

Planning-16

"I had wondered," a woman said in a stern tone, "if you would come."

Tibs gasps in and his hand reached for his breast, then stopped so he couldn't cut himself on the sword that was...

He wasn't dead... How could he not be dead? The sword had skewered his heart. He looked at his chest. There wasn't even a rip in his shirt.

"It did not," the woman said. "If it had, you would not be here."

He looked around. The space was large, the surfaces gray and filled with sharp angles. The speaker was... also gray, and while her form reminded Tibs of a woman, someone familiar, she too was covered with angles that looked sharp enough to slice him open.

He looked behind him, and the wall he nearly rested against looked ready to cut him to ribbons. He wanted to move away, but the floor looked so safer.

"Metal," he realized. "You Metal." He looked around again. "How am I here? How can I have an audience? It's supposed to happen somewhere close to the element. I'm supposed to feel a lot."

She tapped his chest, cutting the shirt and his flesh in the process. "I cannot think of being closer to the living than against that which keeps them living. Any closer and the living would have ended for you, far too early for you to be ready."

And he'd been dying. The pain of her touch reminded him of that of the sword going through him. The man whispering his thanks and his message. Sebastian had done this to him, just like he'd killed Carina, tried to destroy his town.

Tibs screamed, holding himself. The pain as he fell to his knees was nothing compared to what was inside him. He reached for Water; he had to numb himself before the pain killed him, but it wasn't there. Where was Water? How had he lost his essence?

"This is me," the woman spoke. "My brethren will not hold dominion here. Now, stop whimpering. Thing of man. You are supposed to be special. Show me."

Tibs glared at her. Whimpering? His life had been ripped to shred, and she thought this was whimpering? He reached for Fire—he was going to show her what pain was like—and found nothing. His anger became an inferno. Element or not, he was going to make her pay for belittling what he had lived through.

He launched himself at her, ignoring the pain slicing through his feet.

"Stop." The word was emotionless, but firm. An order, and Tibs found he'd stopped, held in place by points of metal pressing against all of him, but not piercing his body. "Is this what you are?" she asked. "A thing driven by what it feels? Without control? Will you bend under any weight put on you? Will you be nothing without us?"

Tibs tried to glare at her, but she kept walking out of his sight and any motion made the points dig into his flesh, reminded him of the damage they could do.

That he could do to himself.

She hadn't hurt him. She hadn't attacked him. This pain he felt because of what she had placed around him was of his doing.

He forced his breathing to slow. He pushed the pain of losing Carina aside until he remembered where he was, what he should do now that he was here.

The anger clawed at him, and without Water to ice it, thinking was difficult. What did it matter what he had to do when she was forcing him to feel all this pain? She had to pay for that, be made to feel the pain, too. The consequences could go to the abyss for all his anger cared.

But he wasn't his anger, Tibs reminded himself. As all engulfing as it felt. Tibs was not his anger. He forced it to the other side. Away from his pain so they couldn't feed on each other.

When she walked before him again, his mind was clear enough he could search for it, for the shadow within her. He didn't see it then, among the angles and sharp edges, so he looked around as much as his immobilized head let him. Everything here was Metal, so he couldn't get fixated on her, on the body she had created to interact with him.

Not within anything he saw either.

He studied her again as she walked before him. The edges that made her body glinted as if light shone on them, and it reminded him of Tirania's crystal eyes. And he knew who Metal reminded him of.

Her. The guild leader. With her rules and unbending ways, unless it served her. Then Tibs expected rules no longer applied.

His anger blossomed, but he forced it down. Now was not the time for it. Outside, once he was back—he pushed the fear he might not make it back away too.

“Why do you look like her?” he asked when she was before him, and she paused. She might be naked, or clothed, with all the edges it made that impossible to tell.

“Like who?”

“Tirania.” With her remaining still, the glints settled, creating areas of shadows in the light that—

“What is she?”

The question pulled his attention away. “She’s a bitch,” he said before he could stop himself and fought his anger back down. “She’s in charge of the guild here. She’s the reason Sebastian was able to destroy most of the town, twice. She keeps lying about there being reasons for why she does what she does.”

“But what is she?”

Now the question puzzled him and he couldn’t go back to what he’d noticed. Did Metal mean which element? No, the elements knew of each other and even interacted, but they didn’t express much interest in who wielded them. Who Tirania was as a person? What she acted like?

“She’s harsh. She won’t compromise, even when she acts like she will. It’s all about her and what she wants.”

Metal nodded. “Now you know why you see me as this.”

He shook his head. “You make yourself look like that.”

“You make me out of what is here—” she motioned around her “—and here.” She tapped his forehead and Tibs ground his teeth at the pain, then shoved it with the rest.

Tibs snorted. “If I’d made you, you’d be soft shapes.” And what he needed would be easy to find.

“I am not made for softness,” She said. “And you cannot make us what we are not. That will never be something you can do.”

