**TIDE OF SHADOWS #26 – Forced Perspective**

Scuro turned back to face the blank wall once more. His mind was racing. He was injured, they all were, but his thoughts spun around this all-encompassing problem: How could any entity usurp his demesne? It was an impossibility. As Pelias moved from ally to ally, healing the most grievous of wounds, Scuro focused on more important things. The spells that were weaved into the fabric of his stronghold were extensions of his being. He would sense disturbances within his realm like an itch on his arm – the itch would be metaphysical, but it had allowed Scuro to expand his consciousness effortlessly to search for the source of the bothersome itch. Somehow, all these intricate connections had been severed.

***It has been millennia since you set foot here. Whoever did this had time to unweave your arcane web.*** Scuro barely acknowledged Ro-Lund-Do’s thoughts on the matter. Pelias called to Ro-Lund-Do to aid in restoring the others. Turning back to Ska’arr, Scuro, still distracted, continued to heal the warrior of his wounds with Pelias’ help.

Ska’arr got up gingerly. “Save your magic. We may need it shortly.” He pointed at the blank wall as Kat, excited by some discovery, focused her search on the center of the wall. She had been the least injured and, once her injuries had been treated, had sprung forward to explore. Touching his magical belt, Ska’arr felt a warm healing glow wash over him as the rest of his wounds closed.

Pelias looked for the others. Shribryn stood guard, her head cocking this way and that, listening and feeling for the slightest change in the air that could indicate a hidden enemy. Her nerves tingled with trepidation, but she could sense no immediate threats. ***The calm before the storm?*** Kat gave a low whistle and Shribryn rushed over to see what the curious little gnome had found.

Pelias approached Raven. The bruising and lacerations that covered Raven brought a sharp gasp from Pelias but they hardly seemed to trouble her. Pelias focused healing energy through his wand and began repairing the gruesome damage Raven had sustained. As her flesh knitted itself back together, agony was replaced with soothing warmth.

As Shribryn approached Kat, Kat began to mumble to herself. “No latch system. A simple lock to pick. No surprises to neutralize. It almost seems too easy.” Shribryn’s fingers gently tapped at the hidden door. She too could sense nothing amiss and knew the way forward should be revealed. The door should have opened, except it didn’t.

Kat fumed. All the defenses had been by-passed, and the door remained obstinate. Kat rechecked the door and noticed what she had missed before – a small indentation in the shape of a hand in the middle of the door. There were no signs of any danger, but based on the previous magical bombshells that had been thrown at them, there were no guarantees. “Welp. My job is done.” Turning back to the others, she saw that everyone had been healed of their injuries. “Hey Ro-Lund-Do, you seem to know the most about this place. What do you make of this hand print?”

Ro-Lund-Do cautiously approached the door. ***What are you doing?*** Scuro reproached. ***Let the menials deal with this. I will not sully my hands.*** Ro-Lund-Do was growing weary of the nagging and condescending voice. ***From what we can tell, I am the key to this place. If we are to proceed, some risks must be taken.*** Even as he argued, Ro-Lund-Do quickly spun a spell of Sanctuary around himself before placing his hand on the indentation. ***What? You are the key? You misspoke. You are merely a vessel. It is Imax Scuro Forzar who is supreme!*** Ro-Lund-Do’s hand touched the door, but nothing happened. Scuro stretched his essence forward and the door swung silently open. ***Remember your place Ro-Lund-Do.*** Scuro stepped forward into the darkness before him.

Kat darted forward, her curiosity getting the better of her. No illumination was present but there were no signs of any traps in their immediate vicinity. The path continued forward with more platforms dotting their course. Pelias took out a torch and cast a quick cantrip. Suddenly, the end of the torch lit up with magical light. A sea of fog surrounded the path, billowing ominously.

As the others began to move forward into the new area, Raven glanced back to make sure nothing was sneaking up on them. What she saw caused her skin to crawl. Where there had been faint, ghostly illumination in the previous areas, a darkness was moving forward towards them, enshrouding the interior. Raven gave a warning hiss.

The others looked back and saw the darkness approaching. Raven began to run forward towards the new region. “We need to get moving. I’ll scout ahead.” Jumping upwards, she shifted forms to that of a bat, a bat that the others had never seen before (except for maybe in their nightmares). Raven’s flesh squirmed as short, coal black fur sprouted from her body. Her hands extended outwards while a thin membrane formed between each digit. Her face became elongated as vicious fangs grew in. Her head became wolf-like and she gave a short snarl as she pumped her wings furiously and took off. Though her body remained about the same size, Raven’s speed in her new form was extraordinary. Raven flew above the others and beyond, scanning for any obvious threats. She noted immediately that the room continued following a similar pattern as before: narrow walkways linked by platforms. The room was not as expansive as the other one. There were only three platforms which ended at a double door on the far wall.

Ska’arr moved swiftly down the walkway, his chain gripped tightly. Suddenly, the floor beneath his feet flared to life as a bolt of lightning crashed through everyone on the walkway. The initial flash of light was the only warning, but it was enough for Kat to throw herself flat on the floor. The bolt passed above, so close the hairs on her arms stood up, but it passed her harmlessly. The others were not so fortunate. Raven saw the surge of energy as she flew above it and saw the devastation it brought to the ones struck. Muscles spasmed uncontrollably and smoke rose from the points of contact.

Of them all, Shribryn had felt the brunt of the magical blast. After it had struck her, the bolt had grounded itself, meaning she felt its full weight. Gasping for air, she clutched her belt, activating its innate magic and healing herself of some of the damage. Pelias pulled out his wand and began healing the others.

***Don’t want to go through that again.*** Shribryn clicked her teeth twice. The sound was barely audible to the others, but it was enough to allow her to mentally map the area around her. Shribryn made a quick run forward and performed a small leap, landing perfectly in front of the next platform. Even without her sight, she managed to avoid the trapped region of the walkway.

Kat watched Shribryn with a mixture of awe and alarm. If Shribryn had made a small misstep, it would have led to great harm, possibly even reactivating the magical trap. Not wishing to risk it, Kat focused and stepped into the shadows, allowing her to jump from one shadow to the next, and stepped out beside Shribryn.

“I don’t want to have anything come up behind us,” Scuro said. “I’ll close the door and bar it.” ***Plus, it will allow you fools to find the rest of the traps.*** As Scuro turned back, he was terrified to see that the darkness had caught up to them. Slamming the door, he backed away slowly, checking to see if the darkness was seeping through.

Shribryn’s fingers darted across the surface of the platform, her fingertips barely grazing the surface. With no signs of any traps, she stepped gingerly forward. Nothing happened. Shribryn breathed a sigh of relief. Seeing that things were being handled, Kat stepped back into the shadows again and stepped out to the last platform, beginning to search for traps as soon as she re-entered normal space.

Ska’arr, after healing his wounds, began to rush forward once again. “Whoa! What are you doing? Remember the traps?” Pelias said. Ska’arr grinned. “What are the odds that lightning strikes twice?” Pelias shook his head and surreptitiously moved over to the side, just in case.

Raven winced as she saw Ska’arr make his way to the second platform. Thankfully, no additional traps were released. ***That we could see.*** The troubling thought only flittered briefly in her mind as she continued to fly above, keeping a watch out for any threats. Ro-Lund-Do clicked the heels of his boots together and blinked out of sight. He reappeared on the pathway just passed the first platform and strode towards the next one.

Finding no surprises on the last platform, Kat moved forward towards the double door. Right away, she noticed six depressions in the form of palm prints on the doors. A quick search revealed that a small needle trap was placed in the center of each depression. She pulled out a small looking glass and peered inside one of the trap openings. Kat had expected to see signs of poison on the needle, but was surprised to see that the needle was hollow. Checking the other needles, she saw that they too were all hollow. ***Strange.*** Uncertain what the function of the needles were, Kat managed to jam one of the needles with some small pebbles. Finding the doors locked, she looked for the locking mechanism, but could find nothing. Glancing over her shoulder to see where the others were, she noted that the darkness hadn’t continued its forward movement. ***Well that’s good.***

The others continued to move forward, healing themselves as needed. Shribryn made her way to the double door and passed her hands quickly over the doors. Feeling the palm prints and the small openings on each – most likely trapped – she carefully placed her ear to the door and listened. Nothing but silence.

Raven swooped down, transformed back to human form, and landed gracefully beside Kat. As the others reached the double doors, Shribryn and Kat relayed their findings. “We know the doors are trapped,” Shribryn explained, “but we can’t figure out how to unlock them.”

