Trapped in a Facet of Desire

Alpha

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Written by Septia.

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The crumble of topsoil, the twitch of an ear, a chorus of matching flicks; the pack is on high alert. The situation is the same as it was but a blink of an eye ago; the tunnel's ceiling humid and the floor coarse against dirt-encrusted fur, and yet, the tension is tactile enough to weigh down your tongue, clearing the path for the five pairs of nostrils to sharpen their senses. Eyes drew to the tunnel leading topside. The first patches of chalk coat faded in from the tunnel, and calm set back in. It was nothing, as always. There was no danger, just Izuza.

“Izzy, you spooked us good, what's the word?” Of course Yutu takes the initiative, again.

“Here I'd thought you slackers might actually be putting those claws to use. But I see you're all slacking off.”

“We're hungry.”

The gem lantern illuminated Izuza's fur as she entered, so pale her entrance brought its own luminance, a beacon of hope. “I've got bad news in that case, you're gonna stay hungry.” She heaved up the knapsack off of her back, dumping its contents on the ground. A few soft packages wrapped in leather, and a handful of unpolished quartz. It was enough to feed Izuza, perhaps, which meant it was still a quantity that two pups would tussle over.

“Yield is low all over, veins running dry, we're not in the season for any majestic gems in any form.”

The news was met with sloping expressions from the other diamond dogs.

“All clans I've bumped up with are doing the same thing, cuttin' down on meals, rationing, fasting, top dogs know its best for there to be enough for all, so we'll hare and ration.”

Yutu held up his paw. “Hold up, you come here saying you're not only, ehm… not showing up with food, but that we gotta give some our ours away?” Towards the end of the sentence he got a handle on things.

Izuza towered over him in – voice if not lacking in stature. “Are we top dogs or not, chum?”

This was met with silence, Yutu slumping back on his hind, his tail patting the ground.

“Yes… we are.”

“See, that's a good boy, rest of you should follow suit, we'll make it through this, but not without getting our paws dirty diggin', dig it?”

At this point you had heard enough. It made more sense to contribute than just sitting along and listening. Following the tunnels excavated recently was a safer bet, there'd be something there, though it would require a fair amount of force and dedication. Same old, same old. Except, now you were working on an empty stomach, a stomach that had expected food for quite a while now.

“Hey Abana.”

Your ears twitched at hearing your name, though it was just Yutu, having the same thought as you. He came huffing as he rattled up in the route you'd carved around roots and rocks.

“Izuza already done?”

“Give Izzy a break, Abana dun think she get much more grub than we do.”

This you could concede to.

“Two two pairs of four paws digs faster than one pair of twos?” Yutu said. A moment passing before his brain caught up to what had just left his gruff fangs.

“Aaah-rugh-…”

“Yeah, sounds solid.” You cut him off, and showed him what directions mark unexplored soil.

Scores of upturned dirt flung asunder, pawfuls gouged from the walls, then packed back into the walls of the tunnel for support, claws elongating to gauge the solidity of the sediments, avoiding hard root networks of vegetation and mountains alike. Your path trended downwards, so as to cover more ground with Yutu handling top. It was similar to how the ancestors had built, each little scrape of Ziggy's claws matched by a platoon of diggers, carving out grand pathways past the depths of the earth. It must have taken a lot of effort to feed all those dogs, something the legends didn't go to deep into. Thoughts crept towards gems, sweet citrine crumbling to a candied powder in your jaws, jade filling out your gullet, amber melting to a syrup on your tongue. It took some doing shaking off those thoughts, especially when the whole reason you were digging was to find those succulent, crunchy… -Chwfrkkf- A crumble of soil ground above. Yutu might've found something. That was a topic: Yutu. Any reason he'd joined you on this escapade? Better to work in pairs, sure, though was that it? Would he make a good mate? That cobalt coat of his was pretty. -Chhtckt- A chill burned through your arm as a paw retracted from the gouge in the ceiling. Specks of dust, the falling specks uncovering a shimmer of pearlescence, quartz, and a fairly good chunk of it at that. Dust trailed along in veins from the gemstone, and in its facets lay your charcoal grey coat reflected. The sight alone was distracting you from the fact you had a broken claw. That claw of your boss digit chipped and sanded by particulate coarse sediments. It gave pause.

