*Chapter 9: The Elephant in the Room*

Round 215

“You know, I never tire of watching you do that,” Devrion said with a smile.

Angren smiled awkwardly. “I’m just pissed that he stole my move.”

The pair walked to the top of the stairs and looked at the chamber.

Brene stepped to the edge of the chamber floor and looked for traps.

Atlas tapped himself once more with the wand as he went to join Devrion and Steelshade. He also glanced back to ensure that the cloud wasn’t catching up to them, and said cloud was dissipating above them and coalescing towards the top of the domed chamber.

*Atlas gained 11 + 4 = 15 hps [85/99].*

As they made their way and got a better sense of where they were, their eyes adjusted to the slightly dimmer light, the party beheld the rest of the domed chamber, and the staircase beyond it.

A picture containing light, green

Description automatically generated

Round 216

“I don’t care for leaving mysteries behind us,” Atlas said. He stepped up to Devrion and tapped the warmage with his wand.

*Devrion gained 8 + 4 = 12 hps [99/99].*

“I think you’re right,” Brene said. She walked down to the no-longer-concealed door and peeked in.

Round 217

“I wonder what’s in that room with the creature. Surely, it had some purpose.” Steelshade watched as the others talked.

Devrion checked on the vapor cloud. “Who knows? Not everything has to make sense, and it will be a while before we can go in there again, anyway.”

Brene stepped over decapitated snakes to peer into the short hallway that led to a second false door.

A picture containing diagram

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Round 218

“You want I should try this one too?” she confirmed with the others before moving towards the false door, seeing no traps of any kind.

“I will go with you,” Steelshade said. “I can get us both back out if the first door closes.”

While Atlas and Devrion waited on the stairs, Steelshade followed Brene to the second door.

The rogue checked it carefully before attempting to open it.

And though there were no mundane traps to spot, there was a magical force warding the plate that she could not see as she placed her fingertips upon it. Instantly, the false wall seemed to grab her as it spun counterclockwise, swiveling and plummeting her over a wooded chest and into a snake pit.

*Dmg: 1. Damage negated.*

Brene scrambled to her feet.

A picture containing diagram

Description automatically generated

Round 219

Steelshade had only seen the room on the other side—lit by a torch that flickered to the north, where the duskblade could not see—for a split second, and was now staring at the other side of the false wall, which was a copy of the first side.

A swarm of snakes accosted Brene.

*Dmg: 8 + 2 acid = 10 + distraction (irrelevant for non-spellcasters). Partial damage negated [****110****/99].*

Atlas and Devrion had heard the stones scraping with alacrity and Brene’s whoa of bewilderment before the wall had rotated 180 degrees and confined the halfling to the snake-infested room.

Steelshade slashed at a single snake that had gotten through the wall without even wanting to.

The rogue activated her wand of cats and invoked the *spider climb* ability. Using it, she scrambled up the south wall out of the snakes’ reach. “Well, isn’t this wonderful,” she muttered as she examined the room more closely.

Outside, Steelshade turned and ran back to the staircase, turned right and headed up toward the door she’d spotted that apparently led into the rotunda. “Brene is trapped in a room, but I think there’s another door over here.”

Atlas and Devrion hurried after her, and the trio made their way along the rotunda’s wall to the double doors.

Diagram, map

Description automatically generated

Round 220

“They’re locked,” Steelshade estimated that she could probably kick them open if they were not magically warded.

“Brene, can you hear us?” Atlas called through the door.

Brene could hear the human’s voice from the other side of the double doors.

Devrion and Steelshade looked around them as Atlas attempted to contact Brene.

Round 221

“Hold your water,” Brene called back. She scrambled along the wall opposite the chest to arrive at the doors. “I don’t suppose you checked that mage for keys, did you?”

“Uh, sure,” Devrion answered. “Hang on a minute.”

“Oh, that’s exactly what I am doing,” Brene called out again.

Devrion went to search the mage for keys, or anything else that might be a talisman to open locked doors.

Round 222

Brene held on, aided by the *spider climb* ability. The snakes began to do a rather queer thing, slithering and melding into one another as acidic fumes began to foment and rise. What had been myriad minute mambas were now coalescing into poisonous pythons, if there could be such a thing.

Devrion found a green and black rod that could possibly have served as a key, and tossed it over to Steelshade, who caught it with no effort. As she held it in front of her, close enough to the door, the locking mechanism clicked, and an inner latch unhinged. The door was likely unlocked now.

Round 223

“Stand back,” Steelshade warned. She reached out and opened the door.

Diagram, map

Description automatically generated

Round 224

“Come on, Sweetie, these things are forming into something nasty,” Steelshade said.

“Yeah, I see that,” Brene replied as she made her way past the snakes and out the door.

“Everyone get to the sides of the door, out of the doorway,” Devrion warned as a half-dozen snakes the size of adult pythons followed after Brene with fangs the size of lions’.

“Hey, don’t burn them, there’s a wooden chest in there,” Brene replied.

Map

Description automatically generated

“Damn. Okay.” The warmage pointed at the center of the mass. “A halál köre!”

*HDs affected: 57.*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Character** | **Save vs.**  *finger of death* | **Ranks** | **Roll** | **Check** |
| Snake Swarm | Fortitude | 5 | 8 | 13 |
| Snake Swarm | Fortitude | 5 | 1 | 6 |
| Snake Swarm | Fortitude | 5 | 11 | 16 |
| Snake Swarm | Fortitude | 5 | 12 | 17 |
| Snake Swarm | Fortitude | 5 | 13 | 18 |
| Snake Swarm | Fortitude | 5 | 5 | 10 |

*Fail6.*

Atlas, Brene, and Angren felt a surge of negative energy pass through them, being familiar with their friend’s spell. It could not affect them, but destroyed every coalesced snake swarm and individual snake within its radius, causing the rest of the critters to cower in the dark corners of the chamber.

A picture containing surface chart

Description automatically generated

Round 225

“Phew!” Steelshade sighed as she lowered her blade, impressed with the warmage’s thoroughness. “What else did the mage have on him?” she then asked Devrion.

Devrion though he heard something to the north, but looking in that direction, saw no one and nothing stirring. “A spellbook, a rapier, a dagger, some rings and bracers... maybe more,” he responded to the swordswoman.

Brene felt safer going in to check out the chest, but not quite safe enough without Steelshade’s backup.

“I think there’s something moving north of us,” Devrion warned as he turned to look.

Round 226

“Let me look,” Brene said as she activated her Scout’s Headband and stepped up beside Devrion.

They saw nothing. “It could have been a draft,” admitted the half-elf, who could not see past the flight of stairs leading northward and upward.

The heroes took note of the fact that several spells’ effects had worn off by now.

*PCs lose the following boosts (applies to any PC with a given boost): Chasing Perfection, Protection from Evil, Call Lightning, True Seeing, Keen Edge.*

*Boosts still in effect:*

*Atlas Freedom of Movement*

*Brene Accuracy*

*Devrion Mage Armor*

*Steelshade Dragonskin*

*Steelshade Resist Energy*

*Steelshade Protection from Energy (Fire)*

*All Lion’s Roar*

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Description automatically generated

Round 227

Then they all heard something to the north: the single ping of metal—the tip of a blade, perhaps?—hitting the solid floor beneath their feet.

