

Chapter 86: Some Kind of Secret

“This construction completely predates the founding of Greenstone,” Clive said, examining the side of the passage they were in.

“Maybe if we look around,” Jason said, “we might even find something more interesting than a blank, brick wall.”

“The construction itself is fascinating enough,” Clive said. “Are you familiar with the Sky River Aqueduct? The building techniques are identical. There’s no mortar connecting these bricks, yet they form a watertight seal. Remember that we’re under a swamp, right now.”

“That explains the stale air,” Jason said, making a distasteful expression.

“It must have been tricky to build,” Humphrey said.

“Beyond tricky,” Clive said. “Even with powerful and sophisticated magic, it would have been an outrageous undertaking.”

“Maybe it wasn’t built under a swamp,” Jason said. “If the same people who built this also built the big aqueduct, then they might have made this place when there was no delta. Before the aqueduct, the river would have spilled into Sky River Gorge, right?”

“That’s a good point,” Clive said.

“We should get moving,” Humphrey said. “We need to find a way down if we’re going to figure out what happened to this adventurer.”

Clive nodded his agreement, taking out a recording stone and throwing it up to float over his head. It joined the other crystal floating there, which continually restored mana. Humphrey had the same essence ability, both men acquiring it through the magic essence.

“I’m going to record everything we see,” Clive said.

They set off down the corridor, the floating motes of light from Jason’s cloak illuminating the way forward. What they found was a large complex buried underground, with very little to indicate its purpose. Every room and every corridor was empty, small chambers and large halls with nothing but bare, brick surfaces.

“Everything has to have been taken away,” Clive said. “Even if this place has been here for centuries, there would be at least remnants of furnishings.”

“This complex is at least the size of a large village,” Humphrey marvelled. “We haven’t even found a way down, yet.”

“It had to be the site of some massive undertaking,” Clive said. “No one builds all this for temporary occupation.”

Their exploration brought them to a stairwell, but the brick stairs were warped and moulded together. It looked like the steps had been melted and reset from a staircase to a ramp, covered in spiked protrusions.

“Some kind of stone-shaping power,” Humphrey said, crouching to look closer. “These stairs were altered to impede anyone looking to go down them. I think this place was attacked.”

“Maybe whoever they were defending against plundered everything away,” Jason said. “It might explain why nothing’s left.”

“Do we try and use these stairs?” Clive asked. “They don’t look pleasant to navigate, and given how big this place is, there should be another way down.”

“The others might be like this,” Humphrey said.

“We have time to check,” Jason said. “That looks entirely too pointy for my liking.”

They eventually found another set of stairs, this time in their original condition. They descended deeper underground, the stairwell switching back with multiple landings before they reached the next level down. Stepping out into another wide corridor, the difference to the floor above was obvious. The walls, floor, even ceiling were marred with signs of battle. Scorch marks, long gouges torn into the brickwork. A wild confrontation of essence users had clearly taken place. There was debris scattered out, mostly stone torn from the wall. As they moved cautiously forward, they looked around at the damage.

“This is incredible,” Clive said. “Almost nothing is known about the history of the region prior to the original Greenstone Colony. There may actually be answers somewhere in here.”

Checking side rooms off the corridor, they had been stripped clean like the floor above. Some were empty and untouched, others bearing the marks of battle. In one of them they found a pair of skeletons, although with no sign of clothing or equipment.

“These are too old to be our adventurer, right?” Humphrey said.

Clive pulled out the tracking stone, which still pointed downward.

“Based on the angle,” Clive said, “I would guess one more floor down. If it’s as far below this one as we’re below the one above.”

Humphrey crouched down to examine the skeletons.

“The short, broad skeleton is a runic,” he said. “You can still see faint traces of the natural runes on their bones. The big one is a draconian, from the skull shape.”

“Draconian?” Jason asked.

“They’re a race that claims to be descended from dragons,” Clive said, “although the claim is not fully substantiated.”