“Really have gone too long without gems in the diet, then…” Claws were the first to go, also the first to recover, Though give it enough time, and soon your bones would be just as brittle. Thoughts of being carried out on Yutu and the other's backs whizz by your eyes, trailing back to the quartz. Just a bite wouldn't upset anymole. If any of the mutts saw your claw's they'd be swayed to think what you did was warranted. A small enough chomp and no pup would even be the wise-… -Chhrcskt- -Cbrrsltks- Pebbles drummed onto your fur, displacing and showering down your back, slivers of daylight shining through from above. The crystal wedged and cracked, and creaking to and fro, displaced the ground. Were the tunnels actually stable? Had this been a load-bearing tunnel? Thoughts of digging yourself out of a cave-in flooded your head, the haunting image of your claws fragmenting as nought but chalk with each heave. Flee, get away from the collapse, warn Yutu, but not before the back exit was secured. It all depended on how far back the collapse would reach… ten meters, even five meters from the crystal, and already there was no disturbance in the ground to speak of. Turning back, the crystal wedged itself and shimmied… upwards? -Chrkrkptch- it left the ceiling, replaced by slivers of sunlight bouncing through the cave. Then it was covered once more.

“Hang on.” A chipper voice called. A head poked down into the cave, a head with a muzzle, round and white as a pearl. The pony turned, eyes drilling into you.

Your heartbeat thumped in your ears – which stood stiff. Tension grew palpable.

“Ey Macy, any fin' interesting?” Came a voice muffled by distance.

“That's a negative, just some critter tunnel's all.” The pony said and drew her head back.

Right, ponies aren't as apt at seeing in the dark, are they? You scrambled forwards, shielding your eyes as you closed in towards the surface gap, and stuck your head through. A barren hill met you, dug out along the side of the landscape, further down was the pony, lugging the crystal and rock it was attached to on her back, strutting towards a cart of similar grey stones. She had not gotten far, but it was still an eternity away. An eternity of sunlight and a hoard of other horses from the same pack. The gem left you, and with it, the hope of relief. A desire tickled your core, holding the pale treasure, bundling it up, feeling it tumble onto your tongue and satiate you with a sweet, soft…

“Abana?”

You peered back, Yutu was behind you, again.

“What's deats?”

What had really just happened? “Pony folk thrifted our gems.”

“Bah,” Yutu scoffed, “blasted goody two paws sticking their snoot in our business, whole lot really itching nerves.”

You poked your head back out into the straining light, staring at the pale coated mare unloading rocks and tucking a green mane back under her a hardhat. Salivation burned in your cheeks... your teeth scalding with drool at the thought of filling your stomach.

“Yeah, sure do.” You peered at your collar. Eight gemstones fitted into the leather, were the situation dire enough, they'd serve as a boost, a source of nourishment to keep your body in shape, were all else to fail. Then again, it'd take forever to find another matching charoite in the right size, and they were all so pretty… -Grhbbgs- Your stomach seemed situated in this decision. When the mare turned her head back towards the slope, however, you'd be gone, along with the traces of your tunnel.

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Steady crunches of dust and grime tore by your side, your locomotion kept in a pace by to survey the ground around before delving your paw in for the next scoop.

-Ckkrh- A soft crunch, something solid. A few dust particles flying by your paw uncovered an emerald about five pebbles large, a piece of a balanced meal. It was stuffed in your coat pocket with the others. That makes five.

Turns out the pony's digging spot was a great place to excavate, even if it had taken Izuza some convincing. As long as you were along and not rousing too much suspicion, it was beneficial to dig out the gems before the greedy ponies got their hooves all over them and shoved it in their manes or… whatever ponies needed precious stones for. Besides, without anymole else here who would notice if one gem went missing? So far though you'd abstained, the weight of the rocks was pleasant in your coat’s pouch, despite having gone through such an ordeal in securing the dig spot to yourself. So… why had the soil shifted above? You were prepared, delving into the softer soil on the side, which broke through to your prepared escape tunnels. Popping up your head through a molehill in the shroud of the forest, the digging site laid bare ahead.

Where you'd just been stood a unicorn, who through the combined ways of might and magic hoisted a few stones into a cart at her rear. That wasn't the one. Further away stood a pony, blue coat, greener hair. Closer… but… There, you caught a glimpse of the emerald tail vanishing behind a carriage. Then… after a few… moments… she appeared on the other side. The mare who had stolen your catch, who had walked away with your quartz unpunished, uncaring for who it might hurt as all ponies were. Anger burned through your… maw? Drool… As their coat glistened in the sunlight, coat mimicking the gem she had stolen, both carrying the same lustre. There was nomole else who could have snatched it. The mane which shimmered with each strand as a molten stream of emeralds only further distinguishing the sneaky pony as nothing but a… but a… It was, becoming difficult to find the right words. Even in your head… was that drool on your chest? It was best to head back underground now, the unicorn had left the area above your tunnel, and you'd be out of their way before they had a chance to come back. … Unless they came back right as you dug down again, then you would… assuredly be detected, and ruin your reputation. Yeah… best stay topside for… just a bit longer, and… survey the enemy… the thief in particular, of course…

“Abana. Are you even listening?”