“That’s coming from the top of those stairs,” whispered Brene, barely exhaling as she positioned herself equidistantly from her teammates.

Diagram, map

Description automatically generated

“Let’s not keep them waiting,” Steelshade said quietly. She led the way around the floor to her right, staying off the mosaic tile as she circled the room to the east and north.

Brene, Devrion and Atlas followed her.

Round 228

Still drenched in the drying goop that had gotten on them on their way into this place, the heroes then noticed that the puffs of vaporized acid that had previously been a fiendish gelatinous cube were now coalescing at the top of the cupola, and Devrion half-suspected having to fight an acidic air elemental in a moment.

And then there came the familiar voice of the one they knew as Graz’zt, “Friends, we’ve all been playing cat and mouse for far too long.”

Except that it wasn’t Graz’zt, or at least any apparition of him they’d seen before.



Sure, he was comely, and could have been a sibling of Graz’zt, but the greenish sheen over his skin, hair, and horns suggested a lineage stemming from Juiblex. Upon closer inspection, they *had* interacted with such a demon just a day earlier, but from afar, and they hadn’t gotten a good look at the much larger demon before they’d destroyed it, and the orb that functioned as a womb-like conduit for a menagerie of demons on Sedesty Island.

A picture containing background pattern

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Rounds 229 – 232

The heroes tried to ready their weapons and spells but the goo around them had become hard as steel, and only Steelshade was strong enough to even budge the all-over restraints. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Ichor the Neversated, and I have a time-sensitive proposition for your group.”

The young and heretofore unknown Demon Lord floated forward, leaning and flapping his wings more for symbolic value than for actual steering and propulsion. The athlete’s build before them retracted its wings, and the masculine demon blinked as he studied some of the most powerful mortals he’d ever beheld. “Exquisite!” he remarked as he looked up to the cloud above them and raised his right hand, immediately rendering a twister that drew the vapors into his body. As he assimilated the essence of the gelatinous cube’s vaporized remains, the Abyssal noble smirked and said to the immobilized heroes, “I’ll assume from your expressions that you’re curious to know more.... A new age is on the horizon. Prophecy tells of the resolution of the conflict between my two progenitors: Juiblex and Graz’zt, and that only one will prevail upon this resolution. It is, however, not specified that the one who prevails will be either of my parents, and my believers are even now preparing for my advent into the echelons that my predecessors now occupy.”

Atlas’ face was free enough of the writhing, grappling goo such that he could now speak. Atlas studied Ichor closely as the demon prince approached. “What do you propose?”

Rounds 233 – 245

The demon’s feet touched the ground now, and he towered over them at a height of about 11’. He frowned to find the right words, smirking as he spoke, “Even as we speak, Juiblex and Graz’zt are in the midst of a transplanar quarrel, and they have recalled most of their avatars towards their core beings in the Concordant Opposition.”

Atlas could now tell where this was going.

“This poses two conditions heretofore inexistent, conditions that we can all exploit. On one end, the conflict has created power vacuums across the planes... everywhere but here on these islands, and then—of course—in the Concordant Opposition of the Outlands where time and space are wholly different.”

“And?” Atlas waited for the other condition.

The demon duke’s smirk became a smile now, and he divulged the second thing. “Aaaand... by the end of the proverbial day, regardless of who prevails, both will be significantly taxed and weakened, which poses a brief window of opportunity for us to agree on some terms and contingencies, for you all to figure out how to bind the likes of me to said terms, and for us to wait for the conflict to resolve itself—shouldn’t be much longer now.”

“Why would your parents want to weaken each other to that point,” Atlas asked. “Surely they are wise enough to know that their offspring might have ambitions. However, our interest is here, in the Material Plane, as is our patron’s. If you can arrange to withdraw Pale Night’s forces from this plane, and keep them away, then we have the basis whereupon to strike an agreement.”

“Ah, but you misunderstand,” the demon failed to see that he had not fully explained their predicament. “This...” he waved his hands all around, and shook his head, “This comes not from me, but from Juiblex. I have ever been trapped within Juiblex’s placental prison, though I have eaten the memories of many who’ve been outside these confines, and I have come to learn that Graz’zt himself is not aware of my existence.”

The demonic form finished inhaling and spoke again, “Juiblex has seen fit to keep me a secret from the rest of the worlds, but now that my prison has come to be situated in your world, an opportunity presents itself. I have been something akin to a pet and a toy, perhaps a gladiator, for my progenitor, and now I shall usurp the place of the Faceless Lord, and perhaps in time even of the Prince of Pleasure.”

“And what is *our* motive for colluding with you?” asked Atlas, though the goo around the faces of all the heroes had now receded, letting them breathe, see, and speak normally.

Ichor the Neversated replied, “I have come to the understanding that you seek to destroy Graz’zt, and now Juiblex. That alone should be motive to align our efforts, and once that labor is achieved, part ways.”

Steelshade protested, “I’m not convinced that you’d simply go on your merry way and not leave destruction in your wake.”

Devrion did his best to ask himself what Aasterinian would do at a time like this.

“Well...” sighed Ichor, his features fluidly coursing from one rendition of fiendish beauty to another. “In order to self-actualize as an arch-demon, many heroes will likely perish at my blade, but I have no quarrel with those whose ends reside with mine. I believe the archivist knows better than any of you that it is devils—not demons—who are the true culprits of suffering in the multiverse. Perhaps...” he rolled his eyes as if someone else were about to propose, “Someday we might even be allies in the Blood War.”

If one removed the fact that they were speaking with one of the purest forms of Chaotic Evil in existence, Ichor made some compelling points. In the most pragmatic sense, it seemed advantageous to consider a tentative partnership with the one who might someday become the Arch-Incubus himself. Perhaps they could even keep him in check somehow. But on the other hand, their deity might have reservations about working side-by-side with an aspiring Demon Lord.

Steelshade regarded the demon closely. “You mentioned a prison. Are you still imprisoned here, and, if so, how?”

The demon seemed troubled for a moment, shaking his head, “It is not a matter of how so much as the fact that my attempts to leave these confines have ever failed. This pocket dimension had a closed-ended feature that teleports my form here when I step out of its so-called exits. There was once a time when I had neither the knowledge of nor a desire for the world outside the tawdry comforts of this womb.”

The four heroes were all certified geniuses in their own domains, and had broad backgrounds in several subjects, but they were at a loss as to how to classify the individual before them, let alone come to a consensus on whether or not to trust the demon. Ichor made a hand gesture with both palms, and the restraints holding the heroes instantly evaporated and were vacuumed into Ichor’s hands as he grew greener and firmer in musculature. His canine fangs glowed green for a moment as the slimy infestations that had held the heroes in place now fortified Ichor’s very bones.

“Show us your prison, please,” Atlas asked.

“Behold,” he held out his hands and said, “my prison. Apologies, though I have a vast intellect, I have not enjoyed many social interactions, and now realize that I’ve been vague. *This* is the prison of which I speak.”

