**TIDE OF SHADOWS #25 – An Affirming Flame**

Ska’arr slipped his arms beneath Pelias’ and lifted him up off the platform as he took flight. Seeing that the walkways had been magically greased and thus hazardous to navigate, they had agreed to bypass them completely. “I’ll drop you off at the next platform and double back to get some of the others. Are you going to be alright?” Raven had scouted ahead before returning and they knew that the walkway turned to the left before reaching the end of the room. There did not appear to be any immediate threats.

As they arrived at the next platform, Pelias quipped, “What’s the worst thing that could happen?” With a grin, Ska’arr released his grip and Pelias landed. His gaze darted around, looking for any immediate threat. As Ska’arr flew off, tendrils of mist rose out of the platform and lashed out, solidifying as they wrapped themselves about his body and constricted. Only a muffled scream escaped his lips.

Two platforms back, Shribryn cocked her head to the side. “What was that?”

Kat looked around. Nothing seemed out of sort. Ska’arr was returning to pick up Ro-Lund-Do. Ro-Lund-Do was complaining about the slow service. Raven was soaring above them. Pelias was being crushed by glowing tentacles. Business as usual. “It’s just your mind playing tricks on you. This place is creepy enough to make anyone think that there are threats everywhere.”

Shribryn was not convinced. “No. I’m pretty sure I heard someone say ‘Melp!’” Shribryn called to Raven. “See anything strange?”

Raven squawked suddenly. Circling around, she saw Pelias’ arm flailing wildly within a mass of tentacles. Hoping to pull Pelias out of danger, she dove down. Though she approached noiselessly, the tentacles lashed out Raven. Banking sharply, Raven quickly cast a spell to prevent the tentacles from impeding her motion and dove back in. The tentacles tried to wrap around Raven, but they could never seem to be able to grab her.

Landing on the tentacle wrapped around Pelias’ torso, she used her talons to shred it. As quickly as she tore into the tentacles, another would replace it. Pelias cried out once more. Raven saw his blood oozing out between the tentacles – they were quickly pulping his body. Crying out in alarm, Raven redoubled her efforts.

Turning when he heard Raven screeching, Ska’arr was startled by Pelias’ predicament. Returning to Pelias, Ska’arr focused his arcane energies and sent them forth towards Pelias. Initially, nothing seemed to occur. Suddenly, the tentacles began to bulge outward as Pelias grew to twice his size. The tentacles continued to try to wrap themselves around Pelias, but for the moment, he was free. Raven quickly grabbed Pelias’ arm and pumped her wings. The tentacles still impeded Pelias’ motion, but with Raven’s help, he managed to take a ponderous step towards freedom.

Though he tried mightily, the tentacles sprouted even more quickly and trapped Pelias’ legs and torso once again.

Scuro was furious. ***This delay is unacceptable. Ska’arr was to carry me. What a useless servant if he can’t prioritize! If I am to maintain my proper dignity, I’ll need to rectify this situation***. Pulling out a scroll, Ro-Lund-Do began to incant. As he cast his spell, the runes on the scroll flared with power as they vanished, adding their mystic energies together. Reaching a crescendo, Ro-Lund-Do pointed at the tentacles. A multi-coloured swirl of energy jumped from his fingertip and enshrouded the tentacles. As the energy dissipated, the tentacles remained. Ro-lund-Do’s smug grin vanished. His spell should have magically dismantled the tentacles, but their magic proved stronger. His anger piqued, Ro-Lund-Do flew from the platform to get a closer look at the tentacles.

Passing above the next platform, a powerful gust of wind pushed Ro-Lund-Do down towards it. Twisting in mid-air, Scuro’s eyes grew large in alarm. He saw that the magical flows had re-aligned themselves and the trap was reset, ready to unleash another prismatic spray on anyone foolish enough to approach the platform. With every ounce of his concentration, Scuro focused on pushing through the blasts of wind to avoid annihilation. A part of his mind throbbed as Dra-Koo-La sent a mental warning, but Scuro had no time for distractions.