You were not. “Wha?”

“Seven gems? That's all for today?”

You nod.

She points to your pocket. Feeling it, you realise this one wasn't emptied.

“Oh and these.” you dump out eight more gemstones, getting some 'oos' from the rest of the pack.

Izuza nodded. “You better not be keeping these for ya self. Though, you are handing in the most out of the rest of the pups…”

She eyed the others, who took to whistling innocently.

She tucked her paws back to her side. “Right, then we're eh whole gang's set to kick back for… Abana? Where're you heading?”

You stopped at the entrance to the network you had been building the past few days.

“Diggin'.”

“More?”

With an affirmative noise you took back into the caverns.

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The patch-up work for the hole was decent. After filling in the tunnel with soft soil in the escape, it was a sinch to dig it back out, seeing the contours the rock had gem had left above, plucked right out of your clutches… where the mare had… more drool… The seat of dirt sculpted around your hind. It needed to be reinforced, again. Such a shoddy structure would only take your weight for so long, or that many times sitting…

“Abana.”

It was getting tiresome to hear your name. Always shouted… always from behind…

“You're droolin’ like a pup.”

“What?” you said, brushing under your chin, “about it?”

“Think we don't see how much ya contributing to the pack? You've been clobberin through dirt and nabbing crystals right under these mangy ponies muzzles.”

“Mm…” this wasn't, untrue, per se.

“So, thought I’d smuggle this… right under the nose of that Izuza.”

He was holding a pair of sapphires, two pebble sizes each, at the most. He held out one for you.

“Keeps ya motivated to taste some o’ da spoils.”

You didn't respond.

“Wha's the matter?”

“Aren't we fasting?”

“Yeah that doesn't mean we can't eat.”

False. Though you let up. He held up your paw and placed the gem on your pad, to which no resistance was given. “Just between us, its sapphires,” leaning in closer, you could smell musk building from the spurt after catching up with you, and he looked uncertain… “Sapphires are my favourite snack”.

“Ah.”

“Can't help it, the crunch's just so satisfying, bit like opals but without the salt.” He tossed the tossing the sapphire into his gob, the first -Chhrrlllcsh c- crunch rippled through the air, diminishing with each chomp still the pup smiled with his cheeks full, savouring the strengthening satiation by way of calcified gemstone.

Your ears laid back. You turned the sapphire in your grasp. The facets were polished… smoothened, cared for. Bringing it closer, the hairs on your back stood on end, the aura of the crustal seeping through your veins… Then… it stopped. You closed your lips, and snuck a glance at Yutu's collar. It was missing a sapphire… He was attempting to hide it, just like Izuza had tucked her claws in when she gathered in today's haul. Another lie, everything was the same. The gem slotted right into the socket on Yutu's collar. The air of mature musk replaced by nervous sweat.

“Was I that obvious?”

“I don't want your charity.” Standing up, eyes trailing towards the ceiling again, you hesitated.

“Thanks.” Then wandered back through the tunnel, calling back “Every mole shares, that's how we remain top dog.”

“Top dog, y-yeha.” Yutu called back.

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-BGrlrlpghshts- Your stomach rustled in your core, a paw clutching it to tame the rumbling. The hunger hadn't disappeared, instead it was biting, chilling… a desire spreading through your veins, laying claim to your nerves and jabbing numbness into your down to your pads… so… why? Did you n… did you not eat? The answer was close, but something you wanted to keep out of the way, silenced, as to not have it become a bother for yourself, or for that matter, the pack. Yet, with each day that passed, more and more thoughts circled back to that very same topic. So, if it threatened the stability of the pack… Maybe it should be dealt with, at its source?