“If you can show us its extents in detail, it will help us formulate course of action,” the archivist explained.

~\*~

Round 250

Ichor had led the No Laughing Matter crew northward and upward along another flight of stairs that led to a terminal, semicircular chamber with a grandiose elephant comprised of green Juiblex goo.

Map

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They’d ventured far and wide, but this series of chambers had hosted some of the queerest and most reality-bending occupants, not the least of which was the elephant that seemed to stare down at them in open-eye meditation.

A picture containing text, light

Description automatically generated

Ichor then explained, “Oh: elephant in the room... he’s an avatar of Juiblex, and likes it when I lure the meat here. Gods bless!” and the traitorous demon flew into the elephant, subsumed by the giant avatar’s green form. Atlas suspected there never was an Ichor; the entire personage was a fabrication of the elephantine Juiblex avatar before them.

A web-like pattern of light swept over the walls of the chamber and corridor.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Skill** | **Rank** | **Ability & Mod.** | **Misc. Mods.** | **Total** | **Roll** | **Check** | **Notes** |
| **Atlas, Know: The Planes** | 21 | **Int (+6)** | 5 | 32 | ? | ?? | Trivial Knowledge |
| **Atlas, Know: The Planes** | 21 | **Int (+6)** | 5 | 32 | 19 | 51 | Trivial Knowledge, **best of 2 rolls** |

*See below.*

Atlas could tell by the Mystran pattern now subsiding that the web was a planar membrane, anchoring anyone trying to teleport out of the area.

The Gargantuan elephant expectorated from its trunk two Huge blobs that almost instantly upon splatting onto the ground took on the forms of gelatinous cubes, exhibiting the remains of recently eaten creatures still inside them—and three more of the human-sized snot goblins they’d fought earlier. The ochre elephant boogers did their best to assume simian forms as they got their bearings and beheld their adversaries while one of the cubes had landed partly on Steelshade, and the momentum of the projectile had caused it to engulf her completely *[Engulf: auto success]*.

*Dmg: 2 acid. Damage negated.*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Save vs.**  Paralysis | **Rank** | **Ability & Mod.** | **Misc. Mods.** | **Total** | **Roll** | **Check** |
| **Fortitude** | 10 | **Con (+3)** | 3 | 16 | 9 | 25 |

*Success. Paralysis negated.*

A picture containing text, seat

Description automatically generated

Seeing Steelshade becoming engulfed in the cube that had just taken form, Altas could tell that they were in for a challenge, and as he looked down the flight of stairs—their only immediate escape route—he noted something else stirring in the distance, likely blocking their path. The elephant began to simplify into an indiscernible blob that now sought to finish off the heroes. This was the embodiment of Juiblex on this plane, and the archivist in the group was fairly certain that its extermination would render the demonic magic in this place inert. However, a tactical calculus was resolved in his head, and he suspected that these fiendish blobs would likely be better dealt with if they could concentrate on one at a time, with the smallest threats first.

Map

Description automatically generated

Round 251

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Character** | **Group** | **Initiative** | **Roll** | **Modified Roll** | **Move** |
| Steelshade | 1 | 5 | 10 | 15 | 20’ |
| Devrion | 1 | 6 | 8 | 14 | 30’ |
| Juiblex & Spawns | 2 | 1 | 13 | 14 | 40’ |
| Brene | 1 | 6 | 7 | 13 | 30’ |
| Atlas | 1 | 2 | 2 | 4 | 30’ |

Steelshade growled and swift-cast dimension hop, then reappeared at the bottom of the current flight of stairs and cast *regroup* to gather the others with her on the stairs.

Atlas, Brene, and Devrion accepted the *regroup*, and then the warmage spoke sharply as he pointed with his right index finger to a spot in the midst of their enemies, as his left hand held the powder of a crushed black pearl to his mouth. “Halál köre!” *[circle of death]*

*Affected 57 HDs’ worth of foes with <9 HD.*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Character** | **Save vs.**  *circle of death* | **Ranks** | **Roll** | **Check** |
| Drone Spawn | Fortitude | 7 | 12 | 19 |
| Drone Spawn | Fortitude | 7 | 5 | 12 |
| Drone Spawn | Fortitude | 7 | 2 | 9 |

*Fail, fail, fail.*

The smallest globule was in the center of the spell’s blast radius, and the shapeless form burst into a splendid coagulation of tentacular radii of sizzling, dying gelatin.

A picture containing text, indoor

Description automatically generated

However, though this spell would have sundered most of the individual fiends they’d encountered this day, these were no mere gelatinous cubes. The two forms charge-attacked the heroes at the bottom of the stairs, using the downward trajectory to increase the engulfing impact that they sought to have on these four mortals.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Character** | **Attack Type** | **Damage** | **BAB** | **Str Mod+** | **Other+** | **Total Score** | **Roll** | **Total** |
| Greater Spawn | Slam 1 | 2d8+10 plus slimy infestation | 8 | 8 | 2 charge + 2 descent | 16 | 16 | 32 |
| Greater Spawn | Slam 2 | 2d8+10 plus slimy infestation | 8 | 8 | 2 charge + 2 descent | 16 | 11 | 27 |

*Hit (all PCs).*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Character** | **Opponent** | **Damage** | **BAB** | **Str Mod+** | **Other+** | **Total Score** | **Roll** | **Total** |
| Greater Spawn | Atlas | Grapple + 2d6 acid | 8 | 18 | 0 | 26 | 6 | 32 |
| Greater Spawn | Brene | Grapple + 2d6 acid | 8 | 18 | 0 | 26 | 15 | 41 |
| Greater Spawn | Devrion | Grapple + 2d6 acid | 8 | 18 | 0 | 26 | 17 | 43 |
| Greater Spawn | Steelshade | Grapple + 2d6 acid | 8 | 18 | 0 | 26 | 2 | 28 |

*Dmg to Atlas:* *7 acid [78/99].*

*Dmg to Brene: 6 acid [****104****/99].*

*Dmg to Devrion: 7 acid [92/99].*

*Dmg to Steelshade: 10 acid. Damage negated.*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Opposed Grapple** | **Dmg** | **D+** | **Atk** | **Roll** | **Check** |
| Atlas | Grapple | - | +13 | 12 | 25 |
| Brene | Grapple | - | +15 | 3 | 18 |
| Devrion | 1d3 | +1 | 11 | 14 | 25 |
| Steelshade | Grapple | +7 +2 | 20 | 45 |

*Grapples against Atlas, Brene, and Devrion remained in place.*

The Juiblex avatar also began to transmute, and seeped an *obscuring mist* around itself, shrouding itself as it took form.

Atlas, Brene, and Devrion struggled to maneuver while inside the cubes that engulfed them. With one leg outside the easternmost cube, Steelshade held her sword and was about to slice her way out of the form, though she had to be careful to not harm Devrion and Brene in the process.

Brene called her dagger to her hand in order to slash at the creature holding her fast. The dagger unsheathed itself and took about 6 seconds to slowly cut through the gelatinous tissue, finally reaching her hand, though the halfling was unable to do much more than to try to wrestle her arms free. Atlas, too, would have liked to draw his dagger and slash at the creature around him, but could not move enough to do so.

