

CHAPTER 12 – LOYALTIES

This wasn't how anybody would have expected their night to end, but it was better than being in the middle of a monster's guts.

Fed and resting, the group finally relaxed for the first time that day. They had hardly gone a mile by Luke's guess, but it would have to do. If anybody else was following them, they would have a hard time tracking them.

He wasn't a skilled huntsman by any estimation, but there were very few markers that would tell of their passing. And those that were, Luke worked hard to erase.

Most of the ruins were stone and rubble, making their footprints a non-issue. A few times he had spotted bits of cloth and the like ripped while trying to squeeze past a particular narrow corridor of rubble and stone. Luke picked them up and stuck them in his pockets.

It wouldn't fool a skilled tracker, but he had to hope that they weren't going to be followed by somebody like that. At least not yet.

Hopefully nobody was far beyond level 5, but judging by the Rogue's level, he had a sinking feeling that his group was far behind the others.

Especially the more bloodthirsty people. The true psychopaths whose family roots stretched back to warlords and brutes. It was fairly likely that Archers could get a tracking skill.

Luke guessed that Archers and Rogues moved in opposite directions. One getting tracking, the other stealth skills. Like a System-enforced game of cat and mouse.

Freed from the mores of society, those warlords and brutes would thrive here. And with real power up for grabs, they could make a

kingdom if they wanted to. All they had to do was be willing to do anything for even a shred of power.

That immediately made him think of his ex, Marcy. She had been a corporate climber, and a pathological liar to boot. If she was still alive, there was no doubt that she would be thriving here. This was her element, if she could get over her squeamishness.

In fact, he would have felt bad for the poor souls that got stuck with her. If she didn't turn into a full-blown psycho right out of the gate, killing anybody who didn't bend a knee, her group was in for a world of psychological pain.

Fortunately, he hadn't wound up with her in that tower. At least he hadn't been that unlucky.

They set up a watch for the night. Luke tucked his cloak around himself and tried to sleep while John and Rachel stayed up for the first watch. Each pair would get 2 hours, then trade off to the next pair.

Even that had taken some convincing to pull off. John still insisted that they were perfectly safe where they were and that if only it was a little bigger, they might be able to make a home of it.

Luke could see him sizing up the space, looking for ways of knocking out one of the stone walls to make some room. There was likely another building behind one of the walls considering how tightly packed this lost city was, but even Dexter with his Strength-focused stats couldn't even scratch the stone.

It didn't take long for Luke to fall asleep. Usually, he struggled with bouts of insomnia. And yet he slept better than he had in a long, long time.

He slept like a baby.

You never would have thought that he had nearly died twice just a few hours ago or killed a man who had nearly killed him.

When a hand grabbed Luke's shoulder to shake him awake, he found his hand immediately reaching for a throwing dagger before he realized it was Janet's.

He swallowed hard at the look of concern on her pretty face. "It's our turn," she told him softly. "If you don't wanna I—"

"No, no, it's okay," Luke said, getting up and yawning. It felt as if he had just blinked.

She smiled wanly at him, holding her spellbook close. Runic letters glowed faintly blue on the tome's spine.

They headed out toward the entrance to the room, just shy of the bend that would reveal them to the rest of the ruins. Janet wasn't the most talkative, even back in the office.

But this was their first time alone. He had hope.

She had been a front-end developer, making things pretty and presentable. She was an absolute whizz with CSS and JavaScript, but give her an SQL database and she was utterly lost.

Luke always wondered if she felt he was there to take her job, and that was why she always seemed standoffish toward him. He was aiming to be the "complete package" aka a full-stack developer.

Or maybe she just had as much trouble with people as he did.

"How do you like your class?" Luke asked and immediately chided himself for how lame it sounded.

"It's... all right," Janet said, clutching her spellbook. "It isn't anything like I thought real magic would be. You know, Harry Potter? There is chanting, but it's more like subvocalizations. I don't say anything cool like *Expecto Patronum*. It's all in some other language I can hardly understand."

"But you do *magic*," Luke pointed out. "I'm just a thug."

Janet tucked a strand of hair behind an ear. "It suits you, Luke. You, more than anybody else, seem to have found your stride. I'm still

floundering here, just as I was back on Earth. Unsure of what to do, where I'm going. You always seemed so driven, ready to dive into anything. I needed a dozen different primers and hours of prep when I was trying to work with the old flexbox stuff.”

They spoke quietly, using the assessment timer to track the time, until they traded off for the next group. It was enlightening.

Somehow, though Luke couldn't figure out how, Janet had seen him as this ultra-powered yuppie developer who probably made his own coding language in his spare time.

It was so far from the truth that he'd nearly burst out laughing when she told him.

Morning came sooner than he would have liked. A rough pair of hands, Dexter's, shook him awake. “Up you get, we've got company.”

Luke was on his feet in a flash, his hand raised to the silver handle of his scimitar sticking up over his shoulder.

