, Jaxton holding tight to the bit. Pierce yelled for him not to let go, but the winds swallowed up his voice in a funnel of whirling fury. A crack of thunder ripped through the madness, loud enough to startle Pierce. The coarse sands struck his exposed skin like tiny, sharp pebbles. The stinging was nearly unbearable.

The knot in the rucksack strap wouldn’t budge, and at any moment the horse could break loose. Pierce unsheathed the ivory-handle knife and began sawing through the strap. The burlap surrendered easily to the blade, and not a moment too soon. The heart of the sandstorm thickened, and more thunder cracked. Jaxton’s horse reared up, ripping itself free from its rider’s grasp. The horse knocked Pierce over as it turned about face and ran off in the direction they’d come from. It took only seconds for the animal to vanish into the plume of sand. Pierce stayed on his side, clutching the bag, trying to tame his

breathing before he sucked all the air out of his first tank. The impact of the fall had rattled his ribs. The hard grit pelted him relentlessly. He was truly thankful for his dapper coat now, especially as the temperature dropped.

Already he was being buried alive. He raised his head. The green tint did nothing to help with visibility. Everyone had vanished in the vortex of dirt. He was surrounded by a curtain of blinding sand that was choking out the sky. Bright lights flashed, and booms burst in their wake. Pierce couldn't stay put. Any minute, the methane gas lying just below him could ignite into flames. Pierce didn't fancy being roasted alive.

With great effort, he rose to his full height, holding the bag close to his chest. His own bag was on his horse—at least, he hoped it was. The gusts drowned out the sound of his breathing, which he was still working to control. He faced the winds and instantly felt an invisible force pushing against him. He dug in his heels and did what he could to stay upright. The wind had muscle of its own, shoving him back to the point where Pierce would've tumbled right over if he didn't keep moving. The sand sucked at his feet. He honestly believed he'd lose a boot before long. He tucked his gloveless hand under the rucksack to shield it. The dense grit tapped against the glass lenses of his goggles. If the lenses weren't as thick as they were, Pierce almost feared they'd crack.

He'd heard that sandstorms only lasted a short while, and that the best thing to do was to hunker down until one passed. But, this was no ordinary sandstorm, not with a mass of bubbling methane gas beneath him. Pierce needed to find Jaxton, who couldn't be more than a foot or two off. He highly doubted he'd moved from where Pierce had last seen him.

The wind level rose, causing his scalp to prickle. Suddenly, an eerie feeling that he wasn't alone crept up his spine. A face with no eyes. It shrieked loudly, and as it did, it crumbled into the sand that eventually carried the face away.

"Fuckin' hell!" he exclaimed, coming to a dead stop.

More figures appeared, gliding in and out of the brown blizzard. Some heads were attached to grotesque bodies of bones and torn flesh that flapped in the wind like rags. These fluttering shadows of dull grey mist swept around him and against the tempest. Pierce's heart nearly exploded with panic. Their wailing and shrieking rose over the sharp whistling of the winds, hurting his ears. Pierce winced at the dreadful sights and sounds surrounding him.

He reasoned they were the poltergeists he'd been warned about, and unless he wanted to end up joining them, he had to keep his wits about him, which wasn't easy to do. Anyone who could honestly look upon a disembodied specter without feeling faint had ironclad balls, in Pierce's opinion. Whether they could physically harm him or not, that didn't stop them from wreaking havoc on his nerves. It nearly caused his knees to buckle. He remembered Grandmother Fey's protection spell. She knew a thing or two about spirits, and therefore, must have done something to prevent these dead buggers from touching him. He simply had to will his way through it.

Pierce went on, doing his best to ignore the tortuous screaming that sounded all around. Hazy flashes of lightning strikes and deafening thunder clashes, boomed as loud as

cannon blasts.