*Dmg: 1. Damage negated.*

A screenshot of a video game

Description automatically generated

Round 252

Steelshade channeled inflict serious wounds through her blade, and full-attacked the creature around her.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Melee Weapon** | **Dmg** | **D+** | **TH+** | **Crit** | **x** | **Type** | **Wt.** | **Atk** | **Roll** | **Check** |
| Shattermantle Bloodstone Falchion +3 | 2d4 | +7 +3 | 3 | 18 | 2 | Slashing | 8.0 | +28 | 10 | 38 |
| SB Falchion +3, 2nd Attack | 2d4 | +7 +3 | 3 | 18 | 2 | Slashing | - | +23 | 5 | 28 |
| SB Falchion +3, 3rd Attack | 2d4 | +7 +3 | 3 | 18 | 2 | Slashing | - | +18 | 10 | 28 |
| SB Falchion +3, 4th Attack | 2d4 | +7 +3 | 3 | 18 | 2 | Slashing | - | +13 | 12 | 25 |

*Hit, hit, hit, hit. Dmg: (5 + 7 + 3) + (3 + 7 + 3) + (6 + 7 + 3) + (5 + 7 + 3) = 15 + 13 + 16 + 15 = 59. Partial damage negated.*

Butchering its underside, she managed to cut the cubic block of demonic goo into a smaller, shallower cube, but it was still just as fierce and menacing.

Devrion closed his hand into a pointing gesture.

*Arcane Spell failure (Somatic), 1d100 = 70, negated. Somatic component is adequate to trigger spell.*

“A halál ujja!” the warmage then gurgled. *[finger of death]*

*Arcane Spell failure (Verbal), 1d100 = 91, negated. Verbal component is adequate to trigger spell.*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Character** | **Save vs.**  *finger of death* | **Ranks** | **Roll** | **Check** |
| Greater Spawn | Fortitude | 14 | 1 | 15 |

*Fail.*

The cube instantly became pH-inert, and slowly began to fizzle away.

Inside the other cube, Brene and Atlas struggled against the acidic grip all around them.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Character** | **Opponent** | **Damage** | **BAB** | **Str Mod+** | **Other+** | **Total Score** | **Roll** | **Total** |
| Greater Spawn | Atlas | Grapple + 2d6 acid | 8 | 18 | 0 | 26 | 18 | 44 |
| Greater Spawn | Brene | Grapple + 2d6 acid | 8 | 18 | 0 | 26 | 6 | 32 |

*Dmg to Atlas: 9 acid [69/99].*

*Dmg to Brene: 7 acid [97/99].*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Opposed Grapple** | **Dmg** | **D+** | **Atk** | **Roll** | **Check** |
| Atlas | Grapple | - | +13 | 15 | 28 |
| Brene | Grapple | - | +15 | 11 | 26 |

*Grapples against Atlas and Brene remained in place.*

Brene and Atlas continued to try to move as the acid ate away at their skins and gear.

To the north, at the top of the stairs, the Juiblex avatar continued to emanate an *obscuring mist*, and now prepared to annihilate the humanoids.

A screenshot of a video game

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Round 253

Steelshade took a 5’ step to the south to get a better angle at the portion of the cube that was not digesting her friends, then full-attacked the cube, aiming her cuts away from her friends.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Melee Weapon** | **Dmg** | **D+** | **TH+** | **Crit** | **x** | **Type** | **Wt.** | **Atk** | **Roll** | **Check** |
| Shattermantle Bloodstone Falchion +3 | 2d4 | +7 +3 | 3 | 18 | 2 | Slashing | 8.0 | +28 | 12 | 40 |
| SB Falchion +3, 2nd Attack | 2d4 | +7 +3 | 3 | 18 | 2 | Slashing | - | +23 | 2 | 25 |
| SB Falchion +3, 3rd Attack | 2d4 | +7 +3 | 3 | 18 | 2 | Slashing | - | +18 | 2 | 20 |
| SB Falchion +3, 4th Attack | 2d4 | +7 +3 | 3 | 18 | 2 | Slashing | - | +13 | 13 | 26 |

*Hit, hit, miss, hit. Dmg: (7 + 7 + 3) + (3 + 7 + 3) + (4 + 7 + 3) = 17 + 13 + 14 = 44. Partial damage negated.*

The warmage produced a miniature platinum sword with a grip and pommel of copper and zinc that had set him back 250 gp. Grasping it between his palm and middle, ring, and pinky fingers, he pointed with his index finger toward Juiblex. “Mordenkainen kardja!” *[Mordenkainen’s sword, expired on Round 271]*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Melee Weapon** | **Dmg** | **D+** | **TH+** | **Critical** | **Type** | **Wt.** | **Atk** | **Roll** | **Check** | **Notes** |
| *Mordenkainen’s Sword* | 4d6 | 3 | 3 | 19-20/x2 | Slashing | 0.0 | 31 | 13 | 44 | Bypasses incorporeality |

*Hit.*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Ranged Weapon** | **Atk** | **Roll** | **Check** |
| Bypass Spell Resistance | 18 | 13 | 31 |

*Fail. This and all subsequent M-sword attacks against the Juiblex avatar bypass Spell Resistance.*

*Dmg: 17 + 3 = 20 force.*

The cube tasted the human’s and halfling’s skin, and liked it, backing away towards the Juiblex avatar.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Character** | **Opponent** | **Damage** | **BAB** | **Str Mod+** | **Other+** | **Total Score** | **Roll** | **Total** |
| Greater Spawn | Atlas | Grapple + 2d6 acid | 8 | 18 | 0 | 26 | 10 | 36 |
| Greater Spawn | Brene | Grapple + 2d6 acid | 8 | 18 | 0 | 26 | 15 | 41 |

*Dmg to Atlas: 5 acid [64/99].*

*Dmg to Brene: 9 acid [88/99].*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Opposed Grapple** | **Dmg** | **D+** | **Atk** | **Roll** | **Check** |
| Atlas | Grapple | - | +13 | 17 | 30 |
| Brene | Grapple | - | +15 | 1 | 16 |

*Grapples against Atlas and Brene remained in place.*

The Juiblex avatar was mad! He or she frowned through the *obscuring mist*, then opened a mouth large enough to eat them, and advanced, intending to subsume the cube along with Atlas and Brene.

Brene twisted her wrist in an attempt to free more of herself from the creature with her dagger, slicing through the tissues as she moved.

*Grapple against Brene remained in place.*

Atlas attempted to cast *lion’s roar*.

*Arcane Spell failure (Verbal), 1d100 = 35, negated. Verbal component fails to trigger spell.*

The archivist could not enunciate enough to manifest the spell.

