

An inky filament sprung up from a pool that had slid away from the boss creature. Its tip spread to intercept Mez's fire arrow; it exploded, burning some of the ink. With a curse, the archer let loose a volley of fire arrows, and many made it past the strands trying to stop them, but then behaved in a way that confused Tibs.

Some came to an almost stop, while others flared so bright, he felt the heat from the distance, and then were gone. Those still there seemed caught in whatever held Jackal and kept him from moving at a normal speed, but it wasn't only the arrow that was slowed, the fire danced slowly. As if, somehow, Don had been right and that whatever bureaucracy the creature was made of had to power to also affect how Fire itself would behave.

Tibs risked extending his sense. The desire to know what could do that overpowering the fear the risk of touching that thing under the building caused him.

It was, unsurprisingly, essence, but where he'd expected a weave of all of them so it could interact with anything sent against it, all Tibs sensed was a bubble of a raw essence he'd never encountered before.

"Whatever it is, it's ten paces around the boss," he told the others.

The back of its hand was finally connecting with Jackal and didn't seem to have an effect, until Tibs saw the fighter's back crawl into an arch from what had seemed like nothing more than a touch.

Tibs made a knife, added a filigree so tight with Ike it flung itself out of his hand before he was done and shattered against the ceiling. Ignoring Don's stare, he made another one, aligning the knife in the direction he needed it to go and staggering Ike on it so it was tighter at the back and—

It didn't quite stop as it hit the bubble, or even slow as much, Ike imparting so much motion it almost counteracts the essence there, but whatever it was didn't just slow thing. Tibs could barely keep the knife and filigree from shattering as Ike seemed to both increase in intensity and not do anything and want to go and all directions at the same time.

When the essence of the knife broke into nothing, Tibs staggered back as if it had been a punch.

"What happened?" Don asked.

"Everything," he answered, shaking off the phantom pain. "But that's not the right word. I don't know. What can do that?"

"I don't know," the sorcerer replied. "The weave would have to—"

"It's an element," Tibs said. "Raw essence."

"That's impossible. No element does everything."

Tibs glared at the sorcerer. Like he didn't already know this couldn't be. "That isn't helping."

"You two planning on doing something?" Jackal asked, now halfway to the edge of the bubble. The words were slurred, as if his mouth couldn't form them correctly. Or couldn't move at the right speed.

"Not getting caught the way you did," Don replied.

But the question meant he could think normally, so this only affected the outside Jackal, the way whatever had held Don in the permit office had. Had that been the same—no, that had been a weave, this was pure essence.

An arrow, somehow, made it through the bubble, but a seal, an almost circle in dark

yellow, moved on the body and once the arrow exploded against it, there wasn't even ash there.

"Ranged attack do not appear to have an effect of significance," Khumdar said, glancing at Tibs, who shook his head. There had been no change in the creature's essence. The weaves on those seals were too tightly woven for him to tell anything about what they might do, other than the obvious.

"How about your thing, Tibs?" the fighter asked, his body bent as if the impact, that sent him crawling away, had been hard.

"Let's keep burning everything down as a last resort," Don replied. "If it isn't enough to destroy it, and probably you, doing that will leave him defenseless."

But that wasn't what Jackal was asking.

Tibs could end this. The creature had a lot of essence, but he could pull all of it out and save Jackal. It would hurt and probably change yet more things inside him, but he was sure he could. But what would the Them do about it? And Sto? They had an agreement, and breaking it here would have repercussions for all the Runners.

Jackal exited the bubble and immediately hit the far wall, causing a crack from floor to ceiling. "Finally." He pushed himself to his feet with a groan and Tibs sent a weave of purity to fix the broken bones. "Being stuck in there hurt almost as much as hitting the wall."

"It didn't look like that hard of a hit," Mez said.

"It still packed a lot of strength in it."

"It's why he flew so fast once he was out of the area of essence," Don said.

"Okay, how are we doing this, Then?" Mez asked. "The one advantage we seem to have is that it's also stuck inside that thing, so we have time to—Watch out!"

