

Tibs hurried down the stairs, pulling his sense tightly against him to keep from sensing what was ahead. He still shivered as he ran past the door to the room that.... He still didn't know what had happened to it, and unless things had changed, neither did Sto.

"This way," Ganny called, ahead of him, but Tibs had to stop before running into the wall.

He placed a hand against the stone. "Ganny?"

"Oh," she said, then was silent. Tibs stepped back at the rumbling that preceded the wall opening. "I forget you can't just move about."

He slipped in as soon as the gap was wide enough and came to a stop.

The room wasn't what he'd expected, he realized, as he looked at the uneven walls broken by someone's—the Them—talons raking through them, shattering the crystalline... roots? that ran over them and to an uneven hole in the back wall. He forced the questions and attention away from the damage and looked for Sto among the stone and crystal rubble.

He cursed. Of course, he couldn't find him. Sto wasn't a person the way Tibs was. There wouldn't be an injured body for him to recognize.

"Ganny? Where is he?" He looked for something out of place, extending his sense. He couldn't sense a person, but he should be able to feel someone different from everything else. Only the miasma was so dense here all Tibs got from the attempt was a headache.

"Here," she whispered, ahead and to his left as he gave up on sensing. "Under here," she said, when Tibs stood before a pile of rubble.

He carefully moved the stone and crystal chunks out until he crouched next to... another crystal. Or at least it was the best approximation his mind came up with.

Sto was the size of Tibs's palms side by side, ovoid, but with the cracked surface faceted; like precious gems, so the light broke apart as it shone through it. He was translucent, like milk mixed with water, and streaked with colors that pulsed faintly.

Elements, he realized. Sto was a gem, with all the elements coursing through him.

What had Bardik said? The core of a dungeon was what he had to destroy so the dungeon would die. Sto was that core. And Tibs was watching him die. Those cracks had to result from what the Them had done to him.

"What do I do?" he asked, his voice catching in his throat.

"I...I don't know." Ganny sounded about to cry. "Tibs, I don't know what to do to help him. This isn't something I've ever been told could happen."

"What did you do when Bardik hurt him?"

She didn't answer.

"Ganny, I need something if—"

"Nothing! I didn't know what to do then, either. What that person did with throwing the corruption around hurt Sto in a different way. It all hurt and was being consumed. Sto's the entire dungeon, Tibs. Hurting any of that hurts Sto. But the Them...Then went for the core of who Sto is. They ripped the connections out before..."

That jagged hole all the roots went to. It was what they'd ripped Sto out of. Out of where he belonged.

As carefully as he could, Tibs picked up his friend, surprised at how light he was. He was no heavier than the gem Tibs had compared him to. There should be more weight to who

he was. Sto was more than what he held; he was the dungeon.

With him in the palm of his hands, Tibs sensed the elements that made Sto's core. They didn't mix the way liquids dumped in a barrel did. They moved within him, around something he couldn't quite make out, a with a shell of life essence. The essences slowly leaked through the cracks.

"Tibs?" Sto said, sounding so far away it scared Tibs.

"I'm here. Everything's going to be okay. I'm taking you back where you should be."

"They're wrong, you know."

"About what?" So long as Sto talked, he was there and Tibs could help.

"I didn't do it for you."

"Did what?" He studied the hole. "Ganny, how do I..." He moved Sto within it. He forced himself to sense through the pain for a hint as to how Sto fit.

"Help Kragle Rock. Help your town...my town."

"The..." She trailed off. "Cradle's gone," she whispered. "They destroyed it, and Sto isn't strong enough to remake it."

"Can you?" Tibs asked.

"You told me they needed help," Sto said, seemingly unaware of the other conversation. "So, I guess it is your fault, in a way." He chuckled, then fell silent.

"I can't make anything, Tibs. I'm not Sto."

"Sto, Keep talking." He'd asked about the third floor, since Sto said she'd made it, once his friend was safe. "Ganny. What do the cradle do?"

