

Chapter 8

“Tibs!” an adventurer called from the doorway to the mess hall.

Tibs had just sat down with his bowl of sop after morning training and a walk around the town; two new wooden buildings were being constructed. One of them was going to be very large. He waited, in case someone else would answer, then stood and left his bowl at the table.

“I’m Tibs.”

The man was thin, with curled copper hair and an unstrung bow on his back. His armor was leather with colored wooden bands over the arms. “Do you know an archer named Ariana?”

“Yes,” he answered cautiously. Had something happened to her? If she’d died in a dungeon would they tell him? He hadn’t seen her today, but they usually ate at least one meal together.

“You need to find her and go to the dungeon, you’re going in in a few hours.” He turned and left.

Tibs stared at his back, wondering how the man expected him to know where Ariana was. He ran for the archery range, not that she had any reason to be there, training was only in the morning, but the field was accessible all day, and he’d noticed that only the sorcerers were more serious about their training than archers.

The range was still crowded, but he managed to find her.

“We’re up,” he told her.

“Together?” she unstrung the bow and walked to the stand.

“The adventurer said to find you because we’re up.”

“I wonder if they consider us to be a team because we left a dungeon together.”

“I hope not,” Tibs grumbled and added at her hurt look. “It means Don’s going to be there.”

“If he’s still alive.”

“He is,” Tibs said dejectedly. He’d seen the sorcerer in the mess hall and walking around the town, always with a handful of hangers-on.

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Don wasn’t there and Tibs felt better. This time, their team consisted of another archer, a man who seemed too fat to be a dungeon runner, a sorceress with pale skin, and a fighter.

“Have you all gone through before?” the fighter asked. She adjusted her heavy shirt again as they walked through the uneven tunnel leading to the first room. She had the largest chest Tibs had ever seen, and the shirts they were provided with hadn’t been made for someone like her.

“It’s my first time,” the sorceress said. Unlike many first-timers, she looked determined, rather than scared.

“How far did the rest of you manage?”

“Second room,” Tibs and Ariana answered together.

“I made it to the third room,” the other archer said, and Tibs looked him over. Did

he even fit between the boulders?

The fighter nodded, giving up on her shirt. “Here’s how we’re going to do this.” The light from the first room was becoming visible in the distance. “The rogue is going in first and alone. You’re just is to check every stone tile and find us the safe path through. When we cross the room, we step exactly where he tells us. I don’t want that room to be responsible for any death, got that?”

“Why don’t you just look for the symbol that marks the trigger tiles?” Tibs asked and received incredulous looks from all except Ariana. He looked at them, baffled. He couldn’t be the only one who knew. Ariana had told another rogue, so everyone had to know by now.

“Explain,” the fighter said.

By the time he tried to work out how to explain it, they’d reached the room, so instead, he gave it a quick look over and stepped in, ignoring the gasps, until he was four steps away from them and turned. Ariana looked amused, those the others stared at him.

He crouched and pointed to a tile halfway between him and them. “The triggers all have that sort of wavy circle on them.” Once they were paying attention to it, he indicated another a few tiles to the left, and then one a little further off. “You have to pay attention, because the other scratches on the tiles something sort of obscure them, but you don’t need me to point them out.”

The sorceress leveled a calculating gaze on him. “What he’s saying is that we don’t need him anymore, right?”

“None of that,” the fighter said, looking up.

“What? He’s a rogue.” The sorceress indicated the floor. “That’s the only thing they’re good for; that and picking your pockets. Do you really want one of them around when the coppers start dropping?”

The fighter looked at the sorceress. “We have to hand them over, what does it matter if they are in my pockets or his until then?” she looked at the floor again, then Tibs. “Rogue.” She shook her hand in annoyance. “What’s your name?”

“Tibs.”

“Tibs, I’d recommend not volunteering too much information in the future. I appreciate you telling us, but her reaction is more typical than I like to think.”

The other archer chuckled. “Well, now I know why Flynn was all mysterious about how he knew. But don’t worry, I’m not prejudiced like Miss magic over there.”

“It’s not prejudice,” the sorceress spat. “It’s survival, plain and simple. We’re here to feed the dungeon. Since he’s done his part, I figure our chances are better if we feed him to it now.”

