

Bug and Astrafel Escape from the High Prince's Dungeon

As penned by Astrafel who was there to see it

Underneath the floating isle of Fornaserine are a massive caverns carved out to make the island lighter and in which are magical spheres that make it float. Parts of these caverns are used as a dungeon by the High Prince Elandorr. It is here that Astrafel and Bug were incarcerated following their attempt to steal from Astrafel's brother Vulwin. The dungeon was operated for profit, with the prisoners working as slaves in various capacities. It was hard work, but at least they weren't in cells all the time.

One of their cellmates was named Alwyne, a seemingly mad elf who spoke all the time in riddles. At some point Alwyne seemed to glom on to Bug, claiming that the halfling's presence was fulfillment of a prophecy about a man of very small stature who would do the impossible and save all of Fornaserine. Alwyne began to follow them everywhere, trying to convince others of Bug's importance.

They'd been imprisoned for several months, and were devising plans of escape, when they became assigned to duty involving prisoners moving the bodies of the dead to a catacomb in another cavern under the city. This duty allowed the pair to get away from Alwyne's ravings, and slightly better rations. While alone carting a body, Astrafel noticed a broach on the dead elf's cloak; a specific sort that he recognized as being magical in a minor way, so he looted it.

Two days later, while still assigned to catacomb duty, they were approached by an elf of apparent high birth who seemed quite uncomfortable in the dungeons. He spoke to them in whispers from a balcony, with a guard waiting for him outside the door to the balcony. He told them that if they were to listen to any conversations had that day by anyone talking to a certain guard, that they might be rewarded, up to and including getting their freedom early if they were to thwart whatever plans were discussed at the meeting. He then told them that he could not return for several days, but would check on their progress then. He did not answer any of their questions, not apparently knowing much, and seeming to be in a rush to be gone from the caverns.

Bug and Astrafel agreed it certainly couldn't hurt to eavesdrop on the guard. But before they went on body duty to the catacombs again, Bug noted that Astrafel seemed to have some sort of infection on the back of his neck. Not sure what it was, when they got back to their chambers Alwyne announced to Astrafel that it was something called Crypt Curse, and that it will be lethal in just a few days if it is not somehow removed. Bringing it to the attention of the guards only brought them their ire, and they were told to keep their distance.

Bug and Astrafel knew now that they had no choice but to thwart the plan, whatever it was, or Astrafel was dead. In discussing this, a very polite elf named Pywailn who also shared their cell overheard their conversation, and offered to help them, hoping that he, too, might be pardoned. Astrafel thanked him for offering, and Pywailn was let in on all of the details. After threatening a guard with his Crypt Curse, they agreed to let Pywailn have a spot on the body detail to the catacombs (not a detail that was very sought after in any case).

Bug hid near the Jailor that they were told to follow, and he was subsequently approached by a prisoner named Tanathar: a known flunky of a very flamboyant female prisoner named Filauril. The conversation seemed to revolve around the locations of something called a focusing stone and

something else called the Crown of the Depths... but Bug couldn't make out much more than that.

They followed Tanathar who, as expected, reported back to Filauril. This daredevil rogue she elf had been imprisoned two years prior for having stolen the heirloom sword of Prince Elandorr from his son and heir-presumptive, who'd had custody of it. Pywaln informed the pair that the Prince's son had easily seduced Filauril, who was apparently very susceptible to romantic gestures. She stole the sword as revenge when, after seducing her into his bed for a couple of months, she found him with another elf maid. Now her dashing nature had made her a natural leader in the prison, and she had several followers.

The three decided to try to corner Tanathar (clearly the one with less willpower of the two conspirators) in a general population area, and get him to spill the beans regarding what Filauril was up to. This quickly became problematic, however, when Tanathar was given duty down in the lower caverns. Bug, listening in, determined that another of Filauril's flunkies, an elf named Erlithan, had gotten a guard to give Tanathar the duty in question, and was, further, watching over Filauril and Erlithan personally. Apparently Erlithan had sway over the guard, as his wife had been bribing him with magical elven bread ever since Erlithan had been incarcerated for foementing rebellion against the High Prince several years previous.

Discussing what to do next, and not thinking that the mad elf might be listening in, Alwyne (in a rare moment of clarity) informed them that the focusing stones were a series of stones located in the caverns that were designed to control the flow of the falls in such a way as to prevent erosion from causing damage to the towers above, or gutting out the floating isle, or whatnot. Now more motivated than ever to find out what was going on, Bug picked the pocket of one of the guards to get the keys to the lower chambers, and they took off after Tanathar.

