

THE ADVENTURES OF TEMPLETON'S THREE!

EPISODE 3: SLIMES ARE A GIRL'S BEST FRIEND

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We join our intrepid foursome, informally known by the moniker Templeton's Three, heading east along the peninsula road. It's been a few days since the events of Windbrisk, and our heroes, weary of travelling, are eager to reach the village ahead.

Since leaving Windbrisk, their time together had been uneventful as they journeyed East towards the mainland in search of their next mission. That isn't to say that their days had been bare of occurrences, far from it; together they'd dealt with a couple gangs of brigands, as well as chased off a pack of Dire Wolves that had been harassing a defenseless farming collective; heroic acts, but nothing ultimately memorable. Their notoriety as saviours of the commonfolk was growing with each good deed, even though none of those deeds were worthy of putting pen to paper.

Now, with the town of Humbon lying just ahead of them, the Three were eager to rest their heads on pillows made of something other than grass or stone.

"You said it's called the Great Lodge?" Gabby asked as they crested the final bend in the road, revealing the welcoming wooden structures of the village before them.

The settlement was surrounded by dense oak forests for miles around. Above them the trees reached high overhead to create a tangled ceiling of branches over the road. They'd been walking in shade all day, so it was of great comfort to see Humbon sprawling before them with the sun shining upon it. It was like a vision of heaven.

"Aye, the Great Lodge of Humbon!" Hrovin said with a cheery grin. "It's the headquarters of the local hunting guild. Lots of game in these forests, so they're always well stocked!"

Gabby licked her lips excitedly. "Sounds delicious! I'm starving!"

The Three had stopped for lunch only an hour ago. None of the Three bothered commenting on Gabby's hunger. At this point it was simply to be expected.

"You'll love it, lassie!" Hrovin continued. "Broiled pheasant, braised elk, roasted boar kebabs!"

With each named dish Gabby hummed louder, her hands balled into tiny fists that she shook with excitement. "Oh, I can't wait!"

While the dwarf regaled Gabby with further tales of the wonders of Humbon's Great Lodge, tales that likely the poor tavern would never be able to live up to, a few paces ahead Mistwillow and Blake walked, quietly conferring.

"Grummond, you know I'm right!" Mistwillow hissed, furtively glancing over her shoulder at Gabby. The blonde's eyes were wide and shining as Hrovin described the time that the inn had supposedly served an entire moose roasted on a spit.

"We're not discussing this, Mistwillow. She's a part of the team" Blake said sternly.

Mistwillow rolled her eyes. "She's useless! Dead weight! What benefit does she provide?"

"Mistwillow. Enough."

"She can't swing a sword, she can't use a bow; every single time we've deal with trouble these past few days she ran and hid while Hrovin and us did all the work!"

"She's not a warrior; you can't fault her for that." Blake said, sparing a glance over his shoulder at the young woman.

"She doesn't belong with us." Mistwillow said. "It'd be one thing if she was of some other use, like if she could cook...but it's the exact opposite. All she does is eat!"

Blake rolled his shoulder, readjusting the pack slung over his right side, the chainmail beneath clinking softly. He couldn't deny that Mistwillow had a point, but still... there was something about the girl that compelled him to believe that she was worth keeping around.

"What about the ogres?" Blake said.

Mistwillow barked a mirthless laugh. "You mean the ogres that were only angry because she ate their feast?"

"Caliban's crew?" Blake offered next.

Mistwillow shook her head. "Grummond, what happened that day... I can't explain, but surely you don't believe that Gabby was responsible?"

"I don't know." Blake said. "I really don't know."

"Exactly" Mistwillow said. "She's not worth the hassle."

"I'm sorry, but I disagree" Blake said. "Also...I think you're just eager to be rid of her because you can't control yourself around her."

"What?!" Mistwillow cried out, loud enough that both Hrovin and Gabby paused their conversation to look over at her curiously.

"What are you talking about?" Mistwillow continued, far quieter.

"I'm just saying, I've noticed your armor's starting to get a little tight" Blake said with a candid shrug.

Mistwillow looked down at herself. She'd always had a curvy figure, far curvier than was typical for an elf, but that hadn't stopped her from maintaining a slender athletic build for the centuries she'd been alive. That all had changed in the past week. The ties on her cloth tunic were taut where her bust, belly and hips pressed firmly against the tough woodland green fabric.

"I...that...how dare you!" She hissed. "I'm just not used to travelling so sluggardly! You three are slowing me down!"

"Mmhmm. Sure." Blake said with a nod.

Up ahead, a dappled pattern of sunlight started to decorate the gravel road as the trees overhead started to thin. The people of Humbon had cleared the forest back a hundred yards from the edge of the town to make space for farmland, though the presence of saplings shooting up between the rows of produce showed that the woods were eager to reclaim their lost territory.

“Thank goodness we’re almost there.” Gabby said, skipping ahead to walk beside Blake and Mistwillow. “Misty, there’s going to be so much good food there! Hrovin was telling me about how one time they even deep fried an entire Griffin!”

Mistwillow’s nostrils silently flared upon hearing Gabby’s pet name for her. “So?!” Mistwillow snapped. “Why would I be interested in that?! Disgusting human food...”

Gabby frowned. “Oh right, sorry. I forgot you only like dessert. Hrovin what did you say their specialty was?”

“Raspberry pie, topped with a mountain of whipped cream!” The dwarf replied.

“Ooo, that sounds so good! We could split one!” Gabby said looking at Mistwillow eagerly.

“No, we will certainly not!” Mistwillow spat. Beside them Blake said nothing, a knowing smile on his face.

Gabby studied her for a moment then nodded with a smile. “Oh right, you’ll want a whole one for yourself. That makes sense!”

“What?! No!” Mistwillow yelled. “I don’t want any pie, even if it is raspberry...” The elf suddenly pointed ahead of them, eager to change the subject. “Oh look! There’s Templeton’s man!”

Sure enough, just outside of the town in the middle of the road astride a spotted grey mare was Dupont. The man’s slicked back hair was just as greasy as they remembered, his goatee just as tangled.

“The Three!” He called to them as they approached. “Right on bloody schedule!”

