

Tankbuster

by Selph

Prologue: Something Slimy This Way Comes

“Keep running, those things are almost upon us!”

An assortment of armoured men, with varying weapons, stood their ground under the obelisk. Its green runes illuminating their faces, exacerbating their panicked expression with hard shadow. They arranged themselves in a circle, their backs to the inside, all six watching the trees and the bushes for movement. The most skittish, a dragon armed with a rifle, swore he saw a shape and squeezed the trigger. The group’s collective hearts stopped, thumping louder while the report of the gun faded away. All he managed to shoot was a tree, leaving a smoking indent in its bark.

“Damn it, keep it together!” The largest man called, trying to inspire some confidence in his motley crew despite his breaking voice. He was a Minotaur, broad and two heads taller than the rest of them. He gripped his claymore and snorted. “They’re here.”

A river surged into the clearing. It was a rainbow of different colours, all writhing and hungry for prey. The slimes separated, leaping despite an absence of limbs. Their shapeless bodies swallowed three of the six men. They gasped in horror, that was their undoing. Within seconds they had swelled up, belts exploding, shoes bursting. Their armour fell to the ground in a clangour, they had inflated with such speed and violence that it sundered the straps fastening their breastplates.

“Fools, never open your mouth to a slime!” The Minotaur called out, but his advice came much too late. He raised his claymore in front of his face just in time to shield his eyes from a spray of ooze. Blue, pink and yellow slime explosions signalled the failure of the victims to contain the sugary sweet volume of their attackers. Popped like balloons filled with paint, it was an embarrassing way to go. The Minotaur snorted. At least one of them had to get back to town and inform the adventurers guild, that way they could be reconstituted by the temple clerics.

“You, kobold!” The Minotaur yelled, swinging his claymore to activate its enchantment. It ignited, and burned away the mass of a tenacious slime trying to consign him an explosive fate. “Run, run away! Inform the guild, tell them to send stronger adventurers; before we’re all--” the Minotaur was cut off. A purple slime had swam under him and surged upward, entering through his mouth. It filled him viciously, fattening him too fast with its saccharine body. There was a moment where he managed to speak one last time, between cheeks the size of grapefruits. “Run... before

you... end up... like..." his eyes rolled back and he moaned, the moment before a slime caused you to explode made you utter all sorts of noises. He exploded, covering half the clearing in purple and featureless scraps of Minotaur.

The Kobold ran, not fancying his chances at containing an entire slime. He had to make it back to the city, back to the adventurer's guild. He winced as he heard the last remaining town guard explode, and hoped the group who came in their stead would have more luck.

Part 1: It Begins at the Tavern, Always a Tavern

Marcus hefted the sack over his shoulder, letting it thump against the reflective flooring of the temple. He nodded to the cleric who had been chosen to wait and receive the shipment of purified silver. He was a tired looking man, and a Chesnaught, the same as Marcus. A large mammalian species with the traits of both hedgehogs and some armoured creatures like pangolins and armadillos. These were largely generalizations by other races, who had no insight into the proud heritage of the Chesnaught people. Though Marcus did admit the green crest which travelled up from his neck, and came to a point at his forehead, did bare a passing resemblance to armour. People often confused it for a helmet.

"You look like you've seen better days," Marcus said. "Is the temple busier than usual?"

The other Chesnaught was large, but not as large as Marcus. He wore a pair of small silver spectacles, which failed to hide the dark rings of exhaustion around his eyes. "Quite. We received a messenger from the town of Vireford. A kobold of the town's guard covered in what we assumed was paint. Poor thing. His captain told him to run all the way from the forest to the city, before succumbing to a slime attack."

Marcus hummed. He made a point to be sympathetic, but he was more interested in the emergence of aggressive slimes. They were an unusual monster type. He had seldom heard of them being so aggressive, let alone in numbers great enough to fell a contingent of trained guards. Either the standards for recruitment were slipping or something else motivated the monsters.

"Is that kobold still here?" Marcus asked.

The cleric shook his head. "He arrived and gave us the request for a mass reconstitution spell. Bringing one person back from a monster attack is hard enough work, bringing five back in

such a short time span is... taxing. The silver you delivered to us will aid immensely in expediting the process. Perhaps we might even get to sleep tonight, gods willing." The cleric gave a dry chuckle, he was in dire need of sleep.

"So where did he go after leaving the temple?"

"Ah, I think he went to the adventurer's guild. Something about the last order he received before his commanding officer well... succumbed to the slimes."

Marcus reached for his shield; he had set it down while conversing with the cleric. It was an enormous, curved barrier, festooned with spikes and the earthy colours of the Chesnaught people. It was three quarters the size of Marcus himself, who was enormous and muscular - even by Chesnaught standards. The shield bevelled at the edges like a turtle shell and was made to pay tribute to his ancestors and their hardened backs. Over thousands of years, they had evolved to do away with that defence, but the memory of it remained strong. The cultural proficiency with shields made Chesnaughts a valuable defensive component of the archetypal adventuring party.

"That's good then," Marcus said. "I was just about to collect my pay for the silver delivery. Maybe I'll run into him on the way there."

The cleric balked at the suggestion. "Surely, you're not going to try and take on the slimes by yourself, they took an entire guard force by storm and decimated them. If you go by yourself, you won't have anyone to speak on your behalf to the temple; you won't be able to be reconstituted, you'll be vanquished, permanently!"

"If I go out with a bang, it'll be one heard around the world. But you don't need to worry, I don't plan on letting a wobbling cretin turn me into their ballooning plaything. I've not met a meal, nor beast, nor spell which can overcome MY tenacity." Marcus fastened his shield to the hooks on the back of his padded armour. Despite his role as a front-line fighter, he eschewed heavy armour and preferred to rely on other means of protection. His shield and his skills were enough.

Marcus set off in the direction of the guild tavern. Leaving a tired cleric to groan and wax lyrical to himself about the hubris of adventurers.

The tavern doors opened with a heady mixture of beer, smoke and roasted meat. Long benches were set up for adventuring parties to congregate, with depressions in the floor fitted with open grills and spits for the more hunting minded groups to roast their kills. Sliding a hunk of meat on the metal bars to be grilled by the coals was a boast. The more exotic and dangerous the creature they were cooking, the more experienced the cooks were at the adventuring game. At least in

theory, Marcus had caught some deep pocketed sorts buying the meat from the black market in a bid to up their status.

It never worked. Half the time they cooked the meat wrong anyway. If they were too green, they might even add heat to something which isn't meant to be brought above room temperature. Idiots tried to grill poisonous basilisk meat once, the clerics were even busier that week than they had been today. On that note, Marcus scanned the hall for a tiny, armoured kobold. He found one person matching that description by the service desk, sitting on a chair that was far too big for him, with a human sized cup between his little claws. He sipped his beer and looked around anxiously.

"Are you the one from Vireford?" Marcus asked.

The kobold took a big sip of his beer. "Mhm." He nodded. His armour had been removed but there were still splotches of slime on his tunic. There was a speckling of salt in the now dried ooze, courtesy of the temple to render it inert. The last thing the city needed was a slime epidemic, especially if they were aggressive as Marcus had been warned.

"Are you going to the dungeon?" The kobold asked.

"Dungeon?"

