Chapter 15: Into the Abyss

Archer led the way, followed by Delia, who took in the surroundings before turning back and nodding for the others to proceed.

A cartoon of a dock with text

Description automatically generated

They had no idea as to which layer of the Abyss this was, but Archer and Delia identified the blood of a water genasi or elemental. “Keep a distance. It may be something harmful,” the druid cautioned.

They noted that there was no portal behind them; instead, each time a new person stepped through, all that was visible from the destination was the person entering as if out of an invisible pool.

Around them was the Abyss, with what looked like three suns above them, dotting a porous sky with the seeming texture of igneous rock. They were on a dock, and some felt wary of what might jump out at them from the waters. Archer led the way towards the shore, cautious to step clear of the puddle of elemental goo.

**A cartoon of a dock

Description automatically generated**

The formation reached the stalagmite with the glyph that looked emblematic of Lolth, but Haal could already tell from a distance that it was irregular. “Keep clear of that glyph as well,” warned the cleric.

“Indeed. Lolth’s lair lies in the Abyss,” Delia replied. “I hope we do not fall into the webs of *her* minions.”

“It’s not radiating magic,” Kassuq announced.

“I don’t believe we will, Lady Delia,” Haal added to his heed as he stayed within 5’ of it. “This is almost certainly a deliberate decoy, or at best a copycat rendition of how a true cleric of Lolth’s foul faith would have carved these etchings and cast the runes along each spider’s legs.”

“What do you make of it?” Baldoor asked, the fellow priest meaning something more like, “If it’s not Lolth, whose faithful would fake her insignia?”

Haal shrugged. “That, I cannot say. I recognize the forgery not because I know much about forgery, but because I know all too well and far too much about drow.”

They nodded, ready for perhaps more drow pretending to be Lolth worshippers, or perhaps believing they are now that they are in their ultimate planar destination. Someone voiced as much, and then Zhrezia said, “I’m hoping for something that mundane. They have really gross things here.”

Looking at their options, “So, up, down or straight ahead,” Haal stated as he pointed up the stairs to their right, down the stairs to the left and then pointed straight ahead along the path.

Kassuq looked in all three directions as did the others. He then said, “Let’s stay on the path. I’d rather not go onto higher terrain and be more visible to the inhabitants. Better we spot them first.”

Baldoor and Nihm nodded their agreement.

Delia and Archer were the first to spot fresh footprints headed southeastwardly along the narrow shore that separated the sheer cliff of igneous rock from the murky waters.

They also heard some chittering of crunchy things to their southwest, most likely being something that heard them talking and woke up hungry.

A cartoon of a dock

Description automatically generated

“Best to get moving before whatever it is arrives,” Baldoor said as he glanced to the southwest.

Kassuq reiterated his suggestion to take the path to the east, and thus, they made way along the narrow beach. They followed the footsteps for what appeared to be 100’ or so, and by the time the inadvertent party happened upon what appeared to be the abrupt end of all further footprints, they came to the realization that they’d been shunted from their previous location to a perfectly square chamber with no windows, and three doors: one marked “O”, another marked “E”, and another marked “I” in the Common alphabet.

The druid, archer, and sorceress were taken aback by their displacement, and could get no bearings on where they’d been teleported. Two shadowlight torches lit the room, which had decorative landscapes of the various Inner Planes, and a single plate with words in the Common alphabet.

A black text on a white background

Description automatically generated

Leaning in, Haal noted that the word “the” was chiseled more boldly into the stone wall than the rest of the words.

Haal pulled out one of his *detect magic* scrolls and read it. He looked at the wording, focusing on the word “THE” and then looked at each of the doors trying to discern if any of them was emitting any strong magic. All three doors appeared to be magical, he noted after several seconds, and all had identical auras.

Haal turned to the group, “All three doors are equally magical. I also do not detect any magic from the wording, though I suspect the word ‘THE’ has some significance based on its different appearance. I am open to any suggestions.”

Baldoor thought for a moment then walked over to the inscription.

Kassuq walked over to the doors and took a sniff at each of them before he decided on an opinion. He wanted to see what, if anything, he could smell from behind those doors, but there was no distinct odor beyond the wood from which it was made.