Then Pierce saw him. A man. He was no ghost like the others, but a solid form, standing with arms crossed, unaffected by the sandstorm. He was tall, strikingly handsome, with a dark complexion and dark hair. He had sharp, almost parallelogram-shaped eyes fixed directly on Pierce. Pierce had seen him before at the square when he accused Tarak of causing the accident that pretty much got this whole bloody mess started in the first place. Why was he here? Was he there at all? Had Pierce finally lost his damn mind? Regardless, it caused Pierce to backpedal and trip over something behind him.

“Ow!” hollered out whatever had stolen his footing.

Pierce sat up. “Oi! Jaxton!”

Jaxton had bunched himself facedown into a ball, with his back to the flow of the winds. “Pierce?”

His whole body was covered in a layer of sand. Not an inch of him showed until he moved and rotated his head toward Pierce. Endless sand and grit blew off him, his eyes tightly shut.

“Right.” Pierce swung his legs off and tucked them underneath himself. “The goggles.”

He turned his back to the storm and leaned over the bag as he opened the flap. The man he’d thought he saw was no longer there, much to Pierce’s relief. He reckoned it was his imagination, stirred up by the fright of seeing the ghosts, which remained real.

“What in God’s name is that noise?” Jaxton asked, referring to the foreboding screeches.

“Hang on, lad,” Pierce exclaimed.

He rifled through the rucksack. The dim light and the fact that his hair kept whipping around his face made seeing anything a difficult task. Finally, his fingers touched the clear lenses of the goggles and he snatched them out.

“Here!” he said, putting them into Jaxton’s hand.

The Australian worked fast and put them on. As he did, Pierce wondered how Itzachu and Emma were holding up. He hoped they had managed to stay put so they could all easily regroup once the blasted storm had passed.

After Jaxton slipped on his goggles, he got his first real look at the sandstorm and its ghosts.

“What are those things?” he exclaimed fearfully.

The sand spirits howled and swirled through the ever-moving storm. Pierce rose with Jaxton, about to tell him to stay calm. That changed the moment a flash of lightning, bright enough to blind, scraped across the land like a match over a matchbox striker. Flames burst straight up from the earth. The fire geysers closest to them sprang up high and blazed hot. Sweat poured from Pierce’s pores. His nerves snapped.

“Run!”

“Where?” Jaxton asked, frantically looking about.

Running seemed like a good idea, a lot better than waiting to be a cooked goose while the ghouls taunted them. Pierce thought it best to run with the wind rather than against it.

“This way!” he said, gripping Jaxton by the arm and tugging him along.

He never let go of him, too afraid to lose him again in the sands. The only pitfall to this sprint was the amount of oxygen they were using.

Goddammit, when will this bloody storm pass?

More lightning flashed, triggering the flammable gas and lighting up the ground in a deadly inferno. One fire geyser shot up right next to Pierce, and then another on his other side. He couldn't help but feel he was being targeted.

You're in serious trouble, Pierce. His grandmother's warning echoed in his head. Do you remember what we spoke about at Joaquin's wake? About your fate thread?

If Pierce hadn't met the Fates, he'd never have believed that most folks were tagged with strings that determined when they would die. Although the Fates had shown him and young Clover mercy by returning them from the dead, in Pierce's opinion, having such power over people was pure bollocks.

Every second inside the storm stretched into an hour. He feared it would never end.

But then it did.

Almost as suddenly as it had manifested, the winds were whisked away like a nightmare fleeing from memory. The grey light of the overcast day appeared, and the sands carried on toward the west. With the storm gone, the world returned to normal, clearing away the apocalyptic trauma of it all. Pierce looked over at Jaxton, still latched onto his arm.

They had made it out. They had survived the storm. They were covered in sand and sweat and chilled by fear after facing ghosts and fires, but, fuckin' hell, they'd made it!

“I think it's time to leave the Fire Field, yeah?” Jaxton said.

Pierce lowered his mask and took in a large gulp of fresh air. “Aye. I agree.”