

Chapter 9

Tibs looked into the room and shuddered. “More rats.” The whine escaped him as he saw the line of them in the middle of the large room.

“But the rabbits are missing,” the archer said.

“Rabbits?” Ariana asked.

“There was a line of stone rabbits behind the rats the last time I was here. They decimated us; I barely made it out.”

“You went in the room?” the fighter asked.

“There were still three of us by the time we got here, and they were bunnies; how hard can bunnies be, right?” he asked her, then shuddered. “I’m never going to look at bunnies the same way.”

“I’m hoping to never see rabbits made of stone outside of this place,” the fighter said, “but if they’re gone, it’s a good thing.”

“I don’t think the dungeon makes any changes so that things will be easier for us,” the sorceress said.

Tibs pushed his fear back and crouches, studying the room. No holes in the wall, so no spears to kill them. He noticed the way the stone tiles were mostly even, except for two dozen larger ones. What caught his attention was the way they were different from the others in exactly the same way. Rectangular and slightly angled, as if one side was about to tip in. If they weren’t triggers for a trap, what were they for?

“They’re in the floor,” he said, realizing it. “If the dungeon took the rabbits away to make things harder, then not knowing where they’ll come from does that.” He pointed. “Some of the tiles look like they’re tipping. It’s probably to make it easier for the rabbits to jump out of them.”

“As if it wasn’t hard enough before.” The archer cursed. “Now they can ambush us?”

“At least there’s five of us,” the sorceress said, “and because of Ariana, none of us are hurt badly. We can clear the room easily enough. Although I’m not sure what’s supposed to happen after that. I don’t see a corridor.”

“If this is the last room,” the fighter said, “we get bragging right since no one’s cleared it yet.”

“Don’t count your victories yet,” the archer told her. “Those things are fast.”

“How many rabbits were there?” Ariana asked. “I count twelve rats.”

The archer was silent for a few seconds. “Eight, maybe ten. I was too busy trying to survive to get a precise count.”

The fighter turned to look at them. “Alright, we’ve been told what to expect and that it’s going to be a hard fight. So what do you want to do?” she asked. “We can turn around now. We’re not required to finish this.”

“I’m not leaving,” the sorceress said. “I’m not letting a few rats and rabbits scare me off.”

“I’m not that suicidal,” the archer said, “because I’ve seen what they can do, but I would like to be able to say I was part of the first team to clear the room.”

“Do we have enough arrows, though?” Ariana asked, counting those in her quiver. “Half my arrows broke shooting the rats in the other room. This equipment is crap.”

“They don’t want us to survive, so they aren’t going to give us anything good,” the archer said. “I have eight.” He smiled, “I guess I’m a better shot than you.”

The fighter looked at the sorceress. “How are you for power?”

She placed a hand over her amulet and closed her eyes. “I’m not used to this, but at a guess, I’d say six, maybe seven shots. This thing doesn’t seem to recharge the way the books I read said they should.”

“So this is going to be a risk,” Ariana said. She squared her shoulders and placed an arrow against the bowstring. “But yeah, I’d love to claim the title of first to clear the room.”

The fighter nodded, tightening her grip on her sword. “I can kill rats and bunnies,” she said. “Tibs, I know fighting isn’t your thing. Do you want to stay out?”

Tibs stood and shook his head. “I want to kill rats.” He did his best to keep his voice from shaking. “I want my revenge on them. I just wish I could tell you what to expect with the rabbits. I can see twenty-four places they can spring from, but if there’s only eight or ten, that means they can jump out of anywhere.”

“If they’re anything like real rabbits,” Ariana said, “there’s probably a warren system under the floor that connects every flip tiles. That way they don’t have to come out from the one they jumped in.”

Tibs looked at her. “Rabbits do that?”

She smiled. “Didn’t you know?”

“I’ve only heard of rabbits before as something the nobles eat. They might as well have been Fairie Folks as far as the odds of me ever seeing a real one before now.”

“We can shoot the rats from here,” the sorceress said, “it’s going to be fewer things for you to deal with.”

The fighter nodded. “Not that I think they’re going to stay in place once you start shooting, but yeah, to more you can take out the better our odds.”

“And we should be safe out here,” the archer said. “They didn’t follow me out of the room the last time.” He shuddered. “I’d be dead if they had.”

Tibs noticed Ariana frowning, and he shook his head when she looked at him. The archer’s story didn’t make sense to him either, in this dungeon so little did. But if the dungeon existed to kill everyone who entered, why let someone injured leave if any of the monsters were still alive?

“Tibs, get down,” the fighter said, and he crouches below the line of fire while she stepped behind the others. “Star firing as soon as your ready. Tibs we go in the moment the rats start moving. And everyone, please don’t hit me or Tibs. It’s embarrassing enough saying rats hurt me enough I’ve had to run off. I’d rather not add that a teammate brought me down.”

The laughter that followed was more nerves than anything else to Tibs’s ears.