A picture containing chart

Description automatically generated

Round 254

With the last remains of the first gelatinous cube fizzling at her feet, Steelshade continued to attack the cube that contained her friends, slashing at it as it moved.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Melee Weapon** | **Dmg** | **D+** | **TH+** | **Crit** | **x** | **Type** | **Wt.** | **Atk** | **Roll** | **Check** |
| Shattermantle Bloodstone Falchion +3 | 2d4 | +7 +3 | 3 | 18 | 2 | Slashing | 8.0 | +28 | 14 | 42 |

*Hit. Dmg: 3 + 7 + 3 = 13. Partial damage negated.*

*Mordenkainen’s sword* continued to slash away at the Juiblex avatar.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Melee Weapon** | **Dmg** | **D+** | **TH+** | **Critical** | **Type** | **Wt.** | **Atk** | **Roll** | **Check** |
| *Mordenkainen’s Sword* | 4d6 | 3 | 3 | 19-20/x2 | Slashing | 0.0 | 31 | 18 | 49 |

*Hit. Dmg: 13 force.*

Devrion held a crystal sphere in one hand and with the other pointed at Juiblex while speaking sharply, adding more power [*Sudden Empower*] to his incantation. “Otiluke fagyos gömbje!”

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Character** | **Save vs.** Empowered  *Otiluke’s Freezing Sphere* | **Ranks** | **Roll** | **Check** |
| Elder Spawn | Reflex | 6 | 1 | 7 |

*Fail. Dmg: 50 x 150% = 75 cold.*

The cube was about to retreat into Juiblex’s body, but noted the cold emanating from the arch-demon, and refrained from doing so, continuing to digest Atlas and Brene.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Character** | **Opponent** | **Damage** | **BAB** | **Str Mod+** | **Other+** | **Total Score** | **Roll** | **Total** |
| Greater Spawn | Atlas | Grapple + 2d6 acid | 8 | 18 | 0 | 26 | 3 | 29 |
| Greater Spawn | Brene | Grapple + 2d6 acid | 8 | 18 | 0 | 26 | 14 | 40 |

*Dmg to Atlas: 6 acid [58/99].*

*Dmg to Brene: 6 acid [82/99].*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Opposed Grapple** | **Dmg** | **D+** | **Atk** | **Roll** | **Check** |
| Atlas | Grapple | - | +13 | 12 | 25 |
| Brene | Grapple | - | +15 | 11 | 26 |

*Grapples against Atlas and Brene remained in place.*

The elder spawn cast *unholy blight*, getting Devrion and Steelshade inside the blast.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Save vs.**  *unholy blight* | **Rank** | **Ability & Mod.** | **Misc. Mods.** | **Total** | **Roll** | **Check** | **Notes** |
| **Devrion, Will** | **11** | **Wis (+1)** | 3 | 15 | 20 | 35 |  |
| **Steelshade, Will** | **10** | **Wis (+2)** | 3 | 15 | 2 | 17 | +2 vs. all spells |

*Success, success. Both save for ½ damage and avoid the Sickened effect.*

*Dmg to Devrion (Good): ½ x 32 = 16 evil [76/99].*

*Dmg to Steelshade (Neutral): ½ x ½ x 28 = 7 evil [****208****/179].*

Brene and Atlas could do little more than jerk around inside the digestive fluid. They kept trying to work their way loose.

*Interpreting this as a shift to using Escape Artist check on next round.*

Diagram, schematic

Description automatically generated

Round 255

Steelshade charged the cube and attacked again, channeling *inflict serious wounds* through her blade.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Melee Weapon** | **Dmg** | **D+** | **TH+** | **Crit** | **x** | **Type** | **Wt.** | **Atk** | **Roll** | **Check** |
| Shattermantle Bloodstone Falchion +3 | 2d4 | +7 +3 | 3 | 18 | 2 | Slashing | 8.0 | +28 | 10 | 38 |

*Hit.*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Character** | **Save vs.**  *inflict serious wounds* | **Ranks** | **Roll** | **Check** |
| Greater Spawn | Will | 5 | 8 | 13 |

*Fail. Dmg: (4 + 7 + 3) + (16 + 15) = 14 + 31 ISW = 45. Partial damage negated.*

Seeing that his friends were still inside the writhing cube, Devrion ran closer and pointed at it. “A halál ujja!”

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Character** | **Save vs.**  *finger of death* | **Ranks** | **Roll** | **Check** |
| Elder Spawn | Fortitude | 19 | 10 | 29 |

*Success. Staves off automatic death.*

*Dmg: 10 + 18 = 28. Partial damage negated.*

And still the cube did not die, but rather fled with their friends in its transparent belly.

*Mordenkainen’s sword* swung true, and though the formless avatar had no discernible anatomy to critically wound, the slash bled the arch-demon of its acidic sap.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Melee Weapon** | **Dmg** | **D+** | **TH+** | **Critical** | **Type** | **Wt.** | **Atk** | **Roll** | **Check** | **Notes** |
| *Mordenkainen’s Sword* | 4d6 | 3 | 3 | 19-20/x2 | Slashing | 0.0 | 31 | 19 | 50 | Bypasses incorporeality |

*Threat; not a critical hit. Dmg: 16 + 3 = 19.*

The Juiblex avatar had had enough. Seeing its pet cube receding eastwardly, it spilled itself onto Steelshade, trying to consumer her as her remaining cube was consuming the others, leaving only Devrion to cast spells freely.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Character** | **Attack Type** | **Damage** | **Roll** |
| Elder Spawn | Swarm | 2d8+10 + slimy infestation | *Automatic hit if occupying*  *same square as opponent.* |

*Dmg: 16 acid + slimy infestation. Partial damage negated [****202****/179].*

In the process, the blob impaled *Mordenkainen’s sword* deeper into its form, thereby harming itself.

*Dmg: 18 + 3 = 21.*

Devrion could tell that the demonic goo was almost done for. Collectively, they’d put a deep hurting on both enemies, and both would likely fall in the next few moments, or he wasn’t worth his salt.

Atlas and Brene did their best to slip out of the gelatinous muscle tissue, and now began to suffocate.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Character** | **Opponent** | **Damage** | **BAB** | **Str Mod+** | **Other+** | **Total Score** | **Roll** | **Total** |
| Greater Spawn | Atlas | Grapple + 2d6 acid | 8 | 18 | 0 | 26 | 17 | 43 |
| Greater Spawn | Brene | Grapple + 2d6 acid | 8 | 18 | 0 | 26 | 6 | 32 |

*Dmg to Atlas: 5 acid [53/99].*

*Dmg to Brene: 7 acid [75/99].*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Skill** | **Rank** | **Ability & Mod.** | **Misc. Mods.** | **Total** | **Roll** | **Check** |
| **Atlas, Escape Artist** | 0 | **Dex (+2)** | 0 | 2 | 3 | 5 |
| **Brene, Escape Artist** | 10 | **Dex (+6)** | 0 | 16 | 81 | 34 |

*Fail, success.*

Brene slipped loose, tearing herself away from the cube with her dagger as she got a footing on solid ground once again.

*No damage.*

A screenshot of a map

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

Round 256

*[DM assumption]* Feeling the goo around her suddenly spasming and losing its grip, the duskblade took the opportunity to slash the area around her.