“Let’s try some magic then,” said Ska’arr. Unrolling a scroll, he passed his hands above the surface of the doors as he incanted. The runes on the scroll glowed and faded from sight as Ska’arr finished his casting. “That should do it.”

Raven pushed against one of the doors. It didn’t budge. Ska’arr grinned sheepishly. “If there are too many locking mechanisms, the Knock spell can only deal with some of them.” Pelias unrolled his own scroll and began casting the same spell. Once he was done, again Raven pushed against the door. It still didn’t budge. Ska’arr scratched his chin. “Hmmm...”

Ro-Lund-Do had been about to start his own casting when he received a mental flick from Scuro. ***I need to see the doors more closely.*** Ro-Lund-Do began his own examination of the door. ***Hollow needles.*** A memory bubbled to the surface. ***It requires a sacrifice – a blood sacrifice.*** Ro-Lund-Do turned to the others. “The locking mechanism needs six unique hand prints to open the door. The needles draw blood to be used to open the door. There is no poison and this is the only way to progress and get to the bottom of this place.” Without waiting for comment, Ro-Lund-Do placed his hand on the door and felt a sharp pain in his palm. As the needle withdrew, they could all hear a small click as part of the lock opened. One by one, the others placed their palms on the door, enduring the sharp violation, and listened as the door was slowly unlocked

Kat was the last to place her palm on the door. Nothing happened. “What? Am I not good enough?” she ranted. “Is gnomish blood deficient? This door is nothing but a racist...” She trailed off from her rant when she remembered that she had blocked the needle from functioning earlier. Taking a small wire, Kat went to remove the pebbles. “Forgot about them.” Kat twisted the wire clockwise to dislodge the pebbles. The wire snapped off inside the trapping mechanism and jammed the pebbles even more tightly. “Crap.” Touching the charm at her throat, reality skipped a beat back. Taking a small wire, Kat went to remove the pebbles. “Forgot about them.” Kat twisted the wire counter-clockwise to dislodge the pebbles. The wire snagged the pebbles, causing them to trickle out. The trap was ready to spring. Placing her palm on the door, she stopped herself from yelping in pain as the needle punctured her flesh. A final click was heard as the door swung silently open.

Beyond the door, the darkness was palpable. Not even the light from Pelias’ spell was able to penetrate the inky darkness. Kat’s darkvision allowed her to see the pathway beyond the doorway, but it was murky and difficult to make out details. All she knew was that the pathway continued beyond her range of vision.

“What do you see?” Shribryn asked.

“Another pathway,” Kat replied. “I think. It’s hard to see beyond the doorway. Could be a magical effect? I don’t know.”

“Only one way to find out,” Ska’arr said as he stepped forward. “There is another way to find out,” Pelias said, but he was too late. Ska’arr crossed the threshold of the doorway and simply vanished, a quick red flash marking where he was last.

Kat gasped and cried out in dismay. “What happened to the big guy? He’s not dead is he?”

Scuro took out a ration from his pocket and tossed it into the doorway, watching closely. It too vanished as it crossed the threshold with a quick flash of red. Scuro had seen the phenomena before. “Don’t worry about Ska’arr. He may be confused, a natural state for him, but he is unharmed. At least from the magic of the portal. He has been teleported to another location.”

“What do you mean, ‘At least from the magic of the portal’?” Shribryn asked.

Scuro answered coolly. “We don’t know what is on the other side. He could be in mortal danger right now. But since we are just standing around discussing it, we will never know.” A look of dismay and worry crossed Shribryn’s face. “We need to help him!”

Shribryn dashed forward and disappeared with a red flash. All the others followed suit. Raven transformed back into her formidable hunting bat form before diving through the portal. ***So easy to manipulate.*** Scuro noted that the magical effect was consistent and that there were no other secondary magical traps set off, meaning it was safe for him to pass through. Chuckling to himself, he walked through the portal and joined his unwitting lackeys.

The party was standing on a dais in a large hexagonal room. The dais was ten feet above the floor and the ceiling was only twenty feet high. Four ten-foot wide corridors ran north, east, south, and west. The room was pitch black, except for the magical light from Pelias’ torch. Five doorways could be seen at the end of each corridor, spread out equally at the end of the corridor. None of them had any doors, except for furthest door in the northern corridor. They were all peering down the corridors when Shribryn heard sucking noises down two of the corridors. Warning the others, she quickly cast Mage Armor around herself.

The sounds were getting louder, but since they could see nothing moving in the corridors before them, the source of the sound had to be in the side rooms at the end of the corridors. The sound increased to an indescribable slithering, gurgling hiss. The group’s iron nerves were shaken by the strain of waiting for the unknown source of the sound to appear. At last, out of two of the side rooms poured huge slimy masses, inky black in the faded light. They glided into the corridors and swiftly advanced upon their prey on the dais, silent save for the sucking sound of its peculiar method of locomotion. Each mass was at least ten feet in diameter, amorphous with pseudopods stretching forward.

Ska’arr heard Ro-Lund-Do behind him casting a familiar spell. Suddenly, the party movements were accelerated and their bodies raced with arcane energy. Ska’arr watched the threat as it approached and, with a shudder, recognized it. “Black puddings! Their touch is corrosive! Keep a safe distance!” Swiftly casting a spell of acid resistance, he swung his chain down on the first black pudding. His chain struck true, sinking into the pudding’s mass, pinching it in half. Ska’arr’s chain struck sparks as it fully cleaved the black pudding into two smaller masses, but if it felt any discomfort or pain from the attack, the smaller black puddings showed no sign.

Scuro prepared to cast another spell when he heard a voice calling out. “Ủỳỹἆἆ! ỼἢἨἰἰ Ὃὡ ὔὲή!” It was in High Netheril, a dead language not heard since the fall of Netheril several millennia before. The voice was faint, but Scuro thought he recognized it. ***So you survived all this time. What a pleasant surprise.***

Pelias saw Ro-Lund-Do stop his spell mid-cast. He too heard the faint voice, but he didn’t recognize the language. In fact, he thought that Ro-Lund-Do had been enchanted by the way he stopped to focus on the voice. No time to deal with that now. Focusing his energy into his hands, Pelias formed a small sphere of energy and tossed it just behind the two smaller puddings. As the sphere struck the ground, it erupted into a massive ball of flame, engulfing the two puddings. Pelias’ smile vanished as the puddings slithered out of the blast, smoking, but with little visible damage.

Kat heard the voice as well coming from behind the only door in the complex. Tumbling off the dais, she began to run parallel to the black puddings. Concentrating, Kat’s form began to shimmer. She did not really appear to be present, as if she had gone shadowy and opaque, like a drawing on smoked glass. She darted near one of the black puddings, tumbling over a pseudopod. Part of the pudding quivered, as if responding to stimuli too faint for it to truly register and then Kat was past it and making her way down the corridor. The sound of the voice grew more distinct as she approached the door. Through a small, barred opening high on the door, Kat saw a pale white face looking out, his red eyes focused on the dais. Confused, Kat followed the prisoner’s gaze and saw that it was focused solely on Ro-Lund-Do.

The black puddings began to spread and surround the dais. Raven swooped down and bit deeply into the larger ooze. Her wolf fangs tore out a sizable chunk, but she immediately spat it out as her jaws and throat began to burn. The black pudding acidity, whether from its flesh or its blood, began to eat away at Raven. Flying off, she desperately began healing herself hoping to stem the tide of the acid as it began to tear through her body.

Shribryn stepped towards the edge of the dais a safe distance from the black puddings and slammed her fists down. Fire erupted from the ground and traced a devastating trail through all the black puddings like a striking snake. The closest ooze extended a pseudopod that stretched unbelievably, lashing out and striking Shribryn, though she stood a full twenty feet away. The pseudopod slammed Shribryn to the ground, knocking her unconscious and leaving horrifying wounds across her body. The pseudopod didn’t retract. It flowed over her body, destroying her flesh and equipment as it moved.

Scuro watched as one of the black puddings began to wrap itself around Shribryn’s body. Seeing the opening he so desperately needed, he made a dash between the attacking oozes and ran towards the trapped prisoner. Ignoring Kat, Scuro addressed the prisoner directly. “It is by will alone that the mind is set in motion.”

The prisoner gave a respectful nod. “Passion must never interfere with reason.” He examined Scuro with unblinking eyes. “Master, you have returned. New flesh or old, I would recognize you.”