The kobold nodded. Then he took another sip. "A dungeon emerged in the middle of the forest beside Vireford. We were sent out to investigate and conquer it, if we could." Conquering a dungeon meant venturing to its deepest part, and slaying the boss monster inside, or destroying the locus of power which propagated the structure. "We were in over our heads though, we barely made it halfway in before our advance party were defeated by a quick moving creature with bladed rings. When we tried to run back the way we came, the river of slime gushed up from the floor and well..." the kobold swirled his cup. "They all exploded. One by one. Except for me, I still feel guilty that I'm the only one who got away."

Marcus clapped a hand on the kobold's shoulder. Though with their difference in scale, it was just his pinkie and ring finger which managed to find enough shoulder to lay on. "But thanks to you, they'll be back. The clerics are working hard. You did a good thing."

The kobold sniffled. "I guess." He looked up at Marcus. "Please, if you can, get rid of that dungeon. Before anyone else gets hurt."

Marcus thumped his chest proudly. "Of course, they don't call me the Tankbuster for nothing."

The guild administrator was a tall, muscular wolf, who looked like she would fare better at the task than some of the greenhorns gathered in the hall. "Here to challenge the Forest Obelisk Dungeon?" She regarded Marcus with a familiar nod, and began arranging the parchments she had finished stamping. "I had a feeling you might, but if you're looking to take this job as a solitary member of the guild, you're too late."

Marcus raised a brow. "Someone got here before me? But the job hasn't even been posted yet."

She replied curtly. "It's a high-profile case, just as you seemed to learn about its existence from somewhere outside of the official listing, three others have done the same. They're by the far table, near the entrance. I... doubt you'll have trouble telling which group it is." Her voice was low, with a hint of exasperation. She handed Marcus an official sign-up sheet for the job, which he signed with a messy approximation of his signature, and turned to move towards the infamous table the administrator described.

Three individuals sat alone at a long table meant for a dozen people. Two smaller, one larger and chaotic in appearance. Marcus strained his eyes just looking at him. He was a tall goat like creature. His fur was short and chalk white, transitioning to black at his forearms and the end of his long, unnervingly animated tail. A head of thick curly black fur surrounded his grinning face and joined his unkempt goatee, isolating his painted smile and drawing attention to the mismatched patterns adorning it.

He regarded Marcus with an unchanging twinkle in his eyes. He knew it frightened people, that was half of why he did it. "Bubblegum," he announced himself. "Pleasure to meet you," his tail swished and stopped with a suddenness redolent of a stalking cobra. Instead of a fanged mouth, however, it ended in a ball of lavender wool.

"Glad to be... working with you?" Marcus said, unsure of himself around the capricious goat.

"Ecstatic. I was just saying we could use a nice thick cut of meat to be our shield, you never know what you're going to find in a dungeon. If the rumours of aggressive slimes are true, I bet you could take three, four, maybe five of them into your belly before they splatter you against the walls." Bubblegum laughed, his bassoon din giving his party members pause for thought at accepting a job

with him. Bubblegum didn't mind, not at all, he liked it when people didn't know how to take him; it made everything so, so much more fun.

In contrast to Marcus, Bubblegum wore little to cover his body. Bandages around his stomach. A pair of loose, rough fabric pants and no shoes. He had a well-developed middle, rounded with fat and muscle like a dock worker. His arms were similarly beefy, an angular blue explosion tattooed on his right bicep; the words HAHAAHAHAHA ringing his left between two yellow lines. His right pectoral was marked with stars, and his left with a sequence of blue spheres and half circles correlating to the moon's phases. His lavender nipples were pierced with golden bars, and each areola was surrounded by a pink flower.

"I haven't seen you around before," Marcus said.

"You wouldn't," Bubblegum replied. "I'm from... out of town, you could say that, you should say that. Actually yeah. That's what I'm sticking with."

Marcus hummed. "Alright. Are the other two with you?"

"Oh, no, not at all. But we've made fast friends. How could you not love me? I'm the party!"

"Don't you mean the soul of the party?" Marcus tried to correct him.

"No." Bubblegum stated.

Two smaller adventurers were sitting with expressions that asked for help, it appears they had been suffering the clown paint goat's capricious tongue for a while.

The first was a hyena. His fur was a bright shade of orange, speckled with warm brown spots. His paws, both hands and feet, were the same shade of brown. His head sported burnished red, almost coppery mane that he had styled after the hair of non-furred people and their fashions. He was plump, fatter than Bubblegum, though it was evenly spread.

“Hi!” He said, eager to introduce himself. Or maybe just eager to talk to someone who wasn’t Bubblegum. “My name is Glitch,” he declared. “I’m a chemist, if you need a pick-me-up or a solvent based solution then I’m your yeen!”

Glitch had a thick pair of goggles currently strapped to his forehead. Their black lenses were made from enchanted obsidian, heavy duty, able to withstand blasts on par with a dragon’s fireball. His simple leather vest pinched at his belly, and a bandoleer filled with vials of every shape and colour jingled when he moved. He was a walking chemical kitchen, or a potential safety hazard, depending on how you looked at it. Glitch liked to think of himself as a universal answer to adventurers woes. Others thought of him as a ticking time bomb.

“So you’re going to be our...” Marcus twirled his hand, gesturing for the hyena to finish the sentence.

“Healer!” Glitch said proudly, beaming with a smile that was all teeth.

“What a lad,” Bubblegum laughed. “Who doesn’t want to be pumped full of chemicals in the middle of a fight?” He turned to look at the fourth and final member of the party, who had yet to introduce themselves and didn’t want to by their posture. Leaned over a mug of beer they hadn’t touched, wrapped in a thick cloak. “Not going to say anything? Come on, introduce yourself!”

Glitch hummed. “Don’t pressure him,” he covered his mouth. “Oops, sorry, pressure is a sensitive word.”

The hooded figure sighed. There was a squeaking noise. He lowered his cloak and revealed his face to the party. To everyone’s surprise except Glitch, the person was almost transparent. They had the shiny complexion of a balloon, the type they blew up in the town square for celebrations. Instead of head fur, they had an inflatable shape which suggested hair. Their eyes moved, blinked and rolled, but they still looked painted on. Synthetic, false. If he stayed still for long enough they could pass for an inanimate object.

“I’m Kay,” he said. “I’m a coyote, or I was.” He scowled at Glitch.

Glitch flushed. “That’s right, uh... we got in over our heads during a mission a few months ago. It turned out the boss of the dungeon was a tad stronger than we expected. We managed to defeat it, it was some kind of sorcerer pig man, and everything seemed to go fine. Until we went to

divide up the loot and the boss' staff started glowing. It fired bolts of lightning in every direction, woosh, kapow!" Glitch threw his arms up for emphasis. "And then one hit Kay..."

Kay grumbled. "And I ended up a balloon." He parted the midsection of his cloak. There was a nozzle. Bubblegum erupted into laughter. Marcus wasn't sure whether to offer condolences or to tell him his sheen was lovely. "I... don't mind, most of the time, but I was a ranger before I transformed. So I've had to make a few changes. No pointy objects, for one."

Bubblegum made a point of loudly checking his nails, and clicking his teeth. "Oh I can imagine. Don't want you to go p o p."

Kay ignored him. "I use this," he tapped his crossbow. On inspection the main mechanism had been gutted and replaced by a long rectangular chamber. At the front was a pointed red ruby. "It's a bolt launcher. Depending on the situation, it can fire different elements; we're going up against slimes, so I chose fire. They don't tend to do well with excessive heat."

"They go splat," Bubblegum interjected.