*Four automatic hits. Dmg: (4 + 7 + 3) + (5 + 7 + 3) + (5 + 7 + 3) + (4 + 7 + 3) = 14 + 15 + 15 + 14 = 58. Partial damage negated.*

*Dmg to Steelshade: 14 + 10 = 24 acid. Partial damage negated [****188****/179].*

And with this, the Juiblex avatar turned to an inert pile of evaporating slime that now coated the staircase and threatened Devrion’s boots. Steelshade’s gear was nearly done for, and she had suffered quite a bit of corrosive damage to her skin and eyes, though the magic coursing through her was even now repairing her living tissue.

The lair shook from its foundations.

*Mordenkainen’s sword* floated in midair, devoid of any acid on its incorporeal surface. *[DM assumption]* Devrion shrugged and before anything else, moved to the west a bit to get a line of sight to the cube, and then directed the sword towards said cube.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Melee Weapon** | **Dmg** | **D+** | **TH+** | **Critical** | **Type** | **Wt.** | **Atk** | **Roll** | **Check** |
| *Mordenkainen’s Sword* | 4d6 | 3 | 3 | 19-20/x2 | Slashing | 0.0 | 31 | 16 | 47 |

*Hit. Dmg: 14 + 3 = 17.*

The cube remained intact, though barely so, and with the sword-shaped forcefield now lodged in it, it quivered as it reached the narrow, eastern passage into the adjacent room, and tried to squeeze Atlas into it.

Surface chart

Description automatically generated

Devrion cast *swift fly* and flew over the acid to attack *[orb of force]* the cube before it could kill Atlas. He pointed at the cube “Erő gömb!”

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Ranged Weapon** | **Dmg.** | **D+** | **TH+** | **Atk** | **Roll** | **Check** |
| Ranged Touch Attack | 10d6 force | +4 | 1 | 13 | 6 | 19 |
| Bypass Spell Resistance | See above | - | - | 18 | 19 | 37 |

*Hit. Spell Resistance bypassed. Dmg: 36 force.*

The warmage was now unable to cast *orb of force* spells for the rest of the day unless he wanted to empower them and tap into a higher-order mana reserve.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Warmage Spells by Level** | | | | | | | | | |
|  | **0th** | **1st** | **2nd** | **3rd** | **4th** | **5th** | **6th** | **7th** | **8th** | **9th** |
| **Warmage Spells** | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 5 | 3 |
| **Charisma Bonus** | 0 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | **1** | **1** | **1** | **0** | **0** |
| **Total Daily Spells** | **6** | **8** | **8** | **8** | **7** | **7** | **7** | **7** | **5** | **3** |
| **DC** | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 |
| **Cast?** | **0** | **2** | **2** | **1** | **7** | **0** | **3** | **5** | **0** | **0** |

However, he was able to put an end to the cube’s existence, leaving them once again amidst dead foes.

Now free from the cube, and clutching her wounding dagger in her dominant hand, Brene dashed toward the cube and slashed at the collapsing acid with her dagger, trying to free her lover, who now emerged from the form, gasping for air.

Surface chart

Description automatically generated

Rounds 257 – 261

Steelshade moved up onto the floor away from the acid, and the others joined her. She took out one of the large canteens and some cloth, and they began to use the water and cloth to wipe off the acid residue from their skins and from their equipment, checking the magical items first. They looked around frequently as they worked.

They were able to shrug off the residual damage from the lingering acid coating their bodies, and vowed to see a hot spring in which to bathe at the first opportunity.

“Can you *plane shift* us out of here?” Brene asked Atlas.

“Nay,” Atlas shook his head. “The walls are now magically impermeable.”

Taking a better look at the chamber—particularly where the giant elephant was a moment ago—the heroes speculated on what lay before them and what options they had.

The foundations of this labyrinthine structure shook once more.

Round 262

With his force-based longsword floating behind him, Devrion examined the back of the main chamber where the statue had been, while Steelshade was now at the west side, looking there. Atlas and Brene had gone to look in the doorway where the cube had been trying to go.

The granddaughter of some of the wiliest dark elves in the land made her way down a staircase and almost instantly spotted a false wall that hadn’t been properly closed and now opened with little fanfare. She cautiously peeked through, and noted no traps—though she wasn’t exactly an authority on this—and spotted a desk; a workbench; some shelves with the wares of a scribe; a book stand with a large, open tome; and a single, wooden chair.

A picture containing text

Description automatically generated

Atlas and Brene were in a chamber with a woodsy rug atop which rested a pedestal and a chartreuse gem the size of Atlas’s skull. Brene studied it from all around, then turned her attention to a chest as a book stand with a small volume caught the archivist’s attention as much as the giant gem had.

A screenshot of a game

Description automatically generated with low confidence

Devrion noted nothing unusual or cryptic in the architecture he now studied.

A picture containing text, indoor

Description automatically generated

Round 263

“Devrion,” Steelshade called. “Come look at this.”

The warmage went and examined the book and the scribe’s materials when Steelshade pointed them out.

Atlas examined the book, while Brene checked the chest for traps and attempted to open it.

Rounds 264 – 266

“No traps,” Brene said *[R 264]*, cracking a few knuckles before proceeding to disarm the locking mechanism *[R 265]*.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Skill** | **Rank** | **Ability & Mod.** | **Misc. Mods.** | **Total** | **Roll** | **Check** |
| **Brene, Open Lock** | 12 | **Dex (+6)** | 2 | **20** | 1 | 21 |

*Fail.*

Brene knew she could do better than that, so she tried again *[R 266]*.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Skill** | **Rank** | **Ability & Mod.** | **Misc. Mods.** | **Total** | **Roll** | **Check** |
| **Brene, Open Lock** | 12 | **Dex (+6)** | 2 | **20** | 18 | 38 |

*Success.*

And voilà! The lock came unlatched and the chest could now be opened.

Devrion reached the bottom of the staircase, having followed Steelshade’s voice down the path he’d seen her take only moments before, and peeked in. “Oh,” he simply said, taking in the sights.

Atlas had picked up the book entitled, *Ooze, Booze, and Cooze: Nobody Slides for Free*, and was now perusing its depraved mucosities and other ramblings.

Round 267

Atlas closed the book and slipped it into his pack for later study, having misread the word Cooze as Clues. Odd that.

Brene carefully opened the chest, then realized the locking mechanism had clicked back into the locked position.

Devrion looked over the study to see if there was anything useful as Steelshade checked the room’s exits. They both suddenly felt nauseous.

The floor shook under their feet.

Round 268 – 891

The heroes might have stayed put right where they were, or they might have gone on ten separate adventures in the span of what seemed like years, but by the time they had caught up to themselves, they were running along a tunnel, having just vanquished a few dozen slime demons along the way.

“Did we just do that?” asked Brene, looking at the vaporizing slimes behind them.

“Friends, our minds have been compromised,” Atlas knew enough to say. “Beware that we may be still be inside a planar trap.”

“You don’t say...” Steelshade muttered as she swung at a green globule of demonic matter that manifested right before her.



They found themselves putting the green décor of the Juiblex lair behind them now, and ran along a violet causeway towards some unknown destination that looked dubiously Graz’zt-themed violet.

