

Tibs smirked as another noble lobbed a silver plate in the air. This time, he hit it with a series of ice shards, spinning it and keeping it in the air until he etched a blob of sticking water that stuck it to the wall, then slowly slid down.

Out of the corner of his eye, Lamberto motioned to him, and, stifling a sigh, Tibs bowed to the ohhs and ahhs of those watching. There was a lot of light on those, but some were honest about being impressed.

Gabrielle handed him another goblet of dark liquid, she and the young nobles around her, her friends, he guessed, were drinking. He pulled the corruption out, then made a cap of purity over it so that as he drank, it was nothing more than flavored water.

What she handed him was no different in essence than what she drank, but now was not the time to be drunk. It wouldn't take much to tell them exactly what he thought of their kind if he wasn't completely in control of himself.

He raised the goblet once he'd downed it, and louder applause ensued. It was like they consider his ability to out-drink them more impressive than what he did with essence. He decided against throwing the goblet at the table, and seeing if he could etch water there fast enough to catch it. They didn't seem to mind when he broke something as part of the tests they put him through, but they'd complain if it happened unprompted.

"That was amazing," Lamberto said, following Tibs to a table laden with food. Each time he went to one of them, someone there pointed to one of the small portion and expressed amazement at one thing or another. Or they commented about the artisanal skill of the servants in arranging the table in such an appealing manner. The way some went on about how this color went so well with that dish, or the sheen of the plating, sounded to Tibs more like they were trying to impress than convey anything of use.

Tibs just wished the food was plated as meals, instead of things he needed to pick with his fingers. He was hungry, but no one did more than take the occasional morsel on display. It all tasted good, and Tibs told the servants as much. He simply didn't feel like he could fill himself without the noble looking at him askance.

It shouldn't matter. He didn't care what nobles thought of him.

"Tell me..." the noble looked Tibs over, stopping him from grabbing a second piece of food, "young man. I've watched you throw ice around, but can you do something about this?" He presented the crystal goblet containing an almost clear liquid. "Our host can't seem to keep his drinks cold." The goblet was filled with a mix of essence Tibs was familiar with from all the alcohol he'd sensed at the inn and here. This was concentrated enough it had to be a potent drink.

"Of course he can," Lamberto said enthusiastically. "There's nothing Tibs can't do with his element. Isn't that right?"

Tibs wished the boy would just stop. He couldn't work out what his game was, but it had to be more than making himself important by latching onto Tibs. Did he think Tibs held him in higher esteem for spreading his fame?

The choice taken away from him, Tibs touched the goblet and formed pieces of ice in the liquid until a few were left floating. The man sipped the content, sighed in appreciation, and walked away without so much as a 'thank you'.

Gratitude was beneath such people.

Tibs looked over the crowd while chewing on a piece of bread crust coated with a

thin layer of meaty and spicy paste.

Nobles pointed at him while talking with those around them. Smiles were exchanged; chuckles, when they no longer looked at him. He could find out what they said. No one here had air as their element, so he couldn't be noticed, but he didn't care what they had to say.

He was surprised at how many of them were armed. Beyond the usual knife everyone carried, many had an extra in their boots or hidden at their back, or in bracers the way he had one in his. A woman even had a metal needle in her hair, masquerading as those that held her braids in place, but were made of wood. A few had swords at their hips that lacked the decorations Tibs saw on those nobles simply looking to impress carried.

Beyond the weapons themselves, some had their knife's scabbard filled with a liquid thick with corruption. It reminded him that one of the items on his ever-growing list was finding a way to get his hand on varying poisons so he could learn to recognize them by the composition of their essence. He also wanted to test if removing the corruption was all it took to make them harmless. He suspected not. Even without corruption, alcohol could affect his judgment if he drank too much of it.

"You," A woman called from within the crowd, and Tibs felt the metal spoon she threw. He turned and with a flick of the finger, water lanced from the floor at the silver spoon before it hit him. He let it float there as the water formed a sphere around it, then plucked it out and placed it on the table.

Not as much applause this time.

"Come on," Lamberto whispered.

Stifling another sigh, Tibs bowed, and the applause increased.

Nobles and their stupid customs.

He watched servants enter, carrying trays, as he ate a piece of crustless bread coated with a sweet and sour jam. Maybe now he'd get to have actual—

No. Only more platters with tiny breads to replace the empty ones.

