

Chapter 11

“Tibs!” a woman yelled and he looked over his shoulder from where he was sitting, trying to get a lock open.

Because he’d showed more skill with picking locks than most, the teacher had given him a more complex one, and instead of letting him use the picks he provided everyone else, he’d given Tibs a box with the kind of scrap he might find in a house. As if Tibs wasn’t already used to that. It wasn’t like he’d owned a set of picks. The times he’d managed to steal one, he hadn’t been able to keep them long.

Being small and weak had its disadvantage.

“We’re up!” She yelled again.

She couldn’t make him out, sitting on the grass among other rogues working on their own skills with locks or disarming traps.

“He isn’t here,” the teacher replied just as Tibs stood and received a glare from the man; as if the fact he didn’t know who Tibs was or if he’d been there or not was Tibs fault. Tibs handed him the open lock and walked toward the fighter.

“How have you been?” she asked.

“Alive,” he replied, trying to make his tone sour, but relieved she was still alive. Since their last run together, she’d done everything she could to find him for meals or just to talk. Among the town he could easily avoid her, but when he ate he had to endure her conversations. And, he had to admit, he was starting to enjoy her company.

“Have you been on any other runs?”

“One.” He didn’t plan on adding anything. “It was horrible.”

The group had been completely disorganized, fighting about who was in charge, about how which room should be handled. Tibs had been ignored in favor of the other rogue, a girl a little older than Tibs, that kept pressing against the archer. They’d lost the sorcerer to the trap room, and when they argued again about the boulder room, Tibs had decided to stop trying. He followed behind the rogue and fighter. They didn’t know about Ariana’s trick and were tripped and then eaten. Tibs stood still by the bodies and sliced the rats that climbed on top of the boulders to get at him.

He’d been nervous, but not scared. Bardik’s training was paying off. He’d had to kill four rats in the process of dragging the rogue’s body back out of the room, by which time the archer was being brought down by more rats. Tibs gathered five coins, the two shirts, the knife, bow, and quiver; enough that as he left the table where he returned the items, he’d realized his roll of coins was getting heavy and he needed to start thinking about either an actual coin pouch or a new set of clothing made from heavier material, in which he could sew hidden pockets.

“At least you were smart enough not to let their stupidity pull you down with them.” She pulled him closer with an arm before letting go. “Sorry.” Tibs didn’t move away, and tentatively she placed her arm around his shoulder again.

They walked by the Long in the Tooth tavern and Tibs looked through the open door at the lighter crowd—it was no longer the only tavern—at Old Walrus behind the bar.

“We can probably grab a tankard if you want,” she offered, noticing where he’d looked. Tibs shook his head.

He’d avoided the tavern, only looking in from the door, trying to determine if anything had happened. If the goal of what Bardik had had Tibs do had been to cause the tavern owner trouble, it had been dealt with quietly. If it had been a message, the signal for some plan, nefarious or otherwise, it was either still ongoing, or had happened so carefully even he hadn’t noticed anything.

And Bardik was still walking around, ignoring Tibs unless they were training or he was behind the table when Tibs returned from a run.

They had to walk further to leave the town this time, new tents being added as wooden buildings replaced those closer to the center of the town and the stone platform.

“This place is going to be a real town soon,” she commented once they were out of it. On top of the new taverns, they had an inn and a sleeping house was almost completed. It was the tallest building, being five stories high, and Tibs liked sitting on the beams that would hold the roof and looking into the distance.

The forest was now more stumps than trees, and he wondered what they would do once it was gone.

“I ended up doing two runs,” she said. “The first one was a mess, kind of like yours, but it was greed that undid them. The archer ran into the boulder room to grab coins instead of shooting the rats.” She paused. “The asshole somehow survived, but we lost our rogue because of it. She was a sweet girl, you’d have liked her.”

Tibs stiffened. “No, I wouldn’t.”

She glanced at him. “Maybe you wouldn’t.” She sounded disappointed. “The second run went better. We almost cleared the third room. We were down to a handful of rabbits when we lost three. I think the archer and fighter had a thing going because when she went down, the archer lost it and ran into the room. She died on top of the fighter. We lost our rogue as we retreated. By then the sorcerer was out of strength.”

Once they had their equipment, they were pointed to a group of three.

“Hopefully this group will be good,” she said, looking them over.

They looked tired, was what Tibs thought of them; weary.

The archer studied them. “I’m Arch,” he said when they were closer. He indicated the sorceress in the red robes. “This is Jazine, and that’s Paul,” the man in the blue ones.

“I’m Talia,” the fighter replied, “and this is—”

“I’m the rogue,” Tibs cut her off, glaring at her.