They eventually caught up with Tanathar in a cavern covered with strange runes. They would easily have caught up with Tanathar there, had they not heard the pitiful cries coming from a very weak looking elf who was apparently sliding down the sides of a pit full of oil far across the room. They considered the situation for just a moment before they decided to abandon chasing after Tanathar to help out the imperiled elf.

This turned out to have been a test of character for Astrafel and Bug, as the elf revealed itself as a water spirit that inhabited the shrine that was this chamber of strange runes. It told them that great peril was upon the city if any should tamper with the falls in any way by attempting to adjust the focusing stones. It then showed them the counter-ritual that would deactivate any focus stone that was being tampered with. It suggested that they be off quickly, to see if that was, in fact, what Tanathar was up to, giving them directions to the focusing stone as well.

On arrival, they discovered that the entire chamber was untouched, although footprints in the sand on the floor of the chamber that Pywaln spotted did seem to indicate that somebody had at least gone far enough to have spotted the stone. Continuing to try to track the footsteps, they emerged into an area where they heard guards coming. They hid, and saw that the guard party was being lead by Erlithan, and they were clearly looking for Bug, Astrafel and Pywaln.

Dodging the guards, they managed to make it to another chamber that lead back to the upper area, but encountered a group of prisoners being shuttled back from the lower chambers through the only door. The guards there had clearly been tipped off by Erlithan that they might try returning this way. The three quickly disguised themselves, Bug and Astrafel cleverly hiding under the same cloak to look like one larger elf, and managed to slip into the line being processed through without being noticed.

They were just being passed through the door when a familiar voice came to them. It was Alwyne, who apparently had identified his cellmates by smell, and was somewhat frenetically trying to greet them as they came through the door, not realizing what he was doing. In a moment, the guards had the three cornered, and in only a few moments more, Erlithan arrived with Filauril, and a number of her other henchmen.

Erlithan's guard moved everybody off to a side-chamber away from the other guards. Filauril tried briefly to interrogate the three, but didn't seem too concerned when she didn't get any easy answers, suggesting to Erlithan that they could be of no harm to their plans locked in their cells. Erlithan seemed to have other ideas and suggested that the three be "gotten rid of." Astrafel made some witty comments, and thought he saw a glint of sympathy in Filauril's eyes for a moment. At the end, she turned from her captives and told Erlithan to detain them permanently, so they couldn't "interfere with taking down the High Prince."

Erlithan, however, had his own idea of how to detain somebody permanently, a way that would mean that their bodies would never be found. Once Filauril had left, Erlithan had the guards shuffle Astrafel, Bug and Pywaln into a nearby cavern that was being collapsed by magic due to it having been found unstable. He gloated about how the cult of his deity Guwaris (the same cult to which his parents belonged) would now come to power, once the High Prince's tower had been knocked off the floating isle by a properly channeled waterfall flow from the river. And how this would be such an ironic present on the High Prince's birthday party, wiping out most of the rest of the high nobility all at the same time. Erlithan and the guards left, and there the three were left, chained, to await their doom.

Astrafel's life flashed before his eyes for just a moment as the guards left, and he heard them setting off the spell to collapse the cavern. But the moment the guards were out of sight, Bug had gotten working with the keys he'd once again pick-pocketed off the guards, and soon had everybody out of their shackles. As the cavern came down around them, they dove for cover into a side-tunnel, and narrowly avoided being crushed to death.

Realizing that Filauril must be on her way to adjust the focusing stone, and that the Prince was sure to free them if they were to thwart the assassination plot, the three started around in this new corridor trying to find a way back to the chamber in question. Coming across an ancient chamber that Astrafel identified from certain runes on the walls as being a particular legendary meeting chamber, he figured out which of the six exits from the room would most quickly lead to the focusing stone chamber.

That's when Tarantthar emerged from behind a secret door, holding a crown. Seeing himself outnumbered, he quickly explained that he would help the other three out if they would let him keep the crown, and try to get him released. Astrafel, Bug and Pywalm not having time to get into a fight with Tarantthar, agreed, and they continued on.