As he cleared the platform, two gargoyles slammed into Ro-Lund-Do, digging their claws into his side. The gargoyles had flown out of their hiding place behind an illusionary wall and pounced on Ro-Lund-Do. Folding their wings around him, all three began to drop towards the trapped platform once more. Panic seized Ro-Lund-Do. ***It can’t end this way!*** A mental switch closed as Scuro activated the innate magic of his boots. One moment, the gargoyles held Ro-Lund-Do; the next, he was gone. Unfurling their wings, the gargoyles looked about and spotted Ro-Lund-Do as he reappeared beyond the tentacle-covered platform.

Clutching his side, Scuro looked about. He had teleported blindly and ended up at the end of the room. The walkway reached the wall in front of him, and went left and right, spanning the width of the wall. Four large trolls appeared suddenly on the platform, drool dripped from their lips. Their intent seemed quite clear. On either side of him, hidden behind more illusionary walls, were pairs of aberrations that Scuro recognized immediately. Their bodies appeared to be glistening brains, devoid of any other features save for four short, clawed legs. ***Intellect devourers***. Scuro shouted at them in Netherese. “Don’t you recognize me?”

A troll’s clawed hand grabbed Scuro around the ankle and yanked him down. Other claws tore into him and pulled in different directions, threatening to tear him apart. Pain wracked his mind. His psyche was being crushed by the combined effort of the intellect devourers. Once his personality was eradicated, he would put up no resistance.

As Scuro felt fangs begin tearing into his body, desperation provided him with a moment of clarity. Fire burst out all around him, forcing the trolls to release their grip. Throwing himself backwards, Scuro flew blindly away from the deathtrap. Even as he fled, his gaze was locked on a bizarre scene unfolding before him.

A gnoll stepped out from behind the trolls. At least it appeared to be a gnoll at first glance. Fear made Scuro’s vision crystal-clear. He saw that the gnoll had no eyes. There was no scarring, no sign of injury – it had never had eyes to begin with. A green ooze seemed to run down its neck, but the gnoll paid it no mind. And the trolls showed great respect, even reverence, towards the gnoll, moving quickly out of the gnoll’s way and avoiding any contact.

Both Raven and Pelias saw Ro-Lund-Do’s assault, but were too stunned to react. Pelias snapped out of his reverie first and made a quick decision. “Raven. Get out of here! I can make it out on my own. Your skills are needed elsewhere.”

Raven took flight immediately. A quick glance told her everything – they were outnumbered and outflanked. It was time to even the playing field. Concentrating her energy briefly, Raven opened a portal to the elemental plane of earth. Beseeching the beings on the elemental plane, two answered her summons and plodded towards the temporary opening to the material plane. Knowing allies were on their way, Raven winged back towards Shribryn to carry her to combat. As she flew back, Raven shuddered from a sudden, lurching feeling.

The first elemental stepped onto the platform in front of the trolls and gnoll, while the second attempted to step onto the pathway within reach of the gnoll. As the second earth elemental stepped forward, the magic allowing it to enter the material plane was disrupted. The elemental’s shriek of agony was like grinding stone as it was torn apart by the failed spell.

The first elemental moved forward to engage the gnoll, but was pierced through and through by a massive harpoon. A ratcheting sound could be heard as the harpoon was pulled back violently, shattering the elemental. A large stone golem stepped out from its alcove to the side, its presence unnoticed until this point.

Ska’arr heard the sounds of combat and saw Ro-Lund-Do fleeing for his life. Enlarging his own body, he flew forward to engage whatever foe had forced Ro-Lund-Do to flee. Even as he moved forward, claws slammed down on his back as a gargoyle appeared above him. The gargoyle’s talons failed to pierce through Ska’arr’s armor, saving him from a potentially fatal wound. Twisting around in mid-flight, Ska’arr swung his fist and caught the gargoyle in the side, slamming it towards the platform where some of the others still stood. A second gargoyle swooped down at Ska’arr, hoping to catch its prey unaware. Ska’arr continued to twist his body in mid-air, drawing his chain out at the same time. As the second gargoyle pounced, Ska’arr’s chain lashed out and sent the gargoyle hurtling down in the same direction Ska’arr had sent the first gargoyle.