Scuro nodded in return, but his tones were harsh. “Your master has returned. You were one of my most competent soldiers, Dilago. This is disappointing.” Dilago quaked a little at the statement, but composed himself once more. Scuro reached his hand out and felt an invisible barrier on the door. He continued to address Dilago. “You were entrusted to guard my citadel. You have obviously failed. Tell me what happened and I will judge whether you are worth saving or not.”

Dilago bowed once more. “Master, I will answer as best I can.”

Kat knew a smattering of many languages and could recognize most after hearing a few words. Whatever language Ro-Lund-Do and the prisoner were speaking was beyond her comprehension. Curious, she listened to see if any hints would be dropped.

The black pudding continued to flow over Shribryn’s body, destroying where it went. Pelias reached forward to help her and a pseudopod from the second ooze lashed out and wrapped around his waist. Pelias’ magical vest began to smoke instantly and within seconds was destroyed. The pseudopod tightened around Pelias causing him to cry out in anguish.

A third pseudopod wrapped around Ska’arr’s leg, causing him to stumble between Pelias and Shribryn. Dropping to his knee, his fist smashed down on the center of the black pudding, splattering slime all around. Only his protective spell prevented him from suffering from the acidic spew released by the ooze. With a heave, the black pudding died. Without hesitation, Ska’arr smashed down on the black pudding trapping Pelias. The next black pudding lost cohesion and died as well. “Get up Pelias! We need you to heal!”

Pelias saw that the last black pudding was causing too much damage to Shribryn. Even if he healed her, she would die soon after. Focusing his inner energies, Pelias released a burst of fire on the pudding, causing it to thrash.

Kat was torn. She wanted to continue her eavesdropping (though it proved fruitless since she did not understand the language) but she could hear the others fighting for their lives. She made a quick decision. Pulling out her hand crossbow, she loaded it and fired in the same motion. The bolt struck the last pudding, tearing a deep furrow through it. The furrow continued to grow until the pudding split itself into two smaller oozes. “Oh, crap.” Stepping back towards the shadows, she blended in, hiding from sight.

The hunting bat swooped in. The huge bat rolled over in mid-air and became a human female, flying down at the black pudding holding Shribryn, Raven’s face a mask of determination. Raven’s muscles snapped in perfect coordination and timing, leading with a tremendous chop of her quarterstaff on the dangerous ooze. The momentum from her wild charge gave extra weight to her blow as the pudding was distended by the impact. Raven could see that the pudding was leaking fluid, but it was not dead yet. A second pseudopod lashed out and wrapped around Raven’s arms, pinning them to her quarterstaff. Her flesh tore open as the black pudding’s digestive acid slathered across her arms. Shribryn, still trapped, twitched slightly as her body continued to be digested.

Scuro could feel the arcane energy protecting the cell. A wall of force had hedged his minion. ***Damn.*** He could not free him immediately, but a plan began to form. First, Scuro needed information. Clicking his heels, Scuro teleported into the cell. He appeared beside Dilago. ***Not all magic is limited***. He turned to the prisoner. Dilago was naked and gaunt. His flesh was so pale it appeared almost translucent. He was a large man and, though he carried no weapon, there was something inherently threatening about him. But now, he quailed as his master interrogated him. “How were you imprisoned? And by who?”

Dilago slowly shook his head. “I do not know who trapped me. I had been patrolling your citadel for centuries ensuring its safety. When you did not return after a century, I sent out emissaries to search for signs of your return. During my last patrol, I felt a disturbance. I rushed to see who had the temerity to enter your domain and to watch as your traps would surely be tearing them apart. Many a thief had tried to enter and all had died horrible deaths. I was stunned to see a cloaked figure walking through the hallways. He either ignored the traps or dismissed them if they proved to be annoying.” Dilago shook his head in disbelief. “I did not think any being could resist your magic.” Scuro frowned at that. “I charged the invader and struck at him with my sword. He flinched at the attack and turned to flee. I thought I had hurt him severely, but I know realize it was a ruse to trap me.” Dilago’s voice trembled with rage. “The thief fled to these lower levels and I pursued him. When I had him trapped in this room, he turned as I swung my sword in what I thought would be a crushing blow. My sword struck his shoulder cleanly and stopped as if it had hit solid adamantine. He raised his hand and I was thrown back against the wall. He then proceeded to strip me of all my equipment and left the room, sealing it with his spells. I struggled to break free from the force holding me to the wall, but it took hours until the spell faded and I fell to the floor. I have been trapped here since.”

Scuro digested the information and came to a conclusion. It was very difficult to hold a swordwraith against its will. This pointed towards a powerful enemy. Was Dilago kept alive as bait? Or as a taunting insult? Either way, this intruder would pay. “You performed your duty to the best of your ability, though it was not enough. You failed to protect my domain, but I will give you the opportunity to redeem yourself.” Dilago bowed. “I will return shortly.” Clicking his boots once more, Scuro teleported into the hallway.

A pseudopod whipped around Ska’arr’s leg again, trapping him. Punching down, he managed to pummel the black pudding to death. With only a single pudding left, Ska’arr stepped forward and struck at it with his fist. The black pudding slithered out of the way, avoiding the hit. An orb of fire hit the pudding, drowning it in flames, cooking part of it. Pelias had hoped to kill the last pudding to free both Shribryn and Raven, but it proved to be a difficult task.

Raven flipped and rolled her body, causing more and more pressure on the black pudding’s pseudopod. Even an amorphous body is limited on how far it can stretch. With a final twist of her body, the pseudopod broke, freeing Raven from its grasp. Continuing her role, she tumbled out of reach of her opponent.

Another pseudopod wrapped around Ska’arr, squeezing him. Gripping it in one hand, Ska’arr heaved and pulled the black pudding closer as his other hand came down with a final blow. The last black pudding splattered and died at his feet.

Pelias began healing the others as soon as the last black pudding died. Focusing on Shribryn, he was relieved to see her open her eyes. She struggled to sit up. “How bad was it?” Shribryn asked. Then she noticed that most of her equipment was gone. “What happened?”

“You’re lucky to be alive,” Pelias said. “The black pudding acid destroyed your flesh as quickly as it destroyed your equipment. But at least we can replace the equipment.” He then moved on to heal the others. Soon, Ro-Lund-Do joined in to help.

When most of the wounds were healed, Kat turned to Ro-Lund-Do. “So, what were you and the pasty guy talking about?”

Ro-Lund-Do looked confused for a second and then replied coolly, “It’s a little unfair to mock a prisoner based on his disheveled appearance.”

“You’re avoiding the question,” Raven pointed out.

Ro-Lund-Do sighed. “Something is enticing us into a trap. I only seek to free the prisoner.”

Kat tapped her chin. “Based on how long you chatted, you seemed to be on good terms with him.”

Ro-Lund-Do looked sharply at Kat. “He is a friend from long ago.”

Something seemed off. ***He’s holding something back.*** “We’re running your errands for you. I thought we were on better terms than that.” Kat tapped her chin again. “What language were you speaking? I’ve never heard it before in my life.”

“You say that something is drawing us into a trap,” Pelias said. “But all the other cells are empty and there is only one prisoner. On top of that, the bait is someone only you are familiar with and only you seem to be able to communicate with. It doesn’t seem like it is a trap for us. It seems more like a trap for you.”

Other than a slight twitch of his eyebrow, Ro-Lund-Do showed no outward signs of worry. ***They are on to us! What do we do?*** His mind was racing, quickly coming up with different explanations and rejecting them just as quickly. ***Calm yourself. We tell them the truth, our version of the truth, enough to satisfy them. There is no need to panic. They so want to keep the group together, they will buy whatever tripe we feed them.***

Ro-Lund-Do turned to Pelias. “What do you want me to say? If it is a trap for me, why would they want me? It doesn’t make sense.” Ro-Lund-Do began to pace. “I haven’t spoken that language for a while. There are very few of us keeping it alive.”

Kat was not satisfied. “What language?”

Ro-Lund-Do stopped his pacing. He did not bother to hide the irritation in his voice. “It is a language only a few scholars know. It is High Netheril. Satisfied?”

“Not really,” said Raven. “You ran from the combat when we could have greatly used your help. You treat us like your servants and you have secrets, many secrets. Why should we continue this game?”

