

“That’s the hero?” a young man a few years older than Lamberto sneered as he stepped forward. “He’s so... small.” He was more than a head taller than Lamberto, and broader in a way that said fighter to Tibs. His jacket was fine leather, red with gold and black trim, and emeralds adorning it. His element was Water, and like Lamberto, he was barely Upsilon.

Three others stood behind him in such a way that they could be a Runner team, with the fighter as their leader. The woman wore sorcerer’s golden robes, that matched her eyes, with black trim. The man on her left had Metal as his element, but with so many more spots of darkness than the others in the room, Tibs would trust him even less than them. The one on her right had Light.

They, and Lamberto, shared dirty blond as the color of their hair.

“Palden,” Lamberto said in a chastising tone. “It isn’t the size of someone that determines their valor.”

Palden gave Lamberto an amused look. “And isn’t that fortunate for you?” The three others, who were closer in height to the fighter, shared a chuckle while the adults looked on. Great. Tibs was going to be used in nobles validating their egos.

“I heard you burned down part of the city,” the metal user said, his gaze calculating.

“Look at my eyes,” Tibs replied sharply before he thought better of it. He was supposed to be nice to them. Not that nobles would ever make that easy on him.

The man snorted. “There’s other ways to burn things down,” the man said in a tone that implied experience with that.

“How does a boy like you claim the title of hero?” the sorcerer asked in a snide tone. “Let alone of the dungeon?” She looked at the light user. “How does one become the hero to a dungeon? Why would anyone want that?”

“It’s savior, Gabrielle,” he replied. “But I wonder the same. Why would anyone save one of those things?”

“So we can train,” Lamberto stated. “Do you want to go through life barely improving? That’s what going to happen without a dungeon.”

“That’s what the guild wants us to think,” the man replied. “So they’ll continue to lord them over us. We shouldn’t be paying them for the honor of training here. They should beg us to honor them with our presence. They’re just—”

“Perhaps you should be mindful of what you say about our host, Carlan,” a man dressed in gray said, joining them, “when in the presence of their representative.” He was the Epsilon earth user Tibs had sensed. He bowed to Tibs. “I am Theodore Galdain. I bid you welcome to my new home; and pray you’ll forgive my children. The need to move has been a strain on them.”

“I’m sure it has,” Tibs replied as neutrally as he could. There was no light on the man’s words, so the need was real.

“And why, Father,” Palden said, “did the guild send th—him, instead of someone meaningful?”

“Because he’ll be taking us through the dungeon!” Lamberto exclaimed joyfully.

Palden looked at his father. “Is he serious?”

“Yes. Your brother was quite enamored with the idea after that bard’s songs.”

“You agreed with something the Lamb suggested?” The tone made it clear he doubted

the wisdom in that. Lamberto bristled at the nickname. And Tibs's mood darkened at the idea there was a bard out there singing about him.

"Tibs's team is among the few original ones still around. And beyond the titles he gained from saving the dungeon and protecting the city, he was the first to unlock the door to the second floor, as well as discover the shortcuts that let the Runners bypass the floors they have already mastered. So yes, I believe Tibs is a good choice."

Palden muttered as he walked away. "I am doomed to linger in obscurity."

"Ignore him," Lamberto said. "He wouldn't know a good thing if someone slipped it into his purse. Our runs are going to be great. I just know it."

"That's the spirit," Theodore said, smiling. "And with Tibs to guide you, you'll all be Epsilon in no time."

"If he's so good," Gabrielle mocked, "why is he still here? Shouldn't he be Epsilon already and out there, making himself the hero of some other cities? Maybe saving other dungeons?"

"Didn't you listen to the bard?" Lamberto replied, offended. "Tibs had to work harder than anyone to get where he is. He started without essence."

"We all do," The metal user said, rolling his eyes. While the numbers of secrets he harbored made Tibs want to say he was a rogue, Lamberto's use of the expression made that more likely. Although there were five of them so, they could both have the same class.

"No," Lamberto insisted. "Even once he had his element, he didn't get any essence. His eyes didn't change color. He had to survive his runs with nothing but his wits and skills."

And his teams, Tibs wanted to correct, but Gabrielle was faster.

"You've been lied to, Lamb, again. You should know better than to listen to bards. As soon as we get our element, our eyes change, and you have essence to wield."

"Tell her," Lamberto ordered Tibs.

Tibs struggled to stay silent and in place. The outside called to him, the roofs, where he'd be away from all these people and their posturing. Of that boy using him to make himself important. Using Tibs for his entertainment.

Gabrielle, Carlan, and their father watched him attentively. The metal user shoved the crowd out of his way. No, not a rogue. Brutish enough to be a fighter.

"I'm told," Tibs said, barely managing not to grit his teeth, "that I'm the youngest Runner to survive the dungeon and get his element." He was careful in the words he used. He doubted Carlan knew enough yet to tell when someone lied, but he also didn't want to sound like it was something he claimed for himself. He had to talk with one of the Light Runners and find out when they learned to see lies.

"Because of that, my eyes didn't change color when I returned from my audience with Water. I did have essence, but my reserve was so small I could barely do anything with it."

Lamberto straightened and puffed his chest. As if he'd accomplished some impossible task in getting Tibs to say this much.

Carlan smirked. "You want a copper for that story?" He looked at his father. "Really? You're saddling us with that because Lamb's infatuated with a bard's story? He's lying to make himself feel important."

"I didn't lie," Tibs said through gritted teeth.

“Let me tell you something you clearly don’t know,” Carlan said, stepping closer, shoulders rigid. “My element’s light. You can’t lie to me. Lies shine bright, and right now, your words are blinding me.”