Unfortunately, Ska’arr partially lost his grip on his chain as he completed his twisting action. Feeling it slip from between his fingers, the chain caught Pelias squarely across the back, tearing a dreadful gash and ruining his spell. Ska’arr’s expression of dismay was wiped from his face as he felt powerful minds sending bolts of energy dancing through his brain. The intellect devourers used their mental might to confuse Ska’arr’s perceptions of the battle, hoping to turn him into an intractable, though unstable, ally.

***Strike. Comfort. Bunny rabbits. Thrash. Escape. Resist.*** As his mind began to collapse under the weight of the intellect devourers’ attack, Ska’arr used all his will to activate his amulet. ***Resist. Resist.*** As his amulet flared to life, waves of calming energy flowed through Ska’arr’s mind, removing the discord. Full of rage, he landed atop the last platform and charged the gnoll.

Kat saw the gargoyles spinning towards her. Drawing her dagger, she threw it with all her strength at the first gargoyle, catching it in the abdomen. Even as the gargoyle reached for the dagger, it tore itself out of the grisly wound and flew back towards the gnome. Looking up, the gargoyle saw Kat catch the dagger as she leapt up and somersaulted in mid-air. Her shortsword slammed into the base of the gargoyle’s neck, almost decapitating the beast. Launching herself off the first gargoyle, she leaped onto the second gargoyle to finish it off when she saw that there was no need. Ska’arr’s chain had shattered the gargoyle’s body and it was breaking apart even as Kat used it as a step to launch herself towards the last platform.

Pelias was not doing well. The tentacles continued to crush him as blood pulsed out of the terrible gash in his back. As he began losing consciousness, he felt healing energy surge through him. Turning, he saw a spectral hand move gracefully back towards Ro-Lund-Do, tentacles flailing uselessly through it. Pelias smiled his thanks. ***Maybe Ro-Lund-Do is finally coming around***.

Scuro grinned back. ***Just another peon to absorb the enemy’s attack***. Flying upwards, Scuro began tending to his own wounds. Pelias’ misconceived notion of Ro-Lund-Do’s motives would help Scuro in the long run. ***It will make it easier to continue to manipulate these fools***. To continue the facade, he shouted to the others, “Beware of the aberrations. They will crush your mind and render you a helpless slave. They hide behind illusionary walls on both sides.”

***Now he tells us***. The thought was extraneous as Ska’arr focused on the task at hand. Slammng his chain down on the gnoll, he was surprised when it hit an invisible barrier. Caught off balance, Ska’arr was left vulnerable to a counterattack. The gnoll stepped forward, its jaws opening prodigiously. A wave of slime gushed forth, threatening to wash Ska’arr away. Shouting quick words of power, a shimmery shield surrounded Ska’arr as the slime hit him. As the slime fell away, Ska’arr was left completely unharmed. He had raised his protective aura in time.

***If he can spray me with acid, his defensive wall must be down***. Ska’arr stepped closer towards the gnoll and immediately heard a thrumming noise. ***A blade barrier? This is going to hurt***. Already committed, Ska’arr continued his swing bracing himself for the pain that would soon follow. His chain swung down without hitting any impediment and struck the gnoll. It just smiled.

Even as he had swung, Ska’arr suddenly shrunk down to his original size as all of his supporting spells suddenly stopped functioning. ***An antimagic field? That explains much. But how could a gnoll possess such powers?*** Without his bolstered strength, the gnoll had hardly felt the chain striking him. It revelled in the confusion and doubt Ska’arr was going through even as it raised a clawed hand to signal the golem to strike the impudent fool.