“He’s had a rough time of it,” she said with a sigh. “He doesn’t want to get to know anyone anymore.”

The archer looked at Tibs. “That’s not a good attitude to have. It’s easier to depend on you if we know you.”

“I’m going to get you through the traps,” Tibs replied, his tone flat, “and I’m going to pull my weight in any fights. That’s all that matters.”

“You don’t look like you have a lot of weight on your to pull,” the man in the blue robes commented, smiling.

“I know how to fight,” Tibs told him harshly, “I’ve been training with an adventurer.”

Talia looked at Tibs, surprised.

“See, that’s the kind of information it’s good for us to have,” the archer said. “You’re going to be the first rogue I’ve worked with who can do more than get us through the trap room. You two know the trick to the second room?”

“Stand against the middle column and let the rats climb the boulders for the three of you to shoot them,” Talia said.

“If you can reach it,” the woman in the red robe said. “In my last run, there were reacting faster.”

“We’ll make it,” Tibs stated.

“Looks like it’s our turn,” the sorceress said, indicating the three exiting the crack in the mountain.

As they crossed paths, Tibs saw they were tired, but not as injured as most he’d seen leave. They had equipment over their shoulders. Maybe the survivors were getting better and people would stop always dying around him. Only if that happened, what would the people in charge do? They’d said they were here to die and feed the dungeon. If they got good enough to no longer die, would they be injured before going in?

At the trap room, Tibs guided the group. He didn’t put on a show of finding trigger stones, but he did play up his search for them. Ariana had been right when she said not to give away his secrets. On the other side, he paused as the others continued and looked back into the room.

“Tibs?” Talia asked.

“Gone on,” he answered distractedly, searching the walls. “I’ll join you.”

She nodded and left him.

There had been something, the last time he’d crossed the room, something that had nagged at him, but the chaos of that team had distracted him from looking, then leaving along he hadn’t remembered.

It had been something new, a change the dungeon had made, he was certain of that, it had been too obvious for him to miss it on the runs he’d done before. This time it wasn’t as much, but he noticed how a large stone wasn’t properly seated against the others.

He studied the floor leading to it, noting where the marked triggers were. He was still careful as he stepped. This felt too much like it was designed to make him overconfident, but the only triggers were the ones marked.

Crouching next to the stone, he didn’t think most would notice it, but the teacher had gone over the importance of paying attention to anything out of place. People didn’t often realize how hiding something would disturb the surroundings. Like the dust on a bookcase when someone pulled a book to hide something in it or behind it.

This was a tiny gap between the stone and the others. He ran the tip of his knife in it, all the way around, feeling to a trigger that would indicate a lock, or worse, a trap. Tibs had almost lost fingers early in his career of stealing when he’d reached into a safe

without first searching for more traps.

His exploration showed him neither, so now he needed to figure out how to open it. He tried to twist it, but it didn't more. When he pressed he went in slightly, then he twisted and got a click. He froze, waiting for something to happen. After a few seconds of silence and nothing piercing him, he let the stone out. His initial disappointment at not seeing a jewel box or a pile of coin inside was replaced by surprise when he made out the shape of a pair of shoes.

Carefully, he searched the inside for more traps before pulling them out. They were made of soft and supple leather. Plain, except for the black thread holding the heavier sole in place. Looking to make sure no one had come to check on him, he put them on and found they fit him perfectly. He stood and couldn't feel the errands pebble underfoot.

He put the stone back and realized he had a dilemma. Did he tell the others? Would the adventurers notice he'd entered without shoes? If they did, would they demand he hand them over?

He wasn't telling anyone, he decided. He was the one who'd done the work. He deserved them as his reward. If the adventurers ordered him to give them up, he'd deal with that then.

Talia was heading for him when he stepped out of the room. "What have you been doing? You're not really making a good impression. Arch decided to clear the second room without you." She noticed his feet. "Where did you get that?"

"What do you care?" he demanded, and immediately looked away, biting his lower lip. "Are you going to tell on me?" he asked quietly.

She placed her hands on his shoulder. "Of course not, Tibs." She sighed. "But they're our team. You said you'd pull your weight and just left us. You aren't going to earn their trust hiding things from them."

"They aren't my team," Tibs stated, but his voice cracked.

"What about me then? We're in this together. We can't survive the runs alone."

"We can't survive them at all! We're here to die. They're going to send us in over and over until we're all dead. It doesn't matter what we do, how hard we try. You're going to die, and it's going to hurt!" he wiped the tears away. "Ariana reminded me of how much it hurts."

"I'm not going to die, Tibs."