“They have scales and breathe fire,” Humphrey said. “I’d call that fairly substantiated.”
He panned his eyes over the ancient skeletons.

“You’d think there would be rotted clothes or old boots or something,” he said, around. “There’s no rusty old weapons, no tools or jewellery. These bodies were stripped.”

“This whole place was stripped,” Jason said. “It’s like whoever invaded didn’t want to leave a trace. Not of who they were, or even of who they were attacking.”

“Then why leave the bodies?” Humphrey asked. “Why not just take the bodies, instead of stripping them and leaving them behind?”

“No one likes carting bodies around,” Jason said. “No one you’d want to make friends with, anyway. Maybe they were convinced that just bodies wouldn’t tell people anything.”

“It could have been due to some religious practice,” Clive suggested. “A lot of religions have taboos around corpses.”

“Perhaps there’s more, bodies deeper in,” Humphrey said. “Maybe they’ll have answers.”

They continued exploring, finding more bodies that offered no more clues than the others. They came from every civilisation-building species; humans, elves and leonids, celestines, runic, smoulder and draconians.

They were starting to get a sense of how things were laid out, based on the two floors they had explored and ended up standing in front of a wall.

“More earth-shaping,” Humphrey said. “This should be the stairwell, shouldn’t it?”

“I think so,” Clive said.

The wall was made up of warped green stone, which had clearly spent time as a fluid before hardening. They continued searching, discovering another wall of warped stone.

“I’ll try and cut through with my big sword, unless someone has a better idea,” Humphrey said. “Do you have any more of that acid, Jason?”

“I used it all getting us in here,” Jason said.

“So much for being prepared,” Humphrey said, which got a snort of laughter from Clive.

“Oh, you’ve got jokes,” Jason said. He took a sledgehammer from his inventory, letting the head drop heavily to the floor.

Item: [Stonebreaker Hammer] (iron rank, common)

A hammer designed to be effective at breaking rocks (tool, hammer).

➤ Effect: Weight increases in accordance with the strength of the wielder.

“Try that,” Jason said.

Humphrey picked up the hammer, hefting it to test the weight.

“I think I might break something this light,” he said, then frowned, hefting it again. “No, there it is.”

“You were saying something about preparation?” Jason asked.

Clive shook his head.

“This thing gets heavier based on who holds it, right?” Humphrey asked.

“Yep,” Jason said.

“Then how good a preparation is it when you’re not very strong?” Humphrey asked.

“That’s why I prepared you,” Jason said.

“Are you calling me a tool?” Humphrey asked.

“Humphrey,” Jason said, placing an earnest hand on the big man’s shoulder. “You’re far more useful and versatile than some ordinary tool. You’re a complete tool.”

“I’m also holding a hammer,” Humphrey said and Jason skittered back.

“As you were, mate,” Jason said.

Clive stood next to Jason as they watched Humphrey hammer away at the wall.

“That mouth of yours is going to get the cream kicked out of you someday,” Clive said.

“Been there, done that,” Jason said. “You can live your life avoiding consequences, or accepting them. I tried the first way in my old world, and I’m trying the other here.”

“And how’s that working out?” Clive asked.

“It feels good,” Jason said. “Wouldn’t recommend it without healing magic, though. Cripes, he’s putting a dent in that wall.”

Humphrey’s hammer blows were crashing into the wall with the regularity of an aggressive metronome. The stone was covered with impact marks all clustered together, spiderweb cracks spreading out. In short order, the hammer breached a hole in the wall, which let out a wave of wet air, stinking with rot.

All three hurried away from the hole.

“That is foul,” Clive said.

“It’s not dissolving monster bad,” Jason said, “but it’s bad.”

Humphrey looked disconsolately at the hole in the wall.

“We have to go down there,” he said unhappily.

Jason nodded.

“I wouldn’t want that to be my final resting place,” he said. “We have an adventurer to bring home.”