Nihm looked to their three guides, “What do you ladies think? My guess is the word THE is some sort of trigger for something. Good or bad, I do not know. Beyond that, I would opt for door E.”

Without any knowledge to the contrary, the three women shrugged in agreement.

Delia pointed out, “I’m glad it’s a word with one vowel that’s distinguishing itself. I’d be at a loss if it had been ‘vowel’ that had been engraved in bold.”

Seeing that nothing happened, Haal looked at everyone, “OK, time for plan B. I’ll open door E and step out of the way. You guys be ready to pummel anything that comes out.”

Haal opened the door marked E, and before walking through it, they blinked as the light dimmed slightly and took in the sights of the nearly identical room to which they’d just been teleported. For one, the gray stone was now a mauve, horizontally layered pattern. Instead of two torches, there were three candles lighting the room with normal light. The artwork depicted primarily scenery set in the Elemental Plane of Earth. Where the E-door had been, there was now just stone, while the three doors along the other walls of the single stone cube were again marked E, I, and O, and were otherwise identical in carpentry to each other, and to the three doors in the previous room.

Baldoor’s sense of geology and stonework strongly suggested that this was limestone, and very highly likely elemental in nature, as did Haal’s understanding of dungeoneering and the Planes. These rooms weren’t just separated by space, but were probably on different planes across the universe. Delia, Archer, and Zhrezia, Kassuq, and Nihm, on the other hand, were out of their element, and their realization of the situation was more general: they were being ping-ponged across rooms by a teleportation spell of some sort.

Another minor variation on the previous room was that it was now “to”—not “the”—that was engraved just a bit more boldly.

**A group of black letters

Description automatically generated**

The last notable thing they spotted was the remnants of what Archer identified as a nashrou. “Demons usually evaporate once vanquished, but the nashrou has a pernicious tendency to shed parts that eventually transform into larval nashrou.”

Haal didn’t know all of that, but it did converge on his understanding of Abyssal creatures. He asked, “How long has it been dead? Will we be fending off the larva soon?”

The ranger answered, “Based on the ones we’ve fought on the Material Plane, the remains look like the kill was made recently... surely today... and it would take days for these to pupate.”

“Well, let’s keep going,” Haal said as he walked over to door O. “Everyone get ready,” he added and waited until they were set, then he opened the door.

The third room to which they were thrust—complete with three doors marked E, O, and I—was comprised of onyx walls, as well as the floor and ceiling, and as they turned around to get their bearings, they noted a cloaked woman lying unconscious on the floor near the corner between the O and I doors. Cowering in the corner was a weasel scared out of its wits at the sight of the wolf and humanoids.

“Well, this was unexpected,” Zhrezia remarked as Delia crouched to calm the weasel down.

As the others focused on the woman and weasel, Haal leaned over to note that the word “follow” was now engraved more boldly on the wall with no doors. In sharp contrast to the pitch-hued onyx, a single overhead lantern shone, fueled by some arcane trick.

Nihm had Lucky sit, then lie down as she watched the others.

Haal moved to the side of the unconscious woman on the floor as Delia went to calm the weasel. Haal saw that the woman had suffered a concussion, and had a few bite marks, suggesting a scrap with the nashrou in the previous room. Seeing that she was coming to, but with pupils dilated, he administered a *cure light wounds* potion, asking Kassuq to help him by sitting the woman up so she could swallow the potion.

*Amara gained 7 + 1 = 8 hps [8/9, only 1 point of nonlethal damage left].*

A moment later, the woman was blinking, the lump on her head subsiding, and her flesh wounds mostly closing up. She took in the sight of a handful of humanoids and a wolf looking at her, and noted the elven ranger’s apparel, triggering an instant sensation of salvation.

Nihm made no secret of her worship of Mielikki, but neither did she display the deity’s holy symbol on her lapel. The garland in her hair and a few other nuances in her attire, however, strongly suggested to Amara that she and the ranger worshipped the same goddess.

