

CHAPTER 57 – HAVENHOLM'S EXCURSION

“Nobody is going to hurt you,” John said soothingly to the young, bedraggled man. “Our group, Havenholm, has laid claim to this area. You happen to be in it. We’re not claiming *you*. You are free to join or leave, but we need to explore every bit of our territory to keep it clear of monsters, understand?”

The young man with oily black hair glared at him. “Yeah? What’s it worth to you?”

Dexter sighed and leaned against the crumbling archway that served at this group’s entry into their sad camp. There was a good reason nobody had found them yet. This was not a place of any value unless you happened to have a [Dungeon Key].

There was no water, food, or resources of any kind. It was a literal hole in the wall and looked to be one good sneeze from caving in.

Todd, who had taken nearly 10 minutes to give his name, was getting on everybody’s nerves, even John’s. And John was normally unflappable.

“Listen, Todd,” John said softly. “If you want to play the big bad man, I totally get it. I’m not here to make you look bad in front of your friends. But wouldn’t you look *better* if you found a group that could take you in, train you, and offer you food and water? Nobody should starve out here, there are more than enough people earning points to buy [Ration Boxes] that we can all have full bellies.”

The kid, who couldn’t have been a day over 18, rubbed his patchy chin thoughtfully.

He was dirty and unkempt. With a petulant expression and a thin veneer of malice that couldn't cover his pants-wetting fear.

"This offer is an open-ended one," John continued, trying to break through to the kid. "We're not going to hurt you if you say no, but we need you to clear out. You're free to come with me and Dex here. You'll be safe. With a bed of your own and three meals a day. It's not so bad, not as good as life used to be, but we're *trying*. That's better than the New Sun."

"Who will enslave me as soon as they look at me," Todd said sarcastically.

"Believe what you want," John told him. He had explained all about the New Sun, but Todd had apparently been hunkered down for a while and hadn't been discovered.

Until now.

Henry stepped forward, lifting the faceplate of his bronze helm. "You're running out of time, John."

Todd quivered slightly. He wasn't an idiot, just brave and likely trying to look like the big man in front of the three girls in his group who stared at him as if he was the sun itself.

If things fell through with Todd, he would make his appeal to them. They were at least polite, if a little reclusive, and might be made to see reason.

He didn't want to split the group up. They had done surprisingly well to survive this long on their own. But that time was clearly at an end.

As always, John thought of Luke when he saw how poorly other people were living. He hoped that he had bought him enough time to get to safety.

The "incident" as the cabinet called it, was the mess that Luke left behind and the group's response to it. They sent out 6 people to

track him down, one of which had his blood and could track him anywhere.

None of them came back.

When another set of scouts were sent forth, they found no evidence of the group and only a slew of mutated rats that were more trouble than they were worth.

The storerooms were boarded up and barricaded to prevent entry, and then quickly forgotten about. Luke may or may not have survived, but it seemed crystal clear that the group sent after him didn't fare any better.

"We can't," Todd said, his facade crumbling as tears streaked down his dirty cheeks. "My brother is sick. We have him... chained up. I won't—can't—leave him."

John started. "Excuse me? Chained up, why?" He tried to keep the incredulity out of his voice, but he clearly didn't do a perfect job. Todd's walls were being built back up.

"Don't worry about it."

"We have a Healer," John said, motioning to the group of 6 men and women who made up the forward group. "Maybe she can help?"

Todd's dark eyes flickered toward the imposing group. Unlike the rest of Havenholm, they had mismatched but proper equipment, making them look like low-budget heroes in a fantasy adventure.

It was better than looking like a refugee.

"A-alright," Todd said. "But only the Healer."

"Not happening," Henry said sternly, his large armored frame naturally looming. "We go where she goes."

John glared over his shoulder at Henry. He softened his look when he turned back to Todd. "What he means is that Healers are very rare. We've had more than one group try to steal, or failing that,

kill, our own. This is just a precautionary measure to keep Alice safe, nothing more.”

Using her name helped to humanize her. John could see the kid turning over the idea in his mind. “Okay, but please keep your distance. He’s very strong.”

Something about this didn’t feel right to John, but he wasn’t about to turn away just because of a gut feeling. They needed access to that dungeon badly.

Everyone was trying to survive. While John strived to be optimistic, the rise of stats and magic allowed for wide gulfs of power between groups. There was no military to enforce order and protect human rights anymore.

If Havenholm fell too far behind New Sun’s power, they might all be enslaved.

Todd led them to the back of the ruins, where there was a filthy sheet of moth-eaten cloth hanging. Brushing it aside revealed a dim passage that he slipped into.

John followed, with Henry’s group close behind, leaving Dexter alone to guard the entrance.

The tunnel twisted this way and that, but there was enough light to see by thanks to the shafts of light piercing through the precariously balanced rubble that served as a ceiling.

“This roof looks like it’s about to come down any second,” John told him. “Are you sure you don’t want to rethink your answer?”

“If you can take Jerry with you, I’ll happily go,” Todd told him over his shoulder.