"... thanks, I was getting to that." Kay finished.

Marcus thumped his chest. "Well you're with THE Tankbuster," he puffed out his chest. "So stand behind me, and you'll have an easy time on this job. In fact, I was ready to take this mission on solo! So really, four of us? That's more than plenty. We can get this done, and we can get it done quickly. Are you ready to go?"

Kay and Glitch rose, Bubblegum skipped towards the doorway, and Marcus nodded. It was time to head out.

Part 2: Into the Dungeon

"So..." Bubblegum took large strides into the forest. "Everyone looking forward to possible riches, or doom, or intense bodily harm, or worse, or better, really I'm just happy to be included." The loose ends of his bandaged stomach flying behind him like streamers. When he was in motion, someone might be forgiven for thinking he was a jester or a clown wearing a fringed unitard. It

wasn't until you got closer that his lurid tattoos revealed themselves a permanent fixture, rather than pieces of an elaborate outfit.

Marcus kept pace behind him. He matched the goat's speed only by virtue of his height. His gait was longer than the rest of the party, but it was still a struggle at times. Bubblegum had the irritating habit of slowing down or speeding up on a whim whenever something caught his fancy.

"I'm looking forward to getting the job done. I enjoy a good fight as much as anyone, but really, I could use the coin. Bravado doesn't pass for currency at the butchers. You can't eat your own ego." Marcus said.

Glitch piped up. "Actually there are several spells and concoctions which can take someone's ego and manifest them as physical substances. So in theory, you COULD eat your own ego." The hyena tried to keep pace; he wasn't succeeding. His chubby face was sweaty, and he panted between sentences.

"That's one benefit of the curse," Kay interjected. "I can feel full just by taking in air." It was unclear if that was meant to be a boast, or a complaint.

"We're heeeeeere~" Bubblegum chimed excitedly.

The obelisk dominated the forest clearing. Even in the brightness of midday, the green runes carved into its face bathed everything in their light, subjugating sun in place of its ominous, verdant rays. It was so tall it speared the skyline. Calculating its actual height only resulted in headaches, with the dimensions of the obelisk feeling like they were ever shifting in defiance of being quantified by onlookers. A stubborn fixture, and it oozed with a palpable malevolence that made everyone - Bubblegum included - shudder uncontrollably.

"No points for subtlety," Kay quipped. He unslung his bolt thrower, ensuring the crystal was fixed in place. He turned a dial halfway up the device and countered the overwhelming green with a red luminescence from his weapon. "Did anyone bring a light source?" He asked, his rubbery body reflecting the light and making it hard for anyone to look at him directly.

"When we have you?" Glitch pulled his goggles then let them snap over his eyes. "You know, Kay. You could easily rectify the problem of needing to carry a light source on every mission if you let me fill you with fluorescent gas."

Kay didn't look particularly amused at the suggestion. "I don't fancy becoming a flammable beacon for enemy archers, Glitch. At that point, I might as well be one of your chemical bombs."

Glitch shrugged. "Oh well. I suppose I could fill MYSELF with it. The transparency quotient of flesh isn't quite as handy for illumination, but if I filled myself readily enough I--"

"Glitch," Kay snapped. "You're getting into one of your 'moods' again. Try to keep it together."

Glitch bit his lip. "Right."

Bubblegum was squatted by the base of the obelisk. Looking into its depths, he hummed a discordant tune. "I wonder what we'll find."

Marcus double checked the straps for his massive shield, making sure they were fitted tightly to his vascular arm without cutting off his circulation. "I'll be up front, that's what tanks do."

Bubblegum shrugged. "Suit yourself. Like I said at the guild hall, I'm more than happy to have a big juicy cut of meat protecting me."

Marcus grunted. "You really do just speak your mind, don't you, clown?"

"If I didn't expel all this hot air, the consequences might be catastrophic!" Bubblegum made a show of puffing out his cheeks. He exhaled and followed Marcus down into the dungeon when he realized the Chesnaught wasn't paying him any mind.

Kay and Glitch followed at a safe distance, wary of the goat more than they were an attack from the front.

"You know, for a dungeon, I expected it to be dirtier." Glitch said, keeping himself close to his rubbery companion. He had a point though. The stonework was surprisingly clean cut and well maintained for a dungeon, the standard fare was usually mossy cobblestone; spiderwebs, spiders

were optional; a few skeletons or bits of them strewn about; and a smattering of broken weapons, for good measure. What Glitch saw instead was dark grey stone, with golden parallel lines running further down.

When the sunlight was fully gone from above, they came upon a well-lit chamber. Six braziers of emerald fire, the same hue as the obelisk's rune light. "Someone REALLY likes green," Kay said and dimmed his crystal.

"Only one exit," Marcus nodded toward a stone archway at the opposite end of the chamber. "Whoever manifested this dungeon prefers things to be direct, it seems. I'd bet my shield that this is a trapped room."

Bubblegum squatted next to Marcus. "Mm. Normally I'd love to gamble my savings away with reckless abandon, but the odds are far too stacked in your favour, meat slab."

Kay surveyed the room, taking out a small ornate spyglass from his cloak. He hummed. "There's grates in the floor, four of them. It might be where the slimes came from."

Glitch began checking his twin bandoleers for a specific bottle. "Hang on, I have something which could help us out here. Um... which shade of blue was it again? Cerulean? Indigo? Sky? Electric..."

The group padded into the room. Marcus took the lead, flanked by Bubblegum and Kay. Glitch followed closely behind Marcus, hoping that in the event of unexpected combat, he would be safe by proximity to the muscle bound Chesnaught.

Burbling filled the room. Predictably it came from the four grates. Glitch approached the one closest to the party and emptied electric blue liquid between the bars. Glitch had never thought about what a screaming slime sounded like, but he thought the angry gurgling giving way to a simmer was close enough.

"That's one out of three."

"Great, what about the other three?" Marcus readied his shield.

“... oh, uh. I only had one vial of slime solvent.” Glitch replied, falling back into position.

“Why would you bring only ONE vial of something which destroys slimes, to a dungeon, with a slime problem!?” Kay exclaimed. Checking each grate in turn, keeping his sights trained for the first sign of a monster.

“I wanted to be prepared for a little bit of everything!”

“... but we’re not fighting everything, we’re fighting slimes!”

The three remaining grates bubbled over. Each with a different colour. The first produced a large, red sphere, tall like Marcus and several feet across. It rolled towards him and battered against his shield. It was too thick to separate like its smaller variants were known to do. Marcus grit his teeth, feeling his joints pulse with pain from the impact. He pushed with as much strength as he could summon, bouncing the slime to the far wall, raising a cloud of debris.

The second grate gushed. A quick, snaking liquid jabbed for Bubblegum’s face. He evaded it with an identically serpentine display of agility. The purple slime kept its elongated shape, coiling, readying itself for another attempt. Bubblegum had avoided it the first time but barely, there was a dollop of the creature’s colour on his cheek. If it had been more accurate by a margin of inches, he might be fighting to stay intact right now.

Kay and Glitch took note of the two skirmishes. Kay raised his bolt thrower, while Glitch crouched nervously behind him. A teal slime emerged from the grate. It bounced and hovered in the air, making it an easy target. Kay pulled the trigger and popped the slime like a balloon, leaving shreds of it stuck to the floor. He was about to turn and provide covering fire for Marcus when the fragments reassembled themselves.