A picture containing light, outdoor object, night sky

Description automatically generated

Round 1498

“Well, this sucks,” Brene sighed for the fifth time on their journey down the corridor in wherever-they-were, headed steadily toward who-knows-where. They’d wanted to use the carpet, but Atlas hadn’t had the chance to repair it, and there was too much risk that it would be again damaged.

Steelshade stepped up next to her. “For once, I wholeheartedly agree.”

They looked ahead at a solid mass of lesser demons and their minions that were blocking the path. “The only way out is through them,” the duskblade said as she turned to the magic users. A tremendous roar boomed forth as the demons charged, and Atlas answered them with a roar of his own as they came into his range. Brene stayed behind the other three, and fired her bow at the most dangerous looking foes, picking them off one by one as they came in.

The warmage snarled as the magical energies flowed through him, and he demonstrated once more why he was the deadliest thing on the battlefield against a massed foe. Every few seconds, he barked another command, sending bursts of magical energy blasting through their formation, cutting down the weaker enemies by their tens, and taking even the stronger ones as they closed in.

Atlas added his own spells, targeting the enemy spellcasters as they attempted to retaliate against Devrion. He also tapped everyone with his wand of haste as the enemy came closer.

Steelshade readied herself as the enemy came in on her, and then she exploded into action. Bodies and body parts flew away from the duskblade as her enemies expended themselves against her. Then, the battle devolved into a raging mass of bodies and vicious strikes as the wave of creatures crashed against the tiny group. Claws and teeth scraped against Steelshade’s shield, and her sword flashed red with the blade’s steel and the blood of her foes.

Devrion and Atlas stood back-to-back behind Steelshade, forming a triangle to defend her back. Atlas used his shillelagh two-handed, keeping his enemies at bay. Brene had switched to her dagger, and she drifted like smoke though the flailing masses, striking with unerring precision, and dodging any attack that came her way.

The combat rose to a crescendo, magic crackled, blood flew, and grunts, yells, and screams filled the air around the tiny group. Then, the surviving creatures turned as one and ran away, some dragging crippled limbs, and a few of them managing little more than a crawl. Steelshade looked up to see one demon, something so grotesque as to be unidentifiable, shambling toward them. The creature shoved its minions aside, and trod on a few unfortunates too injured to get out of the way.

The duskblade was spent, her spells exhausted. She stood with her sword point resting on the floor, and her shield braced against her thigh. She’d taken at least a dozen serious hits, and her healing magics were exhausted. Brene knelt next to Atlas as the archivist spoke a prayer to heal himself before he collapsed. Devrion was also badly hurt, in spite of his magical protection. Atlas had exhausted all of his offensive spells, and there’d been no time to heal himself or the others. The demon bared his fangs in a vicious grin as he took in his weary opponents. He drew closer, and Steelshade lifted her weapon to face him.

“A halál ujja!”

The demon lurched, and turned to face the warmage. The half-elf lowered his hand, having spent his last spell that could have done the demon any real damage. The creature staggered backward for a step, and then crashed down on it’s face.

Round 1805

The group halted as the end of the tunnel came into view. They’d had to dispatch a few of the minor creatures who’d survived the battle, but none of them were in sight now.

Then, an ectoplasmic—or perhaps transplanar—burst rippled from somewhere behind them, spitting them through the invisible membrane between planes that had previously been blocking their *planar shifting*.

They fell towards the ground.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Skill** | **Rank** | **Ability & Mod.** | **Misc. Mods.** | **Total** | **Roll** | **Check** |
| **Atlas, Tumble** | 0 | **Dex (+2)** | 0 | 2 | 18 | 20 |
| **Brene, Tumble** | 8 | **Dex (+6)** | 2 | 16 | 12 | 28 |

*Success, success.*

Devrion and Steelshade were inept tumblers, and thus fumbled onto their behinds as Atlas and Brene tumbled onto their feet.

*Dmg to Devrion: [75/99].*

*Dmg to Steelshade: [****201****/179].*

As they got their bearings, assuming directions from the sun’s position, they took in their surroundings. “Are we back on one of the Whalebones Islands?” asked Devrion.

“*Could* be Sedesty,” proclaimed Brene.

“It’s probably the island we were just on when we entered the Juiblex pocket plane,” Atlas deduced from various nuances.

Steelshade sighed. “Sunset is a bell’s toll away, maybe two.”

The archivist took in as much sensory information as he could, noting the flora’s consistency with the island where they’d just been, minus the blighted trees. If this was Juiblex Island—as they’d dubbed it—they were on another part of it entirely.

“Are you able to *plane shift* us out of here?” asked Devrion, longing for a Waterdeep bathtub.

“I... believe so,” Atlas answered, not having had the ability to cast it until they’d pierced the transplanar membrane that had tethered them to the Juiblex Complex.

“Maybe we should take a look around,” Steelshade said.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m almost completely out of spells for the day,” Devrion replied.

“I think we should go back to Waterdeep to rest,” Atlas said as he looked at his damaged raiment. “We also have to clean this gear, or it will be completely ruined soon.”

“Okay, take us back,” Steelshade sighed.

Atlas prayed briefly, and took them to the same spot outside Waterdeep he’d used in earlier days.

~\*~

And just like that, there they were.

The quartet returned to the same inn they’d stayed in before and set about cleaning and repairing their gear—after they’d bathed, of course. Atlas applied himself to preparing and using mend spells to help restore their more expensive items.

~\*~

They’d gotten cleaned up, and Brene had gone down the street to fetch a few healing potions for their wounds.

Now fully spruced up and out of their corrosive-damaged armor and gear, the quartet of heroes sat at a square table in Atlas’ and Brene’s room, playing a game of crunch troll with a 46-card deck depicting the four suits of the region: clubs, coins, cups, and swords.

Devrion had won the last round, and Atlas now lay down the winning card for this round, causing everyone else to react with their respective protests and remarks about the archivist somehow winning more often than the others.

As Angren was shuffling the deck, a light shone behind her, and they all turned without weapons in their hands to see their goddess, Aasterinian, in human form.

A picture containing arthropod, red, crayfish, lobster

Description automatically generated

The next few moments were a bit fuzzy, but the chairs, table, and inn around them disappeared, and they were instead standing now, facing their goddess in the midst of an alabaster and brass mosque erected in draconic proportions. “Heroes, I welcome you into this space, which has been wrought with strife until quite recently,” explained their deity.

They let the human-shaped brass dragon deity speak, and she divulged what had transpired in the cosmos due to their high deeds. Graz’zt was one avatar short, as was Juiblex, and their hybrid avatar—which in so many timelines in the multiverse would come to succeed his progenitors—was now inexistent on any plane of existence; he had been culled before his fecundity throughout the planes could ensue.

“You are hereby granted a new set of high-order favors from Us,” the goddess spoke of herself in the context of being a decentralized being manifested in multiple avatars, just like the arch-demons of whom she’d just spoken. “Use these gifts well, and the planes will soon be rid of some of the most nefarious forces within it.”

“And what of the balance across the planes? Will this not aid devils in the Blood War in their plight against demonkind? Is it not a better strategy to let them cut one another down indefinitely?” asked the archivist.