Together they gathered before him. “Greetings Dupont” Blake said.

Dupont bowed in his saddle towards the four of them. “Greetings, and welcome to Humbon, home of the Great Lodge. I’ve already taken the liberty of booking you rooms with the innkeeper, compliments of Lord Templeton and myself”

Gabby bounced up and down on her heels squealing excitedly. “Ooo, I can’t wait! What should we get first? Bison? Grizzly Bear!? Dragon!?!?!”

Blake, accustomed to Gabby’s ridiculousness, paid her no heed as he simply nodded at the man atop the horse. “Thank you. We really appreciate it. It’s been a hard few days. We’ll be glad for the hospitality.”

“Of course.” Dupont said with his weaselly smile. “Lord Templeton takes care of those who work for him.”

“He damn well better!” Hrovin harumphed.

“Do you have another task for us?” Mistwillow interjected. “My purse isn’t nearly heavy enough. After all, winter will be upon us soon!”

As one, all present exchanged solemn nods of understanding. Even Gabby paused listing the various meats she wished to sample, to join in expressing her concern for the bitter cold ahead.

“Fear not, Mistwillow” Dupont drawled. “As it so happens, I do!”

“Excellent” Blake said. “You can fill us in at the Lodge.”

Blake moved to step past Dupont and his horse, when the wiry man reached down and placed a hand on Blake’s shoulder. “Aha, about that...”

“To hells with that snake of a man!” Hrovin grouched as he stomped through the forest, chopping through thick underbrush with his axe. “We should string the blighter up for leading us on like that!”

“He didn’t lead us on” Blake sighed. “He just...left out some details”

Dupont’s new mission for the Three was to rescue a lost girl named Calissa, the daughter of the huntmaster of Humbon. What he’d left out during his introduction was the key fact that their stay at the famed lodge was contingent on the successful completion of said rescue. Until they returned with the girl safe and sound, the delicacies and delights of the Great Lodge would be forbidden to them.

They’d soon learned that it was all part of a deal that Dupont had struck. When he’d said that their stay at the lodge was being covered by himself, that’s what he’d meant. The innkeeper would let them stay for free, if, and only if they recovered the child.

All in all, it shouldn’t be the hardest of tasks to accomplish. Mistwillow had quickly picked up the trail of the child and was leading them through the forest about twenty yards ahead of them. Still, they were all a little miffed at having to delay their evening of relaxation.

Well, most of them were miffed.

“Do you think they’ll have roast duck?” Gabby asked cheerfully, bringing up the rear. “I love duck!”

“Aye, probably...though it’ll be cold by the time we get there” Hrovin grumbled, cleaving a thicket of brambles in twain with a clean arc of his axe.

“What about Giraffe? I’ve never had Giraffe...”

Blake, who’d been trudging quietly in between them, stopped in place, shocked by the absurdity of what she’d just asked. He spun to face Gabby. “I...don’t think they’ll have Giraffe...”

Gabby looked crestfallen. “Oh...why not? Are they not safe to eat?”

Blake shook his head. “No...or at least I don’t think so...they just don’t-” He trailed off as he followed Gabby’s gaze towards the North of their path.

Their march through the woods had taken them to the edge of a small lake. Across the water on the far bank there were a plethora of herbivorous animals grazing amidst the trees. Central amongst them was a pair of Giraffes, happily munching on oak leaves.

Blake blinked in bewilderment before he turned back around and set off after Hrovin, muttering to himself something about the gods being jerks. Gabby hurried after him, calling. "They don't 'What' Blake? They don't 'What'?!"

The tracks of the young girl led them around the village, circling from the West side up around the North before heading straight East. They were only a few miles away from the town when Mistwillow found the end of their path.

"Why is it never easy..." The elf muttered as the rest of the Three caught up with her.

The tracks had led them to the base of a rocky cliff face, where a large cave mouth sat yawning wide before them. The inside was pitch black, the far wall hidden by the darkness.

"D'ye think she went inside?" Hrovin said as he sidled up beside her.

"The tracks don't lie" Mistwillow sighed. "She's definitely in there. Dammit all to hell..."

"Fun!" Gabby exclaimed. "I've never been spelunking!"

"At least someone's staying positive" Blake muttered as he grabbed a set of torches from his pack. Lighting them with his flint, the group headed inside in search of the lost girl.

Only a few yards in from the entrance the cave made a sharp left turn. As soon as they rounded the bend, the afternoon sunlight was snuffed out, swallowing them in darkness. The only source of light was the flickering torches, which cast grotesque dancing shadows across every wall.

Hrovin led them into the cave, whistling a happy tune as they delved deeper underneath the surface. You'd have thought the dwarf had just arrived home for afternoon tea. Mistwillow wasn't faring quite so cheerily, her nerves almost immediately on edge.

"You, uh...you alright, Mistwillow?" Blake asked after the fourth time she'd visibly jumped at one of their shadows projected on the stone wall.

"No!" She hissed. "I don't like being underground. It's...unnatural."

"What?!" Hrovin yelled over his shoulder. "You don't know what you're talking about! There's nothing more natural than being deep in the heart of the world, surrounded by rock and stone!"

"I disagree!" Mistwillow huffed. "It's too dark. Too cramped. If we're attacked, there's no space for us to move. We'd be slaughtered."

"And what, pray tell, d'ye think is gonna attack us?" Hrovin asked with a chuckle.

"I don't know!" Mistwillow cried. "I have no idea what depraved, foul, monsters hang out in caves like this..."

As if summoned by her very words, a deep gurgling growl echoed through the cave all around them. Mistwillow let out a short, terrified scream as she spun in place, waving her torch around to try and illuminate the approaching monster. "What was that?!" She cried.

Blake deftly reached out and grabbed her wrist, holding her torch steady. "That was Gabby's stomach."

Behind them Gabby smiled sheepishly. "Sorry! Ever since we started talking about all those delicious meats, my belly's been ready for a feast! I haven't had a good meal in days!"

Mistwillow shot the girl an embarrassed glare before she trotted off after Hrovin. Blake just chuckled, waving Gabby forward as together they journeyed further into the cave.

