

Chapter 85: Because I'm an Adventurer

"I couldn't find anything even resembling an entrance," Jason said as the trio regrouped. The others shook their heads, having fared no better.

"Probably some kind of extended lair," Clive said. "A lot of creatures in this environment, monster and animal both, are just as happy in the water as out. Some like to dig burrows and stash prey for later consumption. The entrance could be in any direction, and is probably underwater."

"Any suggestions?" Humphrey asked.

"We could try a simple ritual used for digging wells," Clive said. "I'm sure I have one in a book somewhere in my storage space."

"I don't know that ritual," Jason said. "Wasn't in my ritual magic skill book."

"People make skill books with knowledge practical for adventurers," Clive said, "not for farmers. It's one of many reasons that skill books aren't proper magic instruction. They only give the flimsiest theoretical grounding."

Jason groaned.

"You sound like Farrah," he said.

"Really?" Clive asked, his head perking up. "Did she say something about me?"

Jason wearily shook his head.

"Why didn't you suggest a magic tunnel in the first place?" he asked.

"My concern would be collapsing whatever underground space we break into," Clive said. "This ground is incredibly wet. Whatever lair or burrow is down there may be full of water already, or our tunnel could collapse the whole thing."

"I don't see a better option," Humphrey said.

"Time to pull out the old bag of salt, then," Jason said. "You know, I'm still on the bag I took from these cannibals I killed. I should practise rituals more."

"Don't bother with the salt," Clive said. "I'll sort it out."

Clive closed his eyes and took a slow, deep breath. Nothing in the surroundings changed, but both Jason and Humphrey felt a stillness come over them.

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- [Human] has used [Mana Equilibrium].
 - Ambient magic has entered a harmonious state.
 - The next spell cast in this area will cost reduced mana, and the harmonious state will be disrupted.
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“That’s interesting,” Humphrey said, looking around. Jason knew that Humphrey’s perception power, dragon sight, allowed him to see magic.

“You’re smoothing-out the ambient magic to make rituals easier,” Humphrey said. “You seem very spell-oriented for a human.”

“I venerate the Celestial Book,” Clive said. “I received a blessing that triggered a racial gift evolution. It changed the human special attack affinity to a spell affinity, like the elves.”

“Nice,” Humphrey said.

“I didn’t understand any of that,” Jason said.

“Then you know what it’s like to talk to you,” Clive said and Humphrey nodding his agreement.

“What’s the Celestial Book?” Jason asked. “Is that the god of books, or something?”

“It’s one of the great astral beings,” Clive said. “They’re similar to gods, but instead of belonging to a specific world, they exist between worlds, in the deep astral. You could almost describe them as gods to the gods, although you wouldn’t catch any gods saying that.”

“So, you took a look at the gods,” Jason said, “and basically asked to see their manager.”

“That’s not even close to how it works,” Clive said.

“What about that racial gift evolution you mentioned?” Jason asked. “A lot of religious folk aren’t big on evolution, where I come from.”

Clive looked at Jason, then turned to Humphrey.

“You explain while I look up this ritual,” Clive said, pulling a book from his storage space. Unlike Humphrey or Jason, where objects were pulled from thin air, Clive’s storage space involved a floating ring of runes, in the middle of which a small portal formed.

“You must be constantly learning new things, coming from a whole different world,” Humphrey said to Jason.

“You have no idea,” Jason said. “I haven’t even learned all the fruit, yet, let alone the magic stuff.”

“Well,” Humphrey said, “every race has six racial gifts. For human like Clive and myself, that is an affinity for special attacks and our essences advance more rapidly than others. Then there are the latent powers, that adapt to our essences.”

“Yeah, I heard about the XP boost,” Jason said. “Seems OP.”

“What?” Humphrey asked, confusion creasing his brow.

“Never mind,” Jason said. “Just keep going.”

“Racial power evolution is where a racial gift changes,” Humphrey said. “Any racial gift can change. The latent human abilities are essentially blank slates that are guaranteed to do so.”

“So any of my outworlder abilities could evolve?” Jason asked.

“They could,” Humphrey said. “Usually, there's some kind of trigger, often a traumatic event. Big monster fights where you barely make it out alive would be the one you see the most. Sometimes it just happens over time, though. You do something enough that it becomes a part of you and your powers actually change so it does.”

“Habits really have a way of taking hold, then,” Jason said.

“Exactly,” Humphrey said. “Have you met anyone from the smoulder race?”

“No, but I've seen them around,” Jason said.

“Well, they have natural affinities for earth and fire,” Humphrey said. “There's a guy on an adventuring team with my parents; he's a smoulder. He has the air essence and, eventually, his earth affinity evolved to an air affinity.”

“So what about Clive and that blessing?” Jason asked.

“Gods can give their followers a blessing, which triggers a racial gift evolution,” Humphrey said. “I guess whatever that thing Clive worships can do it, too. That one was actually new to me.”

“Great astral beings,” Jason mused, remembering something he heard months earlier. “Hey, Clive.”

“What?” Clive asked, looking up from a book.

“That great astral thing you worship...”

