

Demon Hunters: Part 14 - Battle For Blingdenstone



Story and setting based on the Out of the Abyss campaign produced by Wizards of the Coast. Demon Hunters is written by and original characters by GM4Him. Some descriptions of characters, places, events, etc. are taken directly from the Out of the Abyss campaign. And, of course, MAJOR SPOILERS for the Out of the Abyss campaign... though not really any spoilers in this particular part of the story. This part is original.

Chapter 1: Puddings, Oozes, and Jellies - Oh MY!

The Demon Hunters returned to Inner Blingdenstone and reported to the gnome leadership everything they had encountered. Upon hearing of Eromani's condition, having been aged by twenty-five years, the Diggermattocks immediately issued a decree and had word spread throughout the city in hopes that someone might have a Greater Restoration scroll or potion somewhere. They even agreed to pay for the item as thanks for everything the surfacers did to purge Rockblight of its foul inhabitants.

Meanwhile, the group returned to the Ruby in the Rough and laid Udhask's remains to rest in the catacombs. Burrow Warden Jadger then appeared, immensely grateful to them for all that they had done.

"And now, for your reward," said the old ghost. "I can provide knowledge to you about the strengths and weaknesses of anything you wish to hear about within Blingdenstone. So what will it be?"

The Demon Hunters considered what to ask about, and they agreed at last to inquire about the areas they had yet to explore. Jadger informed them that they had, in fact, cleared out a good portion of the northeast section by defeating the medusa and Ogremoch's Bane. That area would greatly expand Blingdenstone's housing potential. Best of all, at the top of the stairs near where they'd had their final battle, there was the Steadfast Stone.

"It was once the temple of Callarduran Smoothhands," said Jadger. "He is our god of stone and mining. The cavern was named after its long-lost galeb duhr protectors - the dharum suhn - also known as the 'Hearts of Steadfast Stone'. I cannot be sure, but I believe the temple requires cleansing. You'll need a special ruby spell gem to do so. Place it into one of the sockets in the menhir there, and it should begin the cleansing process."

"But beware!" said Jadger rather dramatically, startling Rini with his swift movements. "Once you begin the cleansing ritual, the evils that have taken up residency there are likely going to attack you. If I recall correctly, someone tried at one point, but they were killed by earth elementals controlled by Ogremoch's Bane. THAT is the evil there."

"We banished Ogremoch's Bane back to its home plane," said Derivell. "So do you think the temple is cleansed again now that the evil entity is no longer present?"

Jadger was surprised. "Oh. Well. Yes. That'll do it, I suppose. Hah! You did mention you defeated it, didn't you? Hmmm. Well, I guess you can't be sure until you return there and check it out. Still, if Ogremoch's Bane is gone, that likely did the trick."

"How will we know if it's been cleansed?" asked Fiovay.

The ghost rubbed its chin out of force of habit. "Well, you'll see a white light shining from the menhir. It'll produce a hallow effect protecting the galeb duhr from the influence of things like Ogremoch's Bane."

"So there will be galeb duhr there?" asked Eromani.

"Oh yes!" said Jadger. "Yes. They went into hiding when the temple was corrupted by Ogremoch's Bane. So now that its presence is gone, the galeb duhr have most likely returned to protect it."

"Is that the last area within Rockblight that we had to clear?" asked Vlyn.

"Indeed," said Jadger. "From there, a wide, descending staircase leads into the northwest corner of the city. That's the seat of Blingdenstone's former throne. It's where the House Center is, an old stockade, and all sorts of other residences and so forth."

"It's the heart of our fair home," the old ghost continued. "The House Center lies within a large cavern with a rocky sphere in its center. The sphere is hollowed out and contains the royal chambers from which the old kings and queens ruled."

"As for the stockade, it was once a shrine for Baervan Wildwanderer, our deity of the forest and the Father of Fish and Fungus. During the invasion of the drow, we erected a stockade made of zurkhwood and trillimac fungi. We kept our deep rothe there - you know, Underdark cattle - but it was ransacked by the invaders."

"Is there any other way into that area?" asked Derivell.

"Oh sure," said Jadger. "There are many passages into the northwest section." And he detailed them all, pointing them out to Fiovay who had been mapping everything as they went.

In the end, the kitsune noted that all but a few tunnels had been collapsed. "Looks like we either enter that section from the Steadfast Stone or from the Goldwhisker tunnels beyond their refuse pit. I mean, there's a sealed gate just off the House Center, but that would be like sounding trumpets and waving banners and proceeding with a giant parade into the area."

"I opt for the Steadfast Stone," said Rini who wrinkled her nose in disgust when the refuse pit was mentioned.

"We were planning on making sure Rockblight was cleared out anyway," said Derivell. "Makes the most sense to me to enter from that direction. Whatever evils are lurking in the northwest, they will not likely expect anyone coming from Rockblight. However, they may be guarding the wererat tunnels."

Then, before they left, Jadger helped Fiovey map out the remainder of Blingdenstone. He was quite helpful, and it seemed he had memorized every inch of the entire city. Sure, it was likely that his information was outdated, for he knew nothing of the Pudding King or the oozes, but it at least gave the Demon Hunters the ability to strategize. Later, Fiovey even cross-referenced her map with ones the Diggermattocks provided, allowing her to fill in even more details.

And so, the party rested and recovered near the Ruby in the Rough. Much to Rini's relief, Helyn's group had acquired a few Greater Restoration scrolls and even potions, and Eromani was cured of her aging. Only Tanwen remained aged by twelve years, and this was only because she wanted it.

For the remainder of the day, the Demon Hunters and their friends enjoyed another reprieve; eating, drinking and delighting in the ambiance of the Foaming Mug and the gnome city. Rising early the next day, they set out once more into Rockblight, combing the entire area and making sure it was safe for the citizens to begin to inhabit it. By midday, barriers were removed, and the Diggermattocks led the way, flooding every portion of the newly claimed section. And indeed, the Steadfast Stone was cleansed. Three galeb duhrs were stationed about the menhir with the white light shining.

"We can now fortify this area with our elementals, thanks to you," said Senni Diggermattock. "You have no idea how much this means to us."

"The pleasure is all ours," said Derivell with a warm smile. "And we are most relieved to know that whatever we encounter within the northwestern section, you are at our backs ready to protect us if we need to fall back."

"Absolutely," said the gnome leader.

After that, the Demon Hunters made their way to the temple, and sure enough, there was a wide, descending staircase. They were surprised to discover that it ended before a wall of collapsed stone that blocked access to the tunnels and caves that constituted the northwestern section. With the help of the deep gnomes, however, the debris was cleared by the next morning. "After all," said Dorbo at one point, "many hands make a work light. Eh?"

During the night, the Demon Hunters debated. At first, they were all going to enter the northwestern section, but upon further consideration, they decided that a smaller party might be best. In this way, those who would go could rest and depart when the way was clear while everyone else would help the gnomes remove the debris. "Besides," said Fi, "this is a stealth mission. Let's face it, not everyone is cut out for that. We're just going in to see what we're dealing with."

And so, Fiovey, Aelun, and Vlynrifane slipped through the gap shortly after breakfast. It was no bigger than a large man. Tanwen and Bastion wouldn't even be able to fit. Their first objective was to scout out the House Center, for not only was it closer, it had the widest open spaces. If

there was a gathering of oozes, it would surely be within that cavern. From there, they would attempt to skirt about to the stockade in the far northwest corner, and after that they would check out the remainder.

"Remember, Fi, it's just a scout mission," said Derivell. "Don't engage if at all possible."

"Yes, Dad," said Fiovay sarcastically. Then she giggled and winked.

As soon as they were within, the three went straight into a tunnel that branched right and left. The left passage was collapsed by the gnomes while the right angled northwest towards the House Center. There were no signs of slimes or oozes, but they did not lower their guard even for a moment. With each foot they traversed, they expected to spot enemies, and they were ready to flee in a heartbeat.

Because they all had darkvision, they produced no source of light, allowing them to avoid being beacons. Fiovay led the way, for she was the stealthiest, while Vlyn and Aelun remained a good twenty feet behind in case she ran into trouble.

They came to another fork. Left led towards the House Center according to Fiovay's map. Right led back around to where they'd entered. There was some sort of pool of water in that direction, and they figured it might attract oozes. "Maybe we'll check that out first," suggested Fi. "Don't want oozes at our back to cut us off." But as far as they could tell, there were no oozes near the modestly sized source of water.

They returned to the intersection, came to another fork, and Fi decided to take them to the right. "Left leads to another collapsed tunnel and an entrance into the House Center cavern," she explained. "But there is only one way in and out from that direction. We could get easily trapped there. To the right we have more passages - more avenues of escape should we need them."

Sure enough they came to a larger intersection with four other tunnels branching off of it. "The closest left passage leads to the House Center," said Fi. "The second one further on and to the left leads both to the House Center and off towards the Stockade. The closest on the right winds back towards the pool or left on towards other areas of this section. The furthest on the right is connected to the closest on the right."

"So the closest left wins," said Vlyn. Fiovay acknowledged with a smile, and she led the way.

Jadger's description in no way prepared them for what they beheld. The walls of the great cavern were covered in glowing slime - trickling, sickening green slime. Echoes of dripping water also filled the cave. In the center there was a large spherical structure held up off the floor by stone pillars. However, around the pillars crawled dozens of living oozes, heaving forward while reaching out with grasping pseudopods. The sphere's surface, like the cave walls, was covered with glowing slime. Black swirled with yellow and gray in a disgusting soup. The

unearthly patterns in the movements strained the eyes and tugged at the minds of the three who stood gawking in a sort of bewitched horror.

The cavern was damp and had a hundred and eighty foot high ceiling lined with dripping stalactites. The hollowed-out stone sphere was a hundred and fifty feet in diameter and elevated a good ten feet off the ground, such that the top of the sphere was only about twenty feet below the cave ceiling. Stone ramps without railings climbed thirty feet to four small, open doorways in the sides.

And then, the trio jumped in fright as a disembodied voice filled the cave. "What's this? What's this? Visitors? Now? No! Not yet! Not yet! We're not ready! Go away, pests! Begone with you! I will call upon thee and all of Blingdenstone to announce our glad tidings of the Faceless Lord to come at the proper time! Begone, I say! Begone!"

The three withdrew immediately, expecting the slimes, puddings, jellies, and oozes to begin to pursue them, but they did not go far. They only retreated back to the last intersection. When they arrived, each stared at the other two, eyes wide and unsure.

Finally, Aelun found his voice. "There have to be hundreds of ooze creatures congregating there."

"Drawn by the Pudding King," said Vlyn absently as if her mind was elsewhere.

"Dozens upon dozens," said Fi. "Black puddings, gray oozes, and ochre jellies, as well as the occasional gelatinous cube. How in all the Realms are we going to clear out THAT?"

"There's no way we can do this alone," said Vlyn, shaking her head. "Retreat is our only option. If the gnomes want to survive here in Blingdenstone... nevermind resettling this section - I'm talking just surviving here - they are going to have to join the fight. We may even need to get the myconids to help and anyone else we can find."

"It's literally hopeless if Juiblex is within that dome," said Aelun. "All those oozes and slimes and such... That's just one piece of this nasty pie. If the demon lord is already here, the city's doomed. Everything we've fought for up until this point has been to clear the way for the Faceless Lord."

"But wait," said Vlyn. "The voice said something about it not being time yet."

"Oh yeah," said Fi. "He said he'd call upon us and all of Blingdenstone to announce the Faceless Lord has come at the right time. So he's not here yet."

"Maybe if we do clear out the slimes and such, the Faceless Lord won't come at all," said Vlyn.

“Or he’ll be even more ticked that we murdered all his minions,” said Aelun dismally. “I don’t know. This whole thing is too much. We’ve definitely bitten off more than we can chew.”

“Well,” said Fi, “do we keep searching the area? I mean, we just scratched the surface here, but with that many jellies...”

“They know we’re here,” said Vlyn, her eyes constantly darting about to every entranceway. “They could surround us at any time. I think it’s too dangerous to continue. He warned us to begone. If we keep going, we’re likely going to die.”

“But we don’t even know the full strength of what we’re hoping to fight here,” said Fi. “Who knows what else is lurking around all these passages?”

Aelun shook his head, a grim expression on his face. “I’m with Vlyn. It’s too risky. Like Vlyn said, they KNOW we’re here. They may have been following us or watching us since we entered the section. If we push it too far, they’ll likely surround us, ambush us, and take us out easily. I don’t think we should take that chance. And, in fact, in my opinion, as I said, this place is lost. This... This is literally hopeless.”

“Well, we faced the demon lady in the grove and survived,” said Fi. “I don’t know. I don’t think it’s hopeless.”

“No point in arguing about it here,” said Vlyn. “Let’s get back to the others and report. IF we stand a chance at reclaiming this section for the gnomes, we need to know what we have to work with - how many gnomes can fight, what myconids might help us, numbers of earth elementals, spell gems, etc.”

And, with that, the three hurried back to the Steadfast Stone. As they left the intersection where they’d discussed their next course of action, a sickly-looking figure stood hidden in the entranceway furthest from them along the north side of the cavern. With him was a black pudding and a gray ooze. His sneer turned into an almost toothless, insane smile.

“Ah, my children,” he growled, his voice raspy, deep and guttural. “See now? Invaders. Usurpers. They want to lay waste to the Faceless Lord’s Kingdom. They want to take what is rightfully ours - what is rightfully ITS! But we have frightened them off - for now. For now.”

His expression soured, wrinkling his entire head like a prune. “But they will return. Did you hear? They will return with greater numbers - even our Lord’s most hated enemies! Myconids! Fungal abominations! Like Zuggtmoy.” He spat a black mucus wad at his feet.

“This is a test of our faith and devotion,” he continued. “We must prepare. We must fight them off so that we can clear the way for ITS coming. If they return, we must push them back but do our best not to kill too many of them. The Faceless Lord will want them alive - to consume... to devour slowly... to assimilate...”

And with that, he withdrew, returning to his own personal throne room. As he went, the two royal oozes followed as if they were, in fact, just as he had called them - his children. The Pudding King was not afraid. No. In fact, he was excited. This was his chance to prove himself to his master. This was his moment of triumph and glory. Perhaps the Faceless Lord would reward him. Perhaps he would be his master's steward or better yet - his regent.

"Oh Faceless Lord!" he called out as he entered his throne room, and he spread his arms out to the side as wide as he could. "Hear my prayer. Grant me the strength to be victorious. I, the Pudding King, shall smite your enemies and chase them back into the holes they dare to crawl out of. I will prepare them for your great feast. Come soon and find me worthy. Continue to grant me your favor - to be your regent here in Blingdenstone FOREVER!"

Then he turned to the black pudding. "Princess Ebonmire. Go now. Gather and prepare those at the stockade." He turned to the gray ooze. "Prince Livid. Go to the House Center. Await my command. Soon. They will come soon. We must remain ever vigilant." The two oozes departed at once, leaving him alone.