After descending for several more minutes the tunnel finally flattened out. Around them the cave widened into a large open space, roughly circular in shape. The chamber was like a hollow dome, the ceiling arcing high above them.

"Calissa?" Blake called, waving his torch around. "Calissa!"

Templeton's Three split up to search the cave, but after less than a minute they knew there was no point in further investigation. Calissa wasn't here. The cave wasn't that large, and it had no hiding spots. Once they'd illuminated every surface without finding the missing child, they reconvened.

"Now what?" Hrovin asked.

"She has to be down here" Mistwillow replied. "The dirt around the cave was soft, if she came out, she'd have left prints."

Blake nodded in agreement. "And there's no way she could've passed us in the tunnel. She has to be down...wait...do you hear that?"

The four of them went quiet, listening intently. From the far side of the cave they heard a wet sliding sound, like someone dragging a piece of meat across stone.

"What the hell is that?" Blake asked.

"Beats me, but it's our only clue" Mistwillow said. "Let's go."

Together they slowly crossed the cave, heading towards the noise. "Does anyone see anything?" Blake whispered, eyes scanning the wall before them.

"There!" Gabby said, pointing at the base of the wall. There set into the stone wall was a small opening, the entrance to a tunnel. It was a little larger than knee height, just big enough for them to crawl through. The wet noise was emanating from within.

"Get ready." Blake said. "Whatever's in that tunnel is likely responsible for taking the girl."

The rest of The Three nodded. Hrovin drew his axe, while Mistwillow readied her bow, nocking an arrow. Gabby stood behind, hands balled into raised fists, doing her best to look tough.

"Here it comes." Blake said as he pulled his sword from its sheath.

The wet sound grew louder until, by the light of their torches, they could see something exiting the tunnel. It was...colour?

Sliding forward through the tunnel was simply a solid translucent mass of blue, the same hue as a cloudless sky. It seemed to move completely independently; there was nothing behind pushing it. Slowly it pushed free of the tunnel before settling on the cave floor.

“Umm...” Blake said, lowering his sword. “Does anyone know what that is?”

“Don’t look at me” Mistwillow said, keeping her bow trained on the peculiar mass. “Everything down here is a mystery as far as I’m concerned.”

“I wish I could tell you, lad, I really do.” Hrovin said, lifting his axe to rest on his shoulder. “But I’ll be honest, I’m stumped. I’ve never seen anything like it!”

Now free from the tunnel it was a squat round mass, not much bigger around than the tunnel it’d exited. After sliding free from the tight constraints of the passageway, it’d settled into a symmetrical shape, like a slightly flattened ball. It was partially clear, they could just barely see through it. It wouldn’t be unfair to think it was some sort of blown glass creation, except for the fact that it constantly moved, quietly bouncing up and down.

“Alright then.” Blake said, rubbing his chin. “I guess we go around it?”

The Three exchanged looks, then nodded their agreement. That tunnel was the only way out of this cave; the trail of the little girl had to continue on the other side.

Blake sheathed his sword, then slowly walked forward, heading to walk to the left of the strange object. However, as soon as he neared, it moved to block his path. It had noticeably shifted to keep itself between Blake and the tunnel.

“What the...” Blake muttered as he backtracked then aimed for the right. The blue mass matched his pace, smoothly sliding so that it was always in the way.

“Ok, so it’s going to be like that is it?” He growled, his frustration mounting.

He stepped up close to the blue thing then bent over to plant his hands upon it and push it aside. What happened instead was he nearly fell over when his hands sunk in halfway up to his elbows.

“Augh?!” He yelled in shock. He jerked himself back, and with some amount of effort was able to tug his hands free.

“It’s some kind of...slime?” Blake said, shaking his hands to try and clean them off. A thin blue residue still coated his gauntlets in places.

“A slime?” Hrovin said. “So, it’s a monster? Well, that’s no trouble then, I know how to deal with monsters”

With a hearty laugh the dwarf hefted his axe overhead. “Just...like...this!” Taking two quick steps, he swung the axe in a wide arc before slamming the heavy blade directly upon the blue slime. The mighty blow cleaved the creature in twain, splitting it all the way through until Hrovin’s axe clinked against the stone floor. Tiny chunks of slime splattered everywhere, the force of the blow absolutely devastating.

“There!” Hrovin said proudly as he turned back to the group, hauling his axe behind him. “Problem solved!”

“Oh, is that so?” Mistwillow said with a smirk.

Hrovin frowned as he looked back at the corpse of the slime...the corpse that was sliding across the cave floor. Slowly at first, but quickly accelerating, the errant bits of slime that had been launched across the cave from the axe's impact were rolling back towards the center mass of the slime. The two halves that had formed were rapidly knitting themselves back together to create a whole. In less than half a minute the slime had completely reconstituted itself.

"Bloody hell!" Hrovin cursed. Before them the slime began to bob up and down once again, moving with noticeably more energy now.

"I'll handle this" Mistwillow said her tone dripping with condescension. Reaching over her head she fingered through her quiver, feeling the various patterned fletchings of her arrows until she found the one the one she was looking for.

"Everyone knows that the only way to defeat monsters is with silver" She held up the arrow that she'd retrieved, the torchlight glinting off of the shiny silver arrowhead. With practiced ease she set the arrow in her bow and drew back the string.

"Say goodbye, slime." Mistwillow said, a savage grin on her face as she let loose her bow. With a loud twang the arrow shot forth through the air unerringly before it struck the slime center mass...and promptly careened straight through and out the other side. Mistwillow's face fell as they all heard the clattering sound of her silver arrow ricocheting away as it disappeared down the tunnel behind. The slime continued to bob up and down happily, completely oblivious to the fact that it had just been shot.

"Aye, well done!" Hrovin teased. "You sure showed him!"

"Shut up!" Mistwillow yelled. "Gods, I hate being underground!"

Blake sighed. "Both of you stop. Please. We need to figure out how to get past this stupid thing. Does anyone have any ideas?"

The only sound in the cave was the gentle crackle of the torch as Templeton's Three quietly contemplated the conundrum before them. Their go to method of choice, brute force behind a blade, had utterly failed them, and so now they had to think outside the box.

"What about crushing it with a rock?" Hrovin suggested.