A servant caught his attention as he reached for one with thin slices of meat and cheese on it. It wasn't the darkness in her. She had more than the other servants, but compared to everyone else? And secrets didn't mean bad intentions. It was how attentive she was to the room, instead of those before the tables. She was discreet, but Tibs knew the work of a rogue; of a thief, in this case. She had no essence, and he didn't recognize her from any of the Runners.

Her presence annoyed him. It meant he'd get blamed for whatever she'd do. He'd have to deal with the commander again when the nobles complained. He might spend time in a cell again, and Irdian would make sure it was on the day before his team's run.

He needed to increase measures to catch any thief that made it past the guards. Maybe if he explained his rules to them, they wouldn't make his life too difficult.

He let her be, returning to eating something from a different plate. A red slice of some vegetable with cheese on it, this time. Maybe she was good enough, her target wouldn't realize they'd been robbed.

"You need to meet Lord Marton," Lamberto said eagerly, and Tibs nodded. Again, the boy paraded him before another noble. Explained who Tibs was, his element, then offered for the man to test him.

The noble acted impressed. He didn't voice it, so Tibs couldn't tell how honest it

was, but the man had to have seen Tibs's previous demonstrations. He expected that as the host's son, Lamberto was due the same reverence as his father, and the boy seemed intent on taking full advantage of it.

A noble threw another plate. Tibs caught it, and the woman politely clapped before engaging Lamberto in conversation. Something about his plans for after...

Tibs was far enough not to hear the rest. He was glad to be away from the boy, finally; and the food table still called to him.

"I must admit this is one of Theodore's better event," a man with his back to Tibs said once he was next to the table.

"I agree," the woman with him said, her attention on the food. "I can't recall the last time I was this entertained."

"The man has always been clever. For him to turn his problems at home into an opportunity.... Well, that's just like him. Where else could he get such entertainment for nothing more than saying he'd buy a home and have his children live here. He had to do it, regardless."

So someone was taking advantage of the guild? Good. Even if it was a noble.

"You can always count on Theodore to pull one over those who think themselves his better," the woman said.

"As you'd well know," the man replied smugly.

"Yes. Well, unlike others, I've learned my lesson," she replied, unconcerned. "Did you see the boy?"

"Oh yes. Throwing water and ice. So impressive." The man chuckled mockingly.

"And how he preened afterward," she added. "As if that made him more than some dirt born child."

Ice covered the piece of bread in his hand.

What they thought didn't matter, he told himself, as the ice inside him cracked.

Realization at what he'd done didn't hit as hard as he knew it should. Ice did that to him. He thawed it carefully, maintaining control of the rising anger underneath.

Of course, they laughed at him; they were nobles. What else would they do? He wasn't here looking for approval from them, or anything. This was a duty forced on him by Tirania. And, as it turned out, one that wasn't needed. If Tirania had been more clever, she would have known this noble had no choice but to agree to anything she wanted, instead of her bowing to him.

Then why was he so abyss angry? This was how he expected them to treat him.

Because, he realized, it had been nice to be seen by people like them. To be acknowledged as something more than dirt. He didn't want to be seen as anything close to them, but he had seen respect at what he could do.

Hadn't he? Light didn't shine on actions, so he had no way to know how true those looks had been. But he knew. They were nobles. It hadn't been honest. It probably hadn't even been respect. He'd seen what he wanted to see, while they mocked him silently. Smirking at every performance he put on for them.

"Tibs," Lamberto said. "Come, you have to speak with Lady Treflein. She—"

"No," Tibs snarled. This boy was the reason. "I don't have to do one cursed thing you say." The boy had heard some abyss cursed bard and decided on Tibs as a way to make

himself better.

“Tibs, I’m sorry, but what—”

“Fucking stop!” Antagonizing anyone in the room was a bad idea, but he was done taking this noble’s condescension. “I know what you’re doing, with prancing me around like I’m your pet Runner.”

“I’m not—”

“Sure you aren’t.” He snorted. “I know dogs who are treated better than you’re treating me.” Tibs walked away.

“Tibs,” Lamberto called, then caught up with him. “What happened? Let me help to —”

“You happened!” He rounded on the boy. Everyone was paying attention to them, but Tibs didn’t care. He was only here because Tirania bought the noble’s con. “You and your clinging to me. You’re using me to make yourself more important to them. I’m done. I’m leaving and you can’t....”

