

Tibs ignored the dungeon's whimpering as he tightened his hold on the core. Or the way its voice had changed once he'd ripped it out of the cradle.

"Please."

It could plead all it wanted.

"Please, stop."

It didn't deserve to be listened to after all the people it had carelessly killed.

"Please, I don't..."

Tibs didn't care. They would be avenged.

"I don't want to end... to die."

He paused, and the faintness of the voice registered. It no longer came from around him, but from the core directly. It sounded more than weak. It sounded young.

It didn't excuse what it had done. And it wouldn't mean any of the promises it might make.

"Give me one reason why I shouldn't crack your shell and watch your essence leak out." Now that he wasn't completely focused on destroying it, he could see the wonder of the core. It was smaller than he remembered Sto being. Sto had filled his palm, while this one covered maybe half of it. Did cores grow as they aged? Gained strength? Or did they just differ the way people did? The way the colors shifted reminded him of what happened to his reserve when he channeled two elements. Would it look like that if he could channel all of them?

"I'll... I can..." Its whimpering increased, sounding desperate. "I don't know! I don't know what I can do, say. I don't know..." It trailed off. The whimpering grew faint, too. "I don't want to end. But I don't know what to say. I just don't know..."

He tried to tighten his grip again; it hadn't been able to give him a reason to stop. The core was surprisingly hard, but he had enough; could call on Earth if needed. But it didn't resist him. He couldn't get himself to press harder.

Had it been Alistair, or someone else from his youth who'd said the being willing to admit you didn't know was a good place to start to change? Did that make the admission better than a reason? Or did the dungeon know it would make him hesitate?

How could it? Even if it had the element of mind. He wouldn't know how to use that essence until someone with knowledge of it came through it. Either showed what could be done in the process of a run, or it absorbed them and gained the knowledge that way.

If they couldn't know that about Tibs, didn't it mean the admission was honest?

If that was a good place to start changing, could he kill it?

It had done horrible things. Gleeefully killed people. Been arrogant about not needing, not wanting to change. But was that all it was?

Wasn't that what he'd thought of Don, before he had to get to know him? Learn about what he'd gone through, how it had shaped him?

Didn't the dungeon deserve the chance to show it could change?

He was reluctant to admit it. To look past what it had done. That girl he'd carelessly attacked with an etching so powerful it hurt itself.

The way Tibs had done; more times than he was willing to admit.

And he'd been given chances to change. Was trying to change.

"Alright."

“What?” The surprise gave the voice a fearful tone. Or maybe it was just scared of what Tibs meant.

“You get a second chance.”

“You mean it? But...I didn't give you a reason. I don't...”

“I know.”

He headed for the room's exit.

“But... you said.... Wait. Where are you going? My cradles in the other direction.” Now the fear was all that the voice carried.

“Don't worry. I'm not killing you. But you don't get to go back in there right now. I don't trust you to learn if you have access to all the essence in your reserves.” Tibs waited for its response. Thought of it as its first test. Maybe the only one, if it said something he didn't like.

“I...”

He didn't press. Whatever it said, it needed to be without prompting.

It was tentative. “I can still reach it.”

“Really?” he didn't bother sounding surprised. It was the answer he'd hope for, but he needed to know more. “Why tell me? Why not just use it to free yourself? You can have creatures attack. Get one of them to take you from me, take you back to your cradle.”

“I... I don't know. I know that if they didn't crack you open—”

“Kill me. That's what would happen. Just like what you were afraid I was going to do to you. Call it what it is.”

“I'm still afraid you're going to do that.”

“I might. In some places, what you did is considered irredeemable. I'm waiting to see if you'll give me a reason.”

“And if they didn't kill you, that would be a reason. You wouldn't just take me from my cradle this time. You'd crush me. Kill me.”

“So, the only reason you told me is because you're afraid I would have killed you if I found out?”

“I... I think so? But... I don't know.” They sounded exasperated. “I don't know why I told you. I'm scared, and I don't want you angrier, and I thought I should.... I just don't know.”

And admitting you didn't know was a good place to start changing.

“Okay.”

“Okay?” the surprise was filled with exasperation. “What do you mean, okay? I didn't answer you.”

“You did.”

The silence stretched. “I don't understand.”

Tibs chuckled. “That's a sensation you want to get used to. There is a lot out in the world you aren't going to understand.”

“But I know what my helper did. I learned all that when I dran...when I killed them.”

“They didn't know everything. They would have done their best. But they would have made mistakes.”

“Would they have kept me from...”

“I don't know. They would have told you the rules, but you learned about them

through absorbing your helper. They can't force you to follow them. Just threaten you with a visit from the Them."

"I don't think they're real. What they knew at Them was just thing they were told. They never saw one."

"Oh, they're real. I fought one." He stopped before the missing section of floor.

"What are they like?"

Tibs considered how to answer. "Like me, but so much more worse."

"Are you ..."

Tibs laughed. "No. I'm not a Them. They would have an easier time with you. They can talk control of the dungeon, of your creatures. You wouldn't have been able to convince them not to kill you. Once they decide you broke too many rules, they can't be stopped. Alright, since you can still control this, remake the floor."