“How did they get down there?” Humphrey pondered. “It looks like all the entrances are sealed up.”

“That smell means the water got in somewhere,” Clive said. “Best guess? Some monster burrowed all the way down here, found a hole in the lower level and made it their lair. They killed the adventurer up on the surface, then dragged them down into whatever entrance the monster made for itself.”

“Makes sense,” Jason said. “We were expecting some kind of worm monster.”

Humphrey took a deep, unhappy breath.

“Enough stalling,” he said. “I’m going to bring down that wall.”

Soon there was enough of a hole for a person to pass through and Humphrey leaned in for a look.

“Looks like the stairs were reshaped to make this wall,” Humphrey said. “Can we get some light in here?”

One of the floating motes of light drifted through the hole and Humphrey looked again.

“Yeah, we’ll have to drop down,” he said.

They took another of Jason’s metal stakes and Humphrey hammered it into the floor to anchor a rope. Jason was the first one through the hole, drifting down a stairwell now more like an elevator shaft. He stopped when he reached water flooding the level below. Taking out his ten-foot pole, he tested the depth.

“There’s water down here,” he called up. “Shallow enough to walk through.”

The others slid down the rope, ending up knee-deep in black, icy water.

“I don’t care for this,” Clive said.

“Look around,” Jason said, standing on the surface. “We might find our answers down here.”

Like the levels above, the stairwell opened onto a wide central corridor. This one was full of debris, piled up on the flooded floor. There were large clumps of mud with roots jutting out, bricks wholly dislodged from the wall, revealing holes into walls of packed earth. The battle damage was even more extensive than the floor above, and they didn’t have to look far to see corpses.

“This is barely navigable,” Humphrey said. “Where does the tracking stone point?”

“Ahead and to the right,” Clive said, stone in hand. “We’re on the right level.”

“Then stay ready,” Humphrey said. “Whatever dragged our adventurer down here is likely to be lurking about.”

They started searching the semi-submerged level, the water and debris slowing their progress. Clive had the most trouble pushing his feet through the water. Jason stepped

lightly on the surface while Humphrey's strength ploughed through it as if the water weren't even there. They stopped at the entrance to a large hall, one of the largest rooms they had seen.

"Do you feel that?" Humphrey asked.

"Iron rank auras," Jason said.

"Not people, or monsters, though," Clive said. "Some kind of enchanted objects. Do we take a look, or keep following the tracking stone?"

"I don't like the idea of leaving an unknown potential threat behind us," Humphrey said.

"Let's check it out, then," Jason said.

They moved into the hall, Jason's light motes spreading out to illuminate the space. Flooding aside, it looked like the most intact room they had encountered so far. Everything was rotted, rusted or ripped, but the walls were lined with what looked like the hall's original contents. Vertical banners, blackened with rot hung from the walls. Stone statues were covered in black fungus and erosion, while weapon racks of metal and wood had largely collapsed as their integrity gave out.

At the back of the room were what looked like strange statues; mannequins of stone with segmented body parts connected by lengths of metal. They were the source of the auras, twenty-eight of them. They were standing in what was clearly meant to be four rows of ten, like soldiers at attention but a dozen spots were empty.

"Combat dummies," Humphrey said. "If they're giving off this strong an aura, they're almost certainly active."

"I'd like to take one," Clive said. "You can learn a lot about a culture from their magic items."

"We'll have to put them down first," Humphrey said. "They'll probably attack if we get close enough or unleash our auras."

"Let me put some spells on you, then," Clive said.

He cast two spells each on Jason and Humphrey. The first made them glow briefly with a red-gold light.

"Mantle of retribution," Clive said. "Anyone that hits you will take damage."

The second one caused a ring of runes to start floating around them like a slow-motion hula hoop.

"Rune mantle," Clive said. "It consumes a random rune to trigger an effect each time you're attacked."