Ro-Lund-Do was indignant. “I bolstered the party right at the on-set! I only retreated strategically because, unlike you, with your brawn and strength, I could not survive such a battle. As it was, I would have been a hindrance and not a help. I would have fallen quickly and then you would have been scrambling. I stepped away to clear the battlefield, to ensure that the prisoner was safe, and to better plan and execute a form of counter-attack.” Ro-Lund-Do pointed at Kat. “She also left the group to its own devices during that fight. She was there with me with the prisoner. I, at least, was able to gather some information. I will bet that all she was doing was satisfying her curiosity. Yet I don’t hear any of you calling for her head!”

Ro-Lund-Do took a deep breath and visibly calmed down. He looked at the others. “We don’t have time for this. There is a helpless prisoner over there. Whatever else, we are here to help safeguard the innocent. He might also have information to help us find the other people who were kidnapped and brought here. Let us find them and get out of this wretched place.” The others agreed reluctantly and began to search the area for any clues to help unravel the mystery of the place they were trapped in. Scuro chuckled. ***Well played Ro-Lund-Do.***

Shribryn and Kat searched each open cell for any secret doors or compartments. All of them were completely clean. Shribryn couldn’t sense the smallest speck of dust or detritus. “Best guess, those black puddings ate everything they could find, including the doors. We’re lucky to have gotten out of that situation alive.” Finding nothing in the rooms, they turned to the dais they arrived on. After another thorough search, they find nothing on the dais either.

Scuro went back to talk to Dilago in High Netheril. “Have you no further information to help us find your captor?” Dilago shook his head no. “What use are you?” Dilago simply looked down. “Whoever took over my domain has changed parts of the internal structure. Normally we could return using the dais,” Scuro looked over as Shribryn and Kat searched the dais, “but that does not seem to be an option anymore. Did you see how your captor left this area?” Again, Dilago shook his head no. Scuro snorted in disgust. “Again, what use are you?”

Turning back, he saw that Ska’arr was approaching him. “Ro-Lund-Do, how is it you were able to open the doors?”

Ro-Lund-Do sighed. “They were somehow magically attuned to me. Which means that, as you all suspected, this must be a trap for me. Why someone or something is seeking to trap me? That is the better question.”

Joining with the others, Ska’arr could see the exhaustion on all their faces. They decided to rest in the cells closest to the prisoner. Fortunately, nothing bothered them while they recovered. While they were resting, Pelias noticed that Lord Farragut was having some difficulty navigating within the cell they had chosen to shelter in. Usually, he would be out sniffing around in a new area. But now, he seemed more uncertain and stayed close to Ska’arr. “Is everything alright with Lord Farragut?”

Ska’arr scratched his companion’s head gently. “He’s still blind. There’s been so much going on, we haven’t had a chance to restore his vision.”

Pelias called Lord Farragut over. Picking him up gently, Pelias cooed softly and began scratching the ferret behind its ears. As he soothed Lord Farragut, Pelias began to slowly chant. A halo of light briefly appeared over Lord Farragut’s eyes and, when it disappeared, his vision returned. The ferret jumped out of Pelias’ arms and began scooting about, happy that his vision had returned. “Thank you, Pelias. That is much appreciated.”

When they awoke from their rest, Scuro came up with an idea to free Dilago. He called Kat over and handed her his boots. “Kat, you and I are going to free the prisoner. The barriers surrounding him do not limit extra-dimensional travel. I will give you my boots. I know you are able to step through the Plane of Shadow to perform short jaunts. Step through the shadows to the prisoner, give him my boots, and he will be able to free himself.”

Kat looked at Ro-Lund-Do with a frown on her face. “You didn’t say please.”

A look of irritation crossed Ro-Lund-Do’s face. Putting on his most charming expression, he said, “Kat, could you please deliver these boots to the prisoner so he can be freed?”

Kat took the boots and winked. “No problem.” She paused and looked back at Ro-Lund-Do. “I didn’t think you would actually say please. There is hope for you yet, Ro-Lund-Do.” Scuro ground his teeth.

A short time later, Kat and the prisoner appeared outside the cell. She plugged her nose. “He needs a bath.” She took the boots back and handed them to Ro-Lund-Do. “And maybe some clothes so we can take him out to see high society.”

As some simple clothes and weapons were provided, Pelias noticed that the prisoner’s haggard appearance went beyond malnutrition. Suspicious, he extended his holy aura outwards to encompass the gaunt man. When Pelias’ aura touched him, it dimmed slightly. ***Undead.*** He looked more closely at Ro-Lund-Do’s friend and saw that, though he looked human, his flesh appeared almost insubstantial. His eyes glowed dimly in light or dark. His movements were not slowed or jerky like a zombie. He moved gracefully and with determination. Like a warrior. ***Swordwraith.***

Ro-Lund-Do was introducing his friend to the others. “His name is Dilago. We...”

Pelias cut him off. “How do you know him?”

Ro-Lund-Do was annoyed. “Well, before I was interrupted, I was going to say that Dilago and I grew up together and know each other well.”

“Really.” Pelias’ voice was terse. “Is this before or after he was converted into an undead?”

Shribryn sucked in her breath. They were all shocked by this turn of events. “What?” They all stared at Dilago.

Ro-Lund-Do didn’t seem perturbed. He had been expecting this and had thought through his response. He brought up his hands. “I know he is undead. I was the one who converted him.” All eyes turned to Ro-Lund-Do. “Let me explain. He is my friend. He is not evil. When he died, it was almost too much for me to bear. I brought him back so we could be together once again. I know it was selfish of me, but Dilago is not evil, nor is he mindless.”

Pelias could not believe what he was hearing. “He’s not mindless. Then he should be able to answer some questions.”

“Dilago, you may speak to them freely.” Ro-Lund-Do’s voice took on a commanding tone. ***That is not normal. Didn’t sound like the interaction between friends. More like a master to his slave.***

“Do you speak Chondathan?” Pelias asked. Dilago nodded his assent. “How do you know Ro-Lund-Do?”

Dilago’s voice was raspy. “He is my Master. I am loyal to my Master.” ***Master?***

Kat piped up, “How long have you known your friend?”

“I’ve been searching for him for a long time, since I lost contact with him. To know the Master is to love the Master. I have been searching for him since the Great Cataclysm occurred.”

“The Great Cataclysm?” Raven had never heard of the event.

Venom entered Dilago’s voice. He was angry, not at Raven, but at the memory itself. “Yes, when Karsus sought to attain godhood and caused magic to die, destroying our... I mean, a vibrant empire.”

Karsus? He means Karsus’ Folly! “You mean the fall of the Netheril Empire!” Pelias was dumbstruck. “That occurred over 3000 years ago.” Dilago shrugged.

Shribryn was shocked. “Ro-Lund-Do, have you been reincarnated? Or are you also an intelligent undead?”

Kat piped up. “Ro-Lund-Do, you’ve been around for 3000 years! You don’t look a day over 30!” Her tone was heavy with sarcasm.

Ro-Lund-Do sighed. The inane nattering was getting on his nerves, but he needed to play his part so that they continued to serve his purpose. “I am not undead. I have not been reincarnated. I have... memories from the past. I get glimpses from time to time.”

“What do you remember from 3000 years ago?” Kat asked. “Do you remember this place? Have we been risking our lives for your amusement?”

Ro-Lund-Do sighed again. “I just get glimpses. I saw that things were falling apart. A great tragedy had struck the land. It is not always clear. What I do remember clearly is Dilago. He has always been there to support me. We have been together a long time.” Ro-Lund-Do’s voice softened. “Please believe me. If I had known the threats of this place, I would have warned you. Harm to you also leads to harm to myself.”

Kat was apprehensive. “I don’t know. You left Pelias and Shribryn to die.”

Ro-Lund-Do’s voice hardened. “We’ve already been through this. Time is being lost. We need to find the people who were kidnapped. That is why we are here. I may get glimpses of the past, but I am my own person. Let us bring justice to those under the heel of oppression and fear.” Ro-Lund-Do could see his words were not moving his colleagues. “Then check us for evil auras. If you find any trace of evil, you may strike us down. We will not fight.”

Pelias called upon his divine power. Ro-Lund-Do was right. Neither he nor Dilago radiated evil. It did not mean that they were good or that they were not lying, but at least they were not spawns of evil. He informed the others. They accepted Ro-Lund-Do’s words for the time being.