Emerging into another chamber, which shouldn't have been too far from the focusing chamber, Astrafel just behind Bug noticed that there was a huge chasm that split this chamber in two, creating a drop down to the lake below the floating island, a drop of several hundred feet on to rocks. The air between the two halves of the chamber swirled with gigantic bats with wingspans the size of a boat.

Tarantthar, being last in line came hustling out on to the ledge, only to run smack into Erlithan who himself had come in quickly from another tunnel. The two of them spun around, and the crown flew up in the air. When things came down, Erlithan had the crown in his hands, and Tarantthar had fallen off the ledge, a long drop to his death below accompanied by a terrifying scream and an impact with one of the bats on the way down.

After everybody standing stock still for a stunned moment, Erlithan looked at the prize in his hands, and then backed away from the three, who all felt no love of the man who had just a short while ago ordered their execution. Erlithan called down the tunnel, and his guard's voice replied, a ways off. It was at that point that Astrafel noticed Filauril in a gallery on the other side of the chasm, racing towards the chamber with the focusing stone with two henchmen by her side.

Bug hid by the corner of the tunnel into which Erlithan was retreating, and was therefore in a perfect position to snatch the sword out of the hands of the guard that came running around the corner. He gestured with the sword at the guard who ran off down the corridor after Erlithan. Erlithan, seeing his guard vanquished, shouted at them that they would never make it in time to stop Filauril, and that, in any case, they should not. After all, wasn't the High Prince a tyrant who had jailed them in the first place, and who did not deserve to rule?

Astrafel wasted no time responding, explaining to his friends that, given what the water spirit had told them that all of them, and indeed the entire city, might well be in danger, not just the High Prince. Looking around for a way to get across the chasm, it was finally Pywaln who voiced what the other two had been thinking. If one were to leap up and grab the feet of a bat on it's way across the chasm... one might just possibly glide to the other side. Assuming the bats were strong enough.

There was no time to debate. Astrafel, used to working with Bug, lifted Bug up and tossed him right under one of the bats soaring just overhead. Being small, the bat shrieked, but continued on to the other side of the chamber where Bug dropped down to the ledge there. Moments later, Astrafel and Pywaln had accomplished the same feat, much to the astonishment of all. Clearly, however, they'd gotten lucky... those bats had barely been able to keep them up across the span of the chasm. Any attempt to head down out of the island would have ended in disaster.

The three took off speeding down the gallery after Filauril. They arrived at the chamber to find that the ritual had already begun, and Filauril was already adjusting the flow of the river. Not taking time to try the counter-ritual, Bug threw the sword he'd gotten from the guard to Astrafel, who charged at Filauril.

She saw him coming and drew out a long knife she'd likely procured from Erlithan's guard, and the two began to duel. The exchange of blows was short, however, and soon resulted in the two of them locked in a clinch and running into the focusing stone. The stone gave a groan and tilted slightly to one side, and the sounds of the falls coming from outside changed as well.

As they stood there, locked, each unable to break the others blade back, Filauril explained to Astrafel that this was her only way out, and offered to help him find the crown, which was to be her and Taranthar's reward, and asked for him to come escape with her. A magic flying boat was waiting for them just down the corridor to the other side of the room from the way they'd entered.

For just a moment he considered it. But then he shook his head, and tried to explain quickly what the spirit had said and that she was putting the entire city in danger. They might not even make it to the flying boat. And even if the city didn't come down entirely, many people might be killed in the flooding that was certain to happen. The thought of the other prisoners stuck in their cells and not even able to try to swim out made him nauseous.

It was now Filaruil's chance to consider for a moment. But what Pywaln had said was simply not true. She was not easily seduced, and had given her heart to the High Prince's heir only after a great deal of time and effort on his part. And she was not about to be seduced by this elf here and now, no matter how galant he was sounding. She glared back at him.

Suddenly the whole island shook as a cataract came down upon it. Both combatants were shaken to the ground, and lost hold of their blades. Both then scrambled to get back up and get hold of one of the weapons. But when they finally got to their feet, Astrafel had the knife, and had Filauril was without a weapon and covered. Astrafel had won.

Then he noticed Filauril looking behind him, and glancing over his shoulder, he saw Pywaln holding his sword to the back of his neck, telling him to drop the knife. Pywaln asked Filauril if that space on the flying boat was still available, and she nodded in quick agreement. The thought "no honor amongst thieves" went through Astrafel's head, feeling betrayed, and a bit stupid.