"Do you have anything that doesn't require a monster to hit me?" Jason asked.

"If the monsters can't hit you," Clive said, "then what do you need extra magic for?"

“He’s got you there,” Humphrey said. Dragon-scale armour appeared around him, the giant wing sword appearing in his hands. It was too big to swing in most of the complex, but the hall they were in had plenty of room.

Clive pulled back a flap on the front of his robe to revealed a surprisingly ripped torso, covered in runes of blue and green. The runes floated off his body and through the air, where they came together as a ball of light that transformed into Onslow, Clive’s rune tortoise familiar. Jason didn’t bother pulling out Colin, who would have little impact on the combat dummies.

They formed up, Jason and Humphrey in front, Clive in the rear with his familiar.

“Ready?” Humphrey asked, looking at the other two.

“Ready, Jason said, drawing his sword.

Clive pulled out a magic wand.

“Ready.”

“Alright,” Humphrey said. “Auras out.”

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- You are in the area of an ally’s [Dragon Might] aura. Your [Power] and [Spirit] attributes are increased.
 - You are in the area of an ally’s [Lord of Magic] aura. You are continually gaining mana-per-second. Resistance to mana drain effects is increased.
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The combat dummies reacted immediately, all twenty-eight moving toward them. Like Clive, they were hampered by the knee-deep water, but Clive was the first to act. His wand fired a bolt of red and silver light that blasted the arm off a combat dummy.

At his side, a bolt of lightning flashed from Onslow’s shell. It arced out to one of the peripheral dummies, avoiding Jason and Humphrey. Clive touched a hand to the rune that dimmed on Onslow’s shell, feeding mana into it. The rune started to slowly light back up.

Humphrey stepped forward, cleaving two dummies into pieces with one strike as he waded into the most clustered group. Red light flashed as the dummies lashed out, Clive’s retribution spell blasting chunks from their blunted limbs as they hammered on Humphrey’s armour.

Jason was more mobile, using hit and run strikes as he danced over the surface of the water, building up charges on his sword. Unhindered by the environment, he ran rings around the dummies. When a cluster converged on him, he tossed out a throwing dart from the bandolier on his chest, one of the darts with the red cord. It blasted a dummy apart and he escaped through the gap.

Clive focused on using ranged attacks to pick off outliers before they could swarm the other two. Along with his wand and his familiar, he made judicious use of his essence abilities. He cast a spell and a rune lit up under the water. A pair of dummies wandered over it in pursuit of Jason and with a snap of Clive's fingers, an explosion blasted them to pieces, spraying water all through the hall.

Humphrey had torn apart half the dummies alone by the time he slowed down, most of his special attacks on cooldown. Just strength and skill was enough to keep demolishing dummies, though, and his sword continued to smash them apart. Jason was getting into top gear as Humphrey was winding down, his sword now exploding the dummies on contact.

The last few dummies were made short work of. The three regrouped at the end of the fight, chugging potions and eating spirit coins.

"Good fight," Humphrey said. "I think we work well together. Get a healer on board and we have the makings of a team."

"I don't know about that," Clive said. "I've been out on the odd contract with Jason, lately, but my research and duties with the Magic Society consume much of my time."

"Look where we are," Humphrey said. "You're about to sort through what's left of these ancient combat dummies looking for secrets hidden away for centuries. Can you do that in your study room at the Magic Society?"

"No," Clive mused as he looked around the hall. "That's a not-inconsiderable point."

"Did those dummies feel familiar to you?" Jason asked Humphrey. "The way they fought?"

"They fought like you," Humphrey said. "I wasn't sure at first, because the water slowed them down, but that was your fighting style, right?"

"I think so," Jason said.

"Where did your style come from?" Humphrey asked. "I'd never seen it until you and I started sparring."

"I don't know," Jason said. "It's some kind of secret."

"Then let's look around while Clive picks up broken dummy parts," Humphrey said. "Maybe we can learn that secret."