Ro-Lund-Do was relieved. Scuro chuckled. ***The moment of disaster has passed. They will continue to work with you. They may doubt you from time to time, but as long as you are smart, they will never give you up.***

Kat continued her search of the area. They seemed trapped for the moment, but she was confident they would find an exit shortly. As if on cue, Kat found that the seam between some of the stones along the wall was slightly deeper than the others. Ah ha! Checking the area carefully, Kat was confident that she had found the way out. “Hey, Ska’arr! Come over here. Want to do me a favour? I just need you to place your hand right here on the wall while I step back about twenty feet. You good with that?”

Ska’arr sighed. “Are there any traps?”

Kat was mock-indignant. “Of course not. You are completely safe. Now you just wait two seconds while I nonchalantly pop around the corner and then just put your hand on the wall.”

Ska’arr smiled as Kat stepped back. Holding his chain in one hand, he placed the other on the wall. A five foot section of the wall moved back and slid over revealing an area of complete darkness. Light from Pelias’ spell filtered in revealing a short corridor which made a sharp turn, blocking the rest of the passage from sight.

Turning to Kat, Ska’arr said, “I’ve done my part. Your turn.”

Kat stuck out her tongue at Ska’arr. Crouching down, she quietly moved into the corridor, her eyes roving all about. Just before the bend in the corridor, she saw a grid on the wall, lined with ten different gems in the first column of the grid. There was writing around the grid which she managed to translate. It seemed to be a dialect of the Halruaan language. She wasn’t completely certain that she got the translation correct, but she was confident she got the main gist of it. “’The stones are the key to passage.’ I wonder what that means.” Peaking around the corner, she saw that the corridor continued and that it was lined on either side with alcoves. After a quick count, she saw that there were twenty alcoves in total. Seeing no threats, Kat gave a low whistle to signal that the way was clear.

As the others entered, they noticed that there wasn’t much room to manoeuvre. Kat began to idly move the gems around the grid when Ro-Lund-Do gave a warning. “Don’t touch those!”

Kat was perplexed. She had moved the gems but nothing had happened. They didn’t seem to serve a purpose. “What’s the problem?”

Scuro knew that these types of puzzles were used to activate and disarm traps. Though not magical, it was an elegant system that could be used to activate or deactivate multiple traps. Ro-Lund-Do replied, “We don’t know the purpose for the gems. They may be magical and a trap for the unaware, cursing them a plague or something worse.” Kat took her hands off the gems immediately. “Let me check to see if they are magical.” Ro-Lund-Do pretended to cast a spell while he tried to figure out the solution to the puzzle.

Ska’arr began moving down the corridor, Shribryn close behind. Each alcove seemed to hold a dressing mannequin, commonly found in dress shops and clothing stores, but these mannequins were displaying armor, weapons, jewelry, and other items. As Ska’arr scanned each alcove, Shribryn listened intently for any signs of danger. At the far end of the corridor, a large mirror hung.

A crumbling sound caused Shribryn to turn back quickly and give a warning to Ska’arr and the others. A green cloud engulfed Shribryn. Reacting quickly, she dove to the side and out of the cloud. Her body felt lethargic and slow, but, due to her fast reaction, she managed to shake off the effects. Ponderous steps came from the alcoves on either end of the corridor. The fight was on.

The stone golems struck Ska’arr and Shribryn. A stone fist punched Ska’arr, knocking him backwards into a wall. Knowing he was surrounded, he quickly cast a displacement spell on himself and struck back with his chain. A stone foot kicked Shribryn hard in the abdomen, causing her clench over. Her hand caught the foot as it began to retract, releasing a blast of flame in retaliation.

The familiar feeling of hyperactivity washed over the group as Ro-Lund-Do sped up their movement. ***I need to prove myself to them.*** Scuro snorted. ***Do as you must.*** Seeing that the close quarters would hinder his spells and lead to him catching allies as well as enemies, Ro-Lund-Do stepped out of the corridor and back to the larger room.

Kat dove forward, dodging a stone fist that sought to strike her, and landed into a tumbling somersault. As she came up, her swords came out and dug deep gauges into a golem’s leg as she swept past. Shribryn launched a fiery tendril down the hallway, burning through the golems, but also through Kat and Ska’arr. Kat felt the flames coming up behind her and threw herself into an alcove to avoid the fire. Ska’arr had his back to a wall, engaging two of the golems and had no chance. He felt the fiery kiss of Shribryn’s fiery snake.

Pelias began casting. A writhing nest of multicolored worms appeared, floating and filling up a portion of the corridor. “Fall back. The spell only attacks enemies and is safe to pass through.”

“Good to know.” Raven ran forward through the mystical worms and, good to his word, the worms ignored her and even moved out of her way. A golem noticed her coming and threw a backhand at her. Dodging the blow, Raven tried to trap the arm in an armbar, but the golem proved too strong. Before she could cinch her grip, it ripped its arm out of her deadly trap.

At the far end of the corridor, one of the golems moved towards Ska’arr. As its foot landed on one of the tiles, it lit up. A bolt of lightning streaked down the corridor, striking the golems, Pelias, and Ska’arr. Raven and Kat both managed to throw themselves to the floor, avoiding the bolt by the skin of their teeth. The lightning passed harmlessly through the golems. Raven began to jump back to her feet when stone fists slammed her back down. Tumbling away, she regained her feet and clutched her side. Two of her ribs were broken, maybe a third. She spat out blood and rushed the nearest golem.

Ska’arr roared. Throwing caution to the wind, he lashed out wildly and with full force, hoping to drop his opponents quickly before they managed another barrage. His chain flung about, striking the floor, wall, and ceiling, blunting its momentum and rendering his strikes useless. ***Okay. Time for Plan B.***

Ro-Lund-Do could hear the others trapped in combat. He couldn’t get close to the combat, but he wanted to show that he was willing to help. But his offensive spells would cause as much harm to the others as it would to the golems. ***Stop your whining. There may be a way to show that you are not useless.*** Scuro cast a spell, creating a spectral hand in front of Ro-Lund-Do. Right away, Ro-Lund-Do knew what to do.

Kat dodged this way and that, waiting for the right moment to strike. As a golem lifted its arms to smash down on her, she saw her opening. She ran forward, intending to skewer the golem’s exposed midsection with her swords. On her third step, her foot slipped on a loose stone causing her to crash to the ground. Stone fists rained down on her, crushing her. She touched the charm at her throat and reality skipped a beat back. She ran forward, intending to skewer the golem’s exposed midsection with her swords. She dove and tumbled after her second step and came up running without losing any of her forward momentum. Both her swords struck true into the golem’s body, causing wild cracks to form. Slashing like crazy on the weakened part, stone shards shot off as the golem’s entire midsection was torn apart. With a crash, the golem fell over and the magic inhabiting it fled. Before the golem’s body hit the floor, Kat was already moving onto the neighbouring golem. Another wild flurry of blows and the second golem met the same fate as the first.

Raven jumped back to avoid another strike from a golem. She was bleeding inside badly. Suddenly, Raven felt healing energy enter her as Pelias touched her back with his wand of healing. Even as Pelias mended her wounds, Raven focused her own divine energy to reduce her internal bleeding and put her organs back where they belong.

Shribryn gulped down a potion of curing. Though only two golems remained, they were a dangerous threat. Cloaking herself in invisibility, she snuck to the side of one of the golems, hoping to catch it unawares. The golem’s mouth opened up, releasing a cloud of green gas on Shribryn and Ska’arr, and then swung at them. Though they felt the initial impact, the lethargy of the toxic cloud, both managed to avoid any serious effects from it. This was fortunate. The golem’s fists swung down at both, but Shribryn and Ska’arr deflected the blows harmlessly to the side.

Suddenly, Dilago moved into the corridor. “You will not fail or falter!” His voice resonated throughout the corridor. They all felt their spirits rise and their efforts redouble. As another cloud of green gas fell upon them, it seemed an inconsequential thing. Their strength of will and determination were bolstered by Dilago’s words.

A glowing hand, guided by Ro-Lund-Do touched Ska’arr’s arm. Divine energy flowed into Ska’arr, closing many of his wounds. No longer troubled by traumatic injury, Ska’arr swung his chain and struck a golem in the chest twice, staggering it backwards.

A flaming blade appeared in Shribryn’s hands. Slicing the legs of the stumbling golem, Shribryn hamstrung it, causing it to fall to its knees. With the same motion, she turned and dodged the descending fist of the other golem. The fallen golem tried to get up when an orb of acid struck it in the face. Pelias watched as the golem clutched its face as the stone bubbled and melted. With a shudder the golem collapsed to the ground.