He sat upon his throne made of chiseled stone, sculpted with lidless eyes and gaping mouths. A patch of green slime covered it. More patches of green slime hung from the ceiling, forming hideous drapes along the walls. Yet more pools dotted the floor. In front of the throne was a footstool made from a squat, petrified mushroom that he kicked his feet up on.

Phosphorescent lichen illuminated the cave, casting wicked shadows on the Pudding King's face. He grinned once more. "Soon. Soon will be my moment of triumph. Soon. Soon. Soon..."

Galeb Duhr



The Pudding King



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Chapter 2: The War Council

Derivell stood in Diggermattock Hall, arms folded across his chest. It had been a long day. First, they'd worked all night to clear the way so Vlyn, Fiovay and Aelun could scout the northwestern section. Then, after a very short period of waiting, the three returned to deliver news that was, in short, terrible. Hundreds, possibly thousands, of oozes, slimes, jellies, and more had taken up residence in what was being called "The Pudding Court", and as far as the knight could tell, there was very little hope that they could do anything about it.

But after the news was given, the Diggermattocks were swift to act. Elementals were posted at the Steadfast Stone, and the leadership returned to Inner Blingdenstone with the Demon Hunters. They sent word to Chipgrin of the Goldwhiskers to see if he would be willing to meet to discuss battle plans. The wererat gnome complied, bringing an entourage with him, and they gathered at the hall along with Helyn and her companions.

But as Vlyn suggested, the gnomes sent word to the myconids to join them. After all, if Blingdenstone fell to Juiblex and its oozes, the myconids would once again have nowhere to stay. If they wanted to keep their new cavern as their grove, they would need to come to the aid of the svirfneblin to wipe out the ooze infestation once and for all.

While they waited, news spread quickly throughout the city. Before long, Nomi Pathshutter and Gurnik Tapfing arrived, representing the Stoneheart Enclave. Kazook Pickshine arrived, representing the Miners' Guild. Even Burrow Warden Jadger's ghost managed to make it out of the Ruby in the Rough with the aid of a young gnome named Trisk Adamantelpiece who carried the old coot's bones in a box. Trisk was, apparently, secretly training as the new leader of the Burrow Wardens under Jadger's guidance and direction.

As soon as Sovereign Basidia arrived, Senni asked Derivell to inform everyone about what they had discovered. Derivell, in turn, gestured to Fiovay so that she could give her firsthand account. Afterwards, the council broke into tireless debating as they argued about what they should do. Some called for an immediate evacuation before Juiblex itself showed up. Others demanded that they stay and fight to the bitter end.

At one point, Jadger's ghost said that Blingdenstone had no hope to defeat the threat if the settlement stood divided. That meant counting the Goldwhiskers and myconids and all as being absolute equals and sharing the space in Blingdestone as one cohesive new community.

"You're out of touch, Old One," said Dorbo gruffly. "We've already counted the Goldwhiskers as allies as well as the myconids. The myconids are content to live outside of Blingdenstone proper, and the Goldwhiskers will share Inner Blingdenstone and the House Center with us."

"Well," said Jadger with equal grumpiness. "Then act like it. Right now, all I hear is bickering, and it's getting us nowhere. Chipgrin wants to stay and fight. You want to flee with your tail between your legs. Your wife wants to fight. The Burrow Wardens stand ready to fight. The

myconids are pacifists and don't want to get involved, but they also want to keep their pretty new home. The Stoneheart Enclave is ready to pack up and run. The Miners' Guild is scared \$#@\$. Nobody can make up their minds, for crying out loud!"

"Not all of us," said Nomi under her breath. "I'm all for fighting."

"It's just, we've been through so much already," said Kazook. "This is beyond us. It's time to count our losses and return to Mithral Hall."

"See?" said Jadger. "See what I mean?"

Derivell rubbed the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger to try to alleviate some of the tension building. He had a throbbing headache. Eromani put her arm around his waist, trying to comfort him while also hoping it might comfort her at the same time. Their eyes met. They shared a weak smile. "Any ideas?" she asked him.

He shrugged. "We haven't been given numbers yet. I don't even know what we're working with. Part of the problem is that we have to get everyone on board before we determine a strategy for taking out the oozes."

Eromani considered this for a moment while the council continued to fight. "You know, that's not necessarily true. If we could come up with a solid plan of action, we might be able to convince the council to all stand and fight."

Derivell nodded. "Good point. So you think we should stay and fight?"

"Don't you?" she asked. "Shouldn't we at least give it a shot? They've already been through so much to rebuild this place, and so have we to clear out Rockblight. I'd hate to simply give up and let the oozes run this place."

"True." Then he unfolded his arms and stepped forward, cutting into the debate. "Attention, please. Attention. Everyone, please! Listen." It took a few more tries, but he finally managed to take command.

"Before we can properly decide what we're going to do - whether we should fight or flee - we need a solid strategy. In order to truly develop a solid strategy, we need to know exactly what we have to work with. That said, I believe I have at least the groundwork for said strategy if you are willing to at least consider staying and fighting."

He looked at Kazook. "What if we actually do have the numbers and resources to defeat the oozes? Should we just toss aside years of hard work simply out of fear? Shouldn't we at least try and fight?"

He turned to Senni. "But what if we examine our strength and determine that we actually don't have what it takes? What if after we have considered every avenue we discover that our cause is hopeless? Shouldn't we then evacuate so we don't senselessly throw lives away?"

By acknowledging both sides of the issue, he could see that he was at least convincing them to hear him out. "So, here is my basic plan of attack. We can build on this once we know exactly how many troops we have and what our resources are."

He pointed at Chipgrin. "Chipgrin and his wererats have an opening on the far west side just at the edge of their territory. This is the most likely attack avenue that we would use. He would take a larger number of troops and assault the oozes from there. Likewise, Dorbo and Senni would lead their troops from the Steadfast Stone, attacking from the east. Both of these forces would concentrate on luring the enemy away from the House Center."

"Luring them away from the House Center?" said Dorbo. "Why?"

"Because there's a gate near the House Center that a third force could attack from," Derivell explained. "This force would push inward just enough for a small team to slip away into side passages. This small team would seek out the Pudding King and assassinate him. With the Pudding King dead, the oozes might be reduced to their typically mindless and disorganized state. Even if all we do is kill the Pudding King, we can return little by little and slowly dwindle down the remaining ooze population until we clear out the entire Pudding Court."

"What do you think?" he concluded, looking around at the council. "I know it's rough, but it's a basic strategy that, like I said, we can build on once we have actual numbers and resources." A silence fell throughout the room, for those gathered were considering his proposal. Seeing that they were now being receptive, he turned back to Senni. "Let's start with strength, numbers and resources. What do we have to work with? What is the strength of the svirfneblin here in Blingdenstone - not including the Goldwhiskers?"

Dorbo and Senni discussed briefly. "We have a total population of three hundred," said Senni. "Though we're not all fighters, there are many who are willing to give their lives for Blingdenstone."

"Rough estimate, then, of how many we might have for an army against the oozes," said Derivell.

"I'd say maybe eighty," said Senni, "though of that eighty maybe twenty are actually trained soldiers."

"Let's not forget that we have elementals and spell gems," said Nomi. "The elementals have a resilient defense against oozes, making them perfect to lead any charge. If we could find Entemoch's Boon as well, somewhere outside of Blingdenstone, its summoning circle could be put to good use. That would greatly increase our chances of success by increasing our

numbers of elementals. With Ogremoch's Bane having cut down on our elemental population, we REALLY need that summoning circle."

"How many do we have presently?" asked Derivell.

"Twenty," said Nomi, "give or take."

"I suppose that since Ogremoch's Bane is gone and the Steadfast Stone is purified, twenty earth elementals would make quite the vanguard against the oozes," said Gurnik thoughtfully. "The Stoneheart Enclave could protect them during the battle, and even untrained combatants could stay back and support."

"The Goldwhiskers stand ready," said Chipgrin firmly. "We aren't many, but we're sturdier than the average deep gnome. We can also take point on the invasion."

Derivell fought to maintain his calm. He was already tired of asking the same question, and he'd only had to ask it a few times. "How many do you have that will fight?"

"Oh, right," said Chipgrin with a smile. "Twenty, maybe thirty."

"Miners' Guild?" asked the paladin, looking at Kazook.

"Well," he replied hesitantly. "I suppose we could concoct oils to protect weapons and armor from acid corrosion, but I would need a large quantity of ingredients from Neverlight Grove."

"Out of the question," said Eromani. "The grove is dead to us with Zuggtmoy there. As it is, she could still be in this region looking for us out of spite and revenge. She'll be on alert and would certainly capture or kill anyone who even tries to sneak into that place."

"Perhaps we could send a shipment of salt to Gracklstugh to trade for high-quality weapons," suggested Senni.

"That would take too long," said Derivell. "Who knows how much time we actually have before Juiblex arrives. If we are unable to wipe out his army of oozes before he gets here, Blingdenstone will certainly fall. Only if we're able to clean the place out and properly fortify it will we stand any chance at all in defeating the demon lord. We need all of Blingdenstone's defenses concentrated on keeping the Faceless Lord out. That means we have to find every crevice and crack and seal them up so he can't ooze his way in."

"But without good weapons..." Kazook began.

Eromani cut him off. "The bulk of our front line will have to be the elementals," said the sorceress. "In narrow tunnels, that should suffice. One elemental could hold a passage fairly well while those behind it use arrows and bolts to wear down the oozes."

"We'll need a LOT of ammunition then," said Kazook. "A LOT!"

"Best get to work, then," said Chipgrin. "Stone arrowheads shouldn't be a problem. The real need will be zurkhwood for the shafts, but a single zurkhwood could create a LOT of arrows and bolts."

"That we can do," said Senni. "That is also something we can get everyone to help with. We can issue an order that all inhabitants of Blingdenstone are to assist in gathering the supplies we need and to help fashion arrows and bolts to use in the battle to come."

"We will also assist," said Basidia, "though I'm not sure how. We can provide for you only ten myconids. Our numbers are not great. Still, we have already begun to create spore servants and have twelve that can join you at our command. They might be helpful against such foes."

"Anything is helpful," said Fiovey, trying to encourage the sovereign.

"Bah!" said Jadger suddenly, and he "stood". "The Burrow Wardens will defend this city, and since our champions here have managed to calm so many spirits, I believe I have the ability to now convince those same spirits to aid us in this fight. I will rally the other benevolent ghosts of Blingdenstone, and we will once again stand in defense of our fair city."

Derivell immediately noticed that morale was rising within the members of the war council. "This is good. See? It does seem as though we have a fighting chance. Maybe we aren't quite so outnumbered and outclassed."

"Not only that," said Aelun who stood near Vlyn against a wall off to Derivell's right, "but I think that many are overlooking something." He instantly had everyone's attention. "The Pudding King seems like a coward. He is not likely going to be leading from the front of either invasion corridor. My guess is that he'll direct the battle either from the House Center or from the rear of the two divisions of his troops. This means that Derivell's plan is actually quite likely to succeed. The smaller force we send in will come at him suddenly from behind no matter what way you look at it. They will undoubtedly take him out before he even realizes that they're there. Even if he's in the House Center when the third force attacks, the assassination team will slip around, find him, and kill him while the third force draws the attention of his remaining troops."

"Assassination!" said Fiovey with a slightly twisted grin on her face.

"It seems to me that the earth elementals should lead the charge from the Goldwhisker territory," Derivell said after allowing the council to process what Aelun said. "There are more wide-open spaces in that region. We will need the bulk of them to form a line to prevent the oozes from slipping past to the heart of our troops. I think the Stoneheart Enclave should lead the army from there."

"We will be needed at the Steadfast Stone," said Nomi. "We will use its power to help protect the elementals from a distance."

"Okay," said Derivell. "Then I will lead the force from that direction."

Chipgrin shook his head. "I'll lead that force. I know those parts better than anyone. Me and my clan will support the elementals."

"Senni and I'll lead the army from the Steadfast Stone," said Dorbo. "Will we have any elementals with us?"

"The Stoneheart Enclave can provide a few to command the elementals in both armies," said Nomi, "but I will be needed at the Steadfast Stone. I'll also need Gurnik. I'd say fifteen elementals for the Goldwhisker army and five or so for Dorbo's. As someone mentioned, a single elemental in those narrower passages on the east side can stand against a plethora of oozes while the forces behind peg them off."

"Nah," said Chipgrin. "Fifty/fifty. Trust me, I know the western tunnels. There are a few narrow sections we can position the elementals in, and we can lure the oozes right to them. I know of at least four choke points - two really good ones."

"Fine," said Nomi. "Ten each."

"Who will lead the third larger force?" asked Helyn.

"I thought I might," said Derivell, "since Chipgrin and Dorbo are taking the other two. But maybe you could instead. If you and your team lead the charge at the gate, we could fight our way in, and me and my team could take the first eastern passage and slip away. You fight the oozes as long as you can and then retreat back through the door - seal it behind you."

"I could do that," said Helyn. She looked at her party to make sure they were all on board. "I think we're in."

"So who is your team?" asked Dorbo as he looked at Derivell.

He shrugged. "Me, Eromani, Rini, Zen, Vlyn, Shreiken, Fiovay..." He stopped, unsure who else should go with him.

"The more you take with you, the less we have to support the three forces in the battle," said Havvah. "I think the group you just mentioned should be it. Leave the rest of us to support the third force. Since it'll be the closest to the House Center, there may be more opposition than you think there. Besides, we don't really know if Juiblex has already arrived. If it has, we will lure it out once the third force attacks."

"If Juiblex is present," said Derivell, "everyone full retreat. Seriously. The death toll will be far too great. This city isn't worth the lives of so many."

Havvah shrugged and nodded. "A wise call."

"What about Aelun?" said Fiovay. "We could use another mage with us taking out the Pudding King, and he's also a ranger. Could come in very handy, you know?"

"I agree," said Vlyn, but Derivell noticed that she refused to look at him.

'Both ladies just want him close to make sure they can keep him safe,' the paladin guessed. 'If he's not with us, they have no control over what happens to him.' It was a bit annoying, but he couldn't blame them. How would he feel if someone suggested that Eromani be in a different group? He'd probably have the same reaction. He couldn't pretend like that wasn't the case.

"Aelun?" said Derivell. "You in?"

The young man seemed unsure. He looked from Vlyn to Fiovay and then back to Derivell. Both of the girls seemed to be urging him with their eyes. Aelun nodded. "I'm in. Not gonna lie. I'd rather be with you than fighting in one of the three armies."

"Tanwen's not going to like it if she doesn't go with you as well," said Graiyla. "I hope you're not expecting me to babysit her."

"We'll need to explain to Tanwen that some oozes are resistant to fire. She won't be as effective against them," said Eromani.

"I honestly forgot all about her," said Derivell. "Where is she now anyway?"

"Arla's with her," said Rini. "She and Eldeth decided to stay with Tanwen to avoid being a part of 'the magic.'" She gestured to the council. "Besides, I think Arla's still freaked out about what happened during the fight with the medusa and such."

"Think she'll be okay?" asked Derivell.

"She'll be fine," said Rini. "She's still just processing the whole 'I'm a Chosen' thing."