“That’s not how it works,” Ariana said. “The second room wasn’t easier or tougher when there were less of us there. I don’t think the dungeon is smart enough to adjust to how many people enter a room. You should just thank Tibs for telling you how to cross the room and move on. At least now if your next rogue isn’t good enough, you won’t have to be the one paying for it.” She started across the room and Tibs followed her.

On the other side, Tibs paused as he noticed something, but she grabbed his arm and pulled him along. “Come on, I have an idea of how the next room works.”

The other room hadn’t changed, and Tibs shuddered at the memory of his two previous times. If he could think of a way to avoid ever having to step into this room, he’d be a lot happier.

“Okay, I noticed something on my last run,” Ariana began.

“If you try to run through it, the rats bunch up and trip you,” The fighter said. “We tried that on my last run.”

“Yes, but if you stand still among the boulders, the rats will climb on top of them to jump on you. For some reason, they seem to prefer the neck over any other part of the body.”

“Easy kill,” the fighter said, studying the room, “if they open up your jugular, there’s nothing you can do to survive unless you have a cleric with you.”

Tibs stared at her and after a few seconds, she seemed to notice the silence. She turned to look at them.

“I’m here for a reason, like the rest of you,” she said as an explanation.

“Sure,” the other archer said, “but my reason doesn’t involve knowing a neck wound is that dangerous.” He touched his neck and shuddered a little.

“Why are you here?” Ariana asked. “I hunted on the king’s land.”

The man blushed. “I kind of shot a man.”

“How do you kind of shoot someone?” the sorceress asked.

“The arrow wasn’t supposed to hit anyone. I was sending a love letter to my destined. But her father was watching over her, by the window, in the dark. I didn’t see him there.”

“There are easier ways to tell a girl you want to bed her,” the fighter said.

“It’s nothing like that,” the archer said, offended. “I love her. She’s my destined. We’re going to be together and happy.”

“After you shot her father,” Ariana pointed out.

The archer looked at the floor. “I didn’t kill him or anything.”

“What about you?” the fighter asked Tibs.

“He’s a thief,” the sorceress replied with venom, “why do you think he’s here? Can we get on with this?”

Tibs shrugged at the fighter’s raised eyebrow. It wasn’t like he’d ever lied about what he was.

She shifted her focus to Ariana. “So, you want me to just stand in the middle of the boulders while you pick the rats off.”

“It’s easier than having to find them while they scurry around your feet.” Ariana indicated the central column. “If you stand with your back against that, they won’t be able to jump on your back.”

“What if you miss one?”

Ariana shrugged. “Then you hack at it. I’m just saying this simplifies how we get through this room. If anyone had a better idea, we can do that instead.”

“The problem I have with the idea,” the fighter said, going back to studying the room, “is that I have to trust you for this to work. We already had one be vocal about sacrificing one of us to make her life easier. What’s stopping her from blasting me to a crisp?”

“I don’t have an element,” the sorceress said, “so I can’t burn you. All I can do right now is sting you with some sort of light. I’m going for water, in case you’re interested.”

“We’re not,” the other archer replied.

Ariana looked at Tibs and motioned to the room. He looked at the room, then at her. She raised an eyebrow. Did she want him to go in there? She nodded to it again. Tibs swallowed a shudder and nodded. It took his knife out stepped into the room.

“What are you doing?” the fighter demanded.

“I trust Ariana,” Tibs answered, searching the ground for rats. He could hear the skittering of stone claws on the floor. He was already regretting this.

The fighter cursed, then passed him. “Hurry up then. We only have a few seconds to reach the column.”

Tibs didn’t make it. The skittering became louder when he was a few boulders away, and he froze. He could feel the rats looking at him. Coming for him. He could even imagine one of them breathing on the back of his neck.

“Don’t move!” Ariana ordered and Tibs swallowed. He didn’t think he could move even if he wanted. A rat flew away, an arrow through it. Tibs’s eyes grew wide, and he tightened his grip on the knife. It *had* been breathing on the back of his neck. There was an explosion somewhere in the room.

“Tibs,” the fighter called. “Tibs look at me.”

He moved his eyes, the only part of him he seemed able to move. Any motion would draw the rats to him. He could feel them all around, waiting to pounce and devour him. He needed to get out of here. To turn around and run out.

He had almost gotten himself to the point where he thought he’d be able to move when whiskers appeared on each side of the tapering end of the boulder he faced. Tibs’s stomach dropped as a muzzle crested it, and the rat looked at him with its dead gray eyes. It was enormous, and Tibs could read the murderous intent.