“I didn't say worship,” Clive said. “I said venerate. There's a difference.”

“That's fine,” Jason said. “I was just wondering, though. Would you describe it as an ineffable ancient from beyond reality?”

Clive thought it over for a moment.

“That's not how I'd describe it,” he said, “but can see how someone would, if they didn't know what they were talking about. Why?”

“I heard Cressida Vane talking about it. Apparently, her son was into something like that.”

“That makes sense,” Clive said. “Landemere was an astral magic specialist, like me. We often end up paying more attention to the great astral beings than the local gods. We set our sights higher, you might say.”

“And people call me a heretic,” Jason said.

“Here it is,” Clive said, eyes back on his book. “I haven't used this book in years.”

He started waving his hand like an orchestra conductor, and a glowing diagram started drawing itself just above the ground.

“The ability I used earlier was the racial power I awakened for the magic essence,” Clive explained. “it balances out the ambient magic so you don’t need to adjust your ritual circle.”

The diagram of golden light continued to be drawn out.

“I’m drawing the circle using a rune essence ability,” Clive explained. “It lets me draw out magic circles and use any required materials directly from my storage space.”

“I can see how that would be handy,” Jason said.

“You might want to stand back,” Clive said. “I first picked this up to use on the family farm and it makes something of a mess.”

Jason and Humphrey did as instructed. Soon after, mud started shooting up into the air with a loud, wet flapping sound, scattering itself over the area. Jason conjured his cloak and wrapped it around himself, any mud that reached it sliding easily off. Clive, being much closer, was sprayed with mud, but it struck some kind of force-field and fell away. Humphrey had no such protection and ended up speckled with dark mud.

All three went up to stand around the new hole, looking down. It was a cylinder, neatly carved out of the wet earth. It was quite deep, five or six metres, Jason guessed, and a couple of metres wide. At the bottom, instead of breaching some underground burrow, the hole ended with a floor of large, neatly-fitted bricks of green stone.

“Is that a weird thing to find at the bottom of a hole we randomly dug?” Jason asked. “Everything around here seems kind of weird to me, so I can’t judge all that well. This seems like it might be extra weird, though.”

“This is definitely extra weird,” Humphrey said. “Any ideas, Clive?”

“None,” Clive said. “Anything that deep around here should be filled with water. I get the feeling it isn’t, though.”

“We have to check it out, right?” Humphrey asked.

“You mean the secret underground building we found?” Jason asked. “Of course we have to check it out.”

“Should we tell someone?” Humphrey asked. “The Magic Society, maybe?”

“If we tell the Magic Society,” Clive said, “then we won’t be the ones to explore it. Lucian Lamprey will give it to someone that buys him political points.”

“There is a safety issue, though,” Humphrey said. “Someone already died down there.”

“How about this,” Jason said. “We came out here to find the person who died. Let’s do that, and then tell people where we found him.”

“That sounds fair,” Clive said.

“Alright,” Humphrey said, clearly eager to be convinced. “How do we get in?”

“I have some acid that melts through most varieties of local stone,” Jason said and the two turned to look at him.

“What?” Jason asked.

“Why would you have that?” Humphrey asked.

“Because I’m an adventurer,” Jason said. “I have all the basic adventuring gear. Acid, rope, pitons, a tarp, some empty sacks, a ten-foot pole...”

“Why would you have all that?” Clive asked.

“...flammable oil, a couple of empty scroll cases, a rope ladder, a regular ladder, a tent, a magic lantern...”

“Can’t you see in the dark?” Humphrey asked.

“... a non-magic lantern, which was oddly hard to find, caltrops, empty vials, block and tackle, a big ball of string...”

“Can you please just take out the acid?” Clive asked.

“I could,” Jason said. “I was thinking we might need to set up a way out, though. I don’t suppose anyone happened to bring a nice, long rope ladder? Oh, wait, I did. Because I prepared. Like an adventurer.”

“I did bring rope,” Humphrey said.

While Humphrey anchored Jason’s rope ladder to the ground using some long metal stakes Jason also had, Jason started tipping acid down the hole.

“Shouldn’t you go down to the bottom for that?” Humphrey asked, looking over.

“No he shouldn’t,” Clive said, shortly before gas started fuming out of the hole, Jason and Clive both stepping back. After the fumes cleared, Jason did the same again, then a third time. Looking down, he could see a hole bored right through the bricks.

Leaving Humphrey’s familiar to guard the top of the hole, the three adventurers climbed down through the hole on the rope ladder, ending up in a brick tunnel, tall and wide. It was completely empty, with no indication of moisture penetration. Motes of starlight emerged from Jason’s cloak, floating around them and lighting up the tunnel.

“That’s pretty,” Humphrey said.

“You have that and you brought two lanterns?” Clive asked.

“Preparedness,” Jason said. “What about our guy?”

Humphrey took out the tracking stone they were following to the dead adventurer, and since he would be standing at the front, tossed it to Clive.

“That’s unexpected,” Clive said.

“What is it?” Humphrey asked.

“The tracking stone,” Clive said. “It’s still pointing straight down.”