

Planning-95

Fire arrows exploded on the inky filament that sprang from the pools that had formed from what dropped to the floor. The few arrows that made it past slowed as they entered the bureaucratic field around the creature. Jackal was now slowly flying away from it after a spindly limb slowly hit him. Two of Tibs's knives were caught in the same field, and he added air to them, trying to get them to move faster.

The area ten paces around the creature was filled with essence woven so tightly just that might explain why anything crossing into it slowed. He could nudge some of it, but the essence he didn't have brought the rest back into place the instant his attention slipped. He'd need to disrupt where the field originated from, the boss creature, to have any lasting effect, but short of draining it of his essence, there was nothing he could do. That same essence protected it from Tibs the same way the life essence in people kept Sto from just absorbing them.

Even if he hadn't agreed to not drain Sto's creatures; with the Them watching, Tibs was reluctant to show more of what he was capable of.

"You two planning on doing anything?" Jackal asked. The speech was slightly slurred from his mouth not quite moving at the same speed as he spoke, but only his outside was affected by the field. He could think normally, like Don had been able to when he'd been trapped in the lineup of people in the permit office building.

"Not getting caught the way you have," Don replied. He and Khumdar were the only ones not engaged in the fight.

"You have range attacks," the fighter said.

"Which do not appear to have an effect of significance," Khumdar said, just after one of Mez's arrow finally impacted the creature and bloomed into a bright, and fast, explosion. Then, as far as Tibs could see and sense, had no effect on the creature.

"Tibs, how about you do your thing?" Jackal asked.

"Let's keep burning everything down as a last resort," Don replied as Tibs tried to work out what Jackal meant. "If it's not enough to kill it, that's going to leave him defenseless."

Jackal exited the field and slammed into the wall, cracking it. "Finally." He got to his feet with a groan. "Being stuck in there hurt almost as much as that hit."

"It didn't hit you that hard," Mez said.

“Might not have looked like it, but there was a lot of strength in it.”

“It’s why he flew so fast once he was outside,” Don said.

“Okay, so how are we doing this?” the archer asked. “The one advantage we have is that it’s also stuck in whatever slows what we throw at it, so we have the time to—”

Tibs ran for the Tendrils of ink shooting out of the pool that had been edging its way toward them. They wrapped themselves around Jackal’s waist and raised him in the air.

Tibs reached them as they started pulling the fighter toward the boss creature and swung his sword. They resisted—whatever they were, they only looked like ink—but one strand fell, dissolving before hitting the ground, then another, and a third. It let go of Jackal, who groaned as he landed, and the threads retreated into the pool, which flowed around the tip of Tibs’s sword as he ran it on the ground trying to hurt it some more. Now, it behaved like a liquid.

“Don’t let those things touch you,” Jackal said, pulling a bottle from his pouch. “They do something that weakens us.” He drank the entire bottle.

“It has been said that bureaucracy will drain the life out of anyone unfortunate enough to be forced to deal with it,” Khumdar said. Then added at the surprised look Don gave him. “I too have heard storied.”

“Okay,” Jackal said, back on his feet and sounding better. “With that ink able to fight us here, we can’t wait. I’m going back in. You guys figure something out.”

“Jackal!” Don called, but the fighter was already at a near standstill.

“Don’t worry,” the fighter replied. “I have this.”

“Somehow I doubt that,” Don muttered.

Tibs jumped back as strands rose up. Then Khumdar was at his side, blocking them with his staff, and making darkness edges to cut them.

“Is Darkness effective against them?” Tibs asked, coating his sword in fire to little effect.

“No, the edge is what parts them.”

The ground exploded in fire, and the strands dissolved.

“Destroying the pool takes care of them,” Mez said.

“Unfortunately, there are more of them coming,” the cleric replied.

The floor between them and the creature was dark with spilled ink.

“What do you use to clean ink off paper?” Tibs asked, readying himself.

“You don’t.” Don stepped behind him and Khumdar. “Ink soaks into it. You either restart or you cut the section of paper out and glue a new one in.”