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The surface had always carried in itself a manner of uncertainty. A manner which gummed to the back of the spine and latched up your neck…

Breaking through the surface topsoil, you set to survey the dig site. The light dipped low in the sky, shadows of ponies gathering equipment and parking carts elongated over the barren ground. Four of seven were already in place, the unicorn being last to leave as usual, The blue land pony made his round to pick up the other's lost equipment, staying away from the forest edge you surfaced in, as usual. Then, there she was… she stuck around chucking rocks into her cart. She took the whistle ending the labour for the day to mean one last ride was in order. This she shared with the horned one, though her magic pansy couldn't measure up with the pale mare. In strength, posture, and diligence, she stood superior, Taking two boulders while the other struggled with one, each time her cart’s wheel was stuck in a ditch, she would reel it up with just a jut of her haunches. Due to the uneven ground this was common… was she stuck again? Yes. Only for a moment, her rump bobbing to rebound off of her thighs as the cart got rolling once more, but she was too vain to keep herself from celebrating the small victories, and now you saw how she swung her rear side to side in satisfaction. Pale globes surfacing by the side of the cart, crowned by the emerald tail lagging just behind the… swings of… the supple…

The discomfort associated with the surface faded, the reaction subsiding over the past few days. It was ensuring you could stay topside and… keep a good eye on… everything. With the drool wiped off on your jacket collar you took to the depth. Your tunnels were kept bare-bones, as with less reinforcement you could fill in your path when needed, wiping away your tracks. One more round through your tunnels, there should be some gems still hiding in one of the tunnels, one you missed, it would be a shame to seal off all your work, after all. Petting your pocket, there came the chime of a few pebble's worth of gems. Was that it for the day? Perhaps the mission was accomplished, all the gems snatched right under their muzzles… which would mean, it was time to… take the excavation elsewhere.

-Ckkrthc- A rock fell from a clump of sandstone, and more was coming. A claw's length from your forehead the ground was divoted, growing to a bulb of dirt and gravel ready to, once it bloomed, burst into a cascade of earth. Both paws caught the bump, ears stiffened, force pouring into supporting the girth up, back into position, and halt the looming cave in…

“Whooaa.”

“Macy? You doin' ok?”

“That's just fine, just stepped in some loose dirt, ain't like I smudged up my hooficure or nuthing.”

With twitching ears the realization came. It was her voice… she was… standing… right above… This didn't make sense, she'd been on the last carting.

“Hah, ha, right you are. You wanna head over to the town nearby? Heard they're wrapping up the cold season today.”

“Already?”

“Course, and with the new crops coming in you know what that means…”

“Gosh sure, I'd love to, but I'm, ah, they won't be cleaning up winter in my town for another week, I've been saving masself to enjoy the feast back home.”

“Ah come now Tails, you've been working your flank flat on this project.”

This was false, if anything she had it curve out over the past days. The sand shifted and you kept your focus on holding the unstable ground again.

“Its kinds, but they'd know if I came home and couldn't finish four plates of my ma's pancakes…”

“Suit yourself, I wouldn't wanna skip out on something so delicious myself, so I gotcha. Have a nice evening then Macy, get some sleep tonight, ok?”

“Always do, don't eat too much now.”

Each step shook the ground, dust falling from the ceilings as the ponies took off. Your ears sloped back, calm. Scooping up dirt to strengthen the wall, but your paws kept shaking. They'd stood still for a while, so nerves might be getting to you. There was drool on your chest again. Eyes sharpened, you spat out spittle into the dirt cloud, and masoned it to the ceiling, patting it stable. If you left things alone for too long, they'd begin to crumble. Filling the path behind you, you made your way trailing behind the footfalls topside. Just, to ensure she wouldn't break more of your handywork… that was a lie…

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Along the ridge of the dig site opposite the pack pit laid the tents. Three of them, big enough to house a couple and pups with room to spare, though only one pony ever slept in each one, unless one went in during the night and left before morning, though so far you hadn't noticed… The centre tent was … hers: A cone rivalling your stature. A zippered flap locked from the inside was the one entrance. She was in there, as were the first chills of night already. You made out their silhouette, partially patched in by imagination, and partially the scent of honey and soap she emanated. She laid flat as a plate on the ground, tail flicking… A creak -Chhrskths- of breaking the dirt crust burrowed through your head with a slip down the tunnels and turning towards the visitor.

“Hey Yutu, heard you coming this time, and I could use another while before-.” But it wasn't him… it was… her.

“What are you doing here?”

How was she here?

“Think I didn't know you'd be sneaking around here?”

But she was… your heart raced, hammering through your chest, primal notions scaling through your thoughts and dragging you towards fleeing, but keeping you because if she found out, she'd find the pack, and then you'd have… have…

-Sttmmcsh- The swat echoing through your chin. Turning your head back, you saw the pale, white coat of Izuza, as the fellow diamond dog clutched your shoulders.