“Tibs,” the fighter said in what he thought was too calm of a voice for the situation. There was a rat about to eat him. She should be panicking. “You have to kill it. It’s right there. Just stab it.”

He couldn’t stab that! It would just make it angry, then instead of killing him it would just hurt him and call its friend so they could play with him, eating him slowly.

“What’s happening?” Ariana yelled, hint of panic in her voice.

“There’s a rat in front of Tibs,” the fighter answered, still calm.

“I can’t see it!”

“Me neither,” the other archer said.

“I can blast his head out of the way,” the sorceress offered.

“No blasting the rogue,” the fighter ordered. “Tibs, you can do it. You can kill it.”

He gave a minuscule shake of the head and the rat stilled.

He was dead. He was so dead.

It jumped.

With a shriek, he raised his hands to protect his face. Something impacted his hand and then his face. He dropped to the floor, curled in on himself, and waited for the rats to eat him.

And waited.

Something touched him and he shrieked again, backing away. He hit his head and giggling made him open his eyes and look.

Ariana was covering her mouth. "Are you okay?"

"I hate rats," Tibs answered with a shudder, then looked himself over for missing parts.

"Well, you killed your first one." The fighter indicated where Tibs's knife lay on the floor, a rat impaled on it. He stared at it. It couldn't be the one that had been looking at him. This one was tiny.

"I'll be," the sorceress said. "The thief can actually kill something. Granted, I think it was all luck, but even that kind of luck is impressive."

"I'm a rogue," Tibs grumbled, reaching for his knife and yanking it out of the rat. "Is it safe?" it dissolved and left a copper piece behind.

"They stopped appearing, so I'm saying that we are," the archer said. "That was what, ten?"

"Twelve," the fighter replied, "including the one Tibs killed. So I want to see twelve coppers. I am not going to put the team at risk because one of you thinks they can secret one of them out."

Tibs turned the copper coin over. On one side was a sunburst, on the other a woman's face. He handed it to the fighter.

"How itching are your fingers, Tibs?" she asked.

"I want to keep my hands."

"So you don't mind if I keep them?"

"We can't keep them," he replied.

"Yeah," the archer said, standing among the boulders, "the only way we can have coins is if one of us dies and we bring the equipment back." He paused. "Does that seem like an encouragement to make sure we kill someone should we all survive the last room?"

"They did say they don't care if we all die in here," Ariana said, "so I wouldn't be surprised if that's the goal."

"That isn't going to happen on my watch," the fighter stated, eyes fixed on the sorceress. "Is that clear?"

"I only suggested it once," she replied.

"Twice," Ariana countered.

"That wasn't the same, I was just saying I could give you a clear shot."

"And I don't want to hear any other suggestions like that," the fighter said. She

counted the coins that were handed to her and pocketed them. Tibs noticed some had different faces and symbols on them.

“Do you know where the coins are from?” Tibs once they’d left the room. He’d watched the archer maneuver through them with ease, taking a longer way through them, but exiting at the same time.

She took a handful of coins out and picked on with an anchor on it. “This one’s from my home. We’re a maritime nation.”

“Back home our coins almost all have a sun on them,” the sorceress said. “Venalia is at a crossroad, so we have merchants from all over. I saw a lot of different ones.”

“We have a shield on ours,” Ariana said.

“Me too,” the other archer said in surprise. “Are you from Trunion?”

“Altirial,” she answered.

“Oh, the capital. We have nobility among us!”

“Hardly,” she replied with an eye roll. “I’m as street as the rest of you.”

“What about you, Tibs?” the fighter asked. “What’s on your coins?”

Tibs tried to piece a full image of the pieces of coppers he’d seen over his life. “I don’t know. I never saw a full coin before I got here.”

“And I thought I was street,” Ariana whispered in awe.

“Thieves come from somewhere,” the sorceress said, unimpressed. “Why do you think they want coins so much?”

“Shut it,” the fighter snapped, rounding on the woman. “Before I shut it for you. I don’t know what your problem is with rogues, but they are as vital to an adventuring group as sorcerers. Why do you think all groups of legends have five members? It’s always one of each class because we complement each other.” She glared at the sorceress. “When one of us isn’t plotting against the others. So how about you keep your mouth shut from now on? You can express your opinions once we’re out and we don’t have to listen to them.”

The archer cursed and Tibs looked at him, standing at the entrance of the next room

“The room’s different.”