“Essence should be usable,” Mez said.

“Yes, but that makes the scribe who can do that someone only nobles can afford. The rest of us deal with the hassles.”

Inside the field, Jackal was within reach of the creature, dodging its limb.

“You said it’s all about the bureaucracy,” Tibs said, worried about Jackal. “Who do you fight that?”

“I don’t know.”

“You read books!” He glared at the sorcerer.

“Not about city government,” Don replied calmly. “The little I know comes from my

father's stories, and the rare comment recorded in a book. Scholars interested in writing down that they research are not the kind of people who interact with anything that goes into running a city."

Jackal was now planting a fist into the large creature's crotch.

"I'm going to help him." Tibs stepped forward, but Don grabbed his arm.

"You aren't going to be helping him by going in there. We need to help him from out here."

"And we need to help ourselves." Mez fired arrows at the pools of ink gliding in their direction. They split apart, strands raising. The archer cursed as they kept dodging his arrows.

"Got let them touch you," Tibs instructed as he rushed for the closest, swinging his sword. He made a shield as a mass of them launched themselves at him. They hit it, then rolled over the top. With a curse, Tibs shook it, but the mass remained attached, oozing over the back. As he went to throw it away, a tendril touched his arm and sucked his life essence away.

The explosion pushed Tibs back as the mass and tendrils withered away.

"They can't dodge my arrows if they're focused on someone," Mez called.

Tibs replenished his essence from his reserve. "They steal life essence. The yellow potion helped Jackal, so keep one close in case they touch you." He headed for another pool. "Mez, how quickly can you get them? We can't find a way to help Jackal while we're busy here."

The creature was now in the air from the punch.

Tibs had no idea how Jackal managed to fight in that, but he was happy he seemed to be holding his own.

Also, the creature seemed happy to fight him directly, instead of using the pools of ink. Sto's desire to fight Jackal directly manifesting itself, or part of how the creature worked?

When another mass attach Tibs, he ignited his shield, adding more and more fire essence until, finally, the tendrils burned. But while he focused on that, one caught his leg and he landed on his back, life essence draining.

"Tibs!" Don called. "Use corruption on it."

Tibs suffused himself with the element. And as if that was fire, the tendrils let go and moved away. Getting to his feet, he looked at Don, who had ropes of corruption he used as whips. Anytime they touched the ink, it fizzed away.

"How is that working?" Mez demanded. "Corruption is integral to bureaucracy, everyone knows that!"

"Does the dungeon not know this?" Khumdar replied, spinning his staff into a shield that knocked tendrils aside. Tibs wove corruption within his sword and shield and went to the cleric's help.

"I think," Don said, "that it's more that we've gotten used to how much corruption is in any system. But if it wasn't there, how much more smoothly would it run?"

"Does that help me?" Jackal yelled. "I don't know if I'm hurting it in any way."

"Just don't die!" Tibs replied. "We'll figure something."

“That’s not going to be hard; it’s a bad fighter. But every time I hit it, those black stands covering it move to take the blow.”

Tibs strode at another pool of ink, which moved away, split, then went around him.

“Do all the strands connect to those seals, or badge of offices?” Don asked. “And do those move?”

Tibs jumped onto a pool, which bubbles and fizzled away around his feet.

“I think so,” Jackal replied, not sounding certain, “And they don’t seem to move”

“Hit those,” the sorcerer called. “Offices and seals are what hold the bureaucracy together. Break those and I think the strands won’t be effective anymore.”

“Tibs!” Mez called fearfully. The archer was backing away from a group of pools that moved out of his arrows’ way, tendrils extended.

Tibs ran, blasting two with raw corruption essence before the others spread apart and forced him to concentrate his attacks, which made it harder to hit those pools.

“Mez, get here. I want to try something!” Don called. “Jackal, don’t do any sudden movement.”

“Is that a joke?” the fighter called, unmoving under a dodged blow.

“Tibs, can you deal with these?”