Tibs nodded and focused on the play of light and shadows. The shadow was what he was looking for, and only she had them. Even standing still, the light glinted and created shadows. It did the same all around, except for the shadows. Those were only on her.

One of them, then? All of them? Did he have to grab the right one? How could he reach for any of them when he was unable to move?

No, that was untrue. He could move. If he was willing to endure the pain.

What he saw, being only able to move his eyes, showed him enough points against him that if he pushed, he’d feel more than pain. He’d feel his body cut apart, just as when he’d tried to get the shadow out of Purity, there would be nothing left of him.

Except, there had been.

This wasn’t the real world. His body didn’t behave entirely the way it did there. He reached for his essences again and found nothing.

No, there was something. His essence was present, and mixed in were earth and fire, not much of them. All of this was Metal, and she could keep the other essences out. Was she allowing those three elements? If this happened without her knowing, what did it mean? Could he use it to get the shadow?

He couldn’t see how. Maybe if he was more advanced in his studies of etching.

Suffusing himself? Earth would make him more resistant to the pain and damage, but would it keep him from being ripped apart? Even completely stone, Jackal’s body cracked when one of Sto’s creature hit him with enough force.

Fire then? He could—

No. He wasn’t using fire. His emotions were already difficult enough to control.

His essence? He had no idea what it did beyond representing some aspect of things that lived.

He couldn’t think of another way.

He move his arm slightly and pain lance through it as point pressed in and others cut him. That part would be horrible. He pressed forward and immediately stopped. That felt like more pain than forcing his hand through Purity. It couldn’t be, but still felt like it.

He looked at her, searched the shadows he could see as he steeled himself for what he needed to do. They all looked the same.

How long could he take? Was he bleeding-out out there? Time passed. He knew that. Jackal had been worried about how long his audience with Earth had taken, but did it pass the same way? Sto didn’t

understand time the way Tibs did, even Ganny only understood it in relation to what the Runners did.

The elements existed somewhere else entirely. What did time mean to them?

But it did mean something to Tibs, and he couldn't shake the feeling he was running low on it.

With a scream of determination and pain, he pushed through the metal points, reached for one of the shadows, then was free and tumbling into her, through her. He felt the shadow meld into him, the reserve form among the others, then he was on the other side, on the ground, trying to work out which of the shadows it had been.

"Good," she said.

He looked up at her. Saw the remnant of a body held in place by the thin spikes and opened his mouth to ask—

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The breath came in ragged and painfully.

Tibs was confused. He'd been looking at... and now he was in so much pain. He could smell the blood, feel the metal through him.

Metal.

He'd ripped himself apart to reach her and the—

No, he'd been stabbed. What he sensed was the sword through his chest. Her took it, broke it into its base essences, nearly all metal and some of the others. He let them all go. His essence was fading.

He suffused himself with Purity and immediately, breath easier and the pain eased until it vanished and he was left with only one desire.

He growled as he got to his feet.

Where the fuck was the man who had stabbed him?

He was alone in the alley, standing in his blood.

It didn't matter. He knew how to make sure that man died.

He reached for fire.

No!

The pain of realizing he'd killed so many of the townsfolk crashed into him and dropped him to his knees.

Yes!

Who fucking cared how many died, so long as the man who'd done that to him was one of them? He'd acted on Sebastian's orders, took his coins, that meant Tibs could do anything to—

"No!"

He reached for Water, channeled it, suffused himself with it. He could imagine it turning to steam until the heat of the anger he tried to control.

Then he was panting as cracking ice was all he was. He filled the cracks as they appeared and slowly his anger cooled and he could breathe again. When the cracks were all gone, he stood.

He was halfway between two turns in the large alley, keeping anything taking place here from being noticed by anyone not in the alley. Which had included a large crowd. Why had none of them come to his aid? Had they been afraid of his would be killer? How long had he been following Tibs to be right there when the crowd had formed and shifted away from the altercation in the street.

No one had come to his rescue. It didn't matter if no one knew who Tibs was, someone in that crowd should have reacted to the attack. Some of the townsfolk were brave enough to take on Sebastian, one should have tried to stop what had happened. Which would have meant a second body, possibly more.

His would be killer had arranged it all.

The crowd that had formed around Tibs, the altercation that caused it to shift in this alley, the man stopped so Tibs nearly walked in to him.

Then they'd gone away after the deed was done. Had left him to bleed out.

And Tibs had been too distracted to even notice.

What had he been distracted by?

He'd been thinking; about the inn, the work he needed to do, planning for the first Omega team that would be trained.

Tibs had been doing a lot of thinking recently. The ice made it easy to think. It kept the distracting thoughts away.

He looked around.

And kept him from paying attention to what took place around him, it seemed.

Well, at least something good had come of it.

He sensed the reserve for metal. He'd have to make time to practice channeling it... which would mean letting go of Water.

How much damage could metal do? He felt the skin through his sliced shirt. Too much.

And would he be able to keep from reaching for fire?

No. He couldn't take the chance.

What he could do was ask someone how it was he'd had an audience with Metal.