The tendrils were wrapping around Jackal before Tibs took the first step. He'd been so focused on dealing with the boss, he'd stop paying attention to the pools at the edge of the bubble. The fighter grabbed for the strands as they lifted him, but his essence was sucked out as his hands closed on them.

Tibs as his sword made, with a metal edge and a filigree of Dhu to ensure he'd free Jackals. Even with it, cutting through the strands felt like they were made of some harder element, instead of the ink they looked like. When his sword passed through, Jackal fell to the ground, panting, and the pieces of the strands that fell with him vanished.

"Don't let those things touch you," Jackal said, and downed the content of a crystal bottle before Tibs could tell him they weren't really—The fighter's essence filled with the yellow one from the bottle, then shifted to become like his, and Jackal breathed easier. "Those things made me weaker."

"It has been said that bureaucracy will drain the life out of anyone unfortunate enough to fall within its grasp." Khumdar said. He smiled at the sorcerer's surprised expression. "I too have heard stories."

Jackal stood. "Okay. With that ink able to fight us, we can't wait. I'm going back in to keep it busy. You guys figure out how to win."

"Jackal!" Don called in exasperation, but the fighter was already within the bubble, barely moving.

"I have this!" Jackal slurred.

“I doubt that,” Don muttered.

Tibs jumped to the side, slashing at the strand lunging in their direction, and before his shield was formed to take the hit from another one, Khumdar’s staff cut through it.

“Darkness works against them?” Tibs asked in surprise.

“It is more the edge I have shaped my essence in to.” The cleric showed him the end, with the darkness formed into an elongated ax head.

The ground exploded by the bubble, and the strands connected to that pool came undone.

“Those pools are susceptible to fire!” Mez exclaimed, another arrow already formed in his bow.

“I suspect that will not be enough to end this threat,” Khumdar said, motioning to the now black floor slowly spreading toward the edge of the bubble.

“Don. What do you use to clean spilled ink on your papers?”

“You don’t,” the sorcerer replied, joining him and the cleric. “And you well know that. I’ve seen the spills in your ledger.”

“Essences should work, right?” Mez said.

“Yes, but a scribe who has an element can demand so much money only nobles and kings will bother. The rest of us either start again on a new page or glue a clean portion to the one we’re working on.”

“You’re the one who knows about everything,” Tibs said, unsuccessfully trying to breathe his fear for Jackal away. “How do we fight this?” He had almost reached the creature, and Tibs actively didn’t think about how it was the ink was leaving his friend alone. He was already scared enough.

“I don’t know.”

“You read books!”

“Not about city government,” Don replied calmly. “What I know comes from my father’s stories and the rare comment a scholar anointed a passage with. Those of us more interested in recording our research will not be those sent to handle whatever business the academy will have with the city.”

Jackal’s fist hit the creature’s crotch.

“I’m going to help.” Tibs stepped away from them, but Don caught his arm.

“You’re not going to help by going in there. We need to help him from out here.”

“And we’re going to have to help ourselves first.” Mez fired arrows at the ink that sent tendrils in their direction.

“Don’t let them touch you,” Tibs reminded them as he stepped forward, cutting tendrils. This time, the pools parted before the arrow hit. A mass of black launched at Tibs and he had his shield made before it hit, but it oozes over and around. Shaking it did nothing, and before he threw it away, a tendril touched his arm and Tibs’s breath caught as essence left him and a lack of sensation spread along his limb.

The explosion sent Tibs flying and when he looked up from where he’d landed, fire was coursing back to the ink on the floor, consuming it in a nearly comical puff of nothing.

“They can’t dodge when they’re focused on one of us,” Mez called.

Tibs’s essence quickly spread back through his arm, and sensation returned. “If one of them touches you,” he said, standing. “The yellow potions in the crystal bottles helps

undo that. Don't ask me why," He told the sorcerer. "They just do." He stepped toward the ink. "Mez, how quickly can you burn them while they're focused on me?"

Inside the bubble, Jackal had both arms up, and seemed to be sliding away from the punch they'd blocked. Tibs had no idea how long his friend could do this.