He glared at her.

She sighed. "I'm not planning on dying."

"But you will," he replied, "or I will. If I know you, it's just going to hurt more."

She squeezed his shoulders. "But if we know each other, we have a reason to fight harder." She pulled him in a hug and after hesitating, he hugged her back, crying again. "Let's rejoin the others. We're going to need everyone to get through the warren room."

Tibs shuddered as they crossed the boulder room, feeling beady stone eyes on him, unable to shake the sense that rats were going to jump on his back the entire time in the room. Even once they left it, it wasn't until he saw the other three that he felt a little

safer.

“Don’t,” Talia warned the archer as he opened his mouth.

He looked at Tibs, then nodded. “Purity knows this place has been rough on all of us.” He let out a breath and indicated the room. “We’re lucky that there’s three of us who can attack at range. We can deal with the rabbits as your two take care of the rats.” He fixed his gaze on Tibs. “You can deal with the rats, right?”

“We can,” Talia answered.

Tibs suppressed a shudder. “I owe them for the times they scared me.”

The archer didn’t look confident, but his expression softened. “We’ll try to cover you if you pull too many of the rats, but you can’t count on us to save you. We’re going to be busy with the rabbits. They’re fast and more of a danger since they can knock you down. Do your part and we’ll do ours.”

“You can count on us,” Talia said, and Tibs nodded.

“Then in you go. Rush the rats and avoid stepping on the warren doors. We found out the hard way on a previous run they can’t support our weight. You can easily break your ankle and the rabbits will bite it off from in there.”

Tibs hadn’t needed to know that. Now he had trouble not thinking of a rabbit chewing his foot off. He tightened his grip on his knife and looked into the room. Twelve rats sat in a line, unmoving; waiting for him and Talia. And somewhere under the floor, among the many trap doors he could see, were rabbits. Ten of them, if he remembered correctly.

Talia squeezed his shoulder, and he nodded.

Tibs ran, stepping between the trap doors and remaining alert for better-hidden ones. Talia caught up to him, then passed him. She met the rats halfway to where they had been waiting and slashed at the closest; two fell to the floor and were replaced with coins.

Tibs had his own rats to deal with. He slashed at one as he stepped around another, thanking Bardik’s training. Dodging the rabbit that jumped for him was all Tibs, at his size he’d had to learn to avoid being hit from a young age.

Of course, rats were faster than people, and one bit his ankle before he kicked it away and the distraction almost caused him to step on a warren door, skipping away at the last moment. The rabbit that jumped out of it exploded before reaching him, peppering him with small stones.

Tibs killed a fourth, then a fifth rat, then realized that the sound of stone claws skittering on the stone floor had stopped. He looked around. Talia smiled at him as she did the same, tensing as a rabbit leaped out of a warren, only to explode into stone dust.

“And that’s ten,” the sorceress said, still pointing at the stone dust, grinning. “We’re done.” She wiped her hands.

“All right,” the archer said. “We—”

A rabbit jumped out of the warren closest to Tibs and before he could react an impact sent him sideways, sliding on the floor. He sat up as the rabbit exploded. Where Tibs had stood just seconds ago, Talia’s form lay on the floor. As he watched, she

dissolved and was gone.

“You said we were clear!” someone yelled.

Tibs pulled his knees to himself.

“I thought we were! I swear I counted ten of them!”

He stared at where she’d been, tears falling down his cheeks.

Someone cursed, and then the archer was crouched before him. “Tibs?” the archer reached for him but Tibs slapped the hand away.

“I told her! I said she’d die!” he wiped the tears away.

“She saved your life,” the archer said softly.

“I didn’t ask for it! Now I’ve got to feel the pain!”

“I’ve got the coins,” someone said.

“Tibs,” the archer said, “I know it hurts, but you can’t let that stop you. We have a job to do.”

“Our job is to die!” he grabbed the knife from the floor. “Maybe I should just do it for them.” One quick stab and he wouldn’t have to feel anything anymore. He’d be with Mama, with Ariana and Talia.

The archer took his hand. “She wouldn’t want that, Tibs.”

“That’s it?” someone said. “We clear the room and nothing more? Shouldn’t, I don’t know, there be a real reward?”

The archer closed his eyes and let out an annoyed sigh. “Paul, can you shut up for a minute? I’m dealing with—”

“There’s a door over there,” Tibs snapped, pointing at the far wall. He could make out the discoloration marking its location. He stood, pulling his hand out of the archer’s. He had a task and he could use that to distract himself from the pain.