Blake shook his head. "I expect that'll just give us the same result as the axe."

Hrovin nodded "Aye, aye, fair enough"

"We can poison it!" Mistwillow said decisively, smacking her fist into the palm of her other hand. "I know the recipe to a wonderfully lethal infusion made of griffin's blood and kraken weed."

Blake looked at her with scepticism. "And do you have any of that on you?"

Mistwillow opened her mouth then closed it, shaking her head with embarrassment. No one said anything for another minute as they desperately racked their brains. At last Gabby spoke up.

"What about fire?"

Blake nodded "Fire? Hmm, it's worth a shot. I don't know if it really feels pain, but maybe we can burn it...nice thinking Gabby. Good thing you're here." He shot Mistwillow a pointed look. The elf just rolled her eyes in annoyance.

"I was just about to suggest fire" The elf muttered to herself.

Blake edged closer with his torch outstretched. The slime had shown no signs of hostility up to this point, but still he wanted to be cautious. They had no idea how this thing would react to the touch of fire.

Blake inched the torch closer, the reflection of the flames visible on the slime's glossy exterior. The monster shifted closer, as if drawn by the dancing fire like a moth. Closer...closer...it was almost touching...

As soon as the tongues of flame made contact with the slime, all hell broke loose. The creature let out a teeth rattling wailing scream, as it shrunk in on itself. Fire had definitely hurt it, and now they'd made it angry.

"Ha! I don't think it liked-" Blake was cut off as the slime tackled him, somehow springing from a dead rest like some kind of enormous subterranean frog.

The blue slime hit Blake square in the chest, it's integrity unexpectedly far more solid than it had been moments before. Blake was knocked back as if he'd been hit by a battering ram, his chest aching as he was sent sliding along the rocky floor.

"Yup...Fire works" He groaned as he clutched at his chest.

The still standing members of The Three gathered around. "Blake!" Gabby cried. "Are you ok?!"

Blake struggled to sit up, wincing in pain. "Yeah, I'll be alright. Here's some advice, don't get hit by that thing. It really-Look out!"

The upright members of the party jumped backward just in time for the blue slime to sail through the air between them, moving like a rock out of a catapult. It landed on the opposite side of the cave, sliding a few feet before it stopped and prepared to launch again.

"Get it!" Mistwillow yelled, hoisting her torch aloft.

'Getting it' was easier said than done. Every time they came close the slime either dodged away or tried to slam into them. Neither allowed any opportunities for them to attack the thing.

"Gods be damned, this bugger moves fast!" Hrovin roared as he lunged with his torch, the slime launching away to stay far out of reach. "Watch out, Elf!"

After leaping away from Hrovin it had landed behind Mistwillow, sliding into the shadows cast by her body. Mistwillow spun around at the dwarfs warning, just in time to see the slime launch itself directly at her face. Her enhanced elf reflexes saved her as she bent over backward at the waist, catching herself with an outstretched hand behind her as the slime shot through the air mere inches above her.

Unfortunately, her reaction time was too quick for Gabby who'd been standing on the other side of her. Gabby's eyes widened in shock, her mouth opening to speak when the slime hit her. When Mistwillow had ducked, the slime had continued on its path, colliding with the face of the pretty young blonde. Gabby went flying, the momentum of the slime carrying her across the cave, sliding the last few feet along the stone floor. Her dropped torch landed with a wooden thunk, before rolling away, leaving her fallen body in shadows.

"Gabby?!" Blake yelled, finally pushing himself to his feet.

"Ah shite!" Hrovin cursed. "Lassie! Are y'alright!?"

"Dammit, Grummond!" Mistwillow spat. "I warned you! I said that she didn't belong!"

"Shut up, Mistwillow!" Blake snarled as he jogged across the cave towards where Gabby's supine body lay. "Gabby! Are you...Ok?"

When the light from Blake's torch finally fell upon Gabby, it illuminated an unexpected scene. She laid on her back, the slime still covering her face where it'd hit her, except it wasn't nearly as large as it had been moments prior. The answer to the question of what had happened to the rest of the slime was immediately apparent with the sight of Gabby's distended belly.

Gabby's hands were sunk into the blue slime holding it against her mouth, which was open in a round O shape. Though Blake couldn't exactly tell, he assumed that she was sucking it in. Every few seconds Gabby made loud gulping sounds as she swallowed mouthful after mouthful of slime. With a subdued pop, her belly burst forth from her blouse, snapping the lower buttons free from the white shirt.

Within seconds the last of the slime disappeared inside of Gabby. After swallowing the final remnants of the monster, Gabby wiped her mouth with her sleeve then let out a happy sigh. Her belly domed high up off of her, round and bulging, projecting over a foot from her body.

"Blake!" Hrovin yelled from the other end of the cave. "Is she alright?!"

"Yes, I'm alright!" Gabby called back, completely undisturbed.

"Knew you would be!" Hrovin yelled. "Yer a tough lass. I'll scout out the tunnel ahead, while you sort yourselves out."

Using her arms to brace herself, Gabby sat up, her belly sliding forward to rest in her lap. Then, while making a number of soft little grunts of effort, she got her legs under her and stood up. Her belly heaved and bounced before settling as she regained her balance.

"Alright. Let's get going!" Gabby said with a cheery grin.

"Gabby..." Blake said, absolutely dumbfounded. "You...you..."

"What?" She said, cocking her head to one side, her smile never leaving her face. With one hand she reached out and rubbed her belly, which had begun to gurgle with contentment.

"What the hell is going on?" Mistwillow asked as she walked over. "What happened to the sli-Oh my god..."

"I took care of it" Gabby said, as she gave her belly a few affectionate pats on its upper surface.

"Yeah...yeah, you did." Blake said, as he rubbed his chin in quiet shock. "Seriously, Gabby, are you ok?"

"I'm fine?" She said, pursing her lips. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Because you ate the slime?!?!?" Mistwillow cried with exasperation. "Why...why...why was that even a choice?!?"

"Oh!" Gabby said. "Well, it wasn't really my plan, but when it hit me in the face some of it got in my mouth. I was so hungry, and it actually tasted pretty good so...yeah!"

"And so... you ate it." Mistwillow said.

"Yup!" Gabby replied.