The woman with the twin scimitars explained, “It has been until now, and will be again soon enough, perhaps... nothing is certain in a multiverse filled with so many powerful beings. Our successful campaigns against Pale Night and her two sons will usher in a new age that should indeed give arch-devils an opportunity to fill the power vacuum on the Lower Planes. With any fortune on our laps, this will destabilize the echelons of the diabolical hierarchy in the Nine Hells and adjacent planes, allowing ambitious but foolhardy aspirants to rise and reset their structure of command...”

They began to understand but she went on to say, “... and that is the optimal window for an even more overt offensive than that which you’ve just brought to Juiblex.”

“I would hope,” Devrion thought to say, then cleared his throat and checked the pockets of his night garment.

“... and I don’t mean just you. A coalition of Good-aligned deities within the Pantheon are orchestrating a putsch to bring about a new order wherein Evil is far more greatly and efficiently curtailed than it has been in the last few epochs. We mean to put in motion a series of transitions across the multiverse that would fundamentally shift the mean alignment of existence itself.”

“I don’t mean to question your word, o, Daughter of Io, but it sounds like Law and Good are being muddled,” Atlas posed. “How can the freedom-loving folk across the planes thrive under an imbalanced curtailing of free will?”

The dragon lady nodded and smiled for a moment, dropping the names of as many deities embodying Lawful Good as those who embodied Chaotic Good, and a similarly long list of Neutral Good deities. “I can assure you that all interested parties in the Pantheon have had their say in the vetting of our initiative, and although perfect consensus can never be reached with a group of this scope, reasonable consensus around our path forward has been reached. Those more aligned with Chaos—us, for example—have come to see tempering of the Good/Evil axis as being far more reliable an outcome in the long-term management of the cosmos.”

They had another moment to ask their deity a few more questions before she would take her leave and alert another team of agents to their purpose.

Angren stood quietly as Atlas and Aasterinian spoke. Finally, she took a breath. “What would you have us do, My Lady?”

“I and others in this coalition have watched your exploits over the last few years. We believe you are almost ready to undertake this plight without divine guidance,” the goddess proclaimed.

“Oh?” Atlas was actually asking her to elaborate.

“You have internalized the struggle against Pale Night, taken ownership of it. In time, you will likely occupy a seat at the theistic table, but I know full well that you do not undertake this campaign for self-gain.”

“Aye,” Devrion nodded. “Nobility of action is its own virtue... its own reward.”

“Indeed, warmage,” the deity said. “My favors are yours to wield and leverage against the demons. Your directives will make themselves evident to you when the time is right. Your insights have been honed by strife against the best of liars on this side of existence, and by Io’s and my will, you will prevail so long as your resolve remains true. Our enemies surely plot against you even now as they continue to vow our destruction. Prepare yourselves that you might be ready to meet their mettle at a time of their choosing. As you well know by now, Graz’zt has a keen ability to find and pursue his foes through every corner of the multiverse.”

“So we should plan a stronger offensive into the core of Graz’zt’s and Juiblex’s respective lairs in the Abyss while at the same time bracing for them to bring an offensive unto us?” asked Steelshade.

Aasterinian responded, “Yes, like any other business day.”

Steelshade felt like she’d had enough of this business, but also knew that she would miss it if and when she retired, so she sighed and imparted, “We must restore our equipment to functionality.” Pointing out the suits of armor by the fireplace, she anticipated at least a few days’ wait for the suits to be restored, and in the meantime, they could take the rest of their gear to other restorationists.

Their goddess took a last moment to say, “Call upon me when your strength becomes weariness, and I shall answer. Prepare for the challenges that the rising Abyssal tide will bring with it, and fortify yourselves that you might better brave what is to come.” She spoke another few words in a divine tongue that none of them could understand, and they were suddenly all blessed with the benefits of a *chasing perfection* spell.

Aasterinian then disappeared from view, and they found themselves sitting once again at the table, all with heightened Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma, and ready for another round of cards.

“Well, that was interesting, as always,” Brene said after a moment.

“That’s one word for it,” Angren agreed with a sigh.

“So, this isn’t a surprise, or it shouldn’t be,” Atlas put in. “We have much to offer, much more than most people.”

“Yeah, like a demon prince for an enemy,” Devrion groused. “Speaking of which, we probably need to go back and make sure the islands are clear. We might even consider running off that damn ruin chanter, too.”

Brene grinned. “You are still pissed at him, aren’t you?” Devrion snorted, and the halfling giggled. “Okay, so you have reason for it, I’ll grant you.”

“So, what next?” Angren straightened her stack of copper coins she was wagering with in the game. “I have quite a bit more to learn as a duskblade, but I want to start the warblade training after that.”

“I’m tired of not being able to fight,” Atlas sat back. “I’ve been talking with Rook, and I think Aasterinian would support my becoming one of her paladins.” He glanced at Brene. “Don’t worry, love; Elaith is willing to forgive your indiscretions.”

“I want to do something different, anyway,” Brene sniffed.

“I hope it’s better than your pickpocketing skills,” Devrion said with a chuckle.

Brene glared at him. “Hush, you. For your information, I’d like to do more with my weapons. I’m thinking of working up as a scout.”

The warmage nodded. “That actually is a good idea. For me, I’ve been studying what a factotum does.”

“Don’t you already cast spells?” Angren looked over at him.

“Well, yes, but a factotum does a lot more than that, and they’re good with weapons, too. Right now, you’re our only real fighter, and the rest of us are getting pummeled in fights. I really can’t wear heavy armor and all that without screwing up my spellcasting, so I think that’s a good compromise.”

“So, in the meantime, what do we need?” Atlas tapped the card deck absently as he spoke.

“I’ve been working on some higher level spells,” Devrion said. “I’ll be ready with them when we go back out.”

“I’m looking at a better weapon than my dagger,” Brene added. “I don’t know if there is something I can use, and afford.”

“Let’s fix our stuff, first,” Angren suggested, “and then we can see if we find anything better.”

Brene took a sip of water, and set her cup down. “Speaking of better,” she looked at Devrion and Angren in turn, “when are you two going to make a move?”

“Brene,” Atlas said with a sigh.

“No, Atlas. I know that it’s not my business, and they are elves, dragonborn, whatever, and that’s all fine. But we are doing some really dangerous shit here, and, deity or not, we need someone else to lean on.” The halfling lifted her hands, taking in the two of them. “Atlas and I: we are that for each other. You two have been doing the dance pretty much since you met.”

Angren blushed and looked down at the table. “No one ever wanted me before.”

Devrion shrugged. “I’ve not known anyone I’d even consider as a mate, so this is new to me.”

“So, okay, then. You’re both neophytes in this. There’s nothing wrong with that.” She turned and hopped off her chair. “Atlas is going to give me a bath. In the meantime, maybe you two should talk about this. A shared bath might help, especially if you use one of those new ‘shower’ things they’ve put in. It uses a bunch of hot water, but it’s really a fun thing for a couple.” With that, she and Atlas picked up their pile of clean clothing and left the room for the baths.

Devrion and Angren sat in awkward silence for a few moments. Finally, Angren spoke. “Will you wash my back in the shower?”