Raven engaged the last golem. Balanced on the balls of her feet, she shifted position ever so slightly, just enough to allow the golem’s fist to smash down on the ground where she had been standing. As the fist went up, Raven sprung into action. Gripping the arm, she flipped over it, kicked her legs out, and then dropped down to her knees, using her momentum to apply a devastating amount of force on the golem’s arm. If her opponent had been flesh and blood, Raven would have torn the arm in half. As it was, either the arm would shatter or the golem would be pitched over onto the ground. The golem’s arm cracked under the strain but managed not to snap. Instead, the golem was lifted off its feet and slammed into the ground. Like lightning, Raven shifted positions again, twisting the arm behind the golem’s back and planting her feet in the golem’s neck as a brace, holding the arm and preventing it from moving.

The struggle to hold the golem’s arm was taking its toll on Raven. She could taste blood bubbling out of her mouth as her muscles strained and tore. A spectral hand approached her. Raven saw it coming but could do nothing to avoid it. As it touched her arm, she felt a warm healing sensation run through her body. She saw Ro-Lund-Do down the corridor, guiding the hand in its endeavour. ***The little brat is beginning to redeem himself.*** Re-invigorated, Raven kept the pressure on.

The others took advantage. Ska’arr’s chain lashed down and Shribryn summoned a fan of flames that barely missed Raven as it burnt the golem. Multicoloured worms began to swarm around the golem. They burrowed into the golem, leaving pockmarks wherever they went. In a matter of seconds, the golem’s body broke apart, the worms having dealt the deathblow.

Ska’arr quickly ran to the alcoves and began gathering whatever items he could. “What are you doing?” Shribryn cried out.

Ska’arr had a handful of items. “I don’t know about you, but this corridor is a deathtrap. I’m gathering what I can before the next trap goes off.”

“Sounds good to me!” With that, the others began grabbing what they could from the alcoves. As Shribryn reached into one of the alcoves, she felt a slight rumble. Jerking back, she managed to avoid being crushed as the roof in the alcove collapsed. Another yelp and crash indicated that a second alcove had collapsed as well.

Ro-Lund-Do’s bat flittered about the corridor. Using its echo location, Scuro could see the hidden compartments where the golems had been housed inside four of the alcoves. The group managed to save multiple items. Laying them down carefully, Pelias checked them for magical auras and found that all of them radiated magic, some of it quite strong. A new problem arose: identifying the magic of each item.

As Pelias healed the others, Ro-Lund-Do whistled faintly. The bat returned to Ro-Lund-Do and hid under his hat once more. Scuro moved down the corridor, knowing the way was clear. He was staring at the mirror. ***I wonder if this is the same one that the Chronomancer had gifted me all those years ago...*** Taking up a ring they had just found, he stood in front of the mirror and focused his attention on the ring. A short time later, an aura appeared around the ring. As he continued to concentrate on the ring, more auras appeared, dancing and weaving around the ring. As Scuro stared at the auras, he knew they represented the magic stored within the ring and now they stood bare before him. He turned back to the others. “This ring has strong, protective abjuration magic placed on it.” Scuro passed the ring back to Pelias. “The mirror allows me to read the magical auras on items. But, it is a gamble. The more the mirror is used, the higher the chance that something could go wrong.”

“How do you know this?” Raven asked. “Never mind. ‘Old memories’ I assume.”

Ro-Lund-Do shrugged. As other items were handed to him, Scuro identified the magic for each. Ska’arr came up beside Ro-Lund-Do. “We should take turns. If something bad were to happen, we should each share the risk.”

Before Scuro could explain the nature of the risk, Ska’arr stepped up to the mirror with an item and smiled. The mirror shattered. Scuro sighed. “The threat wasn’t to us, but to the misuse of the magic of the mirror. If not implemented properly, it feeds back onto itself, causing it to break.” Scuro shook his head in disbelief.

Kat moved up to the mirror and checked to see if it was beyond repair. The deep cracks throughout the mirror showed her that powerful magic would be needed to return the mirror to its former state. Searching around the mirror, she found that there were no hidden doors or compartments integrated into the mirror or wall.

“Well, we found out the nature of most of the items,” said Shribryn. “With the mirror broken, we might as well continue searching the area. We’re still stuck down here and I would like to get out soon.”

Shribyn and Kat began searching the other hallways for secret doors. In short order, Kat found another secret door. After determining that it wasn’t trapped, she quickly unlocked it and signalled Ska’arr over. Ska’arr braced himself for the worst and threw the door open.

Behind the door was another dark corridor. Shribryn, unhindered by the lack of light, moved in and tapped her fingers gently on the floor, getting a sense of the area from the soft echoes. “It’s clear. Another corridor but with a sharp bend twenty feet ahead.”

Raven still found it amazing how Shribryn could read an area based solely on sound. The rest of the party moved in, ready for any surprises. After twenty feet, the corridor turned ninety degrees. Peaking around the corner, Kat saw that the corridor continued only another ten feet before it again turned ninety degrees, going parallel to the original path.

Pelias moved slightly ahead with his magical light. Easing the light past the last corner, he saw that the corridor opened up into a room with a podium and a door on the far side. Seeing no overt threat, Pelias’ curiosity got the best of him. Moving into the room, he opened his arcane senses and looked around. The podium radiated magic. In fact, the magical aura from the podium proved to be almost overwhelming. Focusing his senses, he saw that the aura coincided with conjuration magic. Whether it summoned something or if it sent the wielder away, he couldn’t tell.

The others followed Pelias into the room. After explaining what he learned, Pelias whispered, “We can try to set off the magic of the podium to see what it does, or we can explore a bit more and double back. Regardless, I am almost out of spells and I will need to rest.”

“I don’t like the idea of moving ahead and leaving a potential trap behind us,” Ska’arr whispered.

“I don’t like the idea of having something come through that door and catching us with our pants down while we look at the podium,” Kat whispered back.

“Okay,” Pelias replied quietly. “I have a solution. If my spell is not blocked, I can extend my sight beyond the door and see what is on the other side. We can decide what we do from there.” Seeing no better option, Pelias proceeded with his spell. Suddenly, he felt like he was floating outside of his body. His sight passed beyond the closed door. Looking around, all he saw was darkness.

Completing his spell, he relayed what he saw to the others. “There doesn’t seem to be any additional threats,” Raven said. “Let’s return to the other cells and set up camp there again to rest. Then we can move on.” As they returned to their previous resting place and prepared to rest again, Pelias moved from person to person, healing them.

Shribryn and Ska’arr began the first watch. Scuro spoke with Dilago in High Netheril. “Make yourself useful and guard my sleep. I do not trust in the skills of a blind woman and one who runs from vermin.” Taking off his hat, Ro-Lund-Do instructed Dra-Koo-La to move to the corridor and stand guard there.

As they began their watch, Ska’arr noticed a shimmer above the dais. As he watched, he saw an armored and horrible bulk begin to coalesce. It was huge, and there was no doubt that it was a predatory beast. Though eyeless and earless, Ska’arr knew that it was stalking them as it moved fluidly off the dais and towards them. Ska’arr opened his mouth to give a warning, but he could make no sound. The beast had silenced the area and moved in for the kill.

The undead bat flew to its master. Landing on his shoulder, it dug its claws into Ro-Lund-Do’s flesh causing him to jerk awake. Knowing that his minion would not wake him unless there was an immediate threat, Ro-Lund-Do ignored the red marks left on his shoulder and got to his feet. It was preternaturally quiet, and Ro-Lund-Do knew something was very wrong. Seeing Raven nearby, he moved to wake her but she woke up as soon as he approached. “-“ Raven’s question was left unheard.

Dilago saw the threat to his master and moved to crush it. Drawing his greatsword, Dilago charged fearlessly and swung down with a brutal chop. The blade turned as it hit the creature’s armored plating on its shoulder, causing it little harm. Shribryn clicked her heels, activating the magic of her boots, and her feet were a blur as she sped and tumbled past the creature. She rolled to her feet, avoiding the awkward kick from the creature’s back leg. ***That was a little too close for comfort***. Summoning further arcane energy, she strengthened her armor as she drew her chain.

Ska’arr moved to the center of the corridor near where the others were still asleep. He drew his chain, swung it in an arc, and lashed out, hitting Pelias, Kat, and Raven. That should wake them up. Kat’s and Pelias’ eyes flew open and they turned to Ska’arr, seeing if he had succumbed to the magical madness once again. Raven was particularly perturbed because she had not been asleep and had not required the rude wake up call.