As the silence stretched, Tibs readied himself.

"Will you take me back to my cradle after that?"

A question was better than an ultimatum.

"No. Nothing I have you do will lead to taking you back there. This is because I don't feel like jumping over it. You made it, you fix it. Think of it as a lesson. You're responsible for what you do. So if you make a mistake, you have to be the one fixing it."

"And this was a mistake?"

"Not necessarily, but it's something you did, so you have to undo it."

Essence shifted within the walls. Earth, mainly, but air, water, and others. "How do I know when I make a mistake?" They sounded strained. "This is harder than I thought."

"Sometimes, it's as obvious as being ripped out of your cradle. Other times, it's years before you realize it. Some people never do. Or never admit it."

The floor that formed wasn't the same as the walls. Closer to normal stone than dungeon made stone. But it covered the hole and was thick enough it could support more than his weight. There was also no flaw in the essence that would hint at a trap.

"So I might not know?"

He crossed the new stone, sensing it for changes. "Did you know you were making a mistake before I pulled you from the cradle?" the dungeon's compliance made him uneasy. Reminding himself it wasn't a person the way he was, only offered a little reassurance. It had been extremely pleased about doing anything it wanted to before.

He reached the other side, and the dungeon hadn't answered. Was it trying to work out if doing something he knew was against the rules qualified as wrong? Was it coming up with a way to justify what it had done? How many people had he met who did that? How often had *he* done it?

It wasn't always easy to be honest with himself, even with light as one of his elements.

"I didn't care," it said.

"So, you knew. I'm just the incentive you can't ignore."

"Yes."

The sunlight became visible, then he stepped outside and paused to let its heat soak in. He hadn't realized the dungeon was much cooler. "Do you feel the heat?"

"I feel essence, fire, light, air, and all the others. There's mostly air, thought, then

light.”

“It’s in how the essences interact.” He raised his face to the sun. “No one really understands why, but they cause reactions like the heat on my skin, the coolness of a breeze.”

“Okay.”

Tibs chuckled at the lack of interest.

He saw her on the grass in the distance, but didn’t rush. There was no point. There was no essence in her anymore.

“What are you doing?”

“Going to see to the girl you... that we killed.” Maybe his blast hadn’t played a part in her death, but she’d been there because of him. How she’d tracked him all the way here, he couldn’t imagine, but regardless, he was in part responsible for this.

“You can’t.”

“This is another lesson. Facing what you caused.

“Stop, please. You can’t take me there.”

“You don’t get to avoid this. We are going to take her, build her a pyre, and send her back to the elements.”

“Stop, you can’t take me outside—” It cried out as Tibs stepped from the dried out ground and onto the grass. Then whimpered. “Please take me back.”

He looked at the line. The dungeon’s border. The end of its influence. He hadn’t considered that. In part, he’d expected its influence to be anchored to the core. He sensed it, and it seemed fine. Its shell was as solid as within the influence, it didn’t leak essence.

He decided it would be fine.

He crouched next to the girl. So abyss young to be out here, chasing him. To be dead.

“Look at what we did.” He pulled the stone from under her armor.

The core whimpered.

“I said look at what—”

“I can’t,” it snapped. “I don’t see anything. I don’t even sense anything other than you and me out here. There is nothing. Take me back!”

Something else he hadn’t considered.

“Please,” it said softly. “I’ll be good. I promise. I’ll only have creatures that can hurt those who come in. I’ll make traps for them to beat. And I’ll wait. I won’t send creatures to bring them in. I’ll wait however long it takes for them to find me. Please take me back.”

Tibs swallowed the lump.

He remembered how it felt to be away from everything he’d known. Away from home. Of not knowing what to expect from this new world he’d been sold to.

He gently took the chain off her and held the stone. He didn’t like how it felt. The disruption was nothing like he remembered, but even this weak, he could tell he’d have to push through the disruption it caused to form an etching.

“Please, I promise I’ll—”

He couldn’t put harshness in his voice. “I don’t trust you. You don’t know how powerful temptation is. I trust you mean what you’re saying. There’s no light on the words, but how long can you deal with nothing until you decide you have to do something to change things? Once I’ve shown you more of what out here, then I’ll bring you back.”

“But there’s nothing!”

He pocketed the stone and chain. He should throw it as far as he could, but it didn’t affect only his essence. It would affect anyone with an element. He couldn’t throw away a tool this useful. He’d find a place to hide it once he’d dealt with the girl’s body.

“There’s more than what you sense. I’ll figure out a way to show it to you, but right now, I have to build a pyre.”

He’d taken five steps toward the far forest when the gasp caused him to whirl around.

The girl sat, life essence seeping back into her from...he had no idea where, but the silver tint gave him a hint, even if it seemed impossible.

She checked herself as her breathing settled, seeming surprised to find herself whole. Then she looked around and her eyes grew wide on seeing him.

Her silver eyes.

“You,” she snarled, “are coming with me.” She got to her feet, and Tibs reflexively pocketed the core. “You are wanted in...” her foot moved, but her leg folded under her and she fell; unconscious before hitting the ground.

Tibs stared at her.

This was going to complicate things.

Tibs story will continue in “Mind Your Step.” (working title)