"So what ARE we going to do with Tanwen?" asked Eromani.

Derivell shook his head. "She's not stealthy at all," he replied. "She might rush into things and get herself killed." He sighed. "I don't know. It's not wise to take her with us, but it's not wise to have her in any of the three armies. At the same time, she's a powerful ally. We really could use her in the fight."

"If Aelun's with you, perhaps the third force could use another sorceress," said Eromani. "I could stay with Helyn's army and try to keep Tanwen under control. You know she views me as a mother, and I speak the language she's most fluent in. If anyone can keep her under control, I can - hopefully... maybe..."

Derivell felt his insides twist. 'Yep. There we go. Now I'm in the same boat as Fiovay and Vlynrifane. But she has a point. Either I should stay with the army and Tanwen or she should. But which should it be?'

"Assassinating the Pudding King is a stealth mission," Havvah pointed out. "Having a heavily armored knight whose armor is clanging around constantly isn't exactly going to be stealthing it. Besides, Eromani's spells and abilities might be better suited on the assassination mission. I think if anyone stays with the third army, it should be you, Derivell. You should take command and lead the way with Helyn as your lieutenant. You could ride on Bastion and command the charge, and your abilities will draw LOTS of attention away from the infiltration team."

"Then you could keep Tanwen under control and keep her from getting killed," said Eromani. "I suppose she's right. Swords aren't as good against puddings and jellies, but spells and missiles are. That might be the better fit."

Derivell's jaw clenched. Almost everyone who had become critically important to him was going in the group meant to fight the leader of the oozes while leaving him behind. He knew, deep down, that he would actually be in just as much danger as they would, but that was of no consolation. He didn't want to be separated from them. He wanted to be with them.

But the logic behind the decision was sound. He could ride on Bastion. He could keep Tanwen under control - hopefully - and he could make a ton of noise and draw lots of attention to himself. With Selune's light and radiance, he would be like a beacon attracting moths. People also seemed to consider him to be the better tactician as well. They thought he was inspiring. They trusted him. And, to top it all off, he was loud. He would, in fact, be a detriment to the assassination of the Pudding King. He could not deny it. They needed to catch him by surprise if at all possible.

He looked at Helyn. "Well, are you willing to share your command?"

She laughed lightly. "I'm not one of those proud types," she told him. "You can take command. I'll follow your lead. If you want me as your second, I'm good with that too."

"I'd appreciate that, actually," he told her. "You know, I'm not actually as experienced at this as everyone seems to think. Two heads are better than one."

"Unless the two heads are butting," said Willowir, the tiefling mage of Helyn's group. She had a mischievous look on her face. "Like a married couple, as long as one is willing to submit to the other if you clash, we won't have a problem."

"It's settled, then," said Senni. "Are we doing this? Are we really doing this? Do we actually think we can win?"

"I think we have a very good chance of winning," said Derivell confidently. "Even if all we do is kill the Pudding King and retreat, that should throw the oozes into disarray. After that, we can slowly and meticulously raid the Pudding Court and withdraw, taking out a few at a time until we've completely destroyed them. It may take months, but without leadership, they pose much less of a threat."

"Agreed," said Senni. "Everyone on board?"

There was a vote. Derivell and his group unanimously voted to fight. The Diggermattocks were both on board. Chipgrin hooted when asked to give his support. Nomi and Gurnik of the Stoneheart Enclave both agreed, though Gurnik still seemed hesitant. Jadger's ghost nodded and said nothing more, and seeing that everyone else was willing to fight, Kazook caved.

¹Chapter 3: Cry Havoc!

Two days later, the armies gathered. In the end, Eromani wasn't so sure they'd made the right decision. Dorbo's army was fifty svirfneblin including five so-called Burrow Wardens, ten earth elementals, three myconids, five ghosts, and only three from the Stoneheart Enclave.

Chipgrin's army was twenty-five wererats, ten svirfneblin archers, three myconids, eight earth elementals, five ghosts, and another three from the Stoneheart Enclave.

As for the third group, there were twenty svirfneblin, three myconids, Basidia, all twelve spore servants, two earth elementals, six ghosts including Jadger, and only one from the Stoneheart Enclave. That said, they were being led by Derivell riding atop Bastion, and he would have Helyn plus her six companions - Drym, Keema, Elris, Fayra, Ellira, and Wilowir - supporting him. Besides them, he had Havvah, Arla, Graiyla, Tanwen, Eldeth, Fargas, Prince Derendil, Ront, Jimjar and even Topsy and Turvy.

"There'd be more," said Nomi bitterly, "if we'd found Entemoch's Boon."

But they hadn't. Because of the unknown, they gathered as many resources as they could within just those two days. This meant that they didn't have as much ammunition as they'd have liked, not as many elementals, and no higher quality weapons for the bulk of their troops.

"But again," said Derivell, "the ultimate objective is to assassinate the Pudding King. The main attacks are just to divert attention long enough to get the team in and out. That's it. Once the Pudding King is dead, THEN we can spend more time trying to acquire ammunition, weapons, finding Entemoch's Boon, and so forth."

But Eromani wasn't at all sure it would be enough. From what Fiovey had reported - and she usually didn't exaggerate about such things - there were hundreds of oozes. That meant that they were likely outnumbered by anywhere between three to six times. Who really knew exactly how many? With all the swirling oozes intermingling, the numbers could even be as high as ten to one.

'But we're just needing to get in and out,' she reminded herself. 'Get in as fast as you can, kill the Pudding King, and get the flip out. That's all. That's it. We don't have to destroy them all.'

Derivell mounted Bastion and checked his equipment. 'He looks really nervous - scared even. I doubt it's for himself. He's afraid of who he might lose. He's especially afraid for me and the others with me. He's afraid we might even get in and kill the Pudding King, but we might not be able to find an avenue of escape - or that we won't even succeed at all. There is a good potential that all escape routes could get cut off rather quickly. We might not have a way back.'

¹ Dice rolls for combat at this point have been removed from the adventure. After all, it would get extremely tedious to constantly roll when there are so many enemies to fight against. Thus, the DM has determined that it is best to simply describe what is happening in combat as opposed to rolling out every hit from every character. Only the most important die rolls will be necessary.

“Okay everyone,” said Derivell as he turned to face his army. “Listen up. The plan is proceeding as we had agreed. One thing that we have added. Archers, you will fire only upon my command. When I cry ‘Havoc!’ then you shoot in the direction that I point. Save your arrows until then. Choose your targets wisely, but generally I will only cry ‘Havoc!’ when I see a larger wave of enemies. If you just point and shoot in that direction, you’ll hit something. Keep rearming and firing until I raise my sword or until every enemy in that direction is dead. Of course, if the enemy breaks through our lines and is coming for you, defend yourselves with everything you have, but unless that happens, only fire on my mark. Also make sure you hold back so that the enemy has a harder time getting to you.”

“When we throw open the doors, one earth elemental will immediately charge left and the other right, leading the way. The myconid spore servants will fan out and take the middle. Jadger and his six ghosts will flit around attacking everything they encounter and distracting the oozes. Helyn will follow the elemental on the left while I lead the charge on the right. Two myconids with Helyn and her team. One myconid with me. Basidia will be behind his spore servants in the middle. Havvah, Arla, Graiyla and Tanwen with me. Eldeth, Fargas, Prince Derendil, Ront, Jimjar, Topsy and Turvy with Helyn. And, of course, Eromani and her team will follow my team at the rear, looking for the best opportunity to slip away.”

“We will push in as hard and fast as we can until we are able to get Eromani’s team to the closest side passage. From there, they are on their own. We will then fall back a bit to try to lure the oozes towards the gate and away from the Infiltration team.”

He turned to look at Eromani, and he gestured to a horn that he’d given her. “When your task is completed or if you require assistance at any point, you can blow on this horn, and we will do what we can to push our way to you in order to extract you. Understand?”

Eromani nodded and said nothing. She didn’t know what to say. What good would it do? If anything, her own anxieties could be noticed and cause individuals to lose heart. ‘It’s going to be fine,’ she kept telling herself. ‘Rini’s going to be safe. Zen’s going to be safe. Vlyn and Shreiken will be safe. Fiovey and Aelun will be safe. Derivell’s going to be safe. I’m going to be safe. Everyone’s going to survive this, and we’ll all have the full activities of our limbs and organs and so forth.’

“If you hear horns blasting repeatedly over and over again, that means that one of the two other armies is in serious trouble. They are retreating and sealing off the exits behind them. That means the way to get to them is cut off. As we retreat, I will also sound my horn, announcing that our way is cut off as well.” He patted a horn he also wore on his hip. “Remember, repeated blasting on the horns means retreat, so make sure that if you need us you sound a long blast - one long blast after another.” He said this last bit to Eromani. “If we charge into the House Center again, I will also sound one long blast after another to announce my return to the battlefield.”

He took in a deep breath and let it out slowly to ease the tension between his shoulders. ²“This is it, everyone. Stay strong. Be of good courage! Remember, these are mindless slimes and oozes. They are easily tricked and outmaneuvered. One of us equals ten of them. They don’t stand a chance against us. Let there be ten thousand of them, and we will still prevail this day, for we are not only better than them, we have the good gods on our side. Selune’s light shall shine forth upon the battlefield, and her purity and might shall be our vanguard.”

“Tyr’s justice is with us. Helm will protect us. Torm, the ever-faithful, will not abandon us. Ilmater will heal our wounds. Mielikki and Silvanus are eager to cleanse this realm of these unnatural blights. Tamara’s mercy will grant us favor. Her light will go before us along with Selune’s and Lathander’s, blinding our enemies and piercing the Underdark with their purity.” Eromani blushed at the mention of her deity.

“Even Zybilna is with us,” he added, gesturing to Fiovay who also seemed to blush. “May her magic empower us and give us great success. Moradin, along with the gods of the gnomes and halflings, and Lady Firehair, Goddess of Beauty - they are all our champions this day, going before us into battle to grant us the victory.” Then the army upraised their weapons with shouts, and the morale of the entire force was lifted along with them.

It was short-lived. Horns blew to initiate the attack from both Chipgrin’s and Dorbo’s invasion corridors. This signaled that they were engaged in battle. Derivell waited painfully long, unsure when was the best time to signal that the bars and braces should be removed from the gates before him. Then, at last, when he could no longer take the wait, he gestured with his sword, and the gnomes who were on standby ripped the beams away and yanked the heavy doors open.

The House Center loomed before them, and much to their great displeasure, it was not as empty as they were hoping. Oozes, jellies puddings and gelatinous cubes slurped towards them, some faster than others. The elementals and spore servants surged into the enemy ranks pounding and slashing oozes but making very little progress. Nevertheless, they proved to be doing their job. The oozes swarmed them and attempted to wear them down with their pseudopods to no immediate avail.

Derivell spotted a gelatinous cube making its way towards the elemental he was supporting, and he pointed his sword in its direction. “Havoc!” he shouted, and the svirfneblin rushed into the House Center area, maintaining position just inside the gate. From there they fired in the creature’s direction. A volley of arrows and bolts rained upon the square blob and every ooze near it, and the paladin didn’t raise his sword until he saw the bluish cube begin to dissolve into goo, indicating it was destroyed.

“Helyn! Focus on the gelatinous cubes!” he called out, and she nodded, her companions hurling spells as much as they could to save their arrows and bolts. “They can engulf even the elementals and spore servants and can render them useless to us.”

² Persuasion Check, DC 10. Derivell rolled 11, granting Inspiration to everyone.

The way was not clear. Eromani hurled a firebolt again and again, as did Aelun. Rini cast Sacred Flame while Vlynrifane used Moonbeam. Still, they could not clear a path to the closest tunnel, for every time they destroyed an ooze, another one took its place.

Derivell recognized this, and he called out, "Eromani! Get down! Havoc!" Then he pointed at the oozes that were blocking the way. Eromani dropped into a crouch, as did those with her, and the archers unleashed their fury. Arrows and bolts soared over their heads. Oozes turned into puddles left and right.

The way was finally clear. It wasn't much, but Eromani could see that there was about a ten foot gap between the oozes and the right wall of the cavern. "Go! Go! Go!" she called, and she sprinted the distance. Rini rode upon Zen, keeping pace with her, and Vlynrifane and Shreiken were right behind. Aelun and Fiovey were at the rear, barely making it before the oozes closed off the path. But the point was that they'd made it, and they were faster than the oozes.

The exit was directly ahead of them, heading due east. It narrowed at the mouth of the tunnel so that there was only about a five-foot gap. As the party hastened to reach it, more oozes, black puddings and even a gelatinous cube, tried to cut them off, but they were too slow. As Eromani sped out of the cavern and into the tunnel, a patch of green slime attempted to drop on her. She dove and rolled, narrowly escaping it.

Reacting in time, Zen, Vlynrifane, and Shreiken leaped over the green goo and joined her. And there Vlyn waited for Aelun and Fiovey to leap over the green slime patch as well and pass her. Then she moved her Moonbeam to directly in front of the tunnel's mouth, scouring the stone of green slime. "That should hold them," she said, and they withdrew into the passage a short ways.

"Hold here a moment," said Eromani. "Vlyn, keep up the spell. Aelun and I will use our firebolts to try to help weaken any that survive the Moonbeam and make it through. Rini, you and Zen hurry down the passage with Fiovey. Make sure the way is clear."

"Shreiken, go with them," said Vlyn.

They all did as Eromani commanded. Indeed, oozes were stupid enough to try to make their way through the Moonbeam. Vlynrifane rushed up to the first one, shield raised. She kept it at bay so that the spell's magic would continue to destroy it. At the same time, though the oozes were resistant to fire, Eromani and Aelun hurled firebolt after firebolt to help finish them.

Rini and Zen returned fairly quickly, her bow glowing to help light her way. "I left Fiovey at the intersection. There are oozes everywhere. We can't get through. We're stuck."

Eromani's mind was racing. This was not unexpected. Fiovey had shown them that the passage they were in led straight to a larger intersection where oozes would likely congregate in

order to defend the tunnels against Dorbo and Senni's forces. "Are they barring the next intersection completely? We can't even sneak past?"

Rini nodded. "Looks like Dorbo's forces are stuck within the first loop just beyond the Steadfast Stone. The oozes are trying to push their way into that area, just like we were hoping, coming from the two northwestern tunnels. I think the earth elementals are holding them at the two choke points. The only problem is that there are so many oozes that they are overflowing into all other passages including the end of this one."

Eromani grit her teeth as she threw another firebolt. "At least they aren't that far into this particular passage," she muttered almost under her breath. That had been one of their biggest fears. She and her team could have darted into the eastern tunnel only to run right into a wall of oozes.

Then, without warning, the oozes stopped attempting to come through the Moonbeam. It seemed as if they had given up on pursuing the Infiltration team - just as they had planned. Now all they needed was for Derivell to lure the oozes towards the gate and away from them.

Eromani paused, waiting to see if the oozes were, in fact, done trying to get to them. When Vlynrifane's Moonbeam ended, and she saw that the oozes were focusing on Derivell and the others in the House Center, she turned to Rini again. "Get Fi. We're going back through the House Center."