"You ate a monster" Mistwillow repeated, her tone growing more tense.

"I did..." Gabby said, cocking an eyebrow at Mistwillow. "Is...is there a problem?"

Mistwillow's face, now a deep shade of red, twitched once before she exploded "YES, THERE'S A PROBLEM! YOU SWALLOWED A SLIME MONSTER WHOLE! JUST BECAUSE YOU WERE HUNGRY?!?! JUST BECAUSE A LITTLE BIT GOT IN YOUR MOUTH?!?! SO, WHAT? IF ONE OF US STUCK OUR FINGERS DOWN YOUR GULLET WHILE YOU WERE HUNGRY, YOU'D JUST EAT US?!?!"

Gabby softly chuckled before giving Mistwillow a confused smile. "Misty that's ridiculous. I'd never eat a person...that's weird!"

"THAT'S WEIRD? **THAT'S WEIRD?!?!?**" Mistwillow's shrieks reverberated through the cave, the word 'weird' echoing around them for several seconds after.

"Ok." Blake said, finally intervening. "What I think Mistwillow was trying to say, is that we're concerned, Gabby. This is unusual, even for you. Have you ever done this before?"

Gabby shook her head. "No...but I feel fine?"

Blake sighed, then nodded. "Alright then. Let's get going. Thank you for killing the slime monster, let's hope that we don't run into any more of them."

Gabby blushed slightly. "Um...about that..."

Blake's eyes narrowed. "About what?"

Gabby laughed nervously. "Killing the slime...you see...it's...umm...hehe...it's not quite..."

On the outer edge of Gabby's belly her skin suddenly warped, a bulge the size of a man's fist pushing outward a few inches. The bulge traveled up, stretching her belly button, before receding back inside near where her belly sloped away from her chest.

Mistwillow's eyes bugged out of her skull. "Oh, dear god..."

"I'm sure it'll die eventually!" Gabby protested. "My stomach will deal with it! Or at least...I'm pretty sure it will..."

Blake groaned as he rubbed his temples. Gabby laughed nervously again as she held her hands palm up to either side of her, giving a gesture of "Oh well!". Below, her entire enormous belly jiggled and moved as the slime within expressed its distaste at being swallowed. Looking down with a stern glare, Gabby swiftly slapped the side of her belly, and the movement stopped.

Behind them, across the cave, the sound of metal scrabbling on rock grew louder as Hrovin pulled himself free of the tunnel. "This is definitely the way" He called.

The rest of Templeton's Three trotted over to see what the dwarf had found. His eyes widened momentarily at the sight of Gabby's bulging belly hanging off of her, but he said nothing. Instead, he simply tossed something small at Blake, who easily caught it.

Blake lifted the item that Hrovin had found. It was a small ragdoll, with real animal hair on its head. "You found this on the other side of the tunnel?"

The dwarf nodded.

"Alright. She's definitely in here. Let's go."

Hrovin turned and crouched down, re-entering the tunnel. Mistwillow followed him, then Blake followed her, leaving Gabby at the rear. The tunnel was fairly short, barely six feet across which was lucky. Blake had to keep his arms pulled in tight to squeeze through, but before he knew it, he was out on the other side.

Blake, Mistwillow, and Hrovin stood in the glowing light of the torch waiting for the final member of their crew to emerge. Seconds passed, then a minute. The tunnel wasn't that long, what had happened?

"Gabby?" Blake called, crouching down beside the tunnel entrance.

"Yeah..." Came Gabby's voice.

"What's the hold up?"

"Umm...I'm stuck..."

Blake lowered his torch and stuck it in the tunnel, allowing the rather predictable problem to suddenly become clear. With the dark tunnel illuminated he could see Gabby's head and arms and then beyond that her belly which filled the tunnel from edge to edge. She'd obviously attempted to crawl in and had gotten wedged.

"Please help..." She moaned softly.

Despite his frustration, Blake smiled. Only Gabby would end up in this sort of trouble. "Alright, I'm coming. Be ready to pull me out" He added to the two behind him.

"Of course she's stuck" Mistwillow sighed, rolling her eyes.

Blake ignored her as he crawled back in. Laying on his stomach he reached out for Gabby. She reached out meeting him halfway, her head and arms held aloft with her belly supporting her. With her delicate hands gripped in his leather gauntlets, he kicked his heels together signalling for them to pull.

Together Hrovin and Mistwillow heaved, holding Blake by his ankles. Nothing happened at first, so they leaned back putting their weight into it. That did the trick and slowly Blake started to slide out, dragging Gabby along with him.

Once Blake was entirely free of the rocky enclosure, he waved for them to stop so he could stand up. Gabby was left with her head and shoulders poking out of the wall and her belly filling the tunnel. It made it look like there was no tunnel at all, just a strange girl growing out of the wall.

“Sorry!” Gabby said, her cheeks pink with embarrassment.

“Ah, it’s no trouble lassie.” Hrovin said, waving his hand. “My ol’ uncle Grumbo once got stuck like this in the mines beneath the Old Grey Mountain, and he smelled a lot worse and complained a helluva lot more than you did!”

With Blake on his feet, he reached down and grabbed onto Gabby’s hands and pulled her free. There was a slight pop as she was tugged loose, landing on her belly which flattened slightly beneath her. She quickly scrambled to her feet.

“Ok, I’m ready” she said as she hurriedly brushed dust and dirt from the sleeves of her academy jacket. She gave a nod to signal she was good to go, as her hands quickly adjusted her golden hair and then did one last check to make sure the red silk bow around her neck was still tied pristinely.

The cave on the other side of the tunnel wasn’t quite so spacious as the one they’d left behind. It was closer to the meandering tunnel that they’d descended in, and sure enough only a few yards past the tunnel exit the rocky ground sloped away. Mistwillow quietly groaned with discomfort as they ventured deeper into the earth, while in front Hrovin started whistling his jaunty tune again.

Blake had purposefully moved to the rear position as they journeyed on, mostly so he could keep an eye on Gabby. The girl, who’d started to hum along with Hrovin’s little ditty, seemed to be fine. In fact, she seemed happier now than she had before, although he recognized that that was typical behaviour for her after one of her gorging sessions.