"We can't help him if we're all busy fighting. Don, Khumdar, think of something! I have the reserve to survive hits, so I'll draw their focus while Mez fires."

The mass that launched itself at him moved out of the way from the arrow, and Tibs had his shield up to catch the attack. When it flowed over the side, Tibs thickened the ice, giving them more distance to ooze over, and then the explosion had him sliding away, prepared of it this time.

Before he had his shield up again, his leg gave out, all sensation gone, and he fell.

"Tibs! Corruption!" Don yelled.

He suffused himself with the element and, before the strands let go of his leg, they were consumed by it. Getting to his feet, his essence spreading back to his leg, Tibs watched Don use whips of corruptions against any that came close to him and the cleric.

"How can that work?" Mez demanded. "Corruption is integral to bureaucracy. Everyone knows that!"

"It would seem the dungeon does not," Khumdar replied, spinning his staff into a shield that knocked tendrils aside. "Nor does it seem inclined to listen to your intention of making yourself the target the ink should focus on."

"I think it's more that we've gotten used to how much corruption is in any system," Don replied. "They would all run smoothly without it there."

"How does that help me?" Jackal yelled. "Tibs, am I even hurting this thing?"

"Busy here!" Tibs replied, cutting strands. "Just don't die!"

"That one's easy," the fighter replied. "That thing's a horrible fighter. I just wish that ink stuff wouldn't be what's taking the hits."

"You haven't hit the seals?" Don demanded.

Tibs strode toward a pool of ink, and it moved away, then split apart when he tried to put his foot in it.

"Tried to," Jackal replied. "They move out of the way a lot faster than I can punch in this stuff."

"Do the seal move on their own, or are they pulled along by the ink?"

"How do you expect me to know that?" Jackal yelled.

"Just pay attention when you punch instead of doing it blindly!"

"Tibs!" Mez called, fear in his voice. The archer was firing arrow after arrow at the mass of tendrils heading for him, but they dodged easily. Tibs ran, sending a wave of raw corruption ahead of him, and most of the tendril were gone before he reached his friend. Then he etched quick attacks of corruption. A sense of the archer told him he'd gotten there before any had touched him.

"Mez, get here," Don called.

"Busy!" the arrows flew over Tibs's head, and he blasted the tendrils as they dodged that.

"We aren't winning doing this! And Jackal doesn't seem to be managing anything, so I want to try something."

Tibs nearly missed blocking the tendril in surprise, then, as they were eaten by corruption, he found he didn't even want to keep the words to himself.

"Don," he said, the tone of warning clear, "what are the rules about trying something new in the middle of a fight?"

"Go to the abyss, Tibs," the sorcerer replied. "The day you go one run without unexpectedly blowing yourself up is the day you can comment on me borrowing how you do thing."

"I will assist," Khumdar said, at his side. "You go. I will make myself a target, as your element is more effective than mine at destroying them. I would appreciate it if you did not allow me to die."

"It's a rule," Tibs said.

"Jackal!" Don called as Mez formed an arrow next to him. "Don't do any sudden movement!"

"Is that a joke?" the fighter replied.

Tibs form tendrils of his own, keeping them formed by will since he still hadn't learned how any of the Arcanus worked with that element. And he had Don, right there, so what had been his excuse to—

He breathed.

He sent tendril against tendril when some spread to move around the cleric's spinning staff and the darkness leaking from it. He forced himself to ignore the corruption Don was mixing in with the arrow's fire. He had to focus.

"What good is this going to do?" the archer asked, as Tibs used his tendril to ensnare one of ink. "It's going to get caught in the field like the others and then..."

"I'm counting," Don replied, "on the fact that as hateful as corruption in city government is, one of the nobles has mentioned something else about it, and that the dungeon has incorporated into how this room works."

"Which is?"

Tibs heard the smile in Don's voice. "Nothing cuts through bureaucracy like a judicious application of corruption greasing its wheels."

Tibs hurried to Khumdar's other side, making an etching of corruption to catch the mass heading there. He added Fey and Dhu and... left it at that. Now was not the time to have this explode.