The glint of metal pulled his attention. Not because the woman on the other side of the room held it, or that it was a knife, but because before he sensed it, the metal essence hadn’t been there at all. It hadn’t been gathered to make the knife, it had appeared.

He was already shoving nobles out of his way before he was done processing the information. He ignored their protests, focused on the metal, and he thought he sensed darkness woven through it. The fact he couldn’t be sure of what he was sensing confirmed how the knife had been hidden. A weave of darkness.

He tackled the man as the knife struck, felt it planted in his stomach, leaving behind corruption as she pulled it out. He absorbed the essence as—

“Watch where you’re going!” the young noble protested. “You made me spill my drink!”

—he elbowed Palden to push him out of reach of the would be assassin. He formed a shield and block her next strike aimed for Lamberto’s brother. He kicked her, ignoring the ongoing complaints from the man, forcing her to back away.

She was the servant he’d noticed earlier.

He formed his sword, and the crowd awed.

They were watching? Of course they were. They’d even moved back enough to let the fight happen without putting them at risk. They wanted a show.

He considered leaving. They knew about the assassin. Let them deal with her.

They’d complain he hadn’t done his duty and protected them. Tirania would be angry at him. More when he explained she’d been played. She might even question if he was really on her side.

Those were good reasons not to leave.

Tibs grinned at her.

They were not why he stayed.

His reason was simpler.

He wanted to hit someone. He had anger to spend, and she was someone who couldn’t bitch afterward at being the target.

She swung, he blocked. She dodged his swing.

The knife meant she needed to get close, but she was nimble. He had ice under her

feet, and swung as she fell, but she rolled out of the way, then was back on her feet before he could adjust his attack. Then she was under his sword, the knife sliced his doublet open, and he absorbed the corruption the tip left in his flesh.

She looked perturbed he was still standing, but Tibs was getting pissed.

He had elements, and she didn't. She shouldn't be able to get in cut after cut while he hardly managed to touch her. He should have won already.

In the back of his mind, Cross laughed.

When she stepped in the water, her foot stuck. He got in one slice that left a thin red line along her stomach, then she'd rolled back, her foot out of her boot. She attacked again before he had a response ready and he parried, trying to use the spikes on his sword to disarm her, or cut her arm, but the knife darted in and out, as if she could bend around them.

He stepped back. This had gone on long enough.

He etched an 'x' attack and only put enough essence in to incapacitate her. The table shattered as she jumped out of its way. He fought through the astonishment and flung an ice shard, but she deflected it with her knife.

Then, she smirked at him as he stared.

He blocked her attack with his shield, but even as he grew the spike, she'd jumped over it and him. He turned to follow and close the distance as she stumbled. Even as he swung, he realized there were no reasons for her to have stumbled. Nothing on the floor, no essence in her path.

It was a ruse.

He readied himself for whatever she might do, unable to stop his swing, as someone yelled his name.

He landed on the floor, unable to tell where that attack had come from. Lamberto stood where he'd been, a man, another servant, pulling a knife out of the young noble's stomach.

Tibs threw his sword and it impaled itself in the man's chest. Then he was up, another forming, ready to finish this.

"It hurts," Lamberto whined, hands over his bloody stomach, as nobles ran for the exit. "It hurts."

Tibs nearly ran with them; the other assassin was hiding among them and escaping. He needed to get eyes on her because her essence was already lost in the crowd. But Lamberto let out a pained moan as he fell.

"Why the fuck did you do that?" Tibs demanded as he kneeled next to him. He couldn't do much without someone asking question, but he wasn't letting him die. Fortunately, Lamberto wasn't losing a lot of essence, and no one could sense him removing as much of the corruption as he could. What had already seeped into his essence was out of his reach.

"I couldn't let you be killed." He looked away as Tibs sliced the shirt open. "How bad is it?"

Tibs stared at something glittered in the blood.

"Is that bad?" Lamberto asked, staring at his bloody stomach.

Tibs wiped blood away to reveal crystal filling the wound, keeping Lamberto from bleeding out.

“How did you do that?” Gabrielle asked, as her siblings joined them.
Tibs smiled at the confused expression Lamberto gave her.
Maybe there was one person in that bunch that wasn’t doomed to feed Sto after all.