“What's up with you…”

Her concern laid heavy in her voice. An answer had to be given, something that would erase all suspicion. “H-hungry.”

She smirked “Why didn't you say so? We got just the thing to cure that.”

“Wh-what?”

“You would have already heard had you not been a straggler mole. The wait's over.”

“… what?”

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It was true. Gemstones were becoming plentiful once more, new crystals growing through the caverns. Izuza had the proof with her, unfolding her sack to dump out a banquet of gems and meal packages shared from the other packs she'd met on the last day's journey.

“After over a week ah starving, the top dogs are eating their fill tonight.”

“Whooo.”

“Hooo.”

They stemmed in howls, divvying up or scrounging to get their shares. The crunch and milling of gemstones filled the pack pit as they gorged themselves in the spoils of hard work. Shards of carnelian, topaz and malachite flung through the cavern, and a chorus of wagging tails bludgeoning the ground drummed joy into the air.

You looked down. Holding, staring at the pile of precious gems by your feet. The wait was over… You could dig in. It was maybe just tough knowing what to start with… This sapphire looked… perhaps a malachite… or, oh there was a topaz here which… looked… Each one put back in the pile.

“Abana?”

Yutu again…

“Hey, dogs, listen up,” Izuza said, standing tall, “you've all shown you're top dogs, and this pack rocks.”

“Hah.”

“I know what I said,” she turned towards you. “And you're all top dogs who worked your claws down to the paw this past while.”

You clenched your fist.

“But we got one dog who left us all in the dirt, our main mole, Abana.”

Eyelids swinging open, suddenly the gazes were all pointing to you, still cheering.

“And she deserves a treat, right pups?”

They all howled in agreement, except… Yutu. Izuza placed aced a gem the width of her forearm into my lap.

“You deserve it, big al.” she whispered.

You peered down… White, glistening, pearlescent, marbled opal, shimmering in the light of your gem lantern, casting streams of jade along its form.

“Abana!”

“Abana!” “Abana!”

“Abana!”

They chanted your name, eyes delving into the sheen of the gem, It was beautiful, polished… desalinating… The chant continued, tearing into your ears, swirling through your mind. Shapes appeared on the surface, forming patterns and lanes of quicksilver, intermingling with the green streaks, gaining definition.

“Abana.” “Abana.”

Forming into… the back of a mare's head.

“Abana?”

The head turned to face you.

-Crrrkkttwch- Then cracked.

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Alpha Secrets, this story has a counterpart posted with it while I was writing this one.

Your heart calmed. The pit silenced under a blanket of tension. Working through the haze, you saw the halves of the opal held in each of your palms. Shards of the gemstone shattered against the ground, a fleeting memory of taut muscles, breaking through the crystal.

Everymole's ears stood on end, the silence broken by the occasional fragment of the once pristine gem falling into the dirt. You dropped the opal to the ground, standing. Moments of breathing pass. Instinctly you turned to your tunnel, to put distance to the ruins of celebration in your wake.

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“Abana, hang back.”

A thrust of scoff heats your nostrils. “What, scamper back to the others Yutu.”

“We know you're not much of a top dog right now. Thought you needed to eat something.”

“Did you?”

“You don't like opals or what? We got a huge haul and-.”

“It is not about that.”

“Oh yeah, so you're just gonna go back and drown yourself in diggin? Instead of dealing with your problem head-on?”

“That's not what this is.”

“Then what are you doing?”

Hesitation bred anger. “It just not what it's about.” It wasn't. Why would it be?

“Abana… we don't haffta sit with the others, I'll bring you something, anything ya want here. Maybe some sapphire orhg-?”

Digits clasped around his neck. “It's not… what this… is about.” The tunnel quaked. An imprint of Yutu formed of softened soils contorting around him in the wall, sounds muffled by his wheezes, scrambling to catch and pry up your grasp. Yutu was large, you were larger. He wasn't going to keep treating you like this any longer… like… like what…? He wasn’t the one wheezing, you were. Breath washed through his fur, and drool dribbled down your chin… the animosity drained, gone with the speed of a squirrel scampering away in the trees. Letting him go, Yutu… he was coughing, clutching his neck, curled up on the ground. The connection between you was marred, the air left sour. First a stumble, now a sprint, anything to escape the rotten air. It lingered: infesting, searing. it only dug deeper and grew. Ignoring it was difficult, despite how fast you ran. Yet, there is was something else weighing down with the same pressure. Something Yutu was right about: you had to *feast*.

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Continued in part 2