Two arrows and one beam of magic hit a rat each, killing them, then the rest scattered. The fighter was in the room before Tibs even thought of moving, and a rabbit

leaped out of one of the traps. She pivoted and slashed at it, but another rabbit slammed into her leg, making her fall.

Tibs unfroze and ran toward her as rats did the same. He jumped over her as she kicked the rabbit away. He slashed at the rats wildly, not doing any noticeable damages but keeping them from approaching.

“Thanks,” she said, standing.

“Sorry for freezing,” he replied.

“We’ll get through this, don’t worry.” She stepped away from him.

Tibs slashed at a rat that got close and cut it in two. He grinned in satisfaction, then was on his back as a rabbit slammed into his shoulder. He hurried to get up before the rats got too close, then he was on the ground again, a rabbit having hit his legs out of under him.

With a scream he planted his knife in the rats that bit his arm, then stabbed it again, and again, stopping when another one bit his leg. He kicked at it and tried to get up, only to jump down as a rabbit jumped for his head. With a shriek, he scrambled away from the approaching rats.

A sword stabbed the rat, and a hand grabbed Tibs’s leg, then pulled him hard. Tibs looked in the direction they were going in and yelled as he watched Ariana being mobbed by rats. By the time they reached the edge of the room, the rats scattered back into the room; Ariana’s form covered with bite marks and unmoving.

The fighter let go of him by the sorceress, and she slumped against the wall by Ariana and the other archer. She slid down with a sigh. She was covered by bite marks too.

Tibs looked at Ariana’s lifeless form. They’d survived their first dungeon run together; she’d been the one to come up with how to deal with the boulder room. They were going to be doing as many runs as they could together, be their own team, no matter who else around them died, and she was already dead.

“Are you okay, Tibs?” the fighter asked.

He shook his head, trying to make sense of how he felt. Of why this hurt so much? It wasn’t like he’d known her that well. He should have known better; after all, they were here to be fed to the dungeon.

“Well, I think we can kiss those coins goodbye.” She indicated the room and Tibs looked. Copper coins were scattered over it.

“We can’t keep them anyway,” he said, feeling hollow.

“At least we got here before they dissolved,” she said. “That means three copper each.”

It took Tibs a moment to understand what she meant, then he felt ice cold. “Is that what you care about?” he snapped. “How many coins you get to keep? They’re dead!”

“Someone was going to die,” she replied flatly, “you know that. That’s why we’re here. We survived. That’s what we need to focus on.”

Tibs knew that, but it didn’t help. It didn’t matter that he’d lost three teammates on each of his runs, something about this one was different and he couldn’t understand

what. He forced himself to stand, to move, to remove the archer's armored shirt, then putting the bow and quiver on it. He removed the sorceress' robe and amulet while the fighter did the same with Ariana.

Under the robe, the sorceress wore a shirt, it was dirty, but intact. What had been her life like that she could wear something this good? Has she had money? If so why hadn't she used it to keep from ending up here? She couldn't be street, she would have been killed for that shirt.

He took off the rags that had been his shirt and then pulled hers off.

"What are you doing?" the fighter asked.

"What does it look like?" Tibs replied with a growl. "She doesn't need it, and mine's just rags."

"Don't you have any respect for the dead?"

"Why?" he yelled, turning to face her. "Why do I have any respect for them when no one has any for me? We're here to die! Don't you get it? They said it. Our only reason for existing now is to feed this fucking dungeon. It's easier than letting us litter their precious streets. Well, they're dead now and I'm not. I'm not going to stay in rags just because you say I have to respect them. You want to keep wearing those because you want to respect them, you go ahead. I don't fucking care."

He went back to the sorceress, pulling off her pants and then putting them on. They were loose on him, so he ripped a strip of his rags to—

The fighter handed him a belt. "It was the archer's." She nodded to Ariana. "It looks like you need it more than she does."

"Don't you respect the dead?" Tibs spat at her to cover the hurt the reminder Ariana was gone caused.

"Okay, I deserve that. I'm sorry for what I said. You're right. They don't need it, and it isn't like anyone's going to make use of them. The moment we walk away, the dungeon is going to feed off them. I lashed out at you because I can't go and kick this dungeon's ass for what it did. I'm sorry, you didn't deserve that."

Tibs took the belt and put it on. "I'm sorry too. I don't know why I yelled. Let's take the stuff and get out of here; forget any of this happened. Okay?"

"Works for me."

Tibs slung the bows and quivers over his shoulders while she grabbed the armored shirts and robe. She handed him the amulet, and they headed back. Crossing the boulder room Tibs shuddered, unable to keep from looking around each boulder he walked back, or behind him. He was certain he heard rats skittering about, felt their eyes on him, ready to jump on his back and bite him. Even once they were out of it, he kept expecting an attack from one of them.

It was only once he stepped out of the crack in the rock wall that he relaxed and remembered how much he hurt. The adventurers on each side didn't offer assistance, comfort, or comments, motioning for them to go down the path worn in the grass as another team walked up it.