“I’ll assist,” Khumdar answered, as Tibs managed to blast one pool. “Force them to attack me so he can destroy them.”

Tibs turned after destroying the last pool that had retreated in that direction. Khumdar was spinning his staff and turning so any tendrils getting close were knocked away, but there were enough tendrils Tibs barely saw the cleric’s nod.

Further back, Mez had a flaming arrow in his bow, and Don was adding corruption essence to it.

“I don’t know what good that’s going to do,” the archer said, while Tibs proceeded to cut tendrils with a corrupted sword, making his way to the cleric. “It’s going to get caught in that field like my others arrows.”

“I’m hoping,” Don replied, “that as hateful as corruption in city government is, another saying will play in our favor here.”

“Which is?” Mez asked.

“That nothing cuts through bureaucracy like a little corruption greasing its wheels.”

Tibs took position next to Khumdar, covering his left. Between cutting and dodging tendrils, he readied an etching. He added Kha, with some Bor, hoping for a similar effect to when he added Bor to a water based etching. To that he added Jir, spacing it because usually that spacing caused a delay in the reaction. He wanted that first, then the rest and...

He so needed to make time and try everything he thought could work, before he needed them in a fight.

He released the etching just as Mez fired his arrow. That had more visible results. It cut through the field without slowing, while the mist that spread before Tibs wasn’t visible. The arrow exploded on hitting the creature, leaving a spiderweb of purple fire spreading over the black stands, while his mist hardening through the tendrils, locking them in place as they fizzled from the corruption, instead of it turning into goo and falling over the pools.

“Do that again!” Jackal called.

When the tendrils were all gone, more spread from the pool to attack, avoiding the mass of misty corruption.

“Get behind me,” Tibs said, angling himself so his friends weren’t in the line of fire. This was going to do a lot of damage, and he knew he wouldn’t be able to stop it. This was going to be a, hopefully, more controlled and directed version of unleashing fire.

The ink seemed to understand he was planning something, because it spread faster than he expected and, in trying to keep it from escaping, Tibs altered his aim and only realized once the corruption was spreading away from him how bad that was going to be.

“Don!” he called at the sorcerer in to process of adding more corruption to a fire arrow.

“You can’t do that!” Sto yelled, and Tibs wished the surprise would break the attack, but this was feeding in on itself. Corruption relishing being set free.

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

Tibs had to hope Don would sense was what coming and get him and Mez out of the way while he struggled to bring the attack to an early end. Corruption wasn’t as hungry as fire, but it was slippery. Even as he absorbed some of it back, it pulled more out of the surroundings. And in filling the air with all the essence to make sensing more difficult, Ganny had given corruption a lot of itself to add to the attack.

“There are rules!” Sto snapped.

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

“I’m a dungeon. You’re supposed to be enforcing those rules, not breaking them!”

“I am here to bring you in line.” The anger was hot. “And I will do so however I please.”

Don grabbed Mez and shoved him away. “Jackal, I’m sorry in advanced, but this is going to hurt!”

“What are you going to do?”

“Minimize the damage,” the sorcerer replied.

And Tibs saw another mistake he’d made. His attack wasn’t only heading so the edge would have hit Don and Mez, it was spreading ever wider. A cone, instead of a jet; and it would spread to include Jackal and the creature.

“After this, Tibs. No more excuses. I’m taking you to someplace with no one around as we’re starting your training.”

Tibs felt Don wrench his control away and was thankful for it, dropping to a knee from the relief. The cone was narrowing, but not all the essence was doing what the sorcerer wanted. Too much for him to control, Tibs expected. He tried to help, but even what didn’t obey was under Don’s control, and Tibs couldn’t take it back. Jackal was in the air, the creature’s arm against his stomach and the two moving terrifyingly slow. The pain was clear on Jackal’s face and Tibs hated himself for creating the situation that had distracted his friend.

Then it was over. The redirected, narrower corruption hitting the creature, and Jackal suddenly moving at full speed, hitting the wall and sliding to the ground, his side emitting a sickly purple smoke.