Taking Astrafel's knife, he retreated over to where Filauril was, and they both backed through the door towards the boat. As she went out of sight, Filauril blew Astrafel a sassy flirty kiss, and they disappeared down the corridor.

For just a moment Astrafel thought of giving chase, but he knew that there was no point. The damage was already done, and Fornaserine was in peril. He had to stop the cataract from falling on the floating island. His parents were somewhere up there, and his younger brothers. And, yes, even his older brother who had gotten the High Prince to imprison him here. And poor Bug, who was only here with him because he'd followed Astrafel into Vulwin's workshop to steal the magic Spheres.

Astrafel focused, and started trying the ritual to get the focusing stone to cease it's rerouting of the falls. But after a couple of minutes there was water everywhere... clearly the city was still being flooded. Had the High Prince's tower fallen as theyd' planned? Had all of the Grey Elven nobility fallen hundreds of feet in a tower to their deaths in the lake below?

It was clear to Astrafel now that because he and Filauril had knocked the stone off kilter, there was no way that the ritual was going to make it stop now. He had to try something else, but what? He looked at Bug, but the halfling only shrugged in response. Astrafel started to think about what he'd thought about just a bit before, about how his theft had probably gotten them killed.

Then it dawned on him...that wasn't the only thing he'd pilfered of late. He grabbed the broach out of his pocket, the broach of spirit calling. Normally such a thing was typically used to send a few words of respect to dead relatives when one was dressing in the morning, or taking one's cloak off when coming home at night. A simultaneous reminder and a way to do the right thing by one's dead.

But spirits were spirits... he hoped. He grasped the broach and called out to the water spirit. Astrafel concentrated as hard as he could, and... nothing. For a moment he almost fell into despair.

And then there it was! The spirit ran with the waters surging around the island. Already the water was up to Astrafel's waist in this chamber... and that was with the excellent drainage of the chasm not far off. Surely some in other places must be in desperate straights by now.

The spirit arrived in very short order, however. It surged round the focusing stone. In Astrafel's head he heard it say that it was thankful that he had called, because otherwise it would have been bound to it's temple cavern, and would not have been able to come. But now that it was here, it knew what to do.

Suddenly it righted the stone to a perfect angle t it's mounting on the floor. And a moment later, the stone ceased pulsing. The floating island stopped shuddering almost at once as the floatation spheres took over normal operation. And the sound of the cateract hitting the floating island outside ceased.

Astrafel heaved a big sigh, hoping things were OK. And then he started noticing that the level of the water in the room was, indeed, receding. He heaved another big sigh, and grabbed Bug who was

swimming nearby and they gave each other a big hug.

But... was everything OK? What would happen now? They'd not had any chance to talk to the elf who'd given them their mission. And they'd been seen with Filauril, and Erithan... both of whom had, for all he knew, gotten away. Who would say what? There were too many loose ends. There was no way he ended up a hero here, or even free, in all likelihood.

The thought galled him. Here he and Bug had saved the High Prince and the floating island itself from certain disaster... and in all likelihood it would do them no good at all. From the look on Bugs face, that had occurred to him as well.

Astrafel clutched the broach again and spoke to the spirit who was apparently about to leave to go back to it's temple cavern. He made a very simple request of the spirit, which didn't even stop to answer. Suddenly Astrafel and Bug were surrounded by a bubble of water and rolling down the corridor the way that Filauril and Pywaln had left. Ahead was light, and suddenly they burst out over a precipice complete with a little air-boat pier.

And then they were falling, and it was terrifying. Astrafel had just enough time to look away from the floating island and see that there was a tiny boat in the air with two figures in it sailing away. And then the lake was coming up very fast. Could the spirit protect them from the rocks or even from hitting the water that fast?

The answer was that the lake reached up and gently grabbed the bubble of the water spirit around them, and set them down as lightly as if they'd been a feather falling from the sky. Astrafel used the broach one last time to send thanks to the spirit as it went away towards the falls without a reply. He looked at Bug, treading water as he was, and shrugged. They both started swimming towards the old ruined city that predated everything that was in the floating city.

Bug reminded Astrafel that the infection on the back of his neck had spread considerably, and Astrafel knew that he wasn't out of the woods yet. But he had a few days yet in which to find aid. The story of how he survived that, is another one entirely, however. And so ends this tale of how Astrafel and Bug Escaped from the High Prince's Dungeon.

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