With each step her large round belly softly jostled, bouncing up and down barely an inch. Blake watched it like a hawk, keeping an eye out for any suspicious bulges. He was ready to spring into action if the slime in her stomach decided to stage a coup. Sure, he didn’t really have any idea of what he would actually do in such a situation, but still...He was ready.

Gabby’s humming stopped, as she stumbled a step. “Ooo...” She groaned.

“You alright?” Blake asked, setting a gentle hand on her upper back.

Gabby nodded, as she closed her eyes, brows knitting. “Yes...I...just...need...”

BRAAAWWPPPP

Gabby sighed happily, as she lightly hit her chest with a fist. “Ah, much better! I’m ok now! That damn slime keeps moving around, shaking everything up!”

Blake coughed, having caught a few whiffs of Gabby’s monstrous belch. “Right...glad you’re...ack...okay.”

“Ah shite” Hrovin’s voice sounded from up ahead.

“What?” Blake said. “What is it?”

Hrovin gestured with his torch. There, five yards ahead of them, in the middle of the tunnel was another slime, this one a vivid red, the colour of a rose.

Blake took a deep breath as he studied the surrounding terrain. This tunnel was far more compact than the previous cave where they’d fought the last slime. That meant less places for the slime to avoid them, but also less space for them to dodge it.

“Alright.” Blake said, turning to face the rest of The Three. “Here’s what we’ll do. Hrovin and I will flank it using our torches to corral it and keep it at bay. Meanwhile, Gabby can use Mistwillow’s torch to create flaming arrows that Mistwillow can use to kill it. I’m not sure how many fire arrows will kill it down, but I still think that’s our best bet for taking this thing down safely. What do you think?”

Hrovin looked at Blake, then back at the slime, then back at Blake before he said. “I think we should just let the lass eat it.”

“What?!” Blake exclaimed.

“Don’t get me wrong” Hrovin continued “That was a lovely little plan you cooked up, but it’s just a wee bit overcomplicated, don’tcha think? A lot simpler to just let Gabby do what Gabby does, eh? Does that sound fine to you lass?”

Gabby smiled, nodding. “Oh, absolutely! I’m still really hungry, and I really want to know what the red ones taste like!”

Blake shook his head in disbelief. “You can’t be serious! This is not a reasonable plan! What happened back there was an accident, it should not be our go to! Mistwillow, please, tell me I’m not the only one who thinks this is crazy!”

Mistwillow said nothing, as she blankly stared over Blake’s shoulder at the red slime that happily bobbed in place in the middle of the path ahead.

“...Mistwillow?” Blake said.

Mistwillow sighed. “Grummond...I’m tired. I’m sore. I’m sick of this god forsaken cave. If the girl wants to eat the slime, then just let her.”

Blake groaned. “Goddammit...alright then. If you want to, Gabby, then...go ahead I guess.”

Gabby nodded, eyes squinting as she smiled. “No problem! Just give me-Oh, wait! I’m so sorry, I’m being rude. I should’ve asked first.” She turned to face Mistwillow. “Misty, did you want it?”

Mistwillow did a double take, eyes snapping open. “What?! No! Why would you even think that?!”

Gabby shrugged. “Well, the blue one tasted like blueberries, and so I figured maybe the red one might taste like raspberries, and I’m pretty sure you like raspberries, so...”

Mistwillow’s jaw fell slightly open. “Are you serious? I...don’t know what to say. How did you even know I like raspberries?!”

"I pay attention." Gabby said with a friendly smile. At her midsection her gut roiled, the slime pushing against her skin on either side of her navel. Gabby showed absolutely no signs of discomfort, as she contentedly patted the side of her belly with one hand.

"So...?" Gabby asked.

"No, I don't want to eat it!" Mistwillow snapped. "That should not be a surprise to you!"

"Alright, alright" Gabby said. "I was just being polite. Mother always taught me it's rude not to share."

Gabby stepped forward through the group, stopping just before the slime. It continued to bounce happily in place, unaware of its imminent doom. Carefully Gabby got down on to her knees, then leaned forward. Her belly settled on the stone floor as she bent over it, lowering her mouth until she made contact with the red slime. As soon as her lips touched and formed a seal, she began to suck the slime in, gulping it down with overly indulgent gusto.

"Can you believe her!" Mistwillow hissed as they quietly watched Gabby calmly consume the red slime. Without the presence of fire, the monster was much more docile, offering no resistance as Gabby swallowed it down.

Blake stood with arms crossed as he placidly watched Gabby at work "Putting her life at risk for us?" He said, "It is admirable, yes."

"What? No!" Mistwillow said. "I meant that she thought I would want to eat one! That's insane! As if I could even do something like that! I'm not like her!"

Blake turned to look at the elf, cocking one eyebrow. "No? When you ate that whole chocolate cake in Windbrisk your gut was almost that big."

"That's...I...Shut up!" Mistwillow spluttered.

Before them Gabby sat up straight, still resting on her knees. Her belly had swollen out before her to rest on the stone floor, a large orb over two feet across. She held the last bit of slime in her hands, the translucent red mass down to the size of an orange. With a wet sucking sound, it disappeared as Gabby swallowed it, giving a sigh of relief as she rested on her haunches.

"All...Urp...done" Gabby called over her shoulder.

The rest of The Three approached to check on the girl. She sat with her knees under her, her massive belly sprawling outward before her upon the cave floor. Her gut was nearly a sphere, stretching over two feet in front of her, curving wide to either side of her. Her eyes were closed as she slowly breathed in and out, both hands resting on the upper shelf of her enormous midsection.

When Gabby hadn't made any attempt to move after several moments Blake crouched down beside her, resting a hand between her shoulder blades "Everything ok?"

Gabby's face winced. "I'll be alright...just...a bit of discomfort..."

Mistwillow snorted. "Finally ate too much? I'm shocked; here I was thinking you had no limit."

Gabby gave a pained smile as she shook her head. "Oh, no, I'm not even close to full. It's the slimes...they're moving a lot."

The rest of Templeton's Three turned to look at the mighty dome of her belly. All over the vast creamy surface there were subtle signs of movement underneath, shallow bulges and bumps appearing and receding constantly.