Kat rolled back towards the wall behind her, blending into the shadows. The creature seemed to be focusing its attention on Dilago and hadn’t noticed her yet. She moved forward carefully, looking for an opportunity to strike. The creature’s claws lashed out at Dilago. He managed to block one of the claws with his greatsword, but the other clipped him, spinning him slightly and leaving Dilago open for a large set of jaws to close on his shoulder.

Raven began to roll to her feet when her body began to morph. Her limbs extended as fur covered her body. She took on the appearance of a large canine with yellow-brown fur and large ears – an ordinary dog. And then she disappeared and reappeared further down the corridor. Then she began blinking in and out of reality at a rapid pace, appearing behind the creature, then on its left flank, then on its right, biting the creature each time as she blinked.

Ro-Lund-Do had few spells left. The ones he did have would have no impact on whatever this creature was. Drawing his crossbow, he loaded it and took careful aim. With a snap, the bolt went flying but got deflected by the bony plates around its eye.

Pelias knew the creature was from a different plane of existence, but he couldn’t figure out what it was. His spells at the moment were also limited and he wanted to make each one count. But without knowing what his opponent was, he would be wasting them.

Shribryn ran onto the dais and leaped off, landing on the beast’s back. Her hands lashed forward as a shadowy filament sprung between them, wrapping around the creature’s neck. She pulled back with all her strength. The shadowy garrotte dug into the creature’s throat, but Shribryn could not get enough leverage to do any severe damage – the creature’s armored plates protected it well. The creature began to buck, trying to dislodge Shribryn. She hung on tightly with gritted teeth.

Ska’arr focused. His chain began to glow as arcane energy suffused it. The creature was limited. It was too big to fit into the corridor they were in. All it could do was reach in with its claws and fanged maw. Unfortunately, its reach was considerable so they were all still in grave danger. Rushing forward, Ska’arr clenched his chain tight and ducked under a claw that sought to swipe his head off his shoulders. Continuing with his momentum, Ska’arr spun around, letting his chain loose to fly out and strike the creature on the neck and the side of its head. Its head snapped sideways from the force of the blow, amplified by the magical energy that had been added to it. Armored plates broke as a dark ichor dripped to the ground. That was the opening Kat had been waiting for.

With a sudden leap, Kat lunged forward, her blades leading. They struck the creature’s neck where its plating had been broken away by Ska’arr’s chain. The blades dug in deeply, slicing through major blood vessels. She continued her lunge, tearing out her blades viciously. The creature shuddered once, and then collapsed. Its body began to dematerialize, becoming a purplish-black mist. Within short order, it was gone.

Pelias stepped out of the silenced zone and dispersed the magical silence. “What was that thing?” Kat asked.

“It was a kaortic hulk,” replied Ro-Lund-Do. “They roam the space between planes, looking for weaknesses. They then slip in and cause as much destruction as possible, eating anything voraciously. There is no rhyme or reason to their appearances. They just appear.”

“Well, that’s a little unnerving,” said Shribryn. “I’m hoping they are a rare occurrence.”

Ro-Lund-Do was thoughtful. “Normally yes. But since this entire citadel seems to be found between planes, we may be in their demesne. Which means that there could be many more of them.”

“You know just what to say to reassure us,” Ska’arr said dryly. “We’ll be vigilant. Right now we need to rest.” Those on watch were skittish, flinching at the smallest noise. Thankfully, for the remainder of the watch, nothing occurred.

After they broke camp, Pelias gathered the rest of the unidentified magical objects. “I can identify them, but I’ll be using up most of my spells. Just be aware that spell support may be limited, at least from my side of things.” They looked at each other and nodded. Pelias began identifying the objects. Once that was done, items were distributed as needed and then they headed back to the room with the magical podium.

Kat and Shribryn searched the room and podium for any traps or hidden compartments and found none. The only door was locked, and once Shribryn was done with it, it wasn’t. Ska’arr stepped forward and kicked the door open. He was fed up with all the magical surprises.

The room on the other side of the door was only fifteen feet by fifteen feet. As light was brought forward, they could see that the room was completely bare. Kat and Shribryn checked the room, but found nothing.

Pelias went back to the podium. Resting near the middle of the top piece was the faint outline of a hand. “Hey, Kat. I think I found something.” Kat came over and examined the hand print. “Huh. How did we miss that?” Checking it for spring loaded needles, she was surprised to find none. “No trap on it.”

Pelias put his hand down on the outline. Nothing happened. Ro-Lund-Do was watching. ***Is it keyed to us?*** Scuro sneered. ***You mean to me. Perhaps. Let us see.*** Walking up to the podium, Ro-Lund-Do put his hand down on the outline. Scuro extended his essence forward. They saw a flash of light in the other room. The center square in the room glowed. Pelias examined the square with his arcane senses. ***Conjuration magic.*** After a short time, the glow faded and the room returned to normal.

“Okay, we are stepping into the unknown,” Ska’arr said. “Plus, there seems to be space for one person at a time. Let’s prepare before we attempt whatever is in the other room.”

“Let’er rip, Ro-Lund-Do!” Shribryn had moved to the center square in the other room. Scuro put his hand down and Shribryn vanished. “What happened to the plan?” Ska’arr moved to the center square and vanished as well. In short order, all the others stepped on the center square and vanished.

They appeared in an area twenty feet by twenty feet. Shribryn was already examining the area via sound and she knew that it opened up into a larger area in front of them. The ceiling above them was only twenty feet high, but beyond the area they were in, the ceiling rose quite a bit.

Buffing themselves, Ska’arr wrapped himself in ectoplasmic armor, while Pelias and Shribryn cast mage armor on themselves. Raven switched to her hunting bat form and ascended up to the ceiling, using her echo location to examine the room. Right away, she detected a huge form in the far corner from them. She couldn’t see it with her eyes, but her echo location told her the hidden enemy was there. Raven growled at a warning to the others. They looked over to where Raven indicated the danger was, but they saw nothing there. In the center of the room by the walls, two posts rose from the floor. Each glowed with faint light, providing shadowy illumination for most of the room. The floor of the room was like glass and the walls were polished obsidian, reflecting what little light there was.

“Well, we won’t learn anything else standing here.” With that, Pelias moved forward. Scuro halted Dilago. “Wait.” Pulling out a wand, Scuro bolstered Dilago’s strength. “This smells like a trap.” Scuro waited and watched as the others entered the larger area. Kat noted that Ro-Lund-Do was not moving and stopped to watch him wearily.

Shribryn moved cautiously along the side wall towards one of the glowing posts. She strained her senses as she hoped to hear any signs of danger. When a voice began speaking in her head, she almost leaped out of her skin. ***Well met adventurer. Unfortunately for you, my master says that you are not worthy. Where is the Dark Lord? Where does he cower?*** Shribryn was unnerved by the voice. She went invisible and was now even more determined to detect the threat in the room.

Ska’arr was examining the room for magical auras. He detected some in the area and moved forward to refine his search. Pelias moved behind Ska’arr and cast a spell. Suddenly, magical light resembling torch flames appeared and danced about, providing stronger illumination for them to see. Looking around, he saw that there were large carvings of resembling Ro-Lund-Do’s face on the walls above near the ceiling. At the far end of the room was a large set of double doors. ***Must be our way out.***

Raven flew further forward. The huge form in the corner hadn’t moved. ***Maybe it is not a threat.*** Wanting to get a closer look, she moved forward. Scuro saw that the others were distancing themselves from him and were no longer effectively acting as a protective barrier. Casting false life on himself, he bolstered his health and began to move forward.

Shribryn’s only warning was a sound of air rushing forward. Panicked from the voice that had invaded her mind, her chain came up an instant too slow to block the blow from a huge, invisible fist. Slammed up against the wall, she bounded back and lashed out with her chain, channeling the damage she had just received into a blast of pure flame. The others saw and heard Shribryn bashed against the wall by an unseen enemy and then saw Shribryn’s chain flail out and hit an invisible foe. The blast of fire that erupted from the end of the chain was blinding. Shribryn coughed up blood. The hit she took had caused serious damage. She needed a safe way out. Tumbling back, she made her way to regroup with the others.

