

A dramatic, apocalyptic landscape. In the foreground, a couple stands in silhouette on a rocky, overgrown path, holding hands and looking at each other. The path is flanked by wild, purple and orange flowers. In the background, a city of ruins is visible, with several tall, skeletal buildings that have lost their roofs and walls. The sky is a mix of dark, swirling clouds and a bright, orange-gold glow from a low sun or moon. A large, full moon is visible in the upper left corner. Several birds are flying in the sky. The overall mood is one of hope and resilience in the face of destruction.

# LOVE AMONG THE RUINS

## Love Among the Ruins

The temple was falling apart around them—stone slabs crumbling, dust choking the air, the distant rumble of something very large and very unfriendly waking from its slumber. It was, in short, a terrible time for romance. Which was exactly why it happened.

"Uh, watch out!" he shouted, yanking her back just as a spear trap fired from the wall, missing her by inches. "I saw it," she lied, brushing imaginary dust from her shoulder. "I totally had it under control." He raised an eyebrow. "Sure. That's why you almost got turned into a kebab."

She scowled, ignoring the way her heart did an annoying little flip. "Oh, like you didn't almost step on that pressure plate five minutes ago?" "I was testing it!" "With your foot?" "Listen," he said, stepping over a pile of rubble to offer her a hand, "I am extremely skilled in not dying. You should take notes."

She took his hand. Sparks. Actual, ridiculous sparks. It was almost embarrassing. Then the ceiling cracked ominously above them. "Less flirting, more running!" she yelled, grabbing his wrist and dragging him toward the exit. They sprinted through the ruins, dodging collapsing pillars and narrowly avoiding a pit of very pointy spikes. At one point, she shoved him out of the way of a swinging blade and somehow ended up with his arms around her waist. They froze, faces inches apart, breathing hard.

"So," he said, voice strangely casual given the deadly situation, "this is romantic, right?" "Oh yeah," she deadpanned. "Nothing gets me swooning like imminent death." "Good to know." Another stone crashed behind them. "Run now, flirt later?"

"Deal." They burst out into the jungle, panting and bruised but alive. Behind them, the ruins gave one last groan and collapsed entirely.

He grinned at her. "Well, we lost the treasure, almost died, and I'm pretty sure I pulled something." She smiled back, ignoring the way her stomach did another annoying flip. "But we had fun, right?" "Yeah," he admitted, rubbing the back of his neck. "And, you know... maybe after we find an inn, we could... continue the whole 'not-dying' thing over dinner?" She arched an eyebrow. "Are you asking me out?" "Depends. Are you saying yes?" She rolled her eyes but couldn't hide her grin. "Guess you'll have to find out."

And with that, she walked ahead—leaving him, for once, completely speechless.