"Are they fighting?" Hrovin asked.

"I think...I think they're playing with each other?" Gabby groaned. The appearance of the outward dents on her skin grew more fervent, the movement from within growing more intense. All at once, her belly suddenly extended outward, becoming more ovular in shape before it rebounded back to a sphere.

"Ouch!" Gabby cried. Her eyes widened and her lips curled with anger as she looked down at her belly. Spreading her arms wide she slapped hard on the sides of her distended abdomen, jiggling shockwaves traversing through her taut flesh.

"Knock it off!" She said sternly, like a mother scolding a truant child.

All at once the movement ceased. Gabby's shoulders relaxed as she let out a sigh of relief. With relaxed ease she rocked backward onto her heels then stood, the enormous swell of her two-foot gut not impeding her whatsoever.

"That's better" She said with a smile "Shall we?"

Together they continued onward, in search of the end of the tunnel. They walked in silence, the desire for idle chatter dampened. While the sight of Gabby's immense belly was becoming more and more commonplace, it was still a peculiar enough sight that the rest of The Three kept a careful eye on her as if she were about to explode at any minute.

The young blonde's mood had only improved with her second gorging. Not even the waning hour of the day nor the oppressive dark of the cave dampened her bliss. One would've thought the rocky terrain and constant downward slope would pose a challenge for her to traverse, what with a belly the size of a large cauldron hanging off of her. Instead, she moved through the passage with ease, her footsteps quick and easy.

Her only holdup was when the slimes within momentarily started to churn once more, but another firm slap on the side of her prodigious stomach somehow willed them into stillness a second time.

About fifteen minutes after the encounter with the red slime, the tunnel opened up into another large cave, similar to the one they'd passed through above. This one was taller than the last, the light of their torches unable to fully illuminate the high sloped ceiling above. Together they gathered at the center of the open space and looked around, searching for the missing child.

Hrovin, his dwarf eyes best suited to the darkness of the caves, spotted her first. "Look! That has to be her!"

Hrovin pointed to the cave wall to their right. There, huddled between some rocks, was a small girl no older than seven. She laid on her side, curled up, an old burnt-out lantern resting by her head. Though they couldn't tell for certain, it seemed that the child was unharmed.

“Oh, thank the gods” Blake said. “Alright, let’s go collect her and then we can get-”

Beside him Gabby gasped. “Watch out! Banana Slime!”

Blake looked over at her. “Banana...what?” Gabby was pointing at the opposite side of the cave where at the edge of their torchlight a bright yellow slime was visible bouncing in place. It didn’t seem to have noticed them at all, content to remain on its side of the cave, bothering no one.

“Gabby” Blake said. “I don’t think we need to worry about that one. It’s all the way over there, way out of the way. I think we can just...Goddammit.”

Gabby had taken off at a run, having completely ignored everything that Blake had just said.

“Don’t worry, I got it!” Gabby called over her shoulder as she beelined towards the harmless slime.

As Gabby bore down upon the slime, it continued to simply bob up and down in place, completely unperturbed by the intruders. It didn’t move at all, even when Gabby leapt the final few feet, diving face first at the slime as she pounced upon it. She’d landed with a rubbery bounce upon her belly, legs flailing high over head as her body bent forward, faceplanting her into the slime which just accelerated her stuffing it in her mouth.

Blake turned away, having no desire to watch Gabby feast for a third time. He instead walked over to where the small child lay. Mistwillow was already there, holding two fingers against the girl’s neck.

“Alive.” She said softly. “Just sleeping.”

Blake nodded as he squatted down beside her. Gently he grabbed hold of the child’s shoulder and roused them.

“What...who...who are you?” The girl asked.

“I’m Blake and this is Mistwillow” Blake said warmly. “Are you Calissa?”

The girl rubbed her eyes as she yawned. “Yes, that’s me.”

“We’re here to take you home” Mistwillow said, gently helping the girl up.

“Oh, okay” Calissa said, taking Blake’s outstretched hand. “Where’s Reddy, and Goldy? Where’s Bluegoo?”

“Who’s that?” Blake asked as he led the girl towards the tunnel that led to the surface.

“My slime friends!” The girl said. “I come down here to play with them. Most days I go back home after awhile, but today my lantern went out so I was stuck...”

Blake nodded “You mean the slime monsters?”

Calissa looked up at Blake, giving him the look that children give when adults say something absolutely ridiculous. “What? They’re not monsters! They’re harmless! They just want to play!”

Blake grimaced. Behind him a loud belch echoed through the cavern. “Uhh, well I’m sure they’re around somewhere...”

The little girl nodded "Okay, if you say so... Can we go home now?"

Blake squeezed the child's hand "Yes, yes we can."

Stopping at the tunnel exit he turned to address The Three. "I guess one of us is going to have to stay here with Gabby overnight. There's no way she'll fit through that crawlspace now..." He couldn't quite make Gabby out in the shadows at the back of the cave, but he didn't need to know that her belly was larger now.

"Mistwillow, do you mind volunteering?" Blake said.

The elf's face twisted with annoyance. "I do mind, in fact! I don't want to spend another goddamned minute in this cave! Why do I have to stay with her!?"

Blake grinned. "Think of it as penance. You're the one who wanted to get rid of her, said she was useless, deadweight."

Hrovin gasped. "Did you really say that?!"

Mistwillow pursed her lips looking slightly sheepish as she crossed her arms over her chest defensively. "I did...but she *was* useless!"

Blake continued "And yet we would not have succeeded in rescuing Calissa here without her."

Mistwillow groaned. "This is bullshit... who could've predicted that the girl's ludicrous ability to eat would actually be helpful on a job!"

Blake shrugged, as he bent down and let the young girl climb on to his back. "Once Gabby's back to normal head back to Humbon. We'll meet you at the lodge."

Hrovin just shook his head disappointedly at Mistwillow. "I can't believe you'd say something that like that about our Miss Fisher."

"Oh, come on! Seriously!?" Mistwillow cried as she watched them disappear into the tunnel. "Ugh..."