Amara, with Alvin now snug in the pocket of her cloak, looked at the elf ranger. “I see you are a follower or Mielikki, as am I.” She then looked around at the others, “I am glad you all showed up. After fighting the nashrou, I ended up here, but not truly sure how I got here.”

Nihm nodded and smiled, “Yes, I am a follower of Mielikki as well, and this is my companion, Lucky. These,” she motioned to encompass all of the others, “are my friends. We came through a portal and have now been bouncing from room to room. If you are well enough, and ready to travel, we have one more door to try.”

Given the circumstances, Amara could not deny a pattern of evidence related to her Sacred Vow, which her faith professed should be declared before the presence of a Celestial being. And here was not only the foretold Celestial in the form of a hound archon, but also the confirmation of Mielikki’s faithful among the archon’s number.

But before any ritual could be enacted to fulfill her duties as a servant of Mielikki, they should get free of this place. The woman’s weasel scurried into her robes as she got up and remembered where she was. Having vanquished a nashrou, she’d been knocked out, and could not remember turning the doorknob that would have teleported her here. She’d lost a bit of time, and had it not been for the magical potion imbibed moments ago, she would still have been blacking out.

Amara nodded, “I am Amara, and this is Alvin,” she said as she scratched the weasel’s head. “We are grateful for your help and we are ready to travel.”

“Very well,” Haal said as he walked over to the ‘I’ door and opened it.

They were instantly transported to an irregularly quadratic space whose walls, floor, and ceiling were comprised of igneous rock.

A map of a game

Description automatically generated

Four pools of magma boiled around them, and from each one there emerged a human-sized magma paraelemental.

Round 1

“Everyone,” Haal called out, “start moving south!” Haal then moved to the bridge and prepared to cast *obscuring mist*.

Amara quickly did as Haal had suggested and moved towards the bridge then cast *ray of frost* at one of the magma elementals.

Kassuq, used his spell-like ability to *detect evil* and focused on the magma paraelemental to the southeast, he also spoke to them in their language (Tongues ability) and said, << We mean you no harm; we just want to leave this place. >> He then moved south, hoping they responded and were not a threat.

Nihm, calling Lucky to her side, ran south just past Haal and Amara, bow in hand. She was prepared to fight or scout ahead and make sure there was a clear path to the south. They could see about 25’ up the steps before the leftward curve impeded any further line of sight. The unlit passage was likely completely dark up ahead.

Baldoor ran southeast then south, his shield and hammer still in hand. Once in position, he activated his Barricade Buckler Shield to defend against the magma beast to the southwest.

Zhrezia cast *magic circle against evil* as she and the other two guides moved southward.

Delia and Archer held their bows ready, but trained downward for the moment as the slightly larger of the four rising paraelementals inhaled before replying to Kassuq in Ignan. << Hold positions! >>



The other three magmic beings had already produced lava harpoons, and now pointed them downward as their largest sibling continued to speak.

Round 2

<< We are captives, gladiators for the pleasure of sadists. We have fended off scores of intruders, and cannot escape this cell, >> the lead stranger got to the point. << Will you help? >>

A screenshot of a video game

Description automatically generated

Round 3

Delia was glad that Kassuq could communicate with the elementals, something none of the others could do. They all waited as Kassuq developed the conversation further.

Kassuq looked at the larger magma creature and nodded, << I don’t know how much we can do, but having a few allies in this place is a good thing. How did you end up in this prison? >>



A femininely formed paraelemental to their southeast spoke up, << We were whisked from our homes by a powerful beholder, and teleported to this place. >>

Zhrezia turned to Haal at that moment, and said, “I believe the correct door should have been O. That was the vowel in the bolded word.”

Kassuq nodded, “One moment, let me translate for my friends.” Kassuq then told the others how the magma paraelementals got here and asked, “Is there anything we can do to help them?”

Elementals were not known for their wits, and if this enclosure had been built with them in mind, it was likely not as escape proof as it looked. Still, given the cryptic nature of the teleportation magic that had brought them here, the answer to their predicament was likely hidden in yet another puzzle.

Archer confirmed that the southern passage was shut by a metal hatch. “I doubt we have the means to bust it open,” she added.

Haal nodded, “Sounds good,” but he will continue trying to think of another way to rescue the paraelementals.