A burst of flame erupted from behind one of the carvings in the wall behind the party. It splashed over Raven, Ska’arr, Shribryn, and Pelias. Pelias threw his arms over his face, expecting the flames to sear his skin. Instead, his mind was invaded by alien thoughts, seeking to numb his mind. Through force of will, Pelias forced the alien thoughts out. He looked over and saw that Raven and Shribryn still seemed to have their full faculties. Ska’arr stood stock still, his mind partially scrambled.

His thoughts were chaotic. Ska’arr seemed unable to do anything, could barely breathe, as his thoughts jumped all around. He knew something was very wrong. Reaching out instinctively to the gem on his forehead, he managed to activate it. An invisible halo of energy surged out of the gem, washing away the alien thoughts. Reclaiming possession of his mind and body, Ska’arr was furious.

Raven flew up towards the source of the mental attack. The wall looked solid, but her echo location showed her that there was a large space above the area they had entered. Inside the space was a huge, serpentine shape. An aura of dread washed over the group as the dragon roared. The sound echoed in Raven’s mind. Fighting down the fear and terror she felt, Raven called upon her powers, blasting the dragon with a pillar of holy fire. Raven knew her spell had worked, but the dragon seemed unfazed. Veering off, she was quickly trying to come up with a plan to bring the dragon down.

Ska’arr saw licks of flame flare out from the wall and knew Raven had engaged the enemy. Too far for him to reach, Ska’arr called on his own powers. His body began to grow to gigantic proportions. Strength surged through his body as it continued to grow. Though he wasn’t as tall as the ceiling, his chain could now reach their enemy. Swinging his now-massive chain, Ska’arr prepared to strike.

Shribryn continued to retreat from the invisible threat. She moved back quickly, beyond the creature’s reach, or so she thought. She was struck twice more and sent flying. Twisting in mid-air, she managed to land on her feet, though she dropped to her knees almost immediately. She was severely injured.

Pelias saw Shribryn fall to her knees after being struck by her invisible attacker. To even the odds, Pelias caste a haste spell, hoping to bolster the group. Stepping towards Shribryn to heal her, the floor underneath his leading foot collapsed underneath his weight. Throwing himself sideways, Pelias saw that the floor had not collapsed. The tile he had stepped on was trapped to spin on an axis, allowing a person to fall through. What was beneath the floor, Pelias didn’t know, but he did know it probably was not conducive towards a long and healthy life. “The floors are trapped! There are trapdoors! Be careful! Shribryn, I’m coming to heal you! Hang tight!”

Ro-Lund-Do summoned a spectral hand before him. “Dilago, assist the others against these miscreants!”

Dilago moved forward. “Stand your ground and maintain your resolve!” As he spoke, a feeling of strength washed over the party. Their willpower had been toughened, protecting them from further mental attacks.

Kat ran past Pelias to provide support for Shribryn. As she darted across the glass floor, she felt the tile beneath her feet give way. Jumping forward, the tile flipped down and Kat saw that there was a clear surface below the glass floor. Whatever that clear stuff was, she did not want to know. Continuing her forward dash, she made her way towards Shribryn’s invisible tormentor.

Shribryn clicked her heels together. Her speed increased even more. Dashing towards Pelias, she drew a potion and drank it down quickly. Her body was in agony, but it lessened a small amount as the magic of the potion began repairing the damage she had sustained.

***Maybe my masters were wrong and you are worthy.*** Ska’arr tried to pinpoint the source of the voice in his mind. ***Regardless, you must die.*** Shribryn had almost reached Pelias when she felt an overwhelming urge to change the direction she was moving and stand right behind Ska’arr. ***This will help Ska’arr.***

Meanwhile, Ska’arr reached up and found the large alcove where the dragon was hiding. Sticking his face past the wall, he got a glimpse of the dragon just as one of its claws swung out and struck him on the side of the head. The dragon was huge. Its scales were a sickly greenish-white colour. The dragon’s most arresting feature was the group of tentacles that writhed around its mouth. Ska’arr couldn’t make sense of it. Fear gripped Ska’arr, his resolve severely shaken.

Raven carried a small splinter of wood in her claw. Her echo location allowed her to see the large golem chasing Shribryn. Flicking her claw forward, the splinter of wood broke apart into two smaller pieces. Each piece expanded larger and larger until the splinters looked like a titan’s javelins, whistling through the air towards the golem. The golem managed to throw one of its arms up, deflecting one of the splinters. The other slammed into the golem’s chest, piercing its body and getting lodged there. The golem did not seem perturbed by this turn of events. Seeing Kat below moving towards the golem, Raven swung around to the side, hoping to distract the golem so that Kat could get in some shots. As she swooped down, the golem’s fists swung out. One struck Raven on her back, sending her down towards the floor. The other struck from below, throwing her battered body back towards the ceiling. Raven had managed to partially roll with the punches, but her wounds were serious.

Pelias touched his armbands, adding magical enhancement to his healing spells. Running up to Shribryn, he called upon his divine magic to heal her. The moment his hand touched her shoulder, Shribryn’s body quaked as healing energy drove through her body.

Though healed physically, Shribryn’s mind was still addled. Moving behind Ska’arr, she tried to get his attention to help him. Pulling out her chain, she was preparing to strike Ska’arr so that he would pay attention to her when she stepped on a trapped tile. Tumbling away, the haze that had been clouding her judgment was dispelled. Feeling foolish at being used as a pawn and a potential lethal distraction for Ska’arr, Shribryn focused on the heavy footsteps coming towards her. Instead of turning to run, she channeled her fury and anger, and unleashed a line of fire that snaked towards the golem, wrapping itself around its legs.

Scuro commanded Dra-Koo-La to fly up to the ceiling. Scuro began to use the senses of his undead pet, hoping to pierce the illusion shrouding the dragon so he could strike it. Sensing the dragon with Dra-Koo-La’s help, Scuro directed his spectral hand up to touch the dragon. The spectral hand touched the dragon’s forelimb, and fire leaped out and engulfed the dragon, hurting it. “Dilago, go destroy the invisible foe!”

Dilago charged towards the golem when gravity suddenly reversed for him. He had been between both glowing posts when everything became bizarre. Bracing himself, Dilago slammed into the ceiling. Standing up, he looked over at Ro-Lund-Do as his master continued to fight.

Suddenly, the dragon sprung out of its alcove and flew towards a second alcove, found on the other side of the room. Ska’arr’s chain slammed into the side of the dragon as it passed, tearing deep furrows into the dragon’s scaled flesh. Raven turned back when she heard the beating of huge wings. Raven saw the hideous glory barreling towards her. Diving down quickly, Raven managed to dodge the dragon, but her nerves were shot full of fear. Raven noticed that the dragon’s wingspan was much smaller than what would be needed for such a beast to fly. ***How is it airborne?*** Raven tried to cast faerie fire on the dragon as it passed, but she lost the spell as she avoided a mid-air collision. The dragon flew into the other alcove and suddenly was gone from sight. Even Raven’s echo location was unable to find it.

Ska’arr quickly cast a fly spell and chased after the dragon. Swinging his chain into the alcove the dragon just entered, Ska’arr knew his chain had hit nothing. Landing by the double doors, Ska’arr’s mind was invaded once more. Ska’arr’s head throbbed. ***My masters were wrong. I will be better prepared next time. Perhaps you are worthy***.

Kat had tapped another of her charms, and suddenly, she was moving so very fast. Dashing up to the golem, she struck at it repeatedly, but the damn thing refused to drop. Kat had been fighting by feel. Though she was comfortable fighting without being able to see her opponent, when she was hit twice by the golem’s fists, it was time to improve the odds.

Kat’s eyes sparkled as her vision became incredibly sharp and clear. She could see the golem beside her, swinging at her. Diving beneath the strike, Kat ran forward and struck the golem repeatedly. Cracks began to form on the golem’s body. A blast of fire engulfed the golem. Pelias couldn’t believe it was still standing. The barrage continued on the golem as it swung back, trying to swat away all the annoying little gnats biting at it. Suddenly, the golem dropped to the ground with an earth shattering crash.

With the golem down and the dragon seemingly gone, the party regrouped by the double doors. Dilago stepped past the zone of anti-gravity and fell to the ground with a bone-shaking thud. Getting up, he showed no signs of discomfort or injury from the amazing fall he just sustained. Rushing towards the double doors, Dilago encountered another flipping-tile trap. He didn’t even break stride. Jumping over the trap even as it sprung, Dilago joined up with his master.

“That really hurt.” Shribryn was clutching her side and her head in an attempt to slow the blood loss. Pelias stepped forward and began healing everyone. “What’s next?” he asked.