Grabbing one of the dropped torches Mistwillow wandered towards the back of the cave where Gabby lay. The last they'd seen her she'd been laying on top of her belly, but since then she'd rolled over on to her back. She'd slipped off of her royal blue blazer and had folded it underneath her head to use as a pillow. At the sound of Mistwillow's footsteps approaching she opened her eyes and turned her head to greet her.

"Hey, Misty!" Gabby said, her cheer undampened despite being immobilized. "Where are the others?"

Mistwillow stood beside Gabby's head peering down at her. "They're taking the girl back to Humbon."

Gabby nodded. "Makes sense. Are you here to keep me company?"

Mistwillow sighed. "Something like that...Are...are they still alive?"

Together they looked at the enormous swell of Gabby's stomach. It rose high up off the ground, the peak as tall as Mistwillow's waist. With Gabby on her back, it overflowed the sides of her body, spreading across the stony floor before curving up and away. The slightly flattened orb of her gut had to be at least four feet across, the bottom sloping away just above her knees.

Gabby was once again trapped beneath it, though she was seemingly unbothered by the weight. Her hands were interlaced together comfortably, resting in the nook between her bust and the near vertical wall of the near surface of her belly.

"I can't tell" Gabby said. "They haven't moved in awhile..."

Suddenly her belly began to quiver, violently quaking with motion. An ominous gurgling rose from the depths, and suddenly all at once the movement stopped. Gabby's mouth twisted with slight discomfort, her cheeks puffing out before she unleashed another obnoxious burp.

"Ahh...So full..." She murmured blissfully, closing her eyes and rocking her head back and forth to get comfortable upon her makeshift pillow.

Mistwillow shook her head with a mix of wonderment and distaste. Taking a few steps to her left she slung her quiver and bow free, setting them down on the stone floor before sitting down beside Gabby, allowing herself to lean back and rest against the vast side of the girl's stomach. Gabby didn't make a sound of complaint as Mistwillow eased her weight against her, not that the elf would've moved if she had protested.

This wasn't Mistwillow's first choice of a resting place, but the warm taut plushness of Gabby would offer more comfort than the cold stone walls. Pulling her long braid free from behind her, Mistwillow settled in to meditate, eyes slowly closing as she laid her head back against the curved flesh behind her.

Peace eluded Mistwillow; this close to the enormous stomach she could hear every noise that came from within. It was like trying to fall asleep next to a roaring ocean, the gurgling contents of Gabby's stomach constantly churning like a frothing storm. Mistwillow shut it out as best she could, focusing on slow rhythmic breathing to center herself.

Her meditation was interrupted when behind her the side of Gabby's belly bowed as a forceful bulge surged out, thumping Mistwillow on the back of the head. Mistwillow's eyes shot open, as she huffed with annoyance. Twisting her head around she glared angrily towards the direction of Gabby's head, out of sight behind the curve of her belly.

"Would you hurry up and digest those damned slimes!"

Mistwillow waited in vain for a response from Gabby; the only sound the blonde made was soft buzz of gentle snoring. Mistwillow groaned with exasperation as she sat back once again.

Those other two would pay for sticking her with babysitting duty again. It wasn't fair. Mistwillow knew that they'd had similar thoughts about Gabby, they just wouldn't admit it. Though Blake had been right, the girl had pulled her weight on this expedition...and at the current moment that was a lot of weight. Maybe Mistwillow was being too hard on her, maybe-

The elf's musings were interrupted when she felt something touch her leg. Slowly, doing her best to not panic, she opened her eyes. On the stone floor, bobbing happily in place beside her right boot, was a small red slime. This one must've been a juvenile, it was tiny compared to the ones they'd seen earlier.

"Gabby!" She hissed. "There's another one...Gabby?!"

Gabby slumbered on, her snoring growing louder in the dark cave.

Mistwillow watched the slime, one hand moving to grip the hilt of the knife at her belt, waiting for it to turn hostile. The slime simply continued to bounce up and down in place, occasionally sliding closer to nudge up against her, like a puppy trying to get its master to play.

Mistwillow kicked out with her right leg, trying to get it to go away. The blow just made the surface of the slime cave in, reforming instantly as soon as her leg was pulled away.

"Shoo! Shoo!" Mistwillow said, waving at it with both hands. The slime ignored her, uncaring that she'd kicked it as it bounced closer again. Mistwillow grit her teeth in frustration, when the sound of a stomach growling broke the silence.

That wasn't Gabby; that was *her* stomach. She hadn't eaten since lunch and that was several hours ago. Dinner tonight was supposed to be the feast waiting for them at the Great Lodge, which was miles away from here. Mistwillow sighed as she attempted to rest again, closing her eyes and laying her head back, when her stomach rumbled again more forcefully.

"Please stop!" She moaned. "I'm sorry, but I don't have any..."

Her eyes fell upon the slime, cheerily bouncing beside her. Moving slowly, as if in a trance, she bent over and reached out. Gently she scooped up the slime, the creature small enough to be held in her two hands. She sat up, lifting the slime up to within inches of her mouth.

She hesitated. She couldn't...she shouldn't. She moved to throw the slime away, when another painful growl ripped from her stomach.

Before she could talk herself out of it, Mistwillow closed her eyes, pressed the slime to her lips and slurped it down.

She let out a sigh of relief as the pain from her stomach dispersed. Her hands fell to her midsection, her armor tight from the slight visible swell of her belly. Mistwillow closed her eyes, and finally relaxed, the droning snores of Gabby a soothing overture.

"Hmm, she was right..." Mistwillow muttered to herself as she dozed off. "...Raspberries."

And so, Templeton's Three emerge triumphant once again, the innocent daughter of Humbon rescued with nary a scratch or bruise upon her!

At some point in the night Gabby, or should I say Gabby's stomach, was successful in slaying the slimes once and for all. She awoke the next morning as happy and slender as ever, curled up beside Mistwillow. The elf wasn't so lucky, spending the next day complaining about indigestion.

Together the pair ascended from the depths and returned to Humbon, to rejoin their comrades at the Great Lodge, where they were booked for an additional night. After all, Gabby had been so looking forward to the culinary delights the Lodge was told to offer, and it would be cruel of them to deny her of that. After all, she is a part of the team!

Templeton's Three will return in... The Secret of The Belly!