"Roger that," said Rini, and she even saluted before she guided Zen back towards where she'd left the kitsune and dinosaur.

To Vlyn, Eromani said, "Can you see? Is the way clear? Is Derivell drawing them away completely?"

"Looks like it," said Vlyn, and Aelun joined her.

"If we keep semi-close to the wall, and we run fast," said the ranger, "we might be able to make our way around to the north without oozes detecting us. ³I believe they have blindsight up to sixty feet, and beyond that they can't detect us."

"There's slime all over everything," said Eromani, peering out into the cavern. "How can you tell what's just slime and what's an ooze?"

"I can't," said Aelun, "but I'm guessing that since none of that is moving, the way is clear. We just don't want to get under those patches of slime." He gestured to all the slime off to the north.

³ Arcana Check, DC 15. Aelun rolled 19. Success.

Derivell's horn blew swiftly many times. They were retreating further back to the gates. 'Well, he's doing his job,' Eromani thought. 'All the oozes are south of us, trying to overwhelm our troops with sheer numbers.'

Rini, Zen, Shreiken, and Fioyay appeared. "Come on," said Eromani. "Let's go. Aelun, lead the way."

And he did. Along the wall they ran, staying about ten feet away from all green slime patches. Glancing to her left, Eromani saw Derivell on Bastion, and he and Helyn were slowly withdrawing as the elementals and spore servants continued to defend at the front of the mass of oozes that were literally crawling all over one another to form mounds and waves of living goo. She turned back to focus on her own objective. Rini's light illuminated the way, and thus far, nothing attempted to stop them.

They reached one of the stairs that led up to the sphere in the center. They skirted around the base. Still nothing stopped them. They came to another passage, but Aelun didn't even ask whether he should go down it or not. Based on Rini's report, the oozes were undoubtedly filling the tunnels there. He continued on to the next.

They reached the next tunnel, and he ignored that one as well, continuing on to the west past a second staircase. Finally they reached the northwestern tunnel, and Aelun led them down it, leaving the House Center and working their way directly towards the Stockade. Since he was first through the entranceway, he also had to dive and roll through to avoid a green patch of slime that attempted to drop on him. The others hopped over it as before.

They entered the Stockade area. Immediately, the sound of dripping water filled the atmosphere. Dozens of black puddings, gray oozes, and ochre jellies slithered across the walls and floor. Some sort of fungal wall or partition once divided the cave, but that barrier had been destroyed. Beyond it rested more wreckage and debris, scoured clean by the oozes. In fact, the Pudding King's minions had dissolved most of what had been left behind during the drow invasion, including the bones of the slaughtered rothe. Two freshwater pools formed along the west wall, and many of the foul creatures were congregating near them. They seemed oblivious to the party.

"Looks like we're far enough away from them to avoid detection," said Aelun. "There are paths to the west and one to the east. Looks like another further along to the north and east beyond the shattered stockade, but I doubt we could get to it without drawing the attention of the oozes."

"East is back towards the larger intersection," said Fioyay. She was jittery with anxiety. "West is towards the Goldwhisker territory."

"Well," said Eromani. "We suspected that the Pudding King would be at the back of one of the two armies. So chances are, we'll need to go one of those two ways to check it out - probably not too far either way."

“He could be in the center sphere back there in the House Center,” said Vlyn. “We didn’t check it out. Shouldn’t we make sure he’s not there?”

Eromani was frozen with indecision. ‘I’m not a freaking leader!’ she snapped but only to herself. ‘I don’t know what the frick to do.’ But she turned to Vlyn. “Can you turn into something and check it out quickly? Just peek inside one of the doors and see if there’s some stupid Pudding King person in there.” Vlyn nodded. Then she turned into a giant spider and raced off with Shreiken.

Eromani turned towards Rini. “You and Zen are fast. Take the east passage and check it out. See if you can spot the Pudding King in that direction. If you do, cry ‘Havoc!’ and attack.” She turned to Fiovay. “Take the west passage. Same thing. Aelun, take the southwest passage.” And just like that, she was alone, shaking like a leaf from the stress of the situation.

Horns blared once more from the south. ‘Derivell’s attacking again.’ She shook her head. ‘He’s probably trying to make sure he keeps their attention and prevents them from spreading back out and finding us or reinforcing the other two armies.’

‘Doesn’t matter. Think Eromani! Stop freaking out and think.’ She spotted a black pudding. It was drawing a bit closer to her just at the edge of her vision. She could see it in the light of some bioluminescent lichen. She withdrew a few paces, just to make sure it wouldn’t detect her. ‘If I was someone who calls himself the Pudding King, where would I be? He’s got to be pompous and arrogant, but he’s probably a coward. He would definitely not want to be anywhere near the front lines.’

‘He’s got to be hiding somewhere in these caves.’ Her gaze fell once more upon the shattered stockade. Beyond, she knew, was another passage. ‘Hiding somewhere. There are dozens of oozes in this room. Beyond that stockade, there’s another passage. We’d have to get past the oozes and the stockade to get at him. But, according to Fiovay’s maps, there’s another way into that same passage. If we take the way Rini just went into the larger intersection, and we take the northwesternmost passage from there, we’d arrive in the same area. But to do that, we’ll likely have to fight our way through even more oozes. He obviously sent so many into this area that Dorbo wasn’t able to make very much progress. Which means...’

‘... he’s in that cavern beyond the stockade, northwest of the larger intersection.’ She groaned almost inaudibly. ‘How in all the Nine Hells am I supposed to get my team into that cavern without being overwhelmed by dozens of freaking oozes? We need to be able to stealth it somehow, but they’re all over that section of this cavern.’

‘Evronar.’ The thought came to her suddenly. ‘If you summoned him, he would keep the oozes busy while you and your team entered the Pudding King’s home. It wouldn’t take much. He would turn the tide in your favor. He could fit within the Stockade cavern. Just summon Evronar, and the way will be clear.’

Vlynrifane returned, looking rather exasperated. She reported, "No sign of the Pudding King in the sphere."

"What happened?" asked the sorceress.

"Green slime above the door dropped on me," she replied. "Took me a bit to scrape it off, and by then I was pretty much spent in my beast form. I threw the door open, Shreiken and I explored the chambers and corridors inside and saw they were scoured and were completely empty. There was nothing within. Even the metalwork had been corroded and eaten away. I think the oozes have been living inside there for some time, but they left to join the fight. Either way, no Pudding King."

Rini then also confirmed Eromani's suspicions. "No Pudding King in the larger intersection, but it is swarming with oozes. I don't think we could even get past them if we flew."

Aelun and Fiovay both returned as well. "Chipgrin's holding his own pretty well," said the ranger.

"Sure enough, he's got the oozes held at a couple of choke points," added Fi. "But no sign of the Pudding King."

"Same here," said Aelun. "Just oozes everywhere."

"That's what I thought," said Eromani, and she sighed heavily.

"You know where he is?" asked Rini, a bit hopeful.

Eromani nodded, and she pointed to the passage beyond the stockade. The rest of them followed her gesture, and their hearts sank. "Well that sucks," said Fi. "Now what?"

Just then, an idea popped into her brain. "Rini, take the others past the stockade and into that passage heading east as soon as you find a decent opening."

"But what about you? What are you going to do? You're not going to do something stupid, are you?" asked the halfling with great concern.

Eromani smiled. She finally felt more in control of the situation. "Nope," she replied. "I'm just going to be the distraction. I'll keep the oozes busy while the rest of you find the Pudding King and kill him. If you need me to come help you, remember to cry 'Havoc!'"

"But you still haven't answered her," said Fiovay. "What crazy thing are you planning?"

⁴Eromani then cast a spell on herself, and she began to hover off the ground. “Rini gave me the idea when she said ‘if we flew’. I’m just going to fly and hit them from a distance. Our greatest advantages against them are speed and that they have to get close to hurt us. If I’m flying, I can maneuver around more easily and pummel them without restraint for a long time, if I have to. Now let’s not waste anymore time. Get ready to rush into that passage and take him out as soon as you’re sure the way is clear.”

Fiovay was all smiles. “Now that’s what I’m talkin’bout. You got it, Boss.”

Eromani flew within range of the oozes, and she began to pummel them with firebolts from a distance, luring them towards her and away from the northeastern passage. As soon as the way was clear, Rini led the charge upon Zen’s back, hurrying over the remnants of the stockade and then on to their destination.

Ochre Jelly



⁴ Eromani cast Fly using a 3rd level spell slot. She expended 1 Sorcery point to Extend the spell's duration to 20 minutes.

Gelatinous Cube



Chapter 4: The Endless Tide

Helyn cast Magic Missile from her left hand, pummeling a gelatinous cube making its way towards one of the two earth elementals defending them. Then she threw herself sideways, tucked, rolled, came to her feet, and slashed a gray ooze with her magic rapier. In sync with her, Drym, the half-orc ranger, fired his composite longbow into the space where she'd been, also attacking the cube. His arrows exploded within it, and the mass sprayed the combatants with its substance.

At the same time, Ellira, the human rogue of their party, jumped up onto a boulder out of hiding and fired from her longbow into a black pudding, her bolts charged with radiant energy. A Guiding Bolt flew from Keema Battlehammer's left hand, and Wilowir cast Thunderwave, sending the same now-glowing pudding and a host of oozes backward.

But the most helpful spell cast among them came from Elris, the elven archer and wizard. She summoned a wall of stone and formed it into a sphere, imprisoning a large number of their enemies within. This created quite the barrier on the west side that forced the oozes to divert their attacks up and over the House Center's sphere, allowing the warriors of Blingdenstone a chance to focus on those coming from the east.

As this was happening, Derivell pointed with his sword and commanded the archers to fire at will. He was no longer concerned with sparing ammunition. Eromani and her team were somewhere beyond his ability to help them, but unless they somehow thinned the numbers of oozes, his friends would have no pathway to return.

He charged at several of the closet oozes. Bastion stomped and kicked them while he stabbed with Esaldayon. Fayra, the golden haired, brown-skinned monk was with him. Havvah, Arla, Graiyla, Tanwen, Ront and Prince Derendil were also there, hacking and slashing and biting with everything they had in them. As for Jimjar, Topsy and Turvy, they fired along with the archers including Eldeth and Fargas.

The earth elemental near them smashed an ooze, turning it to goo. Another replaced it. The spore servants were dropping left and right at that point, but they were at least giving as much as they were taking. Bastion kicked. Derivell stabbed. Havvah slashed. Fayra punched and kicked and smashed with her flaming nunchucks. Arla's hammer pounded another ochre jelly. Graiyla joined her, stabbed with her own sword. She did not use her lightning abilities to enhance her blade, for she had been warned that lightning was actually bad when fighting oozes, especially black puddings.

Keema healed Tanwen. The dragon had suffered from fighting a black pudding with her claws and teeth. Their acid bodies bit back, unlike other oozes. The dwarf then healed Fayra who was suffering the same fate. Prince Derendil was lost in a quaggoth rage, oblivious to his own pain, but Keema healed him next. He'd been battered by several ochre jellies that had ganged up on him.

Willowir hurled a fireball. Helyn joined Derivell, slashing and stabbing with her rapier while blocking with a buckler. Drym's and Ellira's bows sang, working in unison as several oozes were slinking over the wall of stone Elris had made. The elf archer then joined them, slowly wearing down their targets.

More acid splashed every time someone struck a black pudding with a melee weapon. Anyone near it would suffer from the searing pain. The front line was slowly wearing down. The healers were running out of spells and scrolls, and healing potions were almost gone.

"Spells and ammunition are failing us, Derivell," said Helyn as she stabbed yet another ooze. "Not sure how much more we have left in us."

Derivell stabbed and slashed, the radiance of Selune felling another gray ooze. "Perhaps we should fall back again through the gate. We'll heal and recover a bit and wait for the final push once Eromani lets us know her task is done."

"She and her team may try to exit out one of the other tunnels," she replied. Then two oozes attacked her. One was deflected by her buckler, but the other struck her in the side. She staggered. "That's it. I'm out. I need to fall back." And she withdrew at once, hastening towards the gate.

"Helyn, you okay?" asked Keema.

"Keep fighting for a bit longer," Helyn replied. "Don't waste anymore of your spells on me. Help support Derivell."

The dwarf nodded and charged, shield up and morningstar raised high. As she struck one of the oozes that had injured Helyn, Elris' arrows assisted her, ending the creature's existence. At the same time, Ront hacked an ooze with his axe, and it broke. He tossed it to the ground and withdrew. "I need weapon!" he roared angrily, and he followed Helyn towards the exit.

Derivell recognized that it was time. "Fall back!" he called. "Disengage and retreat!" But he and Bastion stayed until the rest of his forces were well on their way before they turned and fled. Only the earth elemental came behind him, thundering along as fast as it could. They reached the gate, and once again it was thrown shut and sealed.

Meanwhile, Chipgrin's troops continued to hold the western front. Only two tunnels led into the wererat domain. One was five feet wide, and the other ten. The earth elementals were holding position quite well, and every time the oozes withdrew, Chipgrin commanded another charge.

Indeed, the wererats were fierce warriors, hacking and slashing and tearing into the oozes efficiently. At first, they'd been concerned when they'd spotted some gelatinous cubes, for they feared that their elementals might be incapacitated by them. But the wererat leader was just as

wise as Derivell and his force. The archers focused on the cubes first to ensure that they would not be an issue.

As for Dorbo, his army was struggling the most. They had encountered the heaviest opposition. The Pudding King had filled the eastern passages with oozes - just as Eromani had deduced - to prevent the deep gnome forces from reaching him. His personal throne room was not too far to the north, and he feared that Dorbo might succeed if he didn't literally fill the tunnels with oozes, jellies and puddings.

Thus, the svirfneblin main force was slowly beaten back to the Steadfast Stone by the sheer numbers of the Pudding King's minions. Even when the elementals stood in the gaps, barring the way through a tunnel, the enemy began to push through by becoming a mass of living goo. They acted like slow moving tidal waves too strong even for the earth giants to resist.

An earth elemental fell, overwhelmed by the oozes. "Fall back to the Steadfast Stone," cried Dorbo. "Hold the line there." And his army did as they were told. Senni, Nomi, Gurnik, and others of the Stoneheart Enclave were there waiting, spell gems ready. As the last of Dorbo's troops escaped through the cleared passage, the spellcasters unleashed their fury. The tide was temporarily pushed back as evocation magic pounded it with intense savagery.

Eromani flew back into the House Center, continuing to lure the oozes away from Rini and the others. Careful not to get too close to the patches of green slime on the ceiling, she launched flaming missile after flaming missile relentlessly at her foes. Slowly and meticulously, every last one from the stockade area came for her, working their way towards the dome.

Beyond the gate, healers were tending to the wounded including Helyn. Derivell still rode atop Bastion as he used the last of his own healing powers to mend the stallion's injuries. Helyn looked up at him, weariness etched on her features but also determination. She was not one who gave up easily.