Marcus caught the coyote and the hyena struggling against their opponent in his periphery, but he made the decision to keep his attention focused on the massive red slime. It would cause far more damage to them if he let it do as it pleased. The slime rolled towards him with the force of a downhill boulder and unbalanced him. He cursed, then chastised himself for opening his mouth. The taste of cherry was overpowering. He tried to tighten his throat muscles, or blow the intruder back with a shout, but his stomach had already distended several inches. He chomped down and managed to use his powerful jaw to sever the tendril pumping into him. He was still too late. He could feel it multiplying. His muscles were starting to lose definition, the slime was transforming his hard-earned physique into fuel for its replication.

“Ugh... got no... choice,” Marcus said and dropped his shield. He took a deep breath. An insane choice, considering the way his stomach bulged like a water balloon filled with heavy pudding. It had already grown to push tufts of fur through his leather vest. With a spray of buttons it exploded open, leaving him with a quaking belly that could smother a grizzly bear. Marcus closed his eyes, and clapped his hands on his belly. And steam rose from his skin.

Bubblegum flew at his opponent, his feet barely touching the ground like a rock skimming the surface of a pond. He made one solitary swipe with his tail, straight through the purple slime’s centre. It bubbled and convulsed, then hardened into a long tube of brittle, solid material. Bubblegum laugh and gave it a poke. It fell over and shattered, bits of it falling between the grates. He wished he could have thought of a more spectacular way to dispatch the slime.

Bubblegum turned around, there were two fights. One was between Kay, Glitch, and the air slime. It kept popping on contact from the coyote’s bolt thrower; then it reformed and blasted the pair with gusts of pressurized air. Two was Marcus and the big red slime, a king slime Bubblegum noticed, but he didn’t share that information with the party. He took note of the chesnaught’s bloated stomach and grinned, eager to see how much of a blast would ensue. Then he started steaming.

“Well that’s unconventional,” Bubblegum said. He decided he would help Kay and Glitch. Though not with any urgency. He walked towards them and their opponent, while keeping an eye on Marcus.

Marcus had a look of intense concentration. He grunted and tensed his body like he was trying to squeeze the slime filling his belly to its limits. As his short fur stood on end, and the hot pink skin beneath gave off enough steam to surround him in a haze which smelled faintly of sweat - and to Bubblegum’s nose, magic - he grew. Though he wasn’t growing fatter to his bursting point like the slime intended. He was growing stronger. Physically bigger, his muscles swelled individually, like a blacksmith was frantically pumping their bellows under his skin. “You won’t... get me... that easily!”

“Oh, what a neat trick,” Bubblegum said.

Marcus grew several heads taller, and wider. His biceps were thickened and rounded out, less defined than they had been, but far more imposing and stronger enough to deliver a devastating right hook to the king slime. It impacted with enough force to fling it against the wall a second time, the gelatinous material bevelling around the chesnaught’s knuckles in the split second before it flew. It crashed into the dungeon wall. And it went splat, like a thrown tomato at a bad theatre performance. Whatever Marcus had done to grow so herculean had given him the ability to stop the creature from regenerating.

The chesnaught hulk turned and prepared to turn his attention on the air slime, but he dropped to his knees. He exhaled steam and deflated, returning to his 'normal' level of heavy hitting beefiness. "Ugh, not enough to burn." He winced. "Sorry, you need to take it out without my help!"

Bubblegum squatted down, halfway between Marcus and the battle with the air slime. He decided to just watch, eager to see if the squeak and the potion mixer were up to snuff, or if they'd be snuffed out.

Kay rolled away from another blast of pressure from the slime. He readied his bolt thrower and took aim, but the slime hadn't fully deflated from its last attack, and shot at Kay's foot. His lack of weight made it easy for him to be knocked off balance. His shot went wide and scorched the wall behind his target. "Damn it!" He growled. "Glitch, watch out it's going to attack again." Kay pulled a lever, dislodging the spent crystal from his weapon, then dug through his backpack for a replacement.

Glitch reached for a vial on his bandoleer. He never managed to grab it, because the slime rushed towards him and pressed itself around his muzzle.

"Glitch!" Kay said, panicking.

The hyena struggled. The slime expanded to an obscene degree, bigger than Marcus had been during his strange muscular episode; bigger than the king slime had been it quivered like a soap bubble, an easy target for a popping. But the tank was indisposed, and the clown merely watched, as it reversed and shrunk while depositing its airy payload into the hyena.

Glitch made an odd noise halfway between a gurgle and a moan of pleasure. His eyes rolled back while the air pumped his cheeks to the size of grapefruits and his bandoleer snapped off his growing body, like two rubber bands pulled too far. "Mmbig..." Glitch cooed.

"Oh ho, no way, he's one of THOSE types?" Bubblegum broke into a fit of laughter.

Kay covered his face with a squeaky paw. "Oh for the love of... Glitch, not again."

Glitch was an insatiable inflatophile. A fact which paid no small part in the events leading to Kay's balloonification. To most people being turned into a gigantic sphere, as Glitch was becoming now that his limbs had become puffy and ineffective, was a nightmarish scenario which they wouldn't wish on their worst enemies. To Glitch it was heavenly. He wiggled his sausage digits with delight and wished he had a mirrored surface to admire his new dimensions. He was barely showing signs of strain, despite being as large as a carriage.

"Shouldn't we help him?" Marcus regained composure. He grabbed his shield.

"I'm enjoying the show, look at him. He's happy as a clam!" Bubblegum quipped.

Kay found another crystal, and sighed in relief. He squeakily fixed it to his weapon and fired a bolt of fire at the slime, rupturing it, leaving thin sheets of translucent teal behind. He aimed at the scraps, expecting it to regenerate, but it didn't. It must have spent most of its energy trying to pop the stretchy hyena, who's tongue lolled, and eyes rolled in a horny daze.

"You 'could' have used ONE of your potions to help," Kay scolded him, rolling him to a far wall in order to begin the deflation process. He put his back into it and forced the air out of him in one protracted exhale. When he finally returned to his original size, Kay tossed him a spare cloak from his backpack and told him to put it on. "You could have popped; we barely have enough money to have you put back together. Especially after last time when you got us jumped by that band of air wizards."

Glitch shook his head, he offered a goofy grin, hoping it would assuage his friend's anger. "Oh come on, we both enjoyed it up until they turned us into fireworks!" he beamed. "I kind of enjoyed the fireworks part too..." he whispered, sounding wistful.

"Wow, someone's got it bad." Bubblegum hopped and skipped to re-join the party proper.

"And why didn't you help them?" Marcus frowned.

"I didn't want to risk popping the poor boy, look how sharp my claws are. They're manicured -and- deadly."

Kay reloaded his bolt thrower. "We should... keep going, I'm sorry for Glitch. He can be a bit inflation-happy."

Bubblegum scoffed, "a bit?" He made a show of circling the coyote. "He was practically stroking himself and begging for another pump to send him sky high!"

Glitch flushed. "I'll behave," he said. "I also have healing potions, if anyone needs them."

"Miraculously, none of us sustained much damage." Bubblegum said. "Though I think the big guy might want to explain his party trick, it looked useful."

"Mana conversion," Marcus stated. "It's how I manage to take on my missions solo. Slimes are made entirely of easily mutable mana, they're always part-way dissolved, it makes them easy to digest. So when the king slime tried to pump itself into my body, I burned it up and converted it into mass." He rolled his shoulders, getting the stiffness out.

