

Chapter 87: Can't Lose

"I think I've found something," Humphrey called out and the others moved over to join him.

"Look at this," Humphrey said, pointing to the wall. "See how the mould has grown in the crack between bricks, all the way down this line?"

"Secret door?" Jason asked.

"That's what I'm thinking," Humphrey said. They glanced at each other with mirrored grins.

"Let me take a look," Clive said. He started drawing in the air with his finger, a magic circle appearing in the air in glowing golden lines. When he was done, the circle vanished and runes started glowing on the wall, in the shape of a door.

"There you have it," Clive said.

"Nice one, Clive," Jason said. "How do we open it up?"

Clive looked over the runes, then reached out to touch several in quick succession. He stepped back as a section of wall swung out. They all stepped into the room beyond, which looked to be some kind of book repository. Unfortunately, most of the room's contents had been taken by rot. There was a breach to open earth in one of the walls, exposing the room to untold years of destructive moisture.

"This is a real shame," Clive said as they started looking around.

"I'm seeing a lot of residual magic," Humphrey said, picking up the leather cover of a book whose pages had long since turned to wet pulp.

"Me too," Clive said. "I'm guessing these were all skill books."

"Would have been worth a fortune, intact," Humphrey said.

"It also might have given us some idea of who inhabited this complex," Clive said. "Sometimes a storage room like this will keep the most important items sealed away, so there may still be something to find."

They searched through long-rotted shelves until Humphrey uncovered a group of metal boxes. Three of the five had been breached, but two looked to be still intact. They were large enough that each could contain several skill books.

"We shouldn't open them here," Clive said. "The contents are definitely old and may be fragile. I have tools back at the Magic Society that would let me open them more carefully."

"Sounds good," Jason said. "Bag them for later and we'll go find this adventurer."

Clive carefully lifted the boxes with Humphrey's help and stowed them in his storage space.

"I'm a bit worried about the state we'll find this adventurer in," Jason said as they left the training hall and its hidden storeroom behind. "What if he's just been eaten and all we find is his badge inside a monster."

"Then that's what we bring back," Humphrey said.

They continued exploring the flooded and debris-filled lower level. Rather than continue on through the filthy, icy water, Clive was now sitting atop his tortoise familiar. Not long after leaving the training hall, something came shambling slowly toward them.

"Zombies?" Humphrey said. "How can there be zombies?"

There were dead bodies making a slow, stumbling path in their direction, looking like skeletons stuffed with mud. Humphrey lunged forward, using his smaller sword in the confines of the tunnel. He still made short work of the animate corpses. Clouds of mist rose off them as Humphrey cut them to pieces.

"Why wouldn't there be zombies?" Jason asked as Humphrey walked back to them, coughing from the zombie mist. "Honestly, I'm surprised it took them this long to show up in a place like this."

"The delta is flush with vital energy," Clive explained. "The water coming out of the astral space that feeds the river is full of it. All that life-force prevents undead monsters from manifesting anywhere in the delta."

"Then how are there zombies here?" Humphrey asked, still coughing.

"You don't sound so good," Jason said. He held his hand in front of Humphrey and chanted a spell.

"Feed me your sins."

➤ You have cleansed all instances of [Corpse Fungus] from [Human].

"Corpse Fungus?" Jason asked.

"What's that?" Humphrey spluttered as he escaped the cloud.

"It's a fungus that uses corpses to propagate itself," Clive said. "It takes over a corpse, makes it ambulate like a zombie, then blows spores over any living creature it comes across. Not a zombie at all; just a regular dead body being moved about."

"What do those spores do?" Humphrey asked.

"They grow inside you," Clive said. "Kill you, eventually, but there's plenty of time to find a healer or an alchemist. If you don't have Jason on hand."

They waited for the spore cloud to settle before continuing on, Jason cleansing Clive and Humphrey again, just in case. They followed the tracking stone, closing in on the dead adventurer's badge. It led them to the most ruined part of the complex, where large sections of brickwork had been torn out of the walls, mud encroaching on the rooms and tunnels. At the end of another large hall, all the brickwork from the back wall was gone, with what looked like a giant, burrowed tunnel beyond.

"What needs a hole that big to get around?" Humphrey asked.

"Nothing good," Clive said.

They set off down the earthen tunnel, still knee-deep in water. It didn't seem to bother Onslow, with Clive riding on his back