

Jackal stood with a curse, taking out a potion, but dropping it as they needed to jump out of the way of the rushing pile of papers. Remembering something Carina said once, Tibs sent a wall of water at the exploding papers and they dropped to the floor, weighed down.

“I’ve got Jackal,” Mez said, standing over the fighter and firing arrows at another pile that was now shuddering.

Tibs fire a jet of water at the pile, but it only resulted in some of the papers being flung off, enough Tibs saw a head, behind the pile? As part of the pile? It was as pale as the papers, eyes black like the ink, and then Tibs had to get out of the way.

Papers exploded around them and before Tibs could shoot water, he heard Khumdar’s muffled cry. Tibs dropped a lake’s worth of water in that area and cursed when that didn’t cause all the papers to fall to the floor. At least Khumdar wasn’t coated in them anymore.

Just soaked and sputtering.

Tibs defended the cleric, cutting the papers and taking the water off him to shoot others, drying him in the process.

“Some warning,” Khumdar said, distracting Tibs as he thought he saw something on a paper, “would be appreciated, the next time you attempt to drown me.”

Tibs looked to where he thought the paper had fallen. But there were so many of them, or had it been one of those that had flown off? And what had it been? Letters? Words? Where every other paper was blank?

“Tibs?” Jackal called, unsteadily picking a paper off the floor, while Mez fired at any papers getting too close. “Is this important?” He held up a drenched paper with lines on it.

Tibs ran. “Keep the piles busy!” He wished he had a potion to give Jackal so his essence would regain strength faster. They’d all grown too used to him being able to do so much.

He snatched the paper out of the fighter’s hands and ran toward the other side of the room. To the table and the tray.

The lines meant nothing to him. They didn’t even look like words. Maybe some other language that didn’t use the Arcanus, or just an imitation of writing. That they meant something or not didn’t matter. They were an oddity, and anything in the dungeon that stood out did so for a reason.

So long as the others had the attention of—

A pile changed direction so suddenly Tibs didn’t have time to do more than throw himself aside, so only the papers at the edge caught him. And shredded his armor and arm nearly to the bone.

He suffused himself with purity and hoped the strands of leather holding the parts of his armor together would be enough for it to repair itself before the next run.

He rolled to his feet, sword in one hand, and his shield dangling from the still healing arm. Instead of continuing in a straight line, like the previous ones, the pile shifted direction again. Tibs fired an etching of water that exploded with ice shards as he backed away, but all the ice did was push papers aside.

This time, he could tell the face was within the pile. Carrying it? No pushing it. That was the Paper Pusher from the plaque. It smiled at him, teeth as thin as the edge of papers, and as sharp looking, surrounded by ink black lips. Then pages flew in his direction, too fast and numerous to hope to stop them individually, so he made a wall of water, then had

trouble believing they were slicing their way through that with ease, so he iced it.

That stopped those caught in the wall, but more were impacting it, chipping at it, no outright gouging at the ice. He tried to add essence, but the wall had taken all the essence in his bracer. With a glance at his not fully healed arm, he switched to channeling water and poured essence into the wall.

He cursed on locating the table.

The Paper Pusher had maneuvered him to the side and placed itself between Tibs and the table. He stepped to the side, and it moved with him, the pile it was under seeming to never run out of paper.

It was taking so much to keep them from making it through his ice wall Tibs could sense his vast reserve dropping. He could keep this going for a long time regardless, but this wasn't getting him to the table.

He needed to change things, but there wasn't enough essence in his bracers for any of the element there to help, and if he stopped channeling water, the only element that ensured he wouldn't die in the resulting onslaught was earth, and as the attack on Jackal had showed, that wouldn't mean he couldn't be beaten.

The assault stopped just before heat so strong Tibs felt it through the ice exploded. "I've got it!" Mez yelled. "Go Finish this!"

Tibs saw papers with lines being consumed by fire as he ran by. Was that the trick? They needed to attack the Paper Pusher itself to get the lined papers? Something to test on the next run.

He slammed the paper on the tray, and with a shimmer, it melted into it.

Sighing with relief, Tibs turned and leaned back against the table.

The piles of papers throughout the room shuddered.

"Tibs?" Jackal called as papers flew off the piles. "Is that what's supposed to happen?"

He almost said yes, but instead of scattering away, they flew to the center of the room, gathering together, taking a form. Tibs looked at the tray. The page had shimmered into it. He'd solve the puzzle.

"Maybe that wasn't the solution!" Mez yelled, firing arrows at the growing form to little effect. Papers burned off, but were replaced by more flying at it. The body grew to twice the size of a pile. Formed like a person too fat to be able to move.