"So you can burn 'any' sort of mana? Anything magical?" Bubblegum hummed.

Glitch piped up. "Oh, I have plenty of magic potions you could use in a pinch. I'd love to see your upper limit!"

Marcus raised a brow as Glitch scavenged one of his bandoleers from the floor, the one with the least broken vials. "We need to keep going," he nodded to the only other archway which presumably led deeper into the dungeon and ushered the party to follow along behind him.

Part 3: Pride and Pressure

The party descended through a narrow hallway for what felt like hours. Marcus kept his shield raised and took point at the front in expectation of an attack, while Bubblegum and Kay alternated as rear lookouts. The uniformity of the black stone passage was oppressive. As they continued their trek the masonry went from a matte black to reflective obsidian. The gaps in the bricks were filled with more and more gold the deeper they went, and the drabness of the upper level disappeared entirely, when they spotted variegated silks draping a light at the end of the hallway.

“They ‘really’ aren’t keen on the whole explore the dungeon at your own pace thing, are they?” Bubblegum remarked. He flexed his fingers, black claws glinting in the light from Kay’s weapon. “A good dungeon crawl usually involves some degree of discovery, checking rooms as you go, backtracking, pillaging loot; this whole place is basically a straight shot to the boss room.”

“Assuming that ‘is’ the boss room,” Marcus said. “We don’t know what to expect. It could be more slime. The adventurer’s handbook states that the deeper underground you go, the more powerful the monsters become. So we could be up against more king slimes, like the red one I faced off against upstairs.” His muscles had fully shrunk to their original size. He was still supremely beefy compared to the rest of the party, and they would be hard pressed to find another adventurer with shield bearing arms like his; but he still felt lacking. The pangs of wanting for more strength always followed. The voice in the back of his mind, telling him to pump his muscles up again, was the reason he kept the ability as a last resort.

Glitch sniffed the air. “Does anyone else smell that?”

Kay shrugged. “My sense of smell isn’t what it used to be,” he said pointing some ire at Glitch. “Everything is tinged with latex because of my ‘condition,’ remember?”

Glitch chuckled and tried to smile apologetically. “Sorry about that.” He tapped some vials which had survived the previous battle. “If we ‘do’ come up against more slime then we have plenty of goo dissolvent this time, we might not even have to fight.”

Kay’s body puffed up in rage. “You had that stuff on you the WHOLE time?”

“Not the whole time!” Glitch made a lowering motion with his paws, trying to calm his ballooning friend. “I had a ‘lot’ of mixtures on me when we entered the dungeon, when I lost half of them, it meant I had an easier time finding the good ones. See, see? I’m focused, and I’m not trying to get all pumped up this time. I promise!”

Bubblegum and Marcus watched the melodrama play out between the inflatable coyote, and the balloon brained hyena. They made a bet with one another whether Glitch would end up popped by the end of the mission. Marcus bet one gold on yes; Bubblegum bet one gold on no. They went to shake hands, then realized the improbability of trying to do so with a gigantic, spiked shield in the way and settled for nods of affirmation instead.

“Let’s get this done with,” Kay said, releasing heated air through the valve in his stomach like a kettle. “I’d like to get paid, get home, and enjoy myself.” He readied his bolt thrower and nodded towards the silk drapery which hung in place of a boss room door. “I could use a shining after today.”

Bubblegum guffawed. “I thought you hated being a balloon, why would you get yourself shined up like a pair of new shoes. Wouldn’t that make you stand out?” His swishing tail broadcast his amusement.

“It’s my policy to make the best of things. If I’m stuck as a living balloon for the foreseeable future, then I ought to be lustrous and well dressed. It’s not any different from personal grooming and keeping yourself presentable.” Kay said.

Bubblegum hummed. “Well dressed...?” He eyed the simple green cloak Kay wore fastened around his neck. It was the only thing covering his body, besides his bolt thrower’s holster and his backpack. He was naked otherwise, though he had no noticeable ‘bits’ between his squeaky orange thighs. “But you’re as tits to the wind as they come.”

Kay snorted and squeaked. “Well of course I am, dungeon monsters have all sorts of abilities they could use to blow me up. If I wore a shirt or a belt, I would burst right out them if I let my guard down. Besides, who wears their expensive clothes to go dungeon crawling?”

“I’ve never really worn much beyond bandages and pants, sometimes I don’t even bother with the pants.” Bubblegum said. “But that’s a good point, frugal too. I see why Glitch keeps you around, lad seems like he’d be lost without you.”

Kay shook his head at that. “He’s a good person, just...”

“Horny?” Bubblegum interjected.

“Eccentric,” Kay shot back. “We all have our quirks,” he looked at Bubblegum with intent. And the clown white goat laughed, apparently getting the hint.

“Everyone, be alert.” Marcus called and parted the silks.

The room was less spacious than the circular arena where they fought the slimes. It might have felt that way, however, on account of how replete it was with glittering piles of treasure; circular furniture of exotic designs and patterns; and a suspicious number of large balloons scattered about the chamber. Some were longer and placed on top of the beds, which Kay swore he saw moving behind the draping canopies. Others were wedged into chairs, with long hookah pipes still releasing fragrant vapour as they lay discarded across the floor. There was an uneasy stillness to the room, interrupted only by the odd squeak of a balloon or the hiss of a pipe.

“They’re so much happier this way, don’t you agree?”

Marcus raised his shield. Seated at the far end of the chamber on a thrown of pillows was a rabbit. His fur had the cool even blue of a cornflower, ringed with dark bands around his arms, long ears, and tail. He had dark purple fur styled to look like swooped up hair, powerful eyebrows, and deep red eyes that glinted like rubies in the eyes of a malevolent, grinning statue. He caressed a balloon with one paw, pressing it to the cream section of his belly until it burst with a sigh of pleasure.

“I just can’t help myself sometimes,” he giggled. “They’re so eager to experience release, and who am I to deny them that pleasure?” He luxuriated amongst his pillows, raising a paw to point at the group of intruders who had come to invade his sanctum. “You’re here to challenge the boss of this dungeon, is that correct?” He flicked his wrist, making the golden bands jingle with a melodious note that lingered in the minds of those who heard it.

The party visibly relaxed. The battle readiness they displayed melted away. Marcus led an uneven trudge towards the bunny. He was small, barely five feet in height with wide hips, large paws, and dressed in a resplendently shiny silk top, with a matching sarouel around his waist that was tied off at the ankle with more golden bands. Despite the majority of rabbit-folk originating in the western forestlands, this one wore the garb of a dancer from the east. He smiled malevolently, leaning forward and drawing his pair of bladed rings into his paws; just a little bit closer, and one cut would be all it took. Then, Zelos would have four new balloons to add to his collection.

“Yes, that’s it,” Zelos cooed. “A little closer now, and you’ll be able to take your first stride into paradise.” He hopped up from his pillows. Behind him was a great black stone door, marked with green runes identical to the obelisk on the surface. He had been tasked with keeping adventurers who made their way to the inner sanctum ‘entertained,’ so that the master remained undisturbed. It was a grim task, so Zelos filled his chamber with as much luxury as he could get his hands on. Soon, he would have new balloons to play with, and he couldn’t wait to see which of them could hold on the longest before they popped!

Bubblegum sped up, subtly, but surely. He was the first to arrive in front of Zelos, the bunny raising a hand and empowering the golden ring blade with his cursed power. He swung it down in an arc, laughing giddily. "Time to join the menagerie~" he said.