The sorcerers joined him as he studied the door. Tibs traced the outline of it. It wasn’t even like a normal door. It was made to blend in with the cracks and other stones that made up the wall. He couldn’t feel a gap; when he pushed on it, it didn’t shift and he couldn’t get it to twist.

“I might be able to blast it,” the sorceress said. “I think I have enough left for one blast.”

“I doubt that’s how this works, Jaz,” the archer answered. “I think this is a rogue exclusive problem.”

Tibs ran his hand over the door itself, feeling the stones. The archer was right. This was a door, so there was a way to open it, and like the trap room, all he needed to do was find the method the dungeon had provided. A stone shifted under his fingers. He twisted, and it came off, revealing a lock.

“Did we miss a key?” the sorcerer asked.

“Search the warrens,” the archer ordered.

“You want me to put my hands in there? What if a rabbit is waiting to bit it off?”

“Can you open it?”

“They don’t let us bring picks,” Tibs answered, looking around for anything he could use in place of pick, but the stones were either too large or had broken into too

small pieces.

The sorceress cursed. “A hidden key? Like this wasn’t hard enough already. Do we have the time to look for it?”

Tibs moved his search to the walls, looking for any indications of another hidden space. “There aren’t any other hidden places,” he said.

“We check the warrens.” The archer dropped to his knees and pried open a warren door. Tibs used his knife while the sorcerers borrowed arrows.

They found two silver coins, which Tibs stared at. Would he ever need to get more coins if he had a silver?

He wasn’t the only one to look at them, but it was the sorcerer in blue that voiced the issue. “Is it even worth taking that out with us? Even if we had equipment to bring out, we’d only get copper coins.”

The archer rolled a coin in between his fingers before letting it fall into the warren. “As far as I know, no one had brought out silver. Let’s keep this our secret until we know what we need to do to keep them.” He looked around. “If the key isn’t in here, it’s got to be in the boulder room.”

“That’s a lot of boulders to check, and I don’t know what we’re looking for,” the sorceress replied while Tibs stared at the coins in the warren, fighting the urge to pick it up, to show them how special even seeing a silver coin was for him.

“We’re also running low on time,” the archer said. “If they decide we died in here, there’re going to send the next team in. I don’t want to find out what happens if two teams run into one another. Tibs. Tibs!”

Tibs looked up from the warren.

“As we walk back, look for anything out of the ordinary. If you find the key, we’re going for the door. If not, we’ll wait until next time. It should be easier to find it now that we know to look for it.”

Tibs looked, he quickly searched the boulders within reach as he crossed the room, but they were normal boulders without hidden spaces. He wanted to spend more time in it, search each boulder, make Talia’s sacrifice mean something, but the archer urged him out.

Next time, he promised himself, promised her memory. On his next run, he’d find the key and see what was beyond the door.

As they walk down the hill, they met the other team and Don, at the lead, looked them over, made a show of counting how many of them there were, and smirked at Tibs. Tibs considered throwing his knife in the sorcerer’s back, but with his three teammates simply ignoring them, he felt childish for his anger.

At the bottom, the adventurers looked them over, spending more time on Tibs. Or more precisely, his shoes. The one with the sword exchanged a look with the other. A sorcerer in gray robes, who shrugged and let them continue.

At the table, the woman leaned forward to look at Tibs’s feet. And not his teammates looked at them too, but by their confused expression, they didn’t understand what was so odd. She too didn’t comment, taking the equipment and coins. They didn’t

get anything in return,

Tibs fought the urge to look over his shoulder as they left, feeling the woman's eyes on him. The three adventurers had noticed his shoes, shouldn't they have taken them? He looked at each adventurer they passed, waiting for one of them to call him out. To accuse him of breaking the rules. To take him to whoever was in charge so they could cut off his feet and throw him unto the dungeon to fend for himself.

When they reached the town, the archer waved at them and headed for the tavern. The sorcerers headed in a different direction, leaving Tibs alone. He looked around for adventurers lying in wait. When he didn't see any, he decided that the rules might be different for items they found in the dungeon and headed for the training grounds.

There was some time before lunch and the trainers left, and he wanted to find out if there was a way to make picks out of stone in case he couldn't find the key during his next run.

At the entrance of the rogue section stood a rogue adventurer, looking bored. Tibs had seen him before and wasn't surprised when he took the crystal out of a pocket and handed it to Tibs. Every time it was the same, take it, hand it over, and go in. Other than the first time, when he'd seen the stone glow when they passed the it among everyone assembled, it had never done anything.

Tibs took the crystal and was in the process of handing it back when he noticed that it glowed. The adventurer looked at it, also surprised.

"Looks like you need to go see the boss," he said in a tone that made Tibs want to run.