"You told me." Sto sounded as if he'd startled awake. "But I did it because someone told me they needed help. Not because it was you." He fell silent again, but spoke before Tibs prompted him. "You told me how I could help. The others... They talked about the problems, but I didn't understand what it meant for the people who helped my Runners until you explained it to me."

"It's Sto," she said, sounding exasperated. "It's the dungeon. It's where Sto is. It's how it all works!" She let out a cry of anguish.

"I don't care about rules that say I have to let my people suffer," Sto said sharply. "Runners come inside me to test themselves. Those outside shouldn't be tested like that. I'll break all the rules so I can help them. Do you hear me?" Tibs thought Sto tried to yell. "Come back here and I'll show you what I can do to someone who threatens my town!"

"So that's how he controls things? That's why the Them destroyed it? So he couldn't stop them from taking control?"

"It's more than that. It's... Tibs, I don't know how to explain it! All of it. The dungeon. It's Sto the way your body is you. Sto's core is you the way..." She screamed.

"The way I'm me. The things that make me think me." He didn't think about it much. Carina had told him there were people researching what made them different from animals, but it was something Tibs hadn't cared about. He was. What else was there to it?

"My body protects me." He chuckled. "It cradles me."

Could he cradle Sto? The outer shell was mostly life essence. If he wrapped Sto in it, it would help, wouldn't it?

He held Sto against his chest and poured life essence over him. Tibs was ready to give Sto everything if it meant he—

Sto screamed in pain. And Tibs stopped.

“What did you do?” Ganny demanded, as Sto’s whimpering calmed.

“I’m trying to save him.” Were the cracks larger?

“That was too much.”

“Then what’s the right amount?” Tibs demanded, then breathed. She was just scared for Sto, as he was.

“I don’t...”

“That hurt,” Sto sobbed.

“Ganny,” Tibs said when she didn’t speak more, breathing his anger down. “I know you don’t know much about this, but I need you to do your best. You know Sto. You know more about all this than I do.”

“Why am I being hurt for helping my friends?”

“Less,” she stated.

“How much less?”

“A lot, Tibs. I don’t think you can do this. That element is so dense in you.”

“I can control how much essence I use.” He extended the thinnest strand of life essence he could. No more than a gossamer of it, and touched it to the outside of Sto. When Sto didn’t react, other than the quiet sobbing that had accompanied his previous question, Tibs moved the strand to one of the cracks and filled it.

Sto whimpered.

“It’s not going to work,” Ganny whispered as Tibs pulled the essence back.

“I’m not letting him die,” he replied through clenched teeth, wrapping Sto in that gossamer of essence. At least, that kept Sto’s essences from leaking out.

“I don’t know if you’ll be able to do this until Sto has healed.”

Tibs snorted. “I don’t have to stop. I have so much essence I can do this until I die.”

“When is that going to be? Don’t you have to eat?”

“Purity will take care of that.”

“I...don’t think that’s how it works. But won’t you have to stop what you’re doing to suffuse yourself?”

“What do you want from me, Ganny?” he yelled. “I’m doing the best I can. I don’t know everything. I’ll use my bracers when I have to switch.” He could do that without much of an interruption.

It’d be fine.

It had to be.

“I don’t know if it’s going to be enough, Tibs. I think...what you’re doing is helping, but Tibs... I don’t think you understand how long this is going to take. Sto doesn’t...live the way people do. Time is—”

Tibs chuckled. “I know. Sto doesn’t get the concept.”

“It goes deeper than that. Dungeons exist for periods of time even I can’t imagine. If they lived with time, the way people did, they would go mad. There’s just too much of it.”

“What do you want me to do, Ganny?” he asked softly, scared of her answer.

“I don’t know. This, but so you aren’t going to die doing it.”

This.

He chuckled at the absurdity of what she wanted.

He was weaving strands of life essence so thin he couldn't perceive them within the dense miasma of the room. He doubted he'd be able to sense much more of them outside of it, or even out of the dungeon. A moment of distraction within a crowd and he'd lose track of it among that of the people around—

His head snapped up, looking at where Ganny's voice came from as the realization hit.