Kassuq turned back to the magma creatures, << Are there any items here that you know of that might be keeping you here? Something that isn’t natural or that doesn’t belong here? Or are you free to walk out of this room? >>

The elementals were not astute enough to answer with certainty, and the seemingly female one—who exhibited the most clarity—admitted to being unaware of any such oddities, if they could even identify them. As far as they could tell, someone had gone to great lengths to create as native a habitat for the paraelementals as could be had in such a tight space. The garnet crystals here provided sustenance to the creatures, and the shallow pools of constantly hot lava consisted of the trappings of luxury for such beings.

A few minutes passed....

There were a few notable elements from their finds. Archer was quite a good searcher, and together with Haal, they’d noted that the bones of the unidentified tetrapods to the west and northeast were carved in runic scripts consistent with the Abyssal alphabet, which no one in present company could read.

Haal asked, “Do any of you have *comprehend languages* memorized? It could help us to understand what is on these skeletons.” He then asked Kassuq, “Can you ask our friends if these are remains of something they fought or if they have always been here?”

The druid, ranger, and sorceress did not have such a spell.

Kassuq then asked the magma people, << Can you tell me how long those skeletons have been here? Are they something you fought or have they always been here? >>

They replied that the bones were part of the décor when they arrived.

Nihm, Amara and Baldoor had a look at the metal hatch that Archer mentioned. They looked to see if there was anything about it that could help them figure out how to open it. It was a metal unknown to Baldoor, whose understanding of masonry and stonework informed his assessment. “There’s no way we’ll get through this without a proper key, or an exceptional locksmith.”

Haal’s well rounded education had—on the other hand—drawn his attention to the crystalline formations, inside of which were complex veins and patterns. Something peculiar about one of them had caused him to inspect each one, and by the time he reached the third one, he noted something that could not have been random.

“What is it?” Zhrezia asked, noting the cloistered cleric’s interest in the crystals.

“That pattern there,” he pointed it out. “It looks like the writing on the bones.”

Haal looked at Kassuq, “Ask our friends if they know what this writing says.” Kassuq did so as Haal continued to look it over and tried to remember what he knew about summoning creatures.

“They say they can’t read it. It’s Abyssal, and they speak and read Ignan,” Kassuq clarified.

“Would destroying the crystals free the writing somehow?” the sorceress naively asked.

“Nnnot really,” Haal could think of no causal factor that would render such an outcome.

The guides diligently scoured the area as Kassuq made friends with the Ignan speakers and the rest of the heroes did their best to discern the clues they had around their captivity in this cell. They speculated some more, and Baldoor considered preparing a *comprehend languages* spell, which would involve them staying here for a third of a day.

“Doesn’t look like we have much choice about it,” Delia sighed. “In the meantime, it wouldn’t hurt to keep trying to proact our way out by some other means.”

Haal nodded when Baldoor offered to pray for the *comprehend languages* spell. He then thought, “Can anyone hit that door with a cold or ice spell? I am guessing it is protected against heat to keep our friends in here, but may not do so well against the cold.”

Amara smiled, “I can cast a weak *ray of frost* spell. I can try a couple and see what happens. Should I focus on the lock or on the hinges?”

Haal looked at Baldoor, “He would have a better understanding than I, so I will let Baldoor guide you there.”

After a nod from Baldoor, she tried a *ray of frost* spell against the hinge, which did no lasting damage.

Meanwhile, Kassuq explained to the magma creatures what was going on, then said, “Forgive my rudeness. I am Kassuq, my friends are, Baldoor, Nihm, Lucky, that’s Haal, Archer, Delia and Zhrezia, oh, and Amara and her weasel, Alvin, we just found her down here as well. What can we call you?” Never having talked to any elementals, Kassuq was finding the experience rather enjoyable.

The Ignan speakers provided their names in their native language, which was unpronounceable in Common. Their mannerisms were unexpectedly cordial despite their seemingly primitive forms, and they spoke fondly of their past lives in ways that were wholly alien to Kassuq and the others from the Material Plane.

They began to prepare spells again, at least those that would replace what had already been cast.