"I had an idea," she said to him matter-of-factly. "We've done what we set out to do here. We got the infiltration unit into the heart of the tunnels. We've lured the oozes right to this very gate. They have moved away from the northern section. Reports have come from the Steadfast Stone. Dorbo's forces are pushed out of the northwestern section. They're holding at the temple. The wererats are managing to hold their own as well."

"Sounds to me like the bulk of the ooze army is actually fighting Dorbo. That means that if we make a concentrated push from the west, assisting Chipgrin, we might overwhelm the enemy on that front and push our way completely into the Pudding Court. Basically, if we lead the charge, we might just clear a path for Eromani and her team to get out either by luring the rest of the oozes away from this gate or by clearing the way off to the west."

Derivell's face lit up. "Sounds like a better plan than mine," he admitted. "Let's do it."

"We're with you," said Arla who was nursing her left arm. She got to her feet. "And if Sune would kindly grace us again by having me turn into her avatar, I would greatly appreciate it."

Havvah turned to her. "Chosen usually have some control over that, you know," she told her. "But you can usually only do it once a day for a limited time. Choose your timing wisely."

"I hate slimes," said Tanwen. "I hate them with a passion now."

"Me too," said Jimjar. "I bet I hate them more than you."

"Nuh-uh," said the dragon, and she spit on the floor for the fifth time in an attempt to get all the corrosive pudding out of her mouth.

"Our ammunition is spent," said Topsy. "We're going to have to fight up close if we support you."

"But we won't get much healing at this point," added Turvy.

"We still have healing kits," reported Keema. "And we've got some who know how to use them well."

Derivell nodded. "If we have any hope of reclaiming Blingdenstone, we need every capable fighter to help us in the charge. You up for it?" The twins exchanged nervous glances but nodded in unison. Prince Derendil only grunted. He looked more quaggoth than elven prince at that point. Ront grabbed a new greataxe from a weapon's rack nearby. He also only grunted.

Helyn stood. She made eye contact with her own party. "I think we're ready," she told the knight. "Lead the way. We're right behind you." Then Derivell spurred Bastion into a trot, and they worked their way to the back of Chipgrin's army.

Chipgrin was in wererat form, as were all of his people. When he saw them coming, he said, "What are you doing here?" Derivell quickly explained their plan. Chipgrin smiled. "I like it. We're in. Just give me a minute to prepare my troops, and we'll let you lead the way, Commander."

"Commander?" asked Derivell.

"Well," said Chipgrin. "Aren't you? I mean, you're literally the knight in shining armor riding on his valiant steed inspiring the troops and guiding them to victory. Am I right?"

Helyn smirked, but her tone was serious. "We haven't got time for this. Alert the troops. Let's do this."

“Yes Sir - Ma’am Sir Miss M’lady,” said Chipgrin, and he hastened towards where the earth elementals were still battering any oozes that dared to oppose them. Several wererats were on either side, poking spears and long pikes around the giant in an effort to assist.

“Everybody listen up. Fall in around me. Someone tell the other group. When you hear the signal, charge with everything you got. Push into the enemy territory as hard as you can.” He jerked a thumb back at Derivell. “The Commander’s assuming command.”

“Haha!” laughed one of the wererats, and he gave Derivell a salute. “We’re at your service and disposal, Me’lord.” And he laughed all the more.

Derivell guided Bastion towards the front. He chuckled in return. “I don’t mind the service part, but let’s avoid the bit about disposal.”

The wererat bowed. “Your wish is my command, Sir.”

“We’re ready,” said Chipgrin. “Didn’t take long. Not much to prepare. The earth elementals have been doing most of the work so far along with long spears, pikes, bolts and arrows.”

Derivell nodded. He looked down at the Stoneheart Enclave member who was commanding the elementals in that area. “On my command.”

“Ready, Sir,” said the deep gnome female, and he noticed that she swallowed hard to try to fight her nervousness.

Derivell focused his attention towards the back of the earth elemental who was keeping the oozes at bay. He had to calm his own fears for a moment. Thoughts of Eromani and his other friends popped into his mind unbidden. ‘I can’t think about them right now. I can’t worry about them. They can take care of themselves. I have to focus on those under my command. I have to focus on victory here.’

He gripped Esaldayon with both hands. “Ready?” He lowered the sword, pointing at the back of the elemental. “CHAAAAAARGE!”

The earth elemental suddenly shoved, clearing a space before it. Derivell guided Bastion into the gap and stabbed and stomped. Behind Helyn cast Ray of Frost. Wilowir cast Firebolt. Elris cast Chill Touch. Havvah found another gap and wedged herself into it. Arla was right behind her along with Graiyla.

Oozes died. The army pushed their way slowly through the goo. Helyn managed to get close, casting Thunderwave. The gap widened. Prince Derendil and Ront filled the gap followed by Chipgrin and several wererats. More oozes died. Tanwen pushed her way in, unleashing a bout of flames. Further and further in they went, facing opposition on every side, even from above.

Ooze reinforcements arrived. All at once, there was a resurgence of the fowl goop monsters. Bastion was struck in the head and nearly fell. In response, Derivell slung Esaldayon into its scabbard on his back, and he dropped down off the horse. He then quickly grabbed his shield from the saddle, drew his longsword, and sent the horse retreating back behind friendly lines before it took another hit.

As this was happening, his attention was drawn to Prince Derendil. He roared in pain and fear as a gelatinous cube suddenly engulfed him. Ront withdrew, staggering from a blow to the chest. From the sound of his wheezing, a lung had been punctured. A wererat managed to save his life, dropping onto the black pudding that had been pounding the orc, and the she-rat tore into the vile glop.

The oozes began to surround Derivell, pounding at his armor and shield with everything they had. Helyn tried to help him, but she was struck in the left shoulder which popped out of place. She gave a cry, but the knight was amazed to see her ignore her injury. Though she fell back, she continued to fight on, slashing and stabbing as Drym the half-orc joined her. He had shortwords out, one in each hand, and he punched hole after hole into his adversaries.

“Derendil!” Derivell called out. “He’s in that gelatinous cube. Someone help him! Quick!”

Eldeth was at that point up close and pounding oozes with her warhammer. When she heard him say this, she led the charge. The gelatinous cube was withdrawing, taking Prince Derendil with it. Havvah joined the dwarf, as did Arla and Graiyla, intent on hacking their way through. Desperate to save one of her companions, Arla willed herself to transform - to become an Avatar of Sune. She succeeded.

“Avert your gaze!” commanded Havvah as soon as she noticed that Arla was transforming. “Otherwise you’ll be enamored by her beauty.” Just in time, every ally turned away as Arla transformed into a gorgeous angel. She surged into the ooze forces, bashing them left and right, taking the vanguard position in Eldeth’s charge.

Tanwen recognized that Derivell was in trouble, and so she hurried to Helyn and Drym. She pounced on the oozes, throwing herself into a full blown dragon rage. She bit and raked with her claws and sent periodic bouts of flames at them, filling the passages with a sulphuric aroma.

Chipgrin then appeared with the largest portion of his wererat forces. They were screaming in unison, like a chorus of shrieking banshees. In a frenzy, they tore into the oozes surrounding the knight, and they managed to form an avenue of escape for him. “Quickly,” said the wererat leader. “Fall back. There’s still too many of them. We can’t keep this up. Our numbers are dwindling fast.”

Derivell nodded, and he took the opportunity to withdraw himself. Nevertheless, he did so slowly, enduring the battering assault of the oozes as long as he could. Fortunately, they were

now all in front of him, and so he was able to act just like the elementals, enduring a great deal of punishment while his armor and shield kept him from serious harm.

Meanwhile, as they retreated back towards the choke points, Arla and her team reached the gelatinous cube. The raging Chosen One bore down on it, pounding it mercilessly again and again. More oozes swarmed her on every side. They bashed and pummeled her and her companions, but in the end, the gelatinous cube was defeated. Prince Derendil was released.

But he wasn't moving. His body was limp. He wasn't breathing. Arla tried to use her Chosen powers to heal him, but his body didn't move. The wounds didn't close. The gelatinous cube had killed him. There was no life left in him. Setting her jaw firmly, Arla was not about to leave him to be digested horrifically by the Pudding King's minions, and so she grabbed him and quickly slung him over her shoulder.

"I've got him. Let's go!" she cried, and she saw her companions turn and flee. Eldeth was unconscious, being carried by Havvah, and Graiyla was limping painfully, her left leg causing her intense pain.

Derivell spotted Jimjar carrying Topsy. Turvy was covering his retreat. The paladin hacked at another ochre jelly. It split into two. 'Ah! I meant to hit the gray ooze. Dang it!'

"We're almost to the choke point," said Chipgrin. "Then the last of the elementals can once again hold them off at least for a little while."

"How many elementals are left?" asked the knight.

"Three," said Chipgrin. "Well, that's as near as I can tell at the moment. They took a serious pounding."

At last, they reached the choke point. An elemental took its place at the entranceway, fighting the tide back. Derivell gasped for air, but he knew he didn't have time to really rest. "Status," he said as he gripped the tunnel wall for support. "Does anyone know how many casualties we've suffered?"

Jadger reported. "I do. My ghosts have been keeping tabs. Dead: Eight wererats, twelve svifneblin, all myconids except the sovereign, all spore servants, seven earth elementals, two Stoneheart Enclave, a halfling, and a quaggoth. Wounded: Six wererats, eleven svirfneblin, the myconid sovereign, three spore servants, three earth elementals, two Stoneheart Enclave, a horse, Lieutenant Helyn, one half-orc, one aasimar monk, one elf fighter mage, one angel, one yuan-ti pureblood, one red dragon wyrmling, and one dwarf. That's besides you."

Derivell looked around at the beleaguered forces. "There's just too many of them," he said, shaking his head. "No matter how hard we try, we just can't get through the sheer numbers."

"We may have done what we set out to do," said Helyn. Then she nodded to Drym and Keema to proceed with forcing her shoulder back into place. They did, and she screamed and bit down hard on the zurkhwood peg they put in her mouth. She fell to her knees.

Elris then added, "We clearly drew more of the oozes away from the House Center. Eromani and her team may find the way clear now once they're ready to return."

"Here's hoping," said Derivell worriedly. Then he gestured to Arla who was back to herself. "Prince Derendil? Fargas?"

Arla shook her head sadly. "They're both dead. There was nothing we could do."

"Revivify?" asked Derivell, looking at the Stoneheart Enclave survivors.

"We've used all spells at our disposal," one of them replied sadly. "I'm sorry."

"I couldn't heal them," said Arla, grief threatening to overtake her.

"You did what you could," said Derivell, fighting to maintain his own resolve. They were dead, after all, because he just had to try to clear a way for Eromani and her team. He sacrificed the lives of many to save the ones he loved most. He felt very selfish.

But he knew he couldn't be weak - not then. He needed to remain strong to keep everyone from falling apart. They'd lost so many, but it was for more than simply saving Eromani and her team. He knew that, deep down. They had to weaken the ooze army, for if they didn't, they would never defeat them and save Blingdenstone.

"We all did what we could, and we thinned their numbers tremendously. We have lost many, but our enemy lost many more than we did. For every one we lost, dozens of oozes were destroyed. We have to keep that in mind. Those who died gave their lives so that Blingdenstone could be rid of the Pudding King's forces and so that Juiblex may think twice about coming here."

"How many do we have that are still able to fight?" asked Helyn as she stood back to her feet. "How much more do they have in them?"

Jadger was once again the one to report. "Eleven wererats at full strength or close to it. The six injured can still fight, but not for long. That's seventeen in total including Chipgrin. Seven svirfneblin are at full strength with eleven wounded. Of that number, only ten can fight. Three elementals are damaged and still fighting to keep the passages from being overrun. Not sure how long they'll last, but for now they're holding. Two Stoneheart Enclave don't look like they're up for anything, and they should stay back unless absolutely necessary. The horse is injured and can't fight. Lieutenant Helyn looks like she could get back in the fight, but not for long. The

half-orc, monk, elf fighter mage, angel, yuan-ti pureblood, red dragon wyrmling all look like they could keep going for now.”

Derivell did the math. “That’s thirty-seven at most. Right?”

“Including yourself, that’s thirty-eight,” Helyn confirmed. “I wonder how Dorbo’s doing.”

“He and Senni spoke of resealing the tunnel if necessary,” said Elris. “I think they had explosives set up just in case.”

“That’s not comforting,” said Derivell. “Once they seal that passage into the Steadfast Stone, the oozes will withdraw from there and may reinforce the Pudding King against Eromani and her team.”

“We’ve bought them a significant amount of time,” said Havvah. “It’s the most we can do. The rest is up to them. At this point, we need to reserve the remainder of our forces. Eromani’s team’s only hope of returning alive is if they first succeed in killing the Pudding King and if we are able to clear a pathway for them back into Inner Blingdenstone when the time comes.”

Derivell couldn’t help but agree, and so he fell silent as he nodded. There was nothing left for him to do but wait and hope. ‘Please come back to me, Eromani. Please bring everyone back to me alive. I don’t know how I’ll be able to handle it if you don’t.’

Meanwhile, Dorbo and Senni analyzed their own situation. “Casualties are high,” said Dorbo grimly. “Not much left we can do. The last of the elementals is holding the oozes back and keeping them out of the Steadfast Stone, but there isn’t much left in them. We’re out of spell gems and spells. We have no more ammunition. We have but two choices. We can either charge with everything we have in us, suffering many more casualties, or we can collapse the passage.”

Senni shook her head. “I hope we’ve bought them enough time.” Then she gestured to her team of explosive engineers. The well-placed smokepowder sticks would be detonated with a single throw of a lever. The head engineer nodded. “As soon as the last of the elementals falls, do it,” she told him.

Not a minute later, the last of the elementals was beaten down. The engineer threw the lever. Everyone plugged their ears and braced themselves behind their barricades. The resulting explosion shook the entire city. The tunnel collapsed, burying the remains of those that had fallen along with a large number of oozes. It would take a very long time to clear out those passages again, but it would all be worth it if it meant destroying hundreds of oozes and freeing Blingdenstone from their evil.

⁵Chapter 5: The Royal Family

Vlynrifane was right behind Rini as they finally managed to maneuver over the shattered stockade and into the tunnel leading to the cavern where they were sure the Pudding King resided. As they drew near, his voice echoed to them, babbling and whimpering anxiously.

“Faceless Lord, please forgive your faithful servant,” he said in Undercommon. “So many... So many subjects... not my fault... not my fault... What was I to do? Eh? Huh? I had to defend your new kingdom. I had to. This is a disaster, My Loves. Disaster! So many dead.”

They came to the entranceway. Phosphorescent lichen illuminated the cave. The floor was covered with pools of green slime. More green slime clung to the ceiling and draped along the walls. In the middle of the cave, facing east, was a slime-covered throne. And there was the Pudding King with a black pudding and gray ooze. He was pacing back and forth before his throne staring at some sort of crystal ball.

“I’ve had to pull most of my troops away from the House Center,” he was mumbling. “They almost broke through. At least I pushed them back near Steadfast Stone, but they’re holding there. And now this sorceress is flying around and pummeling my garrison from above. They can’t even get to her. How the \$#@\$ am I supposed to stop her? She’s not even triggering the slimes on the ceiling to drop on her. There’s literally nothing I can do. Nothing. Even your hurling blobs won’t reach her at that distance, Dear Ebonmire.” He said this last bit to the black pudding.