They wound through a warren of narrow corridors until they finally came to what looked like a bombed-out basement. Rubble had fallen all over the place, but the walls still stood strong.

At the center of the room, bound in chains, was an older man. It was hard to tell his age. He was balding and gaunt, his arms lashed behind his back and forced to his knees.

“This is inhumane,” John started to say, but just as his voice cut through the stillness of the room, the older man looked up.

There wasn't a lot of light to see by, but it was enough for John. This wasn't an old man as he had thought, but a young man who was clearly very, very sick. He looked like he had taken a nasty dose of radiation.

Skin was hanging loose, sloughing off all around him. His body was gaunt and hollow-looking, eyes sunken. Black-brown stains adorned his hands up to the wrists and all around his mouth as he looked up and snarled weakly.

“See?” Todd said, keeping away.

Henry pushed ahead but skirted around the chained up figure. His eyes were scanning the cracked walls. He latched onto one pile of rubble and motioned.

Anthony and Derek immediately began digging through the pile, clearing it enough to reveal an ancient doorway of metal and stone inlaid with precious jewels.

Henry turned toward them triumphantly. “We've found our Dungeon.”

“What about him?” Marcy asked, jerking her chin toward the bound figure.

Henry looked between the two. “Do as you please. We only wanted access to the Dungeon. If they want asylum, we'll give it, but don't dawdle.”

All the forward group except Marcy and Alice went to fully clear the area around the door. The two women approached the chained figure slowly.

The rest of Todd's group filtered down the passage but kept well away from the center of the room, clearly afraid.

"What aren't you telling me?" Alice said, halfway to the kneeling man. She turned to glare at Todd.

"If you won't tell them, I will," an equally young man said. He looked almost identical to Todd except his skin was pale and he had enough freckles to rival Ronald. It was impossible to tell the color of his filthy hair.

"Walter, shut it!" hissed one of the girls.

Marcy turned her viperish stare on the young boy. "Tell me. If they are threatening you in any way, we can protect you. There are nearly 50 of us now. We're much better equipped than your group. If we were the New Sun, we would have slit your throats or enslaved you depending on our whim. Tell us before I decide it's a good idea to curry favor and let the New Sun know where they can find 8 more slaves."

The carrot, then the stick, John thought with a shake of his head. The way Marcy wielded them was exceptionally effective, though a bit rough.

Walter stepped forward. "He's a cannibal, miss." Several voices tried to speak at once, but Walter raised his above the jumble. "I saw him with my own eyes! He ate poor Oren when his leg got crushed. Just... ate him as if he was a piece of meat! Then he started to change. He'd go off on his own, and when he came back, he'd look a little different. Wild. Unhinged. He started talking to himself."

"We chained him up when he tried to kill Lucy over there," Todd said, motioning to one of the malnourished girls. She looked as if she had just come from a rave, then rolled in a pile of garbage.

Marcy's eyes narrowed at their tale. She tapped her plump lips with a manicured nail thoughtfully. It was a clear sign that they were both stronger and better off than others. Being clean and well-

groomed was a requirement for anybody facing the outside world. It made Havenholm look better than it was and helped to intimidate any groups they found.

In a world where everybody was dirty and wore rags, having proper clothes with clean faces and clean hair made you stand out.

Marcy wandered over to Jerry. He lifted his head, scented the air, and snapped his teeth in her direction. Unflinching, Marcy stepped up within biting distance.

The chained man, Jerry, looked lost and confused. Then something dark and sinister grabbed hold of him and he lunged at her leg.

Marcy's hand moved like a viper. It slapped him so hard the poor man found himself whimpering on the ground before anybody knew what happened.

"You, you, and you, stay. The rest of you get out," she said. For a brief moment, her eyes flashed a cold, luminescent blue.

It was gone so fast John wasn't sure what he even saw.

Henry frowned. "The Dungeon is right—" he began.

Marcy lifted a hand up, a cruel smirk upon her lips. "The Dungeon will be here in an hour. We need to help this poor man, but Alice needs our assistance. The rest of you will only get in the way. Shoo now. Show our new friends their accommodations."

John, who wasn't on the approved list, guided the rest of Todd's group up the steps.

Down below, Marcy's eyes gleamed with interest. She was alone with Jerry, Alice, and Rachel. "We may have found a way of striking back against the New Sun."

She crouched down low and grabbed a handful of Jerry's stringy hair. "Listen to me and listen good. You want more tasty human meat?"

The light in the thing's eyes burned with an intense hunger. His head tried to bob.

“Then you'll listen and do *precisely* as I tell you, and you'll have all the tasty longpig you can eat.”

The fervent, burning hunger was replaced by a look Marcy had seen countless times in her life, even before coming to this universe: adoration.

Exactly what she wanted.

Grinning like a cat that had just found a mouse all alone, Marcy turned to Alice. “Heal him back to full.” She shook Jerry's head. “If you harm *any* of my retinue, you will die a very slow and painful death.”

Jerry tried to nod, pulling a few hairs free and a bit of scalp from Marcy's grip in the process. “Anything for *meat*,” he rasped.