The platform shook as the golem took a step forward. The golem seemed to pause momentarily as it stared at Ska’arr. Ska’arr’s limbs began to tingle as a feeling of calcification washed over them, making his movements slow and unwieldy. Sustained by his rage, Ska’arr shook off the debilitating feeling and swung again and again against the golem, though his blows hardly scratched the golem’s surface.

The gnoll, seemingly bored with the battle, waved towards the trolls who had been holding back. Letting out gleeful roars, the trolls rushed forward, threatening to crush Ska’arr beneath their mighty blows. The gnoll then turned and walked towards the back platform, fading from sight with every step it took. Soon, the gnoll was gone, leaving no trace. The trolls went berserk and threw themselves at Ska’arr. The intellect devourers continued their assault on Ska’arr’s psyche, lashing it until it was almost completely withered. Feeling his mind shutting down, Ska’arr frantically looked about as his body was being pummelled. With a golem flanking him, the situation seemed hopeless.

Raven redoubled her efforts carrying Shribryn as she lost sight of Ska’arr. When Raven began her dive, Shribryn knew what was coming next. ***Slingshot manoeuvre***. Raven pulled up suddenly and released her hold on Shribryn, launching the blind warrior at the golem. Shribryn’s feet struck the golem in the chest, staggering the magical automaton. As she pushed off, Shribryn somersaulted backwards and drew her chain. As she spun, she twisted, adding more momentum to the blow. The golem lifted an arm to block Shribryn’s strike, but it proved useless. Flames erupted from the chain as it struck the golem’s arm, sending wild cracks all along its length. The golem’s arm hung uselessly.

After releasing her living javelin, Raven dove once more at the golem. The golem’s other arm came up to swipe at the annoying bird when it transformed into a powerfully built human. Gripping the golem’s arm, Raven swung up and planted her feet into the golem’s neck. Any normal opponent would have had its neck snapped, but the golem was made of sterner stuff.

Though its head was jerked back violently, the golem was not overtly hindered. Smashing its arm down, the golem slammed Raven into the platform, hoping to dislodge her. The blow knocked the wind out of Raven, but she refused to release her grip and continued to tighten her grip. Cracks began to spread along the golem’s arm as Raven cranked up the pressure.

The golem lifted its arm again to smash down and turn Raven into a red smear when Kat appeared on the golem’s shoulder. Slamming her blades down on the crux of the golem’s neck, which had already been greatly weakened by Raven’s efforts, Kat shattered the golem’s shoulder, breaking off its arm and destroying much of its neck at the same time. Raven kicked off the golem, pushing it towards the edge of the platform. The golem fell forward and vanished into the fog below.

A blast of fire engulfed the trolls, driving them back off Ska’arr. Pelias could barely move and just managed to focus his energies into that blast. He saw Ska’arr’s still form and panic washed over him. Pelias let out a small sigh when he saw Ska’arr’s chest rise and fall. He was badly injured, but still alive. One of the trolls turned towards its fiery tormentor and charged at him. ***That’s not good***. The troll, overestimating its strength, leaped at Pelias with claws outstretched. They never came close to his throat. The forest of magical tentacles lashed around the troll, gripping it in a powerful hold. The troll tore at the tentacles to no avail. Soon, it too was wrapped up and fighting for its life. Pelias almost chuckled at the predicament, but it was too early to rejoice.

Another blast of fire engulfed the trolls and several of the intellect devourers. After subduing Ska’arr, the intellect devourers had begun to focus their efforts on Ro-Lund-Do, which was unacceptable. Their bodies burned, the intellect devourers were unable to mentally attack Ro-Lund-Do due to the agonizing pain.