Rini looked at Vlyn as if for approval, and she nodded. This was what they came for. Without a word, Vlyn pointed at the Pudding King. The unspoken communication said, ‘Ignore the oozes. Hit the leader with everything before he has time to react.’ She glanced over her shoulder at Fiovay and Aelun who both nodded that they understood as well. Everyone readied their weapons.

Rini initiated the assault, aiming carefully with her bow and firing. ⁶The Pudding King heard the bows twang. He spun just in time to avoid Rini’s arrow and Fiovay’s dagger, but he stepped into Aelun’s bolt. The missile stuck in the insane, slime-covered deep gnome’s left shoulder, and he gasped in pain. Then, to add to his misery, Vlynrifane cast Moonbeam, engulfing him in ghostly flames.

⁵ For this chapter, dice rolls for combat have resumed since each and every attack is vital to the outcome of the overall adventure. Dice rolls are later suspended again when the story switches to Eromani’s point of view.

⁶ Rini = 14, using Sharpshooter but with Advantage. Unfortunately, the Pudding King had cast Mage Armor already, gaining AC of 16. She missed. Aelun = Nat 20 with Hunter’s Mark, dealing 26 damage. Vlynrifane cast Moonbeam, dealing 9 damage. Pudding King Constitution Save, DC 14, was 11. He took full damage. Fiovay hurled a dagger without Advantage because of her range, and she rolled Crit Miss. During the surprise round, the Pudding King lost 35 HP total out of 49.

⁷Before the Pudding King could react, Vlyn then put an arrow to her shortbow as she moved into range. Then she fired, pegging the vile gnome in the right thigh. Fiovay joined her, but the kitsune dove behind a stalagmite unexpectedly. A split second later, she reappeared, hurling another dagger right into the Pudding King's forehead.

'That's it!' Vlyn thought, a bit shocked but excited at how easy it was to kill their adversary. 'Just like that. He's de...'

Time seemed to stand still as the Pudding King gasped and staggered, the hilt of Fiovay's dagger sticking out of his face. Then, much to everyone's disbelief and horror, he laughed madly, dropped the crystal ball which shattered into a million pieces, grabbed the hilt with both hands, and he used it to saw backwards into his own skull. The whole time, he continued to cackle wildly.

And all at once, the gnome's head split completely open, and a shimmering black pudding poured out and onto the floor. "Callooh! Callay! Now you can join the partay!" the Pudding King roared, and he cackled once more. "You can be one with the Faceless Lord, just let yourselves be eaten and disgorged! Princess Ebonmire! Prince Livid! Devour them, my precious children! Make your father proud!"

The two oozes flowed in Vlyn's direction with unsettling awareness and malevolence. As they did, Princess Ebonmire, the black pudding, spat a blob at the drow druid. Before Vlyn could dodge, the black goo struck her square in the chest, sending her flying to the floor. She cracked her head on the stone, and consciousness escaped her...

... but only for a moment. Rini rode up next to her and quickly healed her, sending Mielikki's power through her. Zen then sprang behind a stalagmite to provide himself and his beloved companion total cover from additional black projectiles. Aelun fired again at the Pudding King, and saw his bolt vanish within his - its - wretched form. Immediately afterwards, he also dove behind a stalagmite near Fiovay.

Prince Livid moved closer. Though it was slow, it still managed to get within range for its own attack. It sent a mental spike of pain into Aelun's skull, but the ranger sorcerer effectively repelled it, shaking it off. That's when Vlynrifane spotted Shreiken zoom past her with a vengeance. The little raptor charged up to Princess Ebonmire and bit down on it, tearing a sizable chunk of goo off of it. Enraged that its daughter was injured, the Pudding King roared and sped up to Ebonmire's aid. Lashing out with its pseudopod, the Pudding King smashed the stone floor, barely missing the dinosaur.

⁷ Vlyn = 17, dealing 4 damage. Fiovay Stealth Check = 26. Success. Fiovay = 21 to hit from hiding, dealing 12 damage with Sneak Attack, killing the Pudding King - or did she? Ebonmire = 19, dealing 33 damage to Vlyn. Vlyn fell, dying. Rini healed Vlyn using a 3rd level spell slot, but she only healed her 8 HP. Aelun = 5 for Arcana Check, DC 10. Failure. Aelun = 19, dealing 9 damage to the Pudding King. Prince Livid used Psychic Crush on Aelun. Intelligence Save, DC 10. Aelun = 11, suffering 3 damage instead of 6. Shreiken = 19, dealing 13 off Princess Ebonmire using his Charge feat. Shreiken took 2 damage from Corrosive Form. The Pudding King = 11.

Just then, a not-so-distant explosion shook the entire cavern. All the green slimes dropped from the ceiling above. ⁸Vlynrifane saw one coming for her, and she dove out of the way just in time. Then she quickly got to her feet and darted behind cover. As she went, she spotted a slime coming for Aelun as well, and she cried, "AELUN! DIVE!" Fortunately, the ranger did as he was told without question, and he rolled to safety just as the nasty substance splashed down.

Almost in sync, Fiovey cried, "Shreiken! Look out!", and the little creature darted to the right just in time.

Green slime now coated the floor everywhere, making it nearly impossible to move. And yet, Fiovey managed to maintain her balance perfectly as she wove her way up to the Pudding King, twin magic daggers glinting in the light of Rini's bow. She reached the monster and stabbed and jabbed only to watch as the wounds she carved into it began to close.

"Son of a nutball!" she cried as she withdrew. "It has regeneration abilities! Maybe try casting fire at it like a troll. And don't use slashing weapons. Black puddings split into two."

⁹Princess Ebonmire saw Fiovey as the greater threat and had just enough intelligence to try to hurl a blob at the kitsune. Unfortunately for it, the black pudding wasn't smart enough to realize that trying to hit the swift moving rogue with a projectile at close range was quite difficult. The black gloop splattered onto the floor of the cavern without hitting its intended victim.

Rini still saw the Pudding King as her primary target, and she cast Guiding Bolt with the maximum amount of divine power she could muster. The radiant orb exploded into the black pudding, lighting it up for all to see. Zen then darted back behind the stalagmite she was using for cover.

Aelun liked Fiovey's suggestion, and he darted from cover right up to the three oozes. With both hands outstretched, he cast Burning Hands, engulfing his enemies in jets of flames. Princess Ebonmire and the Pudding King screeched in agony, their blubbery skins charred and permeating the room in stench. This act also cleared a wide space around the three enemies, purging the battlefield of some of the pools of green slime. Prince Livid turned on Aelun in response, lashing out at him unsuccessfully with its pseudopod.

⁸ Dexterity Save, DC 10. Vlynrifane = 14. Fiovey = 13. Rini/Zen = 22. Aelun = 7, then 8, then 22, using his own Inspiration and Vlyn's. Shreiken = 3 and 10, using Fiovey's Inspiration. Fiovey Acrobatics Check, DC 12. She rolled 18. Success. She reached the Pudding King and hit with 26, dealing 15 damage. Second dagger = 24, dealing 3 more. (Because Aelun failed in his Arcana check, he did not know that the Pudding King was a Regenerating Black Pudding and had already healed himself last round back to full health.) Fiovey Arcana Check, DC 10. She rolled 11. Success. Fiovey lost 5 HP from Corrosive Form.

⁹ Ebonmire = 9. Rini = 13, dealing 15 damage to the Pudding King. Aelun Acrobatics Check, DC 12. He rolled 14. Success. He reached within range and positioning of all three oozes and cast Burning Hands at 2nd level. Ebonmire = 11, Pudding King = 3, and Livid = 13 for DC 13 Dex Save. Aelun did 15 damage total. Livid lost 3 HP because it is also resistant to fire while both Ebonmire and the Pudding King lost 15. Livid = 10.

¹⁰Shreiken did not understand Fiovey's commands, and so he bit down on Princess Ebonmire and slashed at it with his claws. The moment he did, Ebonmire ripped into two smaller versions of itself. The acid sizzled on the dinosaur's mouth and feet, and he fell away, rolled to his feet and whimpered in pain.

As for the Pudding King, it was lost in its wrath. It roared so loudly that its voice boomed throughout the passages, echoing the explosion that had occurred just a few seconds before. "TO ME!!!!" it shouted in Undercommon. "ALL MY TROOPS, TO ME!!!! SAVE ME!" And even as it did this, it turned towards Aelun and smashed him in the side with incredible force. Acid ate away at his clothes and turned his skin bright red, but he held his ground, unshaken by its ferocity. He set his jaw, raised his hands, and prepared for another scorching bout of Burning Hands.

But before he finished his spell, Vlynrifane cast Flame Blade and summoned a fiery scimitar into her hand. She then joined the melee by jumping over a few pools of green slime, running up onto a stone outcropping, and leaping over the remainder of the slimes to land in front of the second Princess Ebonmire. As she landed, she growled and slashed, scorching the creature and drawing its attention away from Shreiken and Fiovey.

This got Fiovey's attention as well, and desiring to end at least one of the Ebonmires, she spun and stabbed the same one Vlynrifane had damaged. With savage ferocity, Fiovey stabbed two nasty holes in the thing, nearly finishing it but not quite. Unexpectedly, the Ebonmire's guts spewed out at her, drenching the kitsune in acid. She sizzled, her fur shriveling and her skin turning beat red.

Then both Ebonmires retaliated, aiming at Fiovey. Once again, they attempted to spew at her at close range. Though she was freaking out that she was bubbling from the acid, the oozes were nevertheless too slow. She ducked under the first blob and dove to the side to avoid the second.

Rini and Zen darted out of hiding again as the cleric threw another Guiding Bolt at the Pudding King. The projectile exploded into it, causing it to scream once more and light up with a radiant glow. That's when Aelun completed his spell and blasted all four oozes with another inferno. The second Ebonmire died with a shriek. The first Ebonmire and the Pudding King both wailed

¹⁰ Shreiken = 20, dealing 5 damage to Princess Ebonmire. He hits with his claws rolling 20, splitting Ebonmire in two. Shreiken takes 13 damage. He has 1 HP remaining. Ebonmire had 58 HP remaining. Splitting in two, Ebonmire 1 has 28 HP and Ebonmire 2 has 27 HP. Pudding King = 18, dealing 24 to Aelun. Concentration Check, DC 12. He rolled 13. Success. Vlynrifane Athletics Check, DC 12. She rolled 14, jumping over the green slimes between her and her enemies. Vlyn = 9, dealing 11 damage to Ebonmire 2. She lost 2 HP from Corrosive Form. Fiovey = 24, dealing 10 damage. Second attack = 16, dealing 3 damage. Ebonmire 2 had 3 HP remaining. She lost 16 HP from Corrosive Form. Ebonmire 1 = 7. Ebonmire 2 = 7. Rini = 21, dealing 16 damage to the Pudding King. Dexterity Save, DC 13. Ebonmire 1 = 12, Ebonmire 2 = -2, Livid = 17, and the Pudding King = -1. Aelun did 19 total damage. Livid suffered 5 damage. Ebonmire 2 died. Livid = Crit Miss.

as if they were burning alive in the Hells, and Prince Livid tried once more to put an end to the spellcaster, to no avail.

¹¹The Pudding King was in a full-blown panic. It knew at that point that it was losing the fight, but it could not flee very quickly in its present form. Thus, it threw another “punch” at Aelun. He ducked, pulled out Dawnbringer and was about to activate it when the leader of the oozes attempted to flee. Fortunately, Fiovey caught a glimpse of its movements at the last moment, and she twisted on her heel and planted her dagger into the Pudding King’s charred “back”.

The Pudding King gurgled and died, but as it did, its innards spewed all over the kitsune, coating her once again in devouring acid. She threw up her hands to protect her snout and face, but it was too late. She gave out a pathetic cry, cut short, and she slumped into a heap as the sludge monster continued to dissolve into a puddle that was pouring all around the kitsune’s body, soaking into her clothes and flesh.

Vlynrifane wanted to help her, but there was nothing she could do at the present. She still faced the last Princess Ebonmire. Fortunately, the ooze was thrown off due to the death of its master. As a result, the druid stabbed the flaming weapon into the pudding’s “face”, burning it alive from inside. The last thing Vlynrifane remembered in that moment was the pudding’s insides, like its master’s, spewing all over her and onto her face. She remembered Shreiken bounding away to safety as she hit the ground, and then...

... just like that, magic surged through her once again. Rini cast Healing Word before she’d even fully lost consciousness. Quickly, she climbed to her feet before more acid began to burn her. Thankfully, Rini’s spell had removed any additional acid from her body, and so she did not continue to sizzle. But as before, she was dazed and struggling to get her bearings.

She vaguely registered that Rini fired at Prince Livid. She remembered Aelun disengaging from the ooze, withdrawing to a safer distance and luring it away from Fiovey and Vlyn. She remembered Shreiken climbing up onto her shoulder to escape from the ooze and slime. But most of all, she remembered seeing movement in the tunnel to the south. More slimes were coming, too late, to the Pudding King’s rescue.

She had just enough presence of mind to cast Healing Word on Fiovey, reviving her fallen friend in a flash. The rogue immediately did as Vlyn had done, clambering to her feet in an attempt to avoid the acid pooling around their boots. She then looked about, a bit confused. She, like Vlyn, spotted the movement to the south. “Son of a... Reinforcements are arriving! We need to get out fast.”

¹¹ Pudding King = 12. Fiovey attack of opportunity = 15, dealing 5 damage. She took 7 damage from Corrosive Form. Both the Pudding King and Fiovey fell. Vlyn = 22, dealing 11 to Ebonmire 1, killing it. She suffered 7 damage from Corrosive Form, and like Fiovey, she fell. Fiovey Death Save = 19. 1 Success. Rini cast Healing Word, healing Vlyn 5 HP. Rini = 5. Miss. Aelun Acrobatics Check, DC 12. He rolled 8. Failure. He could only move 15 feet. This forced Livid to use Dash to catch him. Vlyn cast Healing Word on Fiovey, restoring her 7 HP.

¹²Rini finally hit Prince Livid with her bow. It was a well-placed shot that nearly destroyed the monster with a single hit. A moment later, Aelun activated Dawnbringer's blade, and he stabbed with both hands on the hilt. Dawnbringer sang, literally, as her sunblade burst into the creature's blubbery hide, and a moment later, Prince Livid died.

"You haven't won!" the Pudding King's nebulous voice suddenly echoed around them ominously. "No! We will rise from our children! We will be reborn from the Faceless Lord! Juiblex will consume the banquet of the Queen of Fungi and we... will... all... grow..."

"Holy crap on a stick!" said Fiovey, drawing everyone's attention. She was staring down at where Princess Ebonmire had been. Apparently, when she'd died, she'd disgorged a pair of spellbooks with covers made from troglodyte hide and pages made from trillimac fungus. The covers and pages were coated with a magical varnish that rendered them immune to acid damage, protecting them from the pudding's digestive juices. The varnish also protected against water damage.