“More like yours are,” Tibs replied, and smiled as this noble stiffened. “Our previous guard leader had light as his element. Plenty of people lied to him. I did a time or two. He’s Gamma. Are you even Upsilon?”

“Don’t you—” Carlan raised his hand, but his father caught it.

“I will not have you hit a guest and tarnish my name.” He glared at his son. “I taught you better.”

“Yes, Father.” Carlan glared at Tibs. If his father noticed the look, he didn’t care. When he released the hand, Carlan turned, and the crowd parted before he had to push them out of his way.

Theodore faced Tibs after watching his son disappear. “While he brought it on himself, I’d appreciate it if you refrained from baiting my children. They aren’t the hardened Runners that you are, yet. They require a more measured handling.”

“Father,” Lamberto whined. “We’re not children anymore. I don’t need Tibs holding my hand.”

Good, Tibs thought, because he might not be able to resist using it to throw that boy to the rats in the boulder room.

“Tibs will do what is needed to ensure you survive,” his father stated. “If that means holding your hand, then you will let him. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Father,” Lamberto replied meekly.

The man looked at the close-by crowd. “Alright, let’s get back to enjoying ourselves. Tibs will answer questions while he mingles.

Gabrielle rolled her eyes and disappeared into the crowd smoothly enough Tibs might think she was a rogue, if not for her robe.

“Come on,” Lamberto said, his father chastising seemingly forgotten. “I want to introduce you to my friends.” He reached for Tibs’s arm, but stopped. Then walked to a cluster of young people. Reluctantly, Tibs followed, and the group turned once they notice the young noble.

Lamberto gave names, but Tibs didn’t hear them. He was busy controlling his anger at the judgmental looks they were giving him. He knew he shouldn’t care. Nobles’ opinions meant nothing to him. But they weren’t much older than he was and looked at him as if he knew nothing of the world.

“Show us what you can do,” Lamberto instructed. “With your element.”

Tibs wavered between snapping at the tone, and figuring out what the boy could mean.

“Henley doesn’t believe you have an element.” Lamberto indicated a man Tibs could only describe as mousy, although the predatory expression was more that of a rat.

“Look at him,” the rat said, his voice high pitch. “Townspople like him don’t get elements. They don’t have the fortitude for it.”

Says the boy without one himself. Tibs controlled his anger yet again. He wasn’t here to perform feats. He was here to make a good impression on the nobles for Tirania. Which meant keeping Lamberto happy. And that meant...

He gritted his teeth and extended his hand, moving water over it.

Ratie snorted. “So your hand’s wet.” As if that wasn’t a demonstration that Tibs indeed had an element, since the boy was too blind to look at his eyes. Would an ice sword through the chest be enough of a demonstration?

He turned his hand over and pooled the water in his palm. He shaped it into a ball, then lowered his hand, leaving the ball where it was until it floated over it. He smirked at the gasp of surprise. He moved his hand out from under it and the ball fell. Before it hit the floor, he absorbed it.

He almost rolled his eyes at the surprised expressions, but those were quickly covered up with angry and suspicious looks. Like he’d conned them and had just now caught on to it.

“Is that all you can do?” a woman asked, and Tibs spun. She was tall and looked down at him with a disinterested expression that belied the question. “I mean, they say you are some hero. Do heroes only play with water?”

Tibs flicked his hand up and iced the water as it flew out of his fingers and caught the jagged knife.

An eyebrow went lazily up. “How...impressive.”

Yes, it seemed it would take something sharp planted in a noble’s body before they understood what he was capable of.

“Can you make a sculpture?” a man asked. “I’d love to see myself made of ice.”

Tibs could turn the man into ice, the way he’d done with Sebastian, piece by piece. Ice cracked with a lot of water turned into that. If he filled the man with that first, would he shatter without Tibs having to do anything?

“Tibs’s a Runner,” Lamberto said, sounding offended. “Not an artist.”

“Why yes. Of course,” the noble said, amused. “How silly of me.”

Tibs fought the urge to tell Lamberto to mind his own business. Tibs was more than capable of dealing with that man himself.

“Theo, can I bother a servant for a large plate? I would like to see a demonstration of this...” he considered Tibs, “young man’s abilities. He will require a target.”

“That is a splendid idea.” Theodore motioned to a servant, and they brought a silver plate close to half Tibs’s height, then two servants held it between them on the other side of the room, facing Tibs.

“Do you think you can hit that?” the man asked with a condescending smile.

Tibs confirmed no one had air as an element in the room and flung water without looking. He shaped it into a blade as it flew, using air to keep it on target—now was not the time to let his poor aim ruin this—and iced it just before it pierced the plate, stopping at the guard. The plate’s reverberation sounded in the silenced room.

The noble looked from the target to Tibs. “Yes, I suppose that was something of an easy target,” he said in a dubious tone. “Theo, do we have anything more appropriate for this young man’s clearly superior skills?”

“How about this?” someone called out, while Tibs fought not to glare at the man.

The noble motioned for Tibs to act.

He let out a breath and looked at the plate held above the crowd. Tirania owed him for putting up with this. He’d get her to remove Don from his team as payment.

He made a thin knife and etched the ‘x’ attack. He channeled the smallest amount of

essence through it, and the jet of water flung the plate out of the man's hand.

"Do that again," Lamberto exclaimed, grinning.

With a roll of the eyes, Tibs looked around the room as people raised plates and goblets. Three 'x' etching in succession sent the three plates clattering away. One goblet he hit with an etching with Fey in the filigree so that when it hit, the water hardened around it as it sent it flying. Before that hit the wall, he targeting another one with an etched whip, adding Bor to Fey in the filigree. When it hit the goblet. The water stuck and Tibs pulled on the whip, sending it flying back toward him. The water hit his hand and kept going while he held the goblet.

There was silence, then applause.