He caught John's look and the shake of his head, then felt the bottom of his world drop out as he saw who he was talking to.

Another group had found them. Worse, he instantly recognized who John was talking to. *Marcy*. Luke could scarcely believe his eyes. An icy cold pit filled his stomach.

Marcy didn't miss a thing. She glanced toward him, barely managed to conceal her surprise at seeing him, and then gave him one of her trademark viperish smiles.

It shamed him more than a little to realize how attracted to her he still was, even after everything that happened. She seemed to have a direct line to his innermost self. He was determined to get out from under her thumb before she had time to get her claws into him.

The only defense he had against her was to put as much distance between himself and her as possible. Even the so-called “gray rock” method didn't work on her particular brand of psycho.

“Luke!” she trilled happily, for all the world seeming elated to find him again like a long-lost lover.

His first instinct was to turn around and leave.

She pushed past John, who offered no resistance, and sauntered over to Luke who, with a glance over his shoulder, realized he was truly trapped. At his back was a ruin wall. If he was going to get out, it was going to be through her.

Not good.

Marcy hugged his stiff-as-a-board body. Luke fought every ounce of rage and shame that sprang forth from the deepest vaults of his mind.

Every horrible thing she said to him, every bruise, every mind game, came flooding back in the mother of all flashbacks from hell.

Despite it all, he found himself missing her. From the smell of her to the feel of her body pressed against him. He hated her, but most of all, he hated himself in that moment of weakness.

“It’s *so* good to see you, sweetie,” she said in her special voice that said she had just found a new toy to play with.

Two hulking men in heavy armor—Gladiators, by the looks of them—stepped up defensively and Marcy stepped back to melt into their protective embrace.

Luke snapped back to reality and realized that this other group outnumbered them. It was bad enough if Marcy was on her own, but if she managed to twine these two Gladiators and their group around her finger?

We are so screwed.

“Marcy here was just offering us a place to stay,” John said, looking over at Luke and the others who just woke up. “It’s a very gracious offer, considering we used to all work together. I say we take her up on it.”

Luke was shaking his head so hard he thought he could hear his eyeballs rattling around.

Alice, bless her mother hen soul, stepped forward. She was probably one of the few people who knew the extent of Marcy's actions and why she was ultimately transferred out of their department.

It ended up being the best thing for Marcy's career, because word had gotten back to Luke that she had jumped several rungs on the corporate ladder. In a few years, she would have been his boss' boss.

"John, a word?" Alice said.

Confusion crossed John's handsome features, but he nodded and politely excused himself to join Luke and Alice.

Marcy watched him go with thinly veiled amusement. John wasn't her type. She liked those who weren't sure of themselves. It made them easier to manipulate.

"She's bad news, John," Alice hissed. She glanced at Luke sympathetically.

John patted the air between them. "I know she's got a bit of a sordid past with Luke, and I'm sorry about that, but as Luke has said himself, this is a new world. Can't we let bygones be bygones?"

Luke felt numb and detached. "No," he said hoarsely. "If you go with her, I can't stay."

"Come on, Luke. It's almost been a year," John said, not unkindly. "They have nearly 20 people already and they've already found a safe place to hole up. Defensible and with access to running water. How much better could we get it?"

"You don't understand," Luke said quietly, unable to put his thoughts adequately into words. "If she turns out to be our leader, she'll wind up killing us all."

“She’s not taking the leadership role. In fact, she’s just representing their leader. Some guy named Henry.”

Yeah, I’ll bet, Luke thought, she’ll be using him as a proxy. Telling him what to think, how to feel, and what to do. Never actually getting her pretty little hands dirty.

Now that he saw her again, there was no doubt in his mind that Marcy would kill if she found the slightest gain in power in it. The two brutes on either side of her glared death his way.

“I can’t, John,” Luke pleaded. “I’ll just go. You can go with her and I’ll go my own way.”

John shook his head. “No. We all go together, or we don’t go at all. I’m not splitting us up.”

Marcy was suddenly there, poking her perfect, perky little nose and that glowing tanned Mediterranean skin into their private conversation. She had such a smooth way of doing it that it was hard to call her out for it.

“Hey, sorry, I couldn’t help but notice that there’s a little friction here between me and my ex.” She gave a simpering little laugh. “I don’t want there to be any bad blood between us. I’m sorry, truly sorry, for the way I treated you, Luke. I’ve gone to a lot of therapy, and I had written a letter to apologize to you, but I knew I had hurt you enough already and that anything I could say, even out of purest love, would only wound you further so I never sent it.”

He wanted to believe her. And she knew that.

God help him, he wanted to believe so hard his heart hurt. He couldn’t bring himself to say anything.

She extended her hand. “Please say you’ll forgive me, Lukey Star.”

Even Alice made an “aw” at the pet name, but to Luke it sounded like the final nail in a coffin lid.