"Nah," Bubblegum ducked out of the way with supernatural speed. His tail shot out from beneath his legs, striking towards Zelos' chest. To the clown's surprise Zelos deflected it, flipping backwards and landing in a battle-ready pose on top of the largest, most luxurious bed in the chamber. "Oh, he's... faster than I expected." Bubblegum inhaled. He thrust out his left hand, and expunged a wave of magic. "Wake up!" He said, hoping the jolt of shadow magic would be enough of a shock to the system to undo the enchantment.

Marcus shook his head. "What, huh? What... happened to me," he clutched his head with his free hand.

Kay grasped the situation quickly, and fired a salvo of fire bolts at the bunny who jumped, adhered to the far wall of the chamber, and bounded forward throwing both ring blades. They flew in wide arcs, one of them striking Kay in the shoulder, while the other just narrowly avoided Glitch's head. When Kay didn't blow up into a featureless round orb, Zelos growled and landed atop another one of the beds.

"What!?" He yelled. "You didn't blow up; you were meant to blow up!" Zelos was too focused on angrily yelling at the already-ballooned coyote to notice Glitch arming Bubblegum with a jar of green liquid. It flew and smashed against one of the bunny's cursed blades returning to his hand, melting into a puddle of gold on the floor. "How dare you!" He screamed. "That was EXPENSIVE, do you know how many adventurers I had to pop, to get enough gold from them, to make an entire enchanted golden weapon!?"

Marcus grunted. He repositioned near Glitch. "I'm not much use against someone as fleet footed as him," he growled. "Do you three have a plan? Anything you can do to slow him down?"

Zelos jumped and threw his remaining blade. Marcus managed to parry it, but the curse imbued in the metal affected inanimate objects, not just living creatures. He dropped his beloved spiked shield as it transformed into an inflatable parody of itself, squeaky and useless for defence. He took a tentative step away from it, fearing the transformation could infect him by proxy.

"I have one, but I need you to keep him busy." Glitch whispered.

“How long do you need?” Marcus breathed deeply, preparing to harden himself with his magic. He wasn’t sure if the little abjuration he knew could protect him from a ballooning curse, but he was out of options. The alternative was running and hiding, and the Tankbuster never ran from a fight and never cowered from his opponents.

“Two minutes... Bubblegum, I need your tail.”

“You’re not cutting it off,” Bubblegum huffed.

Glitch shook his head. He took an empty phial from his bandoleer, then filled it with a clear fluid. “The thing you did to the slime. You can release poison from your tail, right?”

Bubblegum’s tail wiggled. It knew it was being talked about. “From the tip, yeah,” he motioned to the end, tipped with a lump of lavender cotton. It was deadlier than it looked, much, much deadlier. “You got a job for me then?”

Glitch nodded. “Kay, keep him busy!”

Kay took the instruction and fired another salvo. The bunny dodged and threw his remaining blade. Marcus took a risk and intercepted it with a magic-imbued fist, praying to his people’s gods that he didn’t end up spherical and translucent. The Chesnaught’s fist connected with the golden ring and knocked it out of its arc, sending it sliding across the floor. Kay readied his bolt thrower, turned a knob to flare the crystal, and fired a concentrated beam that rendered the second cursed weapon unusable by melting it.

“I’ll turn you to scraps and scatter you across the oceans for this!” Zelos dove at Kay, his paws glowing purple. He managed to make contact with the coyote, filling him rapidly with lavender smoke that stretched his rubbery skin and made his seams more pronounced as he rounded out. His paws filled out rapidly, a design of the spell, forcing him to drop his bolt thrower. He smacked Zelos away, using his expanded limbs to swat the short, angry rabbit away.

“Gotcha,” Bubblegum struck. His tail, tensed and dripping with gold, struck Zelos in the back. The bunny’s lack of covered fur and skin made him an easy target for the cotton cloud to induce its poison, already coursing through him and making him grind his teeth in exasperation. “Everyone, back away, now!”

Kay fumbled, managing to pick up his bolt thrower. He wasn't sure what was happening, but he had no reason to distrust Bubblegum's battle prowess. He bounded away, again aided more by the pumping he had received than hindered.

Glitch scurried behind Marcus. Bubblegum too. "What did you do to him?" Marcus said, backing up towards the boss door as Zelos shook and twitched. "Is he defeated?"

"Give it a minute," Bubblegum smirked. "Y'know. The hyena balloon-brain had a good idea for once," he said ruffling the hyena's fur. "Thought of a fun way to combine the curse in those stupid ring blades with my poison, now watch."

Zelos stomped, turning to the trio by the boss door. "If you think, for one second, that you have won." He pointed. His pointing paw was shiny and had the same subtle seams that Kay did. As he pointed, the digit he used to accuse the party swelled. It kept swelling, spreading to the entire paw, then the entire limb. "If you think for one minute that you've won...!"

The bunny hiccupped. His foot paws suffered a similar fate, and he waddled awkwardly trying to keep his balance. He teetered until gravity lost its hold on him, letting him drift into the middle of the room. His beautiful silks pulled taut across his body which expanded to the size of one of his regal, circular beds. The wrinkles in the shiny fabric were ironed out, filled to the brim by inflating rabbit. Zelos only continued to get rounder, redder in the face, and louder. Most of his ranting was completely indecipherable amidst a background of hissing air, and violent creaking from his tightening body. He rotated in the air, still shouting until he grew spherical and looked so enraged, he could combust on the spot.

"I am Zelos. The dancer of destruction; the host of doomed heroes!" His prideful rambling had been drowned out by the noises his body made to signal its catastrophic failure to contain the pressure inside of it. Pinprick holes, where his seams had given up and begun to split, did their best to vent the excess air but it was too late. The inflation was too fast, and too vicious. It built up faster than it could be let out. Golden rings exploded off the circular mounds which used to be Zelos' wrists and ankles. His silk garment tore down the middle, overstretched and ruined, like a gaudy tent had been thrown on the floor.

"I can't lose to some... adventurers..." His cheeks puffed up and he found himself having a hard time articulating through the way they smushed his mouth closed. His nose twitched furiously, and he went cross eyed, trying - desperately - to hold himself together.

"I'm not going to pop... like... like some big..." his breathing picked up, and his voice took on a strained quality. Though not a painful strain, more like someone fighting their own rising pleasure.

Trying to deny an orgasm they knew would be their doom. “Like some big, beautiful, reflective, gorgeously taut...” hot steam whistled out of his ears, making them flap comically. “Overfilled... transparent... ready... to... burst... massive, big, BIG, BIIIIIG... UNBEARABLY... OVERINFLATED, PUMPED UP...”

Everyone plugged their ears.

“BALLLLOOOOOOOOON!” Zelos cried out, and exploded. Hot air rushed out from the point of detonation, with featureless blue scraps and a series of golden bands scattered across the room, serving as the only proof of the dungeon mid-boss’s existence.

Glitch blushed, Bubblegum couldn’t stop laughing, Kay made a face, and Marcus rubbed his eyes. “Let’s uh, agree to never talk about this fight. Ever. Okay?”

They all agreed, and proceeded through the final doorway.

Part 4: The Boss

The final chamber was not what the four had expected.