Bardik stood behind the table as they approached. "Mister Light-Fingers, it's a

pleasure to see you're still with us."

Tibs unceremoniously dumped what he carried on the table and glared at the adventurer rogue. The fighter added her to the pile, then places the twelve coppers next to them.

"We get to keep three each," she said.

Bardik looked her over. "And how do you figure that, Miss Muscle?"

"Two shirts," she said, voice hard, "one robe, the amulet, and two bows with quivers. That's six, split into two, three each." She placed her hand on the table and leaned forward. "Are you going to tell me you're changing how things are done?"

The adventurer grinned. "I wouldn't think of it." He put the items away. "How far did you make it?"

"The third room," Tibs answered, then shuddered. "I hate rats."

Bardik looked at the coins and frowned. He made a show of counting them. "Third room, you say?"

"We couldn't pick up that feel there," the fighter snapped. "We're lucky we got out of there at all."

Bardik looked at Tibs, instead of her, and he just looked at the adventurer back, not caring what he expected of him. Bardik could go in the dungeon and look for the coins himself, for all he cared.

Bardik nodded. "I believe you, Miss Muscle." Then turned to smile at her. He took three coins from the ones he held and handed them to her before dropping the rest in the box and locking it. Tibs watched the man's hands. As angry as he was, he couldn't help trying to figure out how he palmed three of the coins, because he knew he had, even if he'd counted nine coins dropping in the box. Tibs had seen plenty of palm artists on the street, and while it wasn't something he'd ever picked up, he could always tell when someone palmed something.

Normally he could, he reminded himself.

"Isn't Tibs getting his share?" she demanded.

"He will," Bardik replied, "but first, I need to have a few words with Mister Light-Fingers."

She crossed her arms over her large chest, and Tibs was slightly surprised Bardik didn't glance at it. Every man who'd been around them while they wait to enter the dungeon had at least glanced at her chest, and that was while it was compressed by the ill-fitting armored shirt. Now it was definitely out there for everyone to look.

"In private, if you don't mind Miss Muscle."

"It's okay," Tibs said softly. "I know him. He's teaching me how to fight with my knife."

She looked at him, then indicated two dozen paces away. "I'll wait for you there, but I'm going to be watching," she told the adventurer, "you try to hurt him and I'll—"

Bardik laughed. "I do appreciate the sentiment, Miss Muscle. It's good that you care about your teammate, but have no illusion about this. If my intentions are to hurt him, there's nothing you can do about it, except end up hurt yourself too. Now, if you

don't mind?"

She glared at him and walked off to where she said she would, then turned and watched them attentively.

Tibs waited for Bardik to speak, but when he didn't, he felt the need to fill the silence. "You gave her coins in the open. Aren't you worried about what those who saw it will do to her?"

Bardik shrugged. "Arrogance deserves to be rewarded. She's either learn a lesson from this or teach one to those who'll attempt to lighten her purse. She looks competent enough I'm not certain which it will be. Now, as for you, find me where we first talked in town, tomorrow after your training. I'll have something for you to do."

Tibs nodded; the first payment for his training. He hoped it wouldn't end up with him being hurt, but he'd do what he had to. "I'll be there."

"I am glad to hear that." The man offered him his hand—empty hand—to shake. Tibs took it and felt the coins. By feel, he could tell there were more than three. "She had the wrong count," Bardik said. "The quivers and bows are counted separately, but she seemed to certain of the amount she should get I didn't feel like contradicting her." He let go of his hand. "It's up to you if you decide she should have her extra coin or not."

Tibs looked at the five coins before pocketing them and was reminded of what had had to happen for him to get them. He swallowed hard as he walked away from the table.

"Are you okay?" the fighter asked as she fell into step with him.

"I'm fine," he replied, his voice hard.

"I'm glad. You were pretty good in there. The rogue on my previous team didn't do as well."

"He died," Tibs stated, making his voice even colder, hoping she'd get the hint.

"Well, yeah," she fell silent. "I'm—"

"I don't want to know," he growled.

"If we're going to go more runs together, I think we—"

"I don't want to know you!" he snapped and shoved her away. "I don't want to know your name. I don't want to know where you're from or how you got here." He glared at her. "You're going to die! I'm going to die! Maybe you can stand knowing someone you know is going to be eaten, I can't. I don't want to be your friend, so leave me alone."

"I'm not trying to—" she began.

"I don't care!" Tibs turned before she saw his tears and walked off. Ariana hadn't been a friend, he told himself. He'd barely known her. They'd just shared a few meals, talked a little. But she'd been nice to him. Just like the fighter was being nice to him now. And Ariana was dead and it hurt. Tibs didn't want to hurt like this, it was too much like when Mama died.

He wasn't here to make friends.

He wiped his tears. Maybe he'd been sent here to die. Maybe the adventurers thought all he was good for was to feed that dungeon, but he'd made himself a promise next to Mama's body. He was going to find those who'd done that to her. He was going

to avenge Mama. And to do that, he had to survive. He had had to survive the street, and now he had to survive that dungeon.