"What?" she asked, alarmed.

"Can I take him out of this room, Ganny?" What he had wrapped around Sto was no more than what flowed through the townsfolk. "I think I know how to save him." But it wasn't only people who had such thin essence.

Her answer was filled with hesitation. "Yes."

Tibs ran

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"Tibs," Ganny called again. "What are you going to do?"

And again he ignored her, clutching Sto against his chest and trying not to jostle him. He saw Serba in the distance, still lying on the ground, her dogs around her.

One raised its head, then was on its feet before her. The others joined it.

That could be a problem. He was without jerky.

Serba turned her head, then let out whistle that caused the dogs to sit, but they kept watching him as he reached her.

"Did you save him?" She asked tiredly.

"It's still in progress." Her essence was faint, and now he was sure the pieces of the Them in here were larger, but he couldn't sense it diminishing, so he had time. "I need one of your dogs."

How was he going to do this?

"Why?" she demanded, and the dogs growled in response to the tone of her voice.

"Good," Ganny said in exasperation. "How about you explain your plan to her, since you aren't explaining it to me?"

"The Them broke Sto's body. Don't think too much about it," he added as her eyes dropped to what had to look like the largest gem she'd ever seen. "The words are never right when talking about this stuff. It's like the elements never meant for us to talk about it," he said, annoyed. "So we have to use the best ones we can think of. But this is his body, just like the dungeon is his body too, just differently. Don't think about it," he said as she opened her mouth. "Because it's broken, the essences that make him are leaking out. I tried to help him, but I have too much life essence and it's like..." he cursed. Words. Why weren't there any easy words to explain this with?

"Like when you move your hand too close to the fire," Serba said. "The comforting heat becomes too much, and it burns you."

"Yes! So Sto needs something so soft, I can't do it for the kind of time he needs to heal. But people, and dogs, barely have any. And that's exactly what Sto needs right now." He made a knife with metal and looked the dogs over. Was a larger one better or—

"No." Serba grabbed his wrist. "You aren't hurting one of my dogs."

"I have to. Sto's going to die otherwise."

“Then use me.”

“No,” He replied, disgusted at the idea. “I can’t do that.”

“Last I checked, I’m people. You said I’m like my dogs that way.” She smirked as if the comparison was a badge of honor.

“I’m going to have to put him inside.” He moved his arm, so she had better view. Maybe she hadn’t realized how much of Sto there was. “It’s going to hurt. It might—” he looked around “Ganny? What would it do to her?”

“I don’t know, Tibs,” she said eventually. “If this had ever been done, I’ve never heard about it.”

“I’m not taking the chance.” He pulled his arm out of her grip, but she grabbed it again.

“I want to help you save him,” she told him, tone firm. “But I’m not letting you do that at the expense of one of my dogs. They’ve done nothing to deserve that.”

“And you have?”

She laughed, then coughed. “Tibs. I’m Wells. Do you have any idea what’s the best thing I’ve ever done with my life? Other than look after my dogs?”

He hesitated, then shook his head.

“Decide you were a leader worth following. That’s it, Tibs. My life is a waste of me hurting people because it’s what I was told to do by someone I followed. I wasn’t even trying to find something better, like Jackie did, until you bribed your way into my dogs. They were all that mattered. The rest of the world I’d have watched burn.”

“You might not survive, Serba. I mean. Sto’s all this. And I don’t know what that’s going to do to the you that’s you. Your dogs, they—”

“Matter fucking lot more than I do, Tibs.” She tightened her grip on his wrist. “The me you talk about? That you say might stop being me? Well, that isn’t someone the city’s going to miss.” She motioned around. “This? Without this dungeon, Kragle Rock dies. A dungeon city needs a dungeon, Tibs. It doesn’t need a Wells.”

“I—” he swallowed as she moved his hand.

When the point was over her heart, she looked at him. “I’m asking you to let me do one thing that will matter to more than me or my dogs, Tibs. I’ve never wanted to be a good person until now. This is the only chance I get.”