No matter what else was needed. He was sitting down with Don after this and going over what Arcanus worked well with Corruption. And whatever other element the sorcerer knew about.

He sensed Mez release the corrupted arrow, and it sliced through the bubble without slowing. The essence in it did affect its edges, but before Tibs could get a sense of how, it exploded against the boss, and a spiderweb of purple fire spread over the black ink.

Tibs unleached his etching and the lattice of corruption that formed held the tendrils in place instead of causing them to be consumed. Not exactly what he'd been aiming for, but—the lattice spread along to reach the ink on the floor—he'd take it.

"Do that again!" Jackal called, And Tibs looked at the fighter, wondering how what he'd done had helped him. The fire was gone, but he could see damage along the creature's side.

“Tibs,” Khumdar said, pulling him back to what mattered. The other pools moving around to avoid the lattice. Again, they couldn’t just fight this. Until the boss creature was destroyed, it would continue to send that ink out at them and leave Jackal to fend for himself. The fire was a step toward winning, but Don needed time to fill it with corruption and in that meant the boss—

Oh abyss.

He knew how to end this within the rule.

“Get behind me,” he told Khumdar, pulling his corruption into a tight lance. This would work better with an etching, but again, he hadn’t bothered training. At least this had no chance to blow up because of misplaced Arcanus. This was pure corruption guided by his will.

“Tibs!” Jackal called. “What are you—” He couldn’t warn his friend, but the lance would be tight enough to miss him.

As if it could sense what he was about to do, the ink gathered between him and the boss creature. Tibs smiled. Too bad. He already knew how that reacted to corruption. And it was packed enough in the lance to punch through whatever wall they formed.

He sent the lance forward and grinned as the ink burned away. There was nothing it could do to save its—

The lance hit the bubble, and the corruption was wrenched away from his control. It was set free, set wild, and it rejoiced in all that was around for it to find, to bring down, to debase.

“Don!” He called as he realized how utterly stupid he’d been to send corruption against an element he didn’t know.

“You can’t do that!” Sto yelled, giving Tibs the only sign this might not be entirely his fault. He caught sight of the boss creature’s fist hitting Jackal as he turned to grab Khumdar.

“Of course I can,” the Them replied smugly.

“There are rules!”

Tibs had to hope his warning would let Don sense what was happening, because if the Them was responsible for this, he had no idea how much damage this would cause.

“Which you seem to only care about when it suits you,” the Them replied.

“I’m the dungeon! You’re supposed to enforce those rules, not break them!”

“I am here to bring you in line,” they replied, the anger so hot Tibs thought he felt it. “And I will do so however I please.”

“Jackal!” Don yelled. “I apologize in advance. This is going to hurt.”

Tibs sensed the corruption spreading. It wasn’t hungry the way fire was, but corruption relished its freedom. He wondered if the Them understood it wouldn’t stop at the walls unless someone could bring it under control.

“Don, what are you doing?”

“Minimizing the damage,” the sorcerer replied, then whispered. “I hope.” Louder again. “And Tibs, you and I will have words after this. I am done letting you make these kinds of mistakes.”

He’d explain what happened once they were well away from the Them, but in the meantime he focused on a bubble of his own, one around him and Khumdar. A bubble made of his will and to keep this wild corruption from reaching them.

And it didn't.

But not because of anything Tibs did.

He sensed Don impose his will on the corruption gone wild, and he was amazed at just how strong the sorcerer was. He didn't have control over all of it; there was too much. But most of it was now tightening instead of ever widening. The only problem was that Don didn't have Tibs's reserve or whatever all his elements let him do when that overflowed. If he tried to absorb it, it would... Tibs had no idea what happened to someone when they absorbed too much essence.

Don would know. It would have been in a book he'd read, and...

It might be why the essence wasn't heading for the sorcerer, it was turning toward the boss creature, with Jackal still close, but crawling away from the impact of the punch he had received at some point. The essence entered the already mess of a bubble, and whatever had affected Tibs's lance had been spent.

Then it was over. The creature was no more, neither was the wall behind it, and Jackal was flying at full speed into the wall, sickly purple smoke wafting off him.