Tibs joined the fight, water dislodging papers, only to have more replace that. If putting the oddity in the tray wasn't it, then what? He dodged a page, slicing it, and frowned at the falling pieces. Lines again.

He cursed as one embedded itself into his already injured arm and focused on keeping them off him while puzzling out why there were now so many pages with lines on them.

No, he knew why. He'd been right; each strike on the Paper Pusher resulted in inked papers flying off. What he realized was nagging at him was that not all lined papers were the same.

"Someone tell me how many different papers there are!" he yelled, too busy defending himself to take the time. He needed both arms working.

"Busy here!" Jackal yelled back.

“I think I have two,” Mez replied. “But the pages are half burned.”

Tibs cut papers, trying to also see something of the papers littering the ground, but they overlapped, folded, or ripped. When too many came at him, he shrouded himself in darkness, and most fluttered to the ground, letting him dodge and cut the rest.

“Five,” Khumdar said. “Say something different.”

“Do they tell you how to kill this thing?” Jackal yelled.

“I do not know what they say. They are—”

Tibs glanced, jumping out of the way of an attack. Khumdar was busy striking at the attacking papers. Maybe the Paper Pusher didn’t want them to have the time to talk about the papers. Did that mean Jackal’s question was important? Did the papers say how to kill it?

Tibs threw himself down to avoid a line of flying papers, and gathers a handful of those lying around and sending them to his pouch. Abyss, he needed both hands. There had been blank papers in that. And he had no idea how many said the same thing.

“If they’re different,” Mez said, striking papers with his bow, then firing arrows. “It can’t be about how to defeat it.”

“We just put them in order,” Jackal said, exploding the larger Paper Pusher’s knee out and sending it topping, only for it to reform standing.

“We can’t read them, Jackal,” the archer snapped. “You need to know what it says to know what order they go in.”

“Mayhap, each page is something that affects the creature, as the page Tibs placed in the tray caused this to happen.”

Tibs gathered more, not caring what was on them. Each time he threw himself down, reforming his sword as he stood, in time to cut more papers, trying to take advantage of him being unarmed.

“Keep it busy!” He didn’t know if he had enough, or of each, but they couldn’t keep going. They’re run out of essence, or they’d get tired.

“Don’t use whatever one makes it stronger!” Jackal yelled.

Tibs suffused himself with purity as he dumped the pages on the table and quickly put those alike together; counting on his friends to keep the papers from striking him.

He had six different phrases and a lot of blanks. There was nothing in the flow of the ink that let him guess what they might do, so he grabbed one.

“I’m using one!”

It shimmered away as the other had done, and the Paper Pusher roared as papers sloshed off it, reducing it to the size of a person.

“That’s the one!” Jackal rushed to punch it. “Do it again.” He went flew from the Paper Pusher’s strike.

Tibs grabbed another of that paper and slammed it in the tray. Only this time, nothing happened.

“It’s not working!” Why wasn’t it? “I’m trying another one! Be ready!”

“For what?” Mez asked as Tibs placed one for the next group in the tray and it vanished with a shimmer.

“That’s the wrong one!” the archer yelled, and Tibs spun.

The papers on the Paper Pusher’s body now glinted in the light the way the edge of a well-honed blade did. With curse, Tibs grabbed a page from the next group and slammed it in

the tray, turning instead of watching it vanish, dreading watching his friends get sliced—

The pages fluttered to the ground. Only a few of them having cut any of this team.

This time, it was the creature that rushed Jackal.

Tibs grabbed one from the first group and slammed it in the tray. Nothing happened. So no giving the fighter a size advantage. But why? What was he missing?

“Hurry up, Tibs!” Mez yelled as fire bloomed at his back.

“Change that one,” Jackal said, groaning. “That one hurts.”

“Use a potion,” Mez yelled.

“I might be too broken for one of those.”

Tibs forced himself to stay. He’d heal Jackal once this was over, but he had to end it and that wasn’t happening if he kept running to his friends to help.

If using the same page twice did nothing, did it mean they needed to fight all the versions the papers created? That couldn’t be. If that was the case, changing paper wouldn’t have undone the larger one, since they hadn’t defeated it by then. Then why had it worked? Why let them undo some changes.

“Tibs!” Jackal yelled.

“Working on it!”

“Work faster! Whatever we’re getting it to lose doesn’t seem to hurt it.”

“Of course not!” he snapped before thinking about what he said. “That’s just to get us the papers.”

“Then hurry to figure them out, because this is hurting a lot.” Then, Jackal added. “Please.”

Tibs grabbed the next one and slammed it in the tray, noticing something as it shimmered away. He turned to see the effect and cursed as two more Paper Pushers were forming out of the paper lying about.