“Okay.” He wiped at his eyes. “But I have to do some things first. Those pieces of the Them are leeching your essence away. I have to take them out.” He considered Sto. The gossamer essence he maintained around him, and how much attention he needed to make sure it didn’t change. “I won’t be able to do anything for the pain.”

She chuckled. “Don’t worry. Pain is something I’m used to.”

All he saw on her face was determination. “I need you to hold him. I’m going to need both my hands.” He offered her Sto.

She hesitated, then gingerly took him. “It’s warm,” she said, surprised.

Tibs nodded, breathed his nervousness away, then proceeded to cut into her stomach.

The loudest sounds she made were groans as he worked. The dog she clung to was louder in its complaint than she was. He went slowly. Faster would only create problems, even if he could sense where the delicate areas inside her were. When he found a fragment of the Them, he extracted it and flung it as far as he could. Hopefully Sto absorbed them and

it would help him heal. If not, Tibs would make sure they were destroyed.

He worked long enough that the dogs replaced each other when one pulled out of Serba's crushing hug. Her clothing clung to her with sweat once he threw the last piece away.

He looked at the gaping wound he'd made, and the blood covering Serba's stomach. He was exhausted, but he wasn't done. He still had to... "Ganny, how do I..."

"I have no idea," she replied with a nervous laugh.

No, she wouldn't.

"What do you need?" Serba whispered. She was pale.

"That's the problem. We don't know."

"You said his body's broken. Well, since you opened up mine, you might as well put him in and see what happens." She offered him Sto.

"Serba, are you—"

"You think I'm going to survive this?" Anger gave her voice strength.

"I can heal you."

"Then heal him, Tibs. He's why you did it. Not to save me. I'm not—"

"Don't say you aren't worth saving," Tibs snapped, tears falling.

"I'm a Wells, Tibs. We aren't good people."

"Jackal—"

She snorted. "He's got you and that man of his."

"You have me too. And you can—"

With a scream that sounded furious to Tibs, she let go of her dog, took Sto in both hands, and before Tibs could stop her, shoved him into her opened stomach. "There," she said, falling back. "You don't have to worry about it anymore." She panted, chuckled, then arched her back and screamed again, her voice filled with pain this time.

"Ganny!" he tried to hold her down as she trashed, and through the contact, sensed essence spreading out of Sto and into her. All the colors.

"Heal her!" Ganny yelled. "Before the core is pushed out."

Tibs wove purity and applied it to the wound, moving a hand over it to keep Sto from coming out. Serba didn't make it easy on him, as if she suddenly had more strength and was trying to escape him.

The dogs whined. One licked her face.

A spasm sent her knee in his face and he ignored his bleeding nose as he hurried back to hold Sto in, but there was no trace of the injury under the blood.

As he healed himself, Serba stilled. She breathed, and essence moved within her, so she was still alive.

"Did it work?"

"It did..." Tibs sensed it as Ganny finished. "Something."

He was up and away from Serba as essence in the ground rushed toward her. He called the dogs to him, but they clung to her unmoving body. He felt bad for not being as brave as they were, but unlike them, he knew something was about to happen, even if he had no idea what it was.

The essence flooded into Serba. More than a person should be able to stand. More than Tibs expected he could survive. It was so dense, the only word that came close to fitting

was 'solid'. It moved within her and around Sto. When they stilled, none of the colors tainted her now much denser life essence, the way corruption had done with him. They wove around all the channels, filling any space that wasn't occupied by the life essence.

"Tibs!" Jackal called, and he spun to watch his friend running, panting hard. "Abyss, there you are! You have to hide. They're coming for you!" he stopped and put his hands on his knees.

Before Tibs could ask what Jackal was talking about, Serba sat up with a gasp, and Jackal startled.

"Serba?" he demanded, taking a step back on noticing the dogs.

"Sto?" Tibs asked.

She looked at him with eyes filled with a myriad of colors, then at Jackal.

"Yes," she said, then seemed surprised by the word.