

Planning-108

Tibs ran along the corridor, ignoring the shiver that ran down his back as he passed the room that... he still had no idea what was with that room, and unless things had changed, neither did Sto.

“This way,” Ganny said as Tibs skidded to a halt before running into the wall.

“Ganny?” He touched the wall. It was solid.

“Oh.” She was silent. Then the wall rumbled as he parted. “I forget you can’t just move about.”

Tibs slipped in as soon as the gap was wide enough and stopped.

The room was... he couldn’t quite find the words and didn’t bother, instead looking for Sto and not finding him. There was no one there, among the stone and crystalline rubble on the floor. Someone, the Them, Tibs figured, had raked through the walls, tearing stone and those crystal... roots? Apart. The roots all seemed to emanate from the most damaged wall facing him. A hole the size of his head had been ripped out of it.

He curse. Of course, he couldn’t find Sto. Sto wasn’t a person the way Tibs was. There wasn’t an injured body for him to see, or at least not one the way he thought about it.

“Ganny, where is he?” He searched for something that would feel different. He didn’t expect a person, but Sto wouldn’t be the same as everything here.

“Here,” She answered, and he followed her voice.

The problem with sensing was that this room was saturated with essence. This was many times more intense than what Ganny had done to the third and fourth floor, so much so it hurt when Tibs to tried to sense through it.

“Under there.”

Tibs moved the stones and crystal until he crouched next to... another crystal. Or at least that what the word his mind associated with what he saw. It was; Sto was ovoid, but faceted, like a precious gem that had been cut so the light broke apart through it. He was translucent, like milk mixed with water, and streaked with colors that pulsed faintly. Elements, Tibs realized. Sto was a gem with all the elements coursing through him.

What had Bardik said? The core of the dungeon was what he needed to destroy so the dungeon would die. Sto was that core. And he was looking at him, dying. The way he was cracked made it clear he was hurt.

“What do I do?”

"I... I don't know." She sounded like she was about to cry. "Tibs. I don't know what to do to help him. This isn't something I know. No one told me this could happen."

"When Bardik hurt him, what did you do?"

She was silent.

"Ganny. What did you—"

"Nothing! I didn't know what to do then too. The way that man threw the corruption around hurt Sto differently. Everything hurt and was being consumed. Sto's the who dungeon, Tibs. Hurting any of that is hurting Sto, but the Them... they went for the core of who Sto is. They ripped the connections out before..."

Tibs looked to the hole in the wall. Before they'd ripped Sto out of where he belonged.

As carefully as he could, Tibs picked up Sto, and was surprised at how light he was. He was no heavier than a gem twice the size of Tibs's fist, but he was an entire dungeon. There should be more weight to who he was.

With the contact, Tibs sensed more of the essence and elements that made Sto's core. They weren't mixed the way liquids when dumped in a barrel; they remained apart as they moved within him. With something he couldn't quite make out as the center and life essence as the shell around him. That was what was cracked, how the essences leaked out ever so slowly.

"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."

"It's wrong, you know."

"About what?" so long as Sto talked, he was still there and Tibs should help.

"I didn't do it for you."

"Did what?" he looked at the gash. "Ganny, how do I..." he moved Sto within it, looking and sensing through the pain for a hint as to how the core fit.

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

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

"You?"

"You told me they needed help," Sto said, "so it's 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 ask about how she'd made the third floor when Sto was saved. "Ganny. What does the cradle do?"

"You told me." Sto sounded as if he'd startled awake. "But I didn't because someone told me they needed help. Not because it was you. You told me how I could help. The others... they just talked about the problems, and 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 all this 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. "I'm going to break of them, if it means I get to help them. Do you hear me? Come back

here and I'll show you what I can do to someone who threatens my town!"

"So it lets him control things. That's it? The Them destroyed it so he couldn't keep 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's you. The core, it's Sto the way you..." she screamed.

"The way I'm me. The things that make me think me." He didn't think about it much. Carina had mentioned there was research into why people were people and not animals. But that was one thing he'd never been curious 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, that would help, wouldn't it?

He held the core against his chest and wrapped it in life essence. Tibs was ready to give Sto everything he had if it—

Sto screamed in pain.

"Tibs?" Ganny called in panic. "What are you doing?"

He stopped, and Sto calmed.

"I'm trying to save him." Were the cracks larger?

"That was too much."

"Okay, then, how much is the right amount?"

"I don't..."

"Ganny," Tibs said, doing his best to not get angry, "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. What is your guess?"

"Less," she said.

"That hurt," Sto whined. "I shouldn't be hurt for helping my friends."

"How much less?"

"A lot... Tibs. I don't think you can do this. You're so filled with that element. It's so dense in you."

"I can control how much essence I use." He extended the thinnest strand of life essence, a gossamer of it, and touched it to the outside of the core. When Sto didn't protest, or react in any way other than the quiet sobbing that followed his statement, Tibs wrapped more of it around the core, trying to focus on the cracks, but as soon as he added a little more there, Sto whimpered.

"I don't think that's going to work," Ganny whispered.

"I'm not letting him die," he replied through clenched teeth.

"I don't know if you can do this for long enough."

He 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 that 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 just use my bracers when I have to switch." He could do that without

too 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... I think what you're doing is helping. But... Tibs, I don't think you understand how long it's going to take if it is. Sto doesn't... live the way you do. Time is—"

Tibs chuckled. "I know. Sto doesn't get the concept."

"It goes deeper than that. Dungeons like Sto, they exist for periods of time even I can't imagine. If they lived with time the way you do, they would go mad. It's just too much of it."