A vast cavern yawned into infinity. The obsidian walls and their gold inlays terminated abruptly, giving to rough, primal stone and oozing green liquid which poured into a pit on the far side. A boar like creature stood on the precipice, his back facing the party with his shadow growing long and distorted from the verdant light below. He appeared naked and bereft of clothing and weapons at first, but on approach, he was revealed to be dressed in the barest resemblance of a gladiator’s subligar. If he noticed the door to his cavern open behind him, he made no indication of it, and chanted in a coarse, sharp language that sounded painful to recite.

“Is that the boss?” Kay whispered quietly, lowering his bolt thrower to avoid its light alerting the figure. “He seems smaller than I expected, but what’s he doing? What language even ‘is’ that?”

“It’s demonic,” Bubblegum stated. His voice was tight and lacked its usual whimsy. If he could go paler than the chalk white of his fur and skin, then he would have. “And it’s a particularly nasty variant, he’s trying to open a portal to another realm. A bad one.” Bubblegum tensed his arms, his void black claws trembling slightly. “We need to take him out, now.”

Marcus couldn't suppress a shiver. The chesnaught people were of the earth and possessed a deep connection to nature. Even though Marcus hadn't been particularly connected to his roots, he could still feel a wrongness in the figure and his actions, a deep-seated urge to distance himself from the green glow of the pit pulsed in his blood. "No doubt about it, that's the boss; and even if it isn't, he's just as bad."

Glitch took a phial in each hand, leaving the last of his stock on his bandoleer. "I think we need to do it quickly, y'know. This is the first time we've had the element of surprise after all." He handed one of the phials to Bubblegum, who received it with a nod. "Throw that, it's explosive. It should knock him into the pit, and boom, we're done."

Bubblegum took on a stance to assist with his throwing. He aimed and took a breath to steady his nerves. With a solid two whirls of his arm he threw the phial, sending it whistling through the air and crashing by the feet of the figure, who turned in time to utter a confused hum before blue flames engulfed the spot where he was standing. "Eh, not the most elegant solution, but I'm down for minimal effort and maximum results."

Marcus tread forward with caution. He approached the scorched earth where the figure stood.

The rumbling knocked everyone to the ground.

"Your caution is surprising, adventurers," a voice boomed. Green fire, the same awful shade of green which had been present from the obelisk on the surface, to the runes on the doorway, geysered from the recesses of the pit and filled the cavern with a dread heat. "The first to fight me were bold and filled with vim and vigour," a pair of claws reached from the inferno and gripped the edge. "The second to fight me were arrogant, wielding technology and magic beyond their ken," a torso rose, pulled up by heaving muscular arms. It was illustrated with cruel, pulsating runes, that the party struggled to look at without feeling their eyes start to heat up and water uncontrollably. "And the third, was the great hero, who entombed me here; so I have to ask you the question, would-be champions of the guild."

A tusked, boar-like face erupted from the wall of green fire and inhaled the remainder of its demonic power. His broad tusks ignited, and his eyes were wide pupil-less and jade. A mane of golden hair tumbled down from his head, across his back and into the expanse beyond. This beast was so enormous, with a belly the size of the guild hall the party had taken their initial job from, and it was gurgling like the cauldron of dark magic it ostensibly was. Beneath the pink rune marked skin, the party could see the emerald inferno, still building and forcing the beast to swell taller, wider, and stronger with every passing second.

“I am Cazareth the Glutton, the devourer and the destructor of proud men. Entire countries once paid tribute at my altar to avert my wrath. What hope does a motley crew of a brute, a jester, a cursed archer, and a meek potion mixer have to defeat me?” He laughed and sent vibrations through the bodies of the four with its low pitch. When Cazareth spoke, it was as if the ground itself reverberated with his voice. He lifted a clawed finger and pointed at Glitch, his face morphing into a cruel smile. “You will be the first to falter.”

“Did he just call me a JESTER?” Bubblegum jumped up. He sprinted at Cazareth in rage, leaping on to the back of his hand and running along his arm. “I’m at LEAST a harlequin you pig!” His claws gleamed with violent intent. He bounded again and landed on the demon’s shoulder and slashed his cheek, separating flesh and spilling green blood from the wound. Bubblegum flipped backwards and away from the spray of fluids, but he was too slow, a speckling burned his leg and he winced. Cazareth tried to swat the goat, but he was too slow to match the agility of the clown, who landed triumphantly, his arms spread despite the bloodstain smoking against his limb.

“A quick tongue for a quick attacker,” Cazareth’s wound dried and sealed up in seconds. “I changed my mind,” he pointed at Bubblegum instead. “You like to beat your chest, and puff it out with pride. Let us see how you fare when that inflated ego of yours is reflected in a more physical manner, ‘jester.’”

Bubblegum exhaled, the wind had been knocked from him. He was unable to move, feeling like a prisoner in his own flesh. He felt a pressure in his chest, like he was holding his breath for far too long. Then he felt it, the stretching. His strong chest, the pectorals he had been proud of with their flower tattoos and jingling rings, inflated like balloons at the faire. He grunted and tried to strain against the magic altering his body, but he was being overpowered. His vision was being obscured by the large, white, rubbery mounds of literal balloon-flesh growing to make a mockery of his physique. His head sunk into a dimple created by the rise of his shoulders, pectorals and trapezoids. His back muscles, similarly squeaky, inflated too.

When the pressure finally left him, he was left teetering as a top-heavy balloon animal. He gripped at himself in futility, trying to reach his nipples to squeeze the air out through his nipples so that he might deflate. But he couldn’t reach high enough, and one overzealous attempt at reaching for them caused him to topple over. “You bastard,” he screamed, hoarse. “I’ll rip you apart, I’ll kill you!”

Cazareth bellowed with laughter. “Ah, you should be wary of your claws. Jester. Less you puncture yourself.”

Kay switched the red crystal in his bolt thrower for a pure, silver gem. He released a powerful blast of white light which struck Cazareth in the chest. It left a goopy, open wound, that closed with a sluggishness Kay hadn't observed when Bubblegum tore open the demon's cheek. "Bingo, he can't stand holy magic!"

Cazareth growled and thrust his palm at the coyote. "Clever balloon. Seems your mind is still intact, and not as hollow as I would like. Allow me to give you some fulfilment," he closed his open hand into a fist. Kay gasped. His body rumbled and began to stretch, but with a violent speed that threatened to tear his seams. He swelled to the size of a weather balloon in seconds, his disproportionately large paws - both hands and feet - wiggling helplessly. The scent of his latex body filled the cavern, which was probably a bad sign, and served as a portent of his imminent destruction.

"I... have more experience with this... than you might think," he said defiantly through puffy cheeks.

Marcus grunted. He finally got to his feet, after being the most disturbed by the initial tremors put out by the demon's emergence. He sprinted over to Bubblegum, who had some luck by slamming his body to the ground and deflated slightly, but he was still indisposed. "Bubblegum, the poison in your tail, is it magical?" He asked, desperate.

Bubblegum grunted. "I'm a little bit BUSY right now."

"IS IT MAGICAL?" Marcus bellowed.

"Yeah, yeah it is! Why!?"

"Poison me," he said. Ripping his tunic off. "Fill me with as much poison as you possibly can."

"But that'll kill you! ... won't it?"

"Just do it!"

While Marcus and Bubblegum worked on their plan, the latter pushing his cotton like tail end into the tank's chest and watching his body convulse as it tried to pass the offending substances, Glitch had a terrible idea. "Hey, Cazareth!"