~\*~

A few hours passed.

It was impossible to discern day from night here, if there even was such a reality outside this chamber.

“All set?” Amara asked Baldoor.

“I believe so,” the dwarf smiled, ready to cast the spell that would dispel any ambiguity in the scripts embedded within the garnet crystals.

Kassuq exchanged stories with the magma creatures, telling them tales of his life in the frigid north as he patiently and gladly listened to their stories of their home. At one point, Kassuq decided to get the 4 magma creatures names they could pronounce, and asked if they would like to hear what he thought.

They agreed curiously.

Kassuq smiled then looked at the largest one, “You I name Stort, which is big or large in my tongue. You,” he turned to the one that took a feminine form, “I call Figuro, meaning beauty.” He then turned to the other two, “You, I call Dugleg, which means full of energy.” Kassuq felt it was appropriate based on the stories he’d heard the smallest of the magma creatures tell. Then to the last one he smiled and said, “You I call Verdari, the protector.” He hoped that they were happy with the names he had chosen.

While Kassuq talked to the magma creatures and Baldoor prepared his spell, the others relaxed and meditated, exchanging stories of their lives prior to their recent meetings. Amara telling the others about the vision she had and what she still needed to complete.

Baldoor cast his *comprehend languages* spell, trying to read the wording inside of the crystals.

After a few minutes of reading the inscriptions inside the crystals, the greater picture became clear to him, he told Haal and the others what it said.

“This is mostly curses upon the enemies of some witch or warlock whose name is not mentioned,” Baldoor started. “But there’s a pattern similar to the engravings about following the vowel in the previous rooms. There are bolded letters that—when read independent of the rest of the text—invokes a transmutation spell upon the chamber.”

“That could mean freedom, or certain death, depending on what type of transmutation we’re talking about,” warned Haal. “Any other specifics on this?”

“I regret not,” Baldoor did his best to be comprehensive. “It seems to be couched in the context of a reminder for anyone who can read Abyssal and has forgotten the exit password.”

“So it’s like an ‘open, sesame’ command?” asked Archer.

“I’m not familiar with that,” Baldoor admitted, “but it’s worth reading the words aloud.”

Before reciting the words, Baldoor asked Kassuq, “Ask our friends how long they can survive outside of their magma pools and if they would need to bring any of those crystals along. Last thing I want to do is take them out of here only to die.”

Kassuq relayed the request to the para-elementals, wondering if they would rather be free of this place and die free or if they could survive outside for an extended period. “A few hours,” Kassuq related after a few words were spoken amongst the Ignaphones.

Baldoor nodded, “Very well,” he said, then looked around at everyone, “Pay attention to what I say. I hope it allows us all to exit, but if it only allows me to exit, then you will each need to repeat it.”

~\*~

And just like that, they were in another square room comprised of opaque garnet walls, floor, and ceiling, with the portraits of a variety of mineral paraelementals. They were all packed quite tightly in the room—which had the same dimensions as the other two perfectly cubic rooms—now hosting beings of flesh and magma together. Soon, the temperature would be intolerably hot for the fleshy folks.

Lucky panted a bit in the stuffy quarters.

As expected, three doors marked O, I, and E were each on a wall, with the fourth wall bearing the same inscription as before, this time with the word “exit” bolded. The ambiguity here suggested that either the E- or I-door could be correct.

“At least we’ve eliminated the O-door this time,” Archer noted, beginning to break a sweat in the cramped quarters lit by four overhead nodes that shone in a peach hue.

Delia, Archer, Zhrezia, Amara, Baldoor, Haal, Kassuq, Nihm, Lucky, and Alvin exchanged a few thoughts as the elementals also crackled and hissed a few phrases to one another. Kassuq could understand both conversations, and did his best to ensure that everyone knew what everyone else was proposing.

They’d converged on E as the first letter, which would be *followed*, implying part of the statement to *follow the vowel to exit*, but this argument was countered by Baldoor, who posed that this was an arbitrary interpretation. “It could just as easily be that we have to choose the vowel that follows, not leads, so it would be door I,” he concluded with as much confidence as the majority.

Haal opened door I.