She quickly snatched up the books, flipping the covers open. "'Written by Lesla Carrowil,'" she read. "'Great Svirfneblin Archmage.' Hah! She actually penned that. Can you believe it?"

"That's great," said Rini sarcastically, anxiety overriding all other emotions. "But maybe we can take up light reading at a more convenient time? Maybe?"

"I agree," said Aelun. "Let's get out of here." And they regrouped and fled out the northern entrance back towards the ruined stockade.

Meanwhile, Eromani heard the blast, and the House Center cavern shook in the same fashion as the Pudding King's Throne Room. Slimes fell from above - every last one of them loosed from the ceiling. The sorceress narrowly avoided them all. Breathing a sigh of relief, she noticed that the oozes were all beginning to turn and "race" towards the northern section - towards Rini and the rest of her team. 'They've found the Pudding King for sure,' she thought excitedly. 'He must be summoning them to protect him.'

But that excitement was short-lived. 'I have to do something to slow them down or stop them. I have to buy Rini and the others enough time to finish the job and escape.'

'Evronar,' the thought came to her mind. 'Summon Evronar. He could certainly hold them off long enough.'

'What the heck?' Eromani thought, shaking herself. She almost even lost her concentration. 'Oh this isn't good. Subtle temptations in moments when I'm weakest. I'm still being influenced by those within the stupid sword, aren't I? They're trying to convince me to use it so they can mess with me and try to regain control.'

¹² Rini = 20, dealing 19 damage to Prince Livid using her Sharpshooter feat. Aelun = 9, dealing 6 damage to Prince Livid, killing it. Dexterity Save, DC 10. Eromani = 16. Success.

‘Focus. You don’t need Evronar. You NEVER need Evronar. You can think through a solution on your own, Eromani.’

Then she looked around her and considered her own inventory. ‘Potion of Speed, Fire Breath, Scorching Ray, Haste, Acid Splash, Acid Arrow, Evronar’s Essence, Alchemist’s Fire, Acid vials, Evronar’s Essence. Son of a... Okay. Think. What are oozes resistant to? What are they not resistant to? ¹³Some are resistant to fire and some lightning, but all are resistant to cold. Poison! I don’t think any are immune or resistant to poisons.’

She quickly flew down to plant herself between the oozes and the northern section, right in the entranceway leading to the ruined stockade. As she went, she cast Dragon’s Breath on herself so that as soon as she landed, she breathed poison at the approaching oozes. She could no longer fly while she was blasting them, but she was faster than they were. She could pummel them with poison, withdraw to a safe distance, pummel them with poison, withdraw to a safe distance, and so forth. She even utilized her metamagic to extend the duration of her spell to maximize on the number of oozes she weakened or killed.

Still, they kept coming. Doves were dying, but it seemed that no matter how many fell, it just wasn’t enough to stem the tide completely. At one point, she heard shouts and screams and shrieks coming from behind her, but there was literally nothing she could do to assist. She simply had to hold out against the ooze army as long as she could and hope for the best.

And then, she heard it. The Pudding King’s voice echoed through the caverns. “You haven’t won! No! We will rise from our children! We will be reborn from the Faceless Lord! Juiblex will consume the banquet of the Queen of Fungi and we... will... all... grow...”

Silence from behind. She breathed another bout of poison. They had already pushed her back to the ruined stockade, and she was having to climb over it as she continued to hold off the relentless force. ‘Does that mean... Does it mean we did it? We beat him?’

Painstakingly long seconds passed. Suddenly, oozes began to pour slowly out of the southwestern tunnel as well. They were coming from the front lines near the wererat territory. ‘Oh crap! This is NOT good. They’re literally cutting off every avenue of escape. We can’t go directly back to the House Center via the southern passage, and we can’t take either of the southwestern passages. The eastern passage leads to the Pudding King’s chambers where Rini and the others are, and so far the only way we actually can go is southeast. But to do that we need to get past the oozes presently coming after me.’

Then, all at once, Rini appeared riding atop Zen. Behind her came a rather haggard group of teammates. Eromani breathed another poison bout at the oozes, focusing on the ones closer to the southeastern wall. Then she withdrew further to quickly rejoin her team. She marveled that

¹³ Arcana Check, DC 10. Eromani rolled 10. Success.

Rini and Zen were untouched while the rest of the group looked as if they'd been put through the ringer.

"Success?" asked the sorceress, hope slightly returning.

"The Pudding King's dead," said Rini. "He was actually a special regenerating black pudding that could transform into a deep gnome and such."

"He could obviously use magic in his deep gnome form," said Aelun. "He was using a crystal ball when we arrived, and he was directly controlling the oozes."

"Everyone okay? Doesn't look like we lost anyone," said Eromani.

"All present and accounted for," said Fiovey. She probably looked the worst with her fur grizzled and shriveled in numerous places. "Requesting permission to get the frick out of here, Sir."

Eromani smiled joyfully in spite of how grim their chances of escape looked. "You have no idea how happy I am to grant that request, if I can. Let's go. If we hurry, we might be able to take the southeastern passage and loop back around to the House Center - maybe. It looked like every last ooze was making its way this way to try to help the Pudding King, so they will hopefully be focused on getting to the cavern where you killed him rather than barring our way."

"Here's hoping," said Vlyn.

And so, they tore into the oozes on the eastern side of the cavern, hitting them with every spell they could to create a gap for themselves into the southeastern passage. Eromani continued to breathe poison. Vlynrifane cast Moonbeam, using it to target key oozes in their path. Fiovey held back, preferring to hurl a dagger here and there unless it was a gray ooze that wouldn't spew acid on her when she hit it up close. Rini used all her magic to heal them and keep them standing, and Aelun used Thunderwave multiple times in an effort to throw their enemies backwards.

Finally, they broke through, and they fled to the southeastern passage. Each of them prayed to every good deity they could think of that oozes had cleared the tunnels as they continued to loop around to the east to obey the Pudding King's last command to congregate in his throne room. As it turned out, their prayers were answered, for they reached the major intersection to find that the vast majority of their enemies were pouring into the Pudding King's chambers, leaving the passage connecting to the House Center clear.

Eromani led her team into the House Center. There were green slime patches everywhere, but much to the party's great relief, as soon as Dawnbringer's light shined upon them, each and every one turned into a harmless puddle of goo. The sorceress put her horn to her lips, sounding it as planned, signaling their victory and the fact that they were retreating to the gates into Inner Blingdenstone. With all of the oozes pouring into the Pudding King's Throne Room,

obeying its last command, nothing stood in their way, and within less than a minute, the infiltration team escaped the Pudding King's Court.

At the same time, Derivell and Chipgrin led another charge. As the oozes began to withdraw, the knight saw another opportunity to gain the upper hand in the hopes of saving Eromani. The oozes were too focused on reaching their destination, and so they didn't even fight back. The paladin and his army were able to mercilessly stab and hack down ooze after ooze, avoiding only the black puddings and leaving them to the spellcasters to hit from a distance so their corrosive acid wouldn't harm the defenders of Blingdenstone.

They pushed their way into the ruined stockade area, the oozes still not fighting back because they were too stupid to do so and they were still obeying the Pudding King's command. When Derivell heard Eromani's horn blare, he was filled with such joy and relief that his determination to wipe out every last monster was renewed. He and Chipgrin and their army continued to slaughter their foes until, at last, the oozes arrived at their destination. Every last one of them was contained within.

Suddenly, the oozes turned and began to fight back. Having arrived at their destination, the monsters recognized that there was plenty of food right there for the taking. And so, they began to pour back out and towards the defenders of the gnome city. Recognizing that there were still too many of them, Derivell finally called for a retreat.

"If we hurry," he told Chipgrin as he blocked a gray ooze's pseudopod with his shield, "they may not even come looking for us. They may simply remain congregated in this area."

"Let's make sure that's the case," said the wererat leader, and he smiled deviously as he fell back behind his own troops. He motioned to one of his own, and all of a sudden two wererats came running from the back of the army with a cart laden with barrels. When they reached the front, they took the barrels out, put them down on their sides, and rolled them towards the oozes. They made sure to roll a few into the southeastern tunnel as well that led back towards the major intersection.

Chipgrin chuckled. "We'd best clear out before the magic happens." And with that, they retreated towards the wererat territory. The last ones to go were spellcasters, and they hurled firebolts at the barrels.

FABOOBOOBOOBOOBOOM!!!! The entire city shook once more. A series of cave-ins occurred in the northern section where the oozes were, especially in the area with the ruined stockade. The Pudding King's army was decimated and/or imprisoned. Several passages collapsed, and the ruined stockade cavern was mostly buried. It would take years to clear it out completely.

But Chipgrin's demolition tactics were rather effective. He'd made it so that there were only three ways for the oozes to escape after that. All three were on the eastern side of the House

Center, and each had a narrow choke point which could be easily defended by a single earth elemental. By caving in the stockade area and sealing off the eastern passages from there, he effectively made it so that the citizens of Blingdenstone could retake the House Center and the majority of the remainder of their city even without having to finish off the rest of the Pudding King's minions right away.

"Over time," the wererat told Derivell as they made their way back to Inner Blingdenstone, "we will finish off the rest. But, for now, we can hold them like prisoners in that section until we've recouped."

"And without the Pudding King to lead them," said Derivell, "or Ogremoch's Bane to mess with the earth elementals, I have no doubt that you'll succeed."

Princess Ebonmire (Black Pudding)



Prince Livid (Gray Ooze)



Green Slime Patches



Chapter 6: A Little Hope

The gate opened back into Inner Blingdenstone, and there was Eromani and her team, waiting for them. As soon as she saw him, and he saw her, smiles spread across their faces along with immense relief. The aasimar saw that they had all come back to him alive and in one piece, and he rushed up to Eromani and threw his arms around her tightly. She in turn, did the same, holding him close with everything she had.

At the back of the group, Aelun turned and smiled at Vlynrifane. This caught her off guard, but she welcomed it and smiled in return. "You okay?" he asked her softly. She noticed that he glanced in Fiovay's direction as if to see whether she would notice them conversing, but the kitsune was too focused on Derivell and Eromani's embrace and the celebration that was about to take place.

Vlyn nodded. "You?" she asked, and she felt a sudden surge of warmth overtake her.

He unexpectedly reached over and brushed a clinging strand of hair out of her face, tucking it behind her left ear. She felt her insides flutter. His smile didn't waver, nor did the gleam in his eyes. "I'm not the one who got pulverized multiple times by acid-spewing goo creatures."

Then, all at once, he withdrew his hand as if losing confidence. He broke away. "But yeah. I'm fine. I actually feel stronger than I've ever felt in my life."

"Me too," said Vlyn, and she decided to take a risk. She reached over and took his hand, squeezing it. She wanted to reassure him that he was on the right track. She wanted him to continue to pursue her. She welcomed his touch, and she wanted him to feel comfortable with such advances.

He met her gaze again, but this time he didn't know what to say. So, he just smiled - that very charismatic grin that she found somehow so irresistible. She was even more encouraged when he squeezed her hand back.

"I'm glad we were together during this," she told him. "It's been much easier dealing with everything since you joined us."

He nodded. "Same here. You're a huge comfort to me..." Then he seemed to realize how she might take that, and he quickly added, "... I mean you and the others - you're all a huge comfort to me."

She smirked, knowing full well what he meant. "Hmmm," she replied coyly. "I liked it better the way you originally said it. When you include the others, I don't feel as special."

He seemed about to say something further, as if to try again to correct his blunder, but Fiovay finally took notice. She spun on them with a wide but mischievous grin. "Hey! Look at you two,

all holdin' hands and smiling sheepishly at one another." Oh, there was clearly jealousy in her tone. Vlyn could feel it as surely as a swift kick in the shin. "Well, I want in on this action too. I'm feeling left out. Derivell and Eromani and Rini are all like one big happy family, and that leaves the three of us." And without even remotely hesitating, she forced herself between them, taking their hands into her own and holding them firmly.

"Here's to us!" Fi continued. "Friends forever, the three of us. We should make a pact. No matter what, we're going to stick together. What say you? Us three. Derivell, Eromani and Rini have one another and now Aelun, Fiovey and Vlynrifane have one another. Yeah?"

'Is it my imagination,' thought Vlyn, 'or is she squeezing my hand particularly hard?'

Fiovey didn't wait for a response. "Hey Deri-Der!" she called, raising their hands together to get his attention. "Enough standing around at the edge of the battlefield. We won! Let's go to the inn and celebrate. Eh?"

Eromani withdrew and faced them. "Sounds like a wonderful idea to me." Then, without further hesitation, the Demon Hunters reunited with all their companions, making their way wearily back towards the tavern to once again tend to their injuries and ease their suffering muscles.

But it wasn't long before they discovered that they had lost a few. Most of the fallen were individuals the group didn't know, but Prince Derendil was dead, and so was Fargas. Rini was, naturally, hit hardest by the loss of the halfling rogue, but the whole group, including Helyn's party, mourned Derendil.

"If only we had some Raise Dead scrolls," said Keema as she took another drink from her mug. "I could maybe cast Raise Dead and bring them back."

"We used pretty much every scroll and potion in this city during the fight," said Havvah darkly. "We're frankly lucky the two of them are the only ones WE lost. The sheer number of casualties was pretty staggering. We started this fight with eighty svirfneblin. Less than ten walked away uninjured. Twice as many are in pretty bad shape. The city only has a couple of earth elementals remaining. There were nine or ten myconids that joined the fight, and only like two or three lived. And Chipgrin had about twenty-five wererats to start, but only five walked away. I think maybe six or seven were carried off to be healed as soon as possible, and the rest were dead."

"Thanks for the heartwarming pep talk," said Drym dismally. "I feel so much better now."

"She's always like that," said Graiyla. "Of course, I'm not one to talk. I'm pretty much the same, to be quite honest."

"Hey," said Fiovey, taking notice that one of their members was missing entirely but hadn't been named among the dead. "Where's Arla?" No one seemed to know.

That's because Arla had fallen behind while everyone left the battlefield. Instead, she withdrew and walked among the dead. A great sorrow had overtaken her, and she was too heavy of heart to join her friends in celebration. No one was with her, for they were all tending to the living. No one cared about the dead - not at that time. After all, there was nothing that could be done about them. There was no longer any hope of saving them.

But the former glassblower from Urmlaspyr was finally broken. With everything that she'd been through, she'd managed to stay strong and press on. This, however, was too much. In just the last few days, she'd discovered that she was a Chosen of Sune, and she'd transformed into an avatar of the goddess twice. There were an oppressive number of demons still roaming at large, and she had a feeling that she was going to be called to face them whether any of the rest of her friends did or not.

The hardest thing for her, though, was the gravity of just how many lives had been lost in an effort to defeat the unending numbers of oozes. 'If there are this many minions of a single demon lord here in Blingdenstone, how many other demon lords are on the loose? How many of their minions do they have with them? How many more countless numbers of lives will be lost trying to defeat this impossible horde of evil? How many other friends will I lose?'