"What do you want me to do, Ganny?" He asked softly, scared of what she'd say he had to do.

"I don't know. This, but so you aren't going to die of it."

This.

Weaving strands of life essence he could barely perceive them among the miasma in this room. He doubted he'd be able to sense much more of them outside the dungeon, as thin as they had to be. Walking through a crowd and he'd lose them about all the—

His head snapped up, looking at where Ganny's voice had come from.

"What?" she asked, alarmed.

This was no more than the townsfolk.

"Can I take him out of this room, Ganny? I think I know how to save him." He couldn't get to them, and even if he could, he wouldn't sacrifice someone to save Sto.

"Yes," she answered, hesitatingly.

He ran.

But there were dogs in the dungeon, and as far as the life essence in them, they were the same as people.

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

Again, he ignored her as Serba came into view, still on the ground, with her dogs lying around her. One raised its head, then was on its feet, the others following suits.

Okay, that could be a problem. He was without jerky.

Serba stirred, turned her head and let out a whistle that caused the dogs to settle down, but they kept watching Tibs.

"Did you save him?" she asked tiredly.

"It's still in progress." Her essence was faint, but only at what was usual for the townsfolk. "I need one of your dogs." How was he going to do this?

"Why?" she demanded, and growling sounded from them.

"Maybe you can explain your plan to her," Ganny said, annoyed, "if you aren't going to explain it to me."

"Sto's body was broken by the Them. Don't think too much about it," he added as she frowned. "The words are never right when talking about this stuff. It's like the elements never meant for us to talk about it. But because his body's broken, the essences that make him are leaking out. I can help, but I have too much life essence and it's like..." he cursed.

Words, how was it going to—

“Like when you put a hand to the fire,” Serba said. “The comforting heat becomes too much, and it burns you.”

“Yes! So he needs something so soft I can’t do that 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.

“No,” Serba said, grabbing his wrist. “You aren’t hurting one of my dogs.”

“I have to. Sto’s going to die otherwise.”

“Then you use me.”

“No,” he said, staring at her in horror. “I can’t do that.”

“Last I check, I’m people, and 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 showed her the large gem. “That’s going to hurt. It might—” he looked around. “Ganny? What’s that going to do to her?”

“I don’t know, Tibs. If this has ever been done before, I’ve never heard about it.”

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

“I want to help you save him, Tibs. But you’re not doing it 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 a 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 that’s what I’ve been told to do by someone I followed. I wasn’t even trying to find something better until you bribed your way into my dogs. They were all that mattered. The rest of the world I would happily burn otherwise.”

“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. You’re dogs, they—”

“Matter a fucking lot more than I do, Tibs. The me you talk about? That you say might stop being me? Well, that’s not 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.

She moved his hand until the point of the knife was on her heart. “I’m asking you to let me do one thing that will matter to more than me or my dogs, Tibs. I’ve never been a good person. I want to be one and this is the only chance I get.”

“Okay.” He wiped at his eyes. “But I’m going to have to do some things first. Those shards of the Them are still in you and leeching the essence away. I have to remove them.” He looked at Sto, considered the essence he was maintaining and the concentration that needed as well as he’d need to get the shards out without severely injuring her. “I’m not going to be able to do anything for the pain.”

She chuckled. “Don’t worry about that. Pain’s something I’m used to.”

He still hesitated, then told himself she’d decided, had made it clear, and proceeded

to cut into her stomach.

She groaned and tensed as he worked. He went slow, but had the advantage of sensing where all the delicate areas were, so he but around those. When he found a fragment of the Them, he extracted and flung it to the side. He'd make sure it was destroyed once he was done.

Serba's clothing was wet with sweat by the time he took the last one out, but all she'd done was clutch her dogs until they whined and extricated themselves; for another to take their place.

He looked at the gaping wound he'd made and the blood he'd spilled. "Ganny, how..."

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

No, she wouldn't.

"What do you need?" Serba whispered.

"That the problem, we don't know."

"You said he's body's broken. Well, you've opened up mine. Might as well put him in and see what happens."

"Serba, are you—"

"You think I'm going to survive this?"

"I can heal you."

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

"Don't say you aren't worth saving."

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

"Jackal—"

She snorted. "He's got you."

"You have me too, I'm—"

With a scream, Serba sat, grabbed Sto from him, and showed the core inside her. "Don't worry about it anymore," she said, panting. Then tensed and screamed again.

"Ganny!" Tibs watched as Serba trashed. Essence was spreading through here. All the colors that had been in the core.

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

With a curse, Tibs made a weave of purity and applied it to the wound, putting his hands over it to keep the core from coming out. Serba didn't make it easy on him, but when his hands slipped, there was no trace of the injury.

Then, Serba stilled, with only her breathing, and how the essence rearranged within her, telling him she was still alive.

"Did it work?"

"It did something," Ganny replied. Then Tibs sensed it. Essence in the ground moving closer. He stepped away and called for the dogs to do the same, but they weren't leaving Serba. He felt bad about not being as brave as they were, but unlike them, he sensed what was coming and had no idea what it would do.

What it did was enter Serba. Move within her, around and through the core, then still, not tainting the strands of her life essence, the way Corruption had done with Tibs, but weaving through and around them. Making each thicker.

"Tibs," Jackal yelled, out of breath, running. "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 he was talking about, Serba sat up with a gasp and Jackal startled.

"Serba?" he demanded, only one noticing the dogs.

"Sto?" Tibs asked.

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

"Yes," she said, seemingly surprised by the word.