Shribryn grinned as a troll charged towards her. She made no move to slow her opponent and leapt gracefully over its head. In mid-leap, she placed her hands together. A shadowy thread dropped down from her hands and looped around the troll’s neck. As Shribryn landed, she pulled her hard and the troll stopped suddenly as the shadowy cord almost tore its head off. Clawing desperately at its own throat, the troll tried in vain to escape the shadowy garrotte as it dug deeper and deeper into its throat. With a final gurgle, the troll collapsed onto its side. With a flare of power, Shribryn’s shadowy weapon suddenly burst into flames, setting the troll’s throat and head aflame. Ignoring the soon-to-be-dead troll, Shribryn turned to face the other trolls. Spinning her chain in a tight arc over her head, it became a blur of motion. Lunging forward to meet the trolls’ charge, she pivoted on her leading foot, allowing her chain to twirl her about as she kicked off with her other foot, adding more momentum to her weapon. The chain smashed into the first troll, leaving a bloody tear as it barely slowed down and tore into the next troll. Shribryn became a steel tornado, ripping and shredding the trolls who dared step too closely. A clawed fist, bleeding badly, struck Shribryn, knocking her flat on her back, her mind dazed.

The trolls stumbled back to regroup and were immediately engulfed in several powerful bursts of flame. Scuro was mildly surprised that Pelias was able to concentrate sufficiently to conjure flames that were almost as powerful as his own, even when he was being squeezed to death by tentacles. ***I need to keep my eye on him. He could soon be a threat***.

As the trolls fell, the intellect devourers had been stalking forward, hoping to catch their opponents when they were most vulnerable. A leopard dashed forward, leaping at the first abomination. Raven’s claws ripped the intellect devourer’s midsection wide open – a sickly grey ichor poured out. Without pause, Raven spun in midair and pulled a small wooden shaft from her hair. Her arm lashed out even before her feet hit the ground, the wooden shaft growing to monstrous proportions, piercing and pinning another intellect devourer to the ground. Suddenly, Raven stumbled and writhed on the platform. Alien thoughts invaded her mind, driving her to madness. Eagle, human, bear, leopard, human, snake. Raven’s mind instinctively sought to escape the mental onslaught by switching shapes, hoping to find one that would allow her to flee the pain and insanity.

Kat charged towards the remaining opponents. Ska’arr was barely breathing. The tentacles enshrouding Pelias were slick with his blood. Raven was a blur – switching so quickly from one form to the next that they all blended together. Shribryn was just getting to her feet, an intellect devourer closing in. Ro-Lund-Do – where was he? Kat saw him standing by the double doors at the end of the hallway, yelling angrily. ***This needs to end now***.

Pulling in more and more shadostuff into her being, Kat lost herself in the moment. With each step, Kat moved through the shadows, covering a spear’s cast with each stride, appearing and disappearing with the rapidity and rhythm of a heartbeat. She appeared beside an intellect devourer, a whirlwind of steel and darkness, sliced through three of its legs, and stepped through the dark. She materialized behind another intellect devourer and drove her swords deep into its side. Grey ichor flowed as the abomination spasmed, fell, and died. She stepped through the shadows and between the last two of her opponents. She dashed back and forth, slashing, cutting, stabbing, leaving both dead.

As the last of their enemies fell, Kat tried to calm herself and slow her rapid heartbeat. Panting, a wave of panic overtook Kat as the she tried to stop the flow of shadows that rushed through her like a torrent. The shadows pulled at her being, threatening to remake her from shadowstuff. Her blood pounded in her ears as she finally managed to regain control of herself. With a cry, she collapsed to the ground.

Scuro stood before the double doors. Nothing blocked his path, yet he was still being stymied. His mind reached out to empower ancient glyphs that should have wrested control from whoever had taken over his temple – his temple – and returned that control to him. But nothing happened. In frustration, he yelled out in ancient Netherese, “We have proven ourselves! Bow to your master-reborn!” He was greeted only with silence.

***There will be further obstacles to face***, thought Ro-Lund-Do. ***We will still need these fools to complete our task***, replied Scuro. Bitterness marred his thoughts. ***Agreed***. Turning back towards the others, Ro-Lund-Do knelt beside Ska’arr and began to heal his fractured psyche as well as his wounds. The others managed to free Pelias as he began to heal himself and them.

Ska’arr looked up at Ro-Lund-Do. “Thank you, my friend.” Scuro could only grimace.