She stopped at Fargas and Prince Derendil who were lying fairly close to one another. She gently touched the halfling's marred cheek. He had suffered a violent blow to the face. It had been so hard that it had snapped his neck. Derendil was much worse. Having been partially dissolved by a gelatinous cube, he looked like a mangled dead animal. He was hardly recognizable.

She wept, wiping her tears frequently with her hands and even her arms. She'd removed most of her armor and gear, preferring to walk amongst the dead in her common clothes. For some time, she sat there with them, cross-legged on the floor between the pair, lost in despair.

Then, without warning, Sune spoke to her. "Weep not, Child. Their lives are not forfeit yet. There is still hope."

Arla quickly wiped her tears away as she got to her feet. She spun around, looking for Sune somewhere in the dark chamber lit only by a few candles. There was no one there. "What do you mean?" she asked at last. "Are you going to give me the power to resurrect them?"

"Perhaps," said Sune, "though unfortunately not directly. You have ten days to resurrect them, Arla. After that, the situation is beyond hope."

"But no one here knows the Raise Dead spell," said Arla. "No one is powerful enough. Even Rini isn't powerful enough, and she's the best cleric we know."

"With a Raise Dead scroll, she could do it," said Sune gently. She sounded almost like a kindly teacher prompting her student to think outside the box. "And where could you potentially get a Raise Dead scroll around here?"

Arla considered her words for a moment. "But we gave all the scrolls from the medusa's lair to the Blingdenstone cleric to use during the battle. I'm certain all the Raise Dead scrolls have been used already, if there were any in the medusa's scroll horde to begin with."

"Think of another powerful cleric you may have to fight before you finally make it back to the surface - one who may be waiting for you as you attempt to leave Blingdenstone."

"Ilvara," Arla breathed, realization suddenly dawning on her. "Mistress Ilvara will almost certainly have Raise Dead scrolls so she can bring her most prized servants back from the dead should they die in the fight against us."

"And you will most assuredly fight her before you reach the surface," Sune said softly. "But you only have ten days. Keep that in mind. You only have ten days."

"But what about Prince Derendil?" she asked quickly, fearing that her goddess was already leaving her. "Will he be sane when he is resurrected? Will he be a savage quaggoth or the elven prince he thought he was?"

There was silence for almost a minute, and Arla thought that Sune had left her to ponder this alone. The goddess, however, caused her to nearly jump out of her skin when she suddenly returned. "There is only one way for him to be resurrected and yet no longer be a quaggoth - to potentially retain his personality as Prince Derendil. This is but a chance, mind you. There is no guarantee that he will truly be Prince Derendil ever again."

Arla was hopeful. "I'm willing to try anything. Please, tell me. What is this chance?"

Sune was quiet once more, but this time for only a few seconds. "Reincarnate," she said at last. "A druid might cast the Reincarnate spell on him. That would cause his body to be reborn into a new form. Instead of being a quaggoth, he would be potentially a human or elf or drow or half-orc... Who knows? He will recall his former life and experiences, and he will retain his abilities. The only difference will be that he will no longer be his original race. He will be whatever new race he is reincarnated into. Since he will no longer be quaggoth, this could potentially cause him to no longer be savage and aggressive. He might remember that he was Prince Derendil, and even if he is no longer insane, it is entirely possible that because he remembers his former life and experiences, he may choose to remain the Prince Derendil you presently know and love - or something close to that personality."

"But this is a VERY big if, Arla," Sune was quick to point out. "He was a quaggoth a lot longer than he was Prince Derendil. Therefore, when he is reincarnated - IF he is reincarnated - he may still be more savage quaggoth than elven prince, for the insanity will be gone, and he will

remember who he had been before he'd lost his mind. He might become elf or halfling or gnome or dwarf, but he may still no longer be your friend."

Arla nodded. "Understood," she said. "So how do I find a druid who can cast that spell? Is Vlynrifane powerful enough?"

"No," said Sune. "And none in the Underdark can help you. You will have ten days to reach the surface and try to find someone who can cast the spell and bring Prince Derendil back to life. After that, it will be too late. You have but two hopes. One is to find a druid who knows the spell and can cast it on their own. The other is to find a Reincarnate scroll and have someone like Vlynrifane try to cast it. Again, your hope of success is slim, but there it is. It is the most I can do for you in this."

Arla's eyes filled with tears. "Thank you, Sune! Thank you so much! I... I have to go now. I have to tell the others. There is hope. That's all I needed. I just needed a little hope. Thank you again!" And she sped from the chamber.

Reaching the inn, Arla burst through the doors. Everyone feared the worst. After all they'd been through, their minds immediately went to every nightmare scenario they could fathom. Most of them figured that Juiblex itself had suddenly arrived, and Arla was there to call them to arms against it. But she immediately shared with them what Sune had told her, and her small hope spread like wildfire throughout their group.

"Perhaps we can give whatever Raise Dead scrolls we get from Ilvara to the deep gnomes so that they can resurrect a few more of their lost loved ones," said Fi.

"Or maybe I'll come back here and raise a few before we finally leave the Underdark," said Rini. "I think I'm maybe more powerful than the cleric here."

"I could potentially do Reincarnate," said Vlyn as she considered what part she might play in bringing their two friends back to life. "If we could find a scroll."

"I checked those two spellbooks that we found," said Fioyay with a sneer. "Unfortunately, none of them are cleric or druid spells."

"Spellbooks don't typically contain either of those types of spells," said Eromani.

"So where could we find a Reincarnate scroll?" asked Ellira.

Drym was the one to answer that one. "It seemed based on several indicators that we are somewhere near Neverwinter or the Silver Marches, or both. If that's the case, we might be able to reach one of the larger cities and find a magic shop that sells such scrolls. Also, the High Forest might have a druid who is powerful enough or who might have a scroll we could buy. Either way, I think it's not as far-fetched as it may have seemed at first."

"But to do it in ten days?" said Havvah. "That's my primary concern. If we truly only have ten days, that's not nearly as much time as you think. Remember, everywhere we've gone down here, it always takes us days upon days to get there. Even IF we get to the surface in less than ten days, there is no guarantee we'll reach one of the bigger cities before time runs out."

"If there's a chance," said Derivell, "then I'm going to at least try. Have faith. Selune and the good gods are guiding us and directing our paths. Trust that they will lead us to victory in this. What's the worst that could happen? We don't make it in time. We fail. Are we worse off than we are now? But at least we did everything we could to make it happen. Our consciences can rest in the knowledge that we didn't just ignore the potential that we might save the lost."

"So let's get some rest and recover from our injuries tonight. Tomorrow, let's see if we can get the Diggermattocks to provide an escort to take us back to the surface at last. If we set out early enough, we stand a much better chance of success. Agreed?"

Most did, but a few were reluctant. After having just fought with an endless army of oozes, Ront, Ellira, Wilowir, Graiyla, and Havvah were not exactly looking forward to immediately setting out, especially since they knew it meant they were heading right for Mistress Ilvara and her troops.

"Who knows how many drow, spiders, quaggoths, and whatever she will have waiting for us?" said Wilowir. "I, for one, was hoping we'd just rest here in Blingdenstone for a bit longer and not rush it. We could take a month or so, buy some potions and other healing items, spell scrolls, etc. from the duergar - or something."

"Well, you know," said Ellira sarcastically in low tones, "there's a chance we could save a halfling we don't know and an insane quaggoth who might turn on us and try to kill us, so let's risk our lives for it." Ront, who was sitting with them, grunted and nodded but said nothing. "I mean, don't get me wrong. I'm sad that Prince Derendil is dead. I kinda liked him. But risking our lives to rush into a drow trap just so we can maybe save him and make him no longer a deranged quaggoth... That's something else entirely."

Helyn, Drym, Keema, Elris and Fayra were also sitting with them. Helyn replied, "I'm looking at it a bit differently. At this point, it could take months for us to gather the resources we might potentially need to confront the drow. During that time, the drow may either get tired of waiting and blow the passages, trapping us completely down here, or they may attack Blingdenstone. I say there's no sense in waiting. Let's get it over with."

"Agreed," said Drym.

"Statistically," said Elris, "our chances of survival actually decrease the longer we sit here. Think about it. We have killed the Pudding King and many of its minions. How long do you think Juiblex will stay away from Blingdenstone after this? It is likely going to begin to make its way

here to retaliate. That is just one of the demon lords we know of in the area. How long do you think it will take Zuggtmoy to find us - or Demogorgon?"

"And what about the madness?" Elris went on. "We see it spreading everywhere we go. The longer we remain in the Underdark, the greater our chances of contracting insanity ourselves. In conclusion, it is actually wise in every way to leave. Staying here even an extra day could be deadly. There are simply too many unknown factors."

And that pretty much concluded the conversation. No one could argue with Elris' sound logic and reasoning - as usual. Therefore, with the matter settled, they decided to turn to celebration, enjoying the food and drinks and one another's company.

Meanwhile, Graiyla and Havvah were having a very similar conversation at another table. "We are likely going to die," said the yuan-ti pureblood. "We're heading straight into Ilvara's web. Wasn't our plan to get the help of the deep gnomes so we actually had our own army to fight hers?"

Havvah shrugged and took a drink of her ale. "Well, doesn't matter now, does it? We could wait here a month or two and the gnomes will still not have enough troops to support us on our way to the surface. After all is said and done, once again we're the ones who are messed over. We're on our own. I'm just hoping they actually give us a guide so we're not wandering for days before we traipse into Ilvara's trap."

Graiyla shook her head. "I just can't help feeling like we've done all this to try to escape this wretched underworld, and in the end we'll wind up right back where we started because we're rushing into it. Maybe we should at least take some time to plan."

Eldeth, who loved to mingle with everyone each time they rested, wandered over to their table at that moment. "Bah! You know what your problem is? You have lost faith in Derivell and Eromani. You are constantly showing this to be the case. You don't trust their judgments about Tanwen, and that's really messed with your ability to trust anything they decide. I'm not exactly faulting you, mind you. Don't get me wrong. I'm just pointing it out. Personally, I do think that risking our lives and rushing into Ilvara in the hopes of saving Fargas and Derendil is a bit foolish, but the majority are behind it. Doesn't do us much good to fuss."

Arla returned to the table then, bringing a few plates of food with her. She set them down in front of her friends. "What are we upset about now?" she asked, seeing Graiyla's face.

"Don't worry about it," said the snake woman, and she looked away.

Arla nudged her. "Come on, Graiy. I've come to really respect you and Havvah the most, and I thought we were closer than this. Don't you trust I can handle it?"

Graiyla met her gaze, and her expression was hard. "I don't approve of our course of action, and Eldeth was pointing out that this has become a trend for me. I am frequently no longer approving of Derivell and Eromani's decisions."

"But we have hope that we could save two of our friends," said Arla, a bit stunned. "What don't you approve of?"

"This is why I didn't want to say it to you. I don't want to hurt your feelings, Arla," said Graiyla. "I mean, you're not really thinking any of this through. The dangers are real. They are many. We will be risking our lives in an attempt to hurry up and save two people; one of which is an insane quaggoth who is likely going to try to kill us once he's reincarnated."

Arla's brow furrowed. "It's not just saving two people, Graiy. It's about doing what we can to save them while we're doing what we set out to do in the beginning - get to the surface with as many survivors as we can. Yes, we're talking about leaving immediately instead of staying and taking our time to rest and resupply, but making haste is what gives us the chance to do both. We can save our friends while we're escaping the Underdark. If we wait, we have no hope of saving them."

Graiyla sighed, and she looked over at Derivell, Eromani, Rini, Zen and Tanwen. They were sitting together at a table some fifteen feet away with the wolf and dragon on the floor. Tanwen's head was raised so it was like she was sitting in a highchair at the table. The four were laughing, and Tanwen was acting like a kid in a restaurant with her parents. She wanted attention, and she was acting up a bit to get it.

"I just... I just keep thinking... Why?" said the yuan-ti. "I love them dearly, but why? I know it would have been hard to simply kill her in cold blood, but she's a red dragon. The amount of destruction she might someday wreak upon the world - the sheer volume of lives she could potentially take... And we're responsible. Now she's even bigger, and they're growing even more attached." She shook her head. "It just seems so stupid."

"Then, to add to it, everything that happened at Neverlight, that was insane. Sarith could have been saved, but they kinda screwed that up by taking him with them. They encountered a demon lady and nearly got us all killed. We should have just left that place as soon as we noticed weird things were happening. Instead, decision after decision, they've not been good."

"But we saved a lot of lives as a result," said Eldeth. "Basidia and his two circles would have eventually been assimilated into Zuggtmoy's tainted one. We also delayed the demon queen's plans by ruining her tower. Everything's been working out in the end, don't you think? Besides, don't you think you should cut them a little slack? They are people too. They make mistakes."

"That's true," said Arla. "They're not perfect. They're doing their best, Graiy. We kinda forced them into their leadership positions, and they're making the most of it."

“They have a point there,” said Havvah as she ate heartily. “They didn’t ask for us to follow them. We kinda chose them to lead us.”

Graiyla forced a smile. “I suppose you’re right. To be honest, I keep bouncing back and forth on this. Sometimes, I’m thinking the very same things that you all just said. ‘I need to give them some credit.’ ‘At the end of the day, they’ve brought us through a lot of crap.’ But then there are times like this when I can’t help but think that they’re just not thinking, and they’re going to get us all captured again.”

“Let it go,” said Havvah. “Fear and doubt are why you lose faith in people. Until you let go of your fears and doubts, you’ll continue to have issues with their leadership. You have to let it go. That’s what I do. I don’t always agree with them, but I understand that they’re in charge. They’ve been given the task of leading, and I can either be a pain in their butts or I can submit and support them. Sometimes, the hardest thing a person can do is submit. Oftentimes, it takes a stronger person to submit than to butt heads and fight.”

“Okay. Okay,” said Graiyla, and she genuinely smiled as she finally began to eat. “You win. I’ll let it go.”

“Thank you,” said Arla.

That night, they indeed celebrated their victory over the Pudding King, but it was not as joyful as perhaps they had initially hoped. They rested well, and after an early breakfast the next day, they gathered their things, gathered their dead, and set out for Diggermattock Hall. After explaining their situation to the deep gnome leaders, they discovered that the svirfneblin were true to their word. Though they were saddened to see the Demon Hunters go so soon, and they were hoping to receive additional help from them to finish cleaning out the Pudding Court, they understood their plight and agreed to provide for them an escort at once.

Within the hour, they bid farewell to all their friends who were remaining in Blingdenstone including Jimjar, Topsy, and Turvy. Then their escort arrived, and they were pleasantly surprised to find that it was Ariana, the merchant who had come with them from Gracklstugh. She and her elemental would accompany them, having been given exact directions as to which paths to take to guide the Demon Hunters, at last, back to the world above.¹⁴

¹⁴ The amount of experience the Demon Hunters receive from defeating the Pudding King and his army is enough to level up Derivell, Eromani, Rini, Fiovay and Vlynrifane at last to Level 6. Aelun, Arla, Havvah, and Graiyla remain at Level 5 for now.