Cazareth turned his attention to the hyena. He stopped pumping Kay towards his doom, letting the orange coyote - transparent and taxed to his limits - rotate helplessly in the air. "What do you want, chemist? Are you going to bore me to death with a safety lesson on mixing potions?"

"Oh there's nothing safe about this," Glitch popped the corks on his remaining explosive phial and drank it. Then he took the final phial, one filled with holy water, and guzzled it. He slapped and jiggled his own stomach to aggravate the mixture. With blue smoke rising from his ears and nostrils, he pulled his goggles down and ran at Cazareth. As he ran, his body inflated in uneven pulses. One paw rounded out, then another. His stomach blew up, making him comically bottom heavy, until his chest joined the curve, and he became a bouncing explosive ball, attempting to throw himself at the boss in an act of self-sacrifice. "Here comes the BOOM!"

"I don't think so," Cazareth pushed on Glitch with his magic. He smiled and drew the hyena closer. "Ah, a clever move. You intended to turn yourself into a makeshift grenade, filled with sacrosanct water that would evaporate into a steam that would melt me away. Pity you didn't think to inhibit my magic first, my swell-crazed friend." He pinched the air, and Glitch's body dimpled on either side. He tried to keep the dangerous mixture inside of him, but he was forced to exhale it in a gout of white-blue flame, aimed away from Cazareth. He deflated to his regular size, and fell to the floor. Looking chronically disappointed that his desire to inflate had been denied a second time.

"Now, where was I?" Cazareth looked back to Kay, and found he was gone. "... where did you go?" He scanned the cavern and found Bubblegum, deflated, squeezing superheated air out of the coyote. "You're... back to normal?" He said, with genuine confusion.

"Yeah. He is," a voice called up at the looming demon. Marcus stood at the edge of the precipice; his face covered with sweat. His muscles pulsed, and grew. He gained in height as well as mass. His biceps and triceps became larger than most horse drawn carriages, while his powerful legs burst free of his leather breeches with their curving mounds. His hamstrings and his calves, they thickened to support his behemoth upper body. And in seconds, Marcus had become a true Tankbuster, a monster of his own making powerful enough to rival the dungeon boss.

"How!? How are you so big!?" Cazareth brought his right arm back and attempted to throw a punch at the chesnaught. It connected, striking him square in the chest, leaving a feeling of ache in Cazareth's propelled fist. "... what did you DO!?" He exclaimed, surprised.

Marcus snorted. He willed his pectorals to inflate. They grew and trapped Cazareth's fist in the cleavage, leaving him free to wail on the boar demon with his own enormous fists. Sweat flew, and with every punch, he felt himself tighten. This boost was temporary. He had taken more poison from Bubblegum's tail than any creature had in the past, and he had lived to tell the tale. It was a magical poison in nature, which meant he could burn it to increase his mass. The problem was that the poison was self-replicating, and once he started burning it, he couldn't stop. To his detriment, his ability to convert magical material in his body into mass had no off switch. It continued until there was nothing left to burn.

He had turned himself into a ticking time bomb.

Bubblegum had been giddy at the chance to see what would happen if Marcus burned his poison. He got his wish. Marcus suspected that, even if he hadn't asked, the clown goat would have stuck him with his tail at some point on the way back to the guild anyway. So this was really an inevitability. But damn, it felt good. Marcus could feel his burgeoning ego swelling within. The rational part of his mind fought against the urge to give in to hubris, and declare his supremacy with a flex and a roar. But he had to keep fighting, at least long enough for the others to escape.

Bubblegum couldn't deflate Kay entirely. He had managed to get him to a size where he could waddle on his puffy paws. "Alright balloon animal, let's go, let's go!" He said, trying to shove him through the gap in the boss chamber doors they had made when entering. Kay's hide squeaked, and for a moment Bubblegum thought he might pop, but he popped free and went bouncing into the silk room on the other side.

Glitch watched the titanic Marcus trade blows with the boss. Cazareth's hand came free, the chesnaught's taught muscle cleavage had been made slick by his perspiration. With desperation in his eyes, Cazareth began to inhale. His stomach billowed and bulged around Marcus's pulsating form, engulfing him like a wave of yielding rubber. Marcus held his own, he threw his arms out and managed to grip his opponent, hard.

"Oh no you don't," he said and launched a headbutt. It was just in time to shut Cazareth's jaws, which were burning green with an attempted fire breath. His cheeks swelled up and morphed his face into a fat, clumsy countenance of its former domineering self. His eyes began to look in different direction, as his face bulged cartoonishly. Like someone had drawn his features on a hot air balloon and inflated it past capacity. "Here's the real reason they call me the Tankbuster. Demon!"

Bubblegum grabbed Glitch and pulled him through the doorway. Then he put his back against the stone and pushed. "It's all yours, give him hell!" Bubblegum waved a scrap of Marcus' vest like a flag of victory, and slammed the black stone doors shut.

Cazareth realized the significance of that vest scrap. It was a possession from a yet to be fallen adventurer, which could be brought to a temple, and used to reconstitute them. He struggled to look down at the overinflated muscle bomb, clutching the demon's belly, and grinning like a madman. His head looked tiny, swallowed by a ridge of taut, steaming muscle mass that was filled with enough magical power to blow the cavern to pieces.

"Here comes the limit break, I hope you're worth enough experience to make up for the revival spell. See you in the bestiary under 'big blowhards,' you overblown sack of bacon!"

With a primal roar of victory that Marcus had been holding back, his quivering, ballooning body finally gave. He glowed brightly, beautifully, and ultimately, exploded with a boom of thunderous noise and bright blue magic that set off a similar chain reaction in his opponent. Cazareth swelled from the heat of the explosion, filling the pit like a gigantic loaf of bread spilling over the edge of a baker's tin, and popped like a gluttonous balloon filled with fire, and hatred for adventurers. Together, they went out with a catastrophic bang, that annihilated the cavern and set into motion the tremors which would bring down the entire dungeon.

The boss was defeated, the dungeon was conquered.

Epilogue: Oops

"And that's how it happened," Bubblegum raised a mug. He sat at a firepit in the guild hall, recounting the adventure to an enthralled group of greenhorns. He cast himself in a marginally better light. Taking some credit where credit wasn't due, and fibbing a 'few' of the more dramatic moments to make himself appear like the star of the tale. It earned a look of silent ire from Kay, who had joined him by the flame. Glitch was off into town, purchasing new ingredients for his mixtures. Though Bubblegum and Kay had a sneaking suspicion he'd visit somewhere else, too, to finally see to his overwhelming ballooning urges.

The kobold who had brought the dungeon's existence to the guild sat nearby, with his fully reconstituted minotaur captain and squad all sharing a hearty meal and a round of drinks, celebrating the victory of the Tankbuster and his party over Cazareth's domain.

"Say, I feel like we forgot something," Kay said. His paws were still rubbery, and the light passed through them, but they weren't blown up and in danger of bursting against a sharp edge. Which was a marked improvement.

Bubblegum hummed. He looked down, and bit his lip when he saw the scrap of Marcus' tunic tied around his waist cord. "... we forgot to revive Marcus!" He shot up. "Ah, heck. Alright if he asks, we DIDN'T forget and we were late getting back to the temple, alright?"

Kay shrugged. "You do the talking, it's what you're apparently good at."

Bubblegum sprinted to the door. "Alright, alright, let's go get the Tankbuster back."