He grabbed a paper from a group, with his previously injured arm without thinking about it, and realized it was the paper making paper slosh off it as it vanished. He was already reaching for another one. When it registered it had shimmered away.

Looking over his shoulder, the two that had been forming fell to the floor like loose paper.

“I think I have it.” He looked at the papers. It had escaped him before that the phrases reach both edges and then the lines—

He was in the air, unable to think. Someone called his name, then he was rolling on the floor until he was against the wall. That had hurt, but his head was already clearing. The pain diminishing.

“Tibs!” Jackal called, fear filling his voice.

“I’m okay! I was already suffused with purity.” And while it had probably saved his life, it might be best not to just count on his friends to protect him. He wasn’t fully healed, but he was healed enough. He suffused himself with darkness and returned to the table.

He took one page from each group and arranged them so that where the ink ran to the edge of one side of the paper lined up with the next page, forming an order to how they went. Then a problem became obvious. It didn’t give him a start or an end. He could move the last page first and the ink flowed into the next page properly.

So how did he decide which one came first?

Wouldn't the one that made the paper slosh off be last? That made it weaker, at which point they could beat it. Which meant this would be the order.

"I'm trying something! It's going to get hard before it gets easy! I'm going as fast as I can!"

He put the first paper, the one that added two Paper Pushers, in the tray. As soon as it shimmered away, he put the next one in, the one turning the papers to metal, and nothing happened.

How could that be? He'd been certain he'd been right. The ink flowed from one paper to the next. If he jumped to the other one, he didn't know what it did, it wouldn't align, so it couldn't—

The paper shimmered and vanished.

"That's not better!" Jackal yelled as Tibs slammed the next paper in, suffused himself with metal, and grabbed hold of the papers.

They fought against his will and Tibs thought they might be pulling him back, instead of him pulling them away from his friends. Even if he wasn't paying attention, Sto had soling control over everything in the dungeon. But at least now the papers moved slow enough his team could get out of the way.

Then Tibs nearly fell onto the table as the metal he held on was no longer there. He added the page to the tray and looked over his shoulder as the Paper Pusher grew. The paper in the tray shimmered away and Tibs added the next one, trying to block the sounds of Jackal taking the brunt of the hits. Mez couldn't help anymore. He was out of essence. His reserve was so low Tibs barely sense it and the bow utterly drained. Khumdar sent lances of darkness, but they had no noticeable effect.

The page shimmered and Jackal's cry made him look over his shoulder again, and stare as the fighter was getting bounced about by a Paper Pusher moving so fast to be hard to see. Tibs remembered to put the last paper in the tray before running to help his friends.

He wrapped a weave of purity on Mez as he landed at his feet, his attempt at rescuing Jackal ineffectual. Khumdar was the next he encountered, the Paper Pusher having blurred before him and caused the cleric to fall in place, legs shattered. With him healing, Tibs ran for Jackal, sending the weave ahead of him as the fighter struggled to stand, and failed. The weave reached the fighter and Tibs felt relief, which shattered, the Paper Pusher becoming visible as he impacted with the fighter and Jackal was sent sliding to the other side of the room.

Tibs ran. Jackal was alive, but the weave couldn't fix the damage fast enough. He'd need a lot more, and if the Paper Pusher hit him again... Tibs didn't want to think about that.

Tibs slid to the fighter and had essence in him. His to hold him together, purity to add to the weave.

"Fire," Jackal said, then coughed blood. "Paper burns."

"No." Tibs made more weaves and didn't look behind him. He had to focus on—

"You have to burn it."

"If I do that, I'm going to burn you too, and you're not in a state to protect yourself. Mez and Khumdar can't even try."

"Then you don't let it," the fighter replied weakly.

"You don't get it. Fire's hungry. It eats everything. I can't—"

“It’s not fire, Tibs. It’s your fire.”

“It’s too much. It makes everything I feel—and then I can’t—”

“Then feel that you want to save us, Tibs. Because otherwise, the dungeon takes more of your friends.”

“You’re not my friend, stupid. You’re my brother.”

“Then I’d like it if you kept my family from dying.” The fighter slumped.

“Jack—” he was alive. Tibs reminded himself of that. He was alive and his essence was getting stronger. His friends were healing, too. But it meant nothing if the Paper Pusher—if Sto killed them.

Tibs stood and turned to face the creature rushing toward him.

He was pissed.

He was angry at Sto for not being here. For not being present when what he created forced him to do the one thing Tibs had promised himself to never do again. For doing something he craved to do almost every time things got in his way.

“If you aren’t going to watch this,” he whispered hotly, “then you better fucking feel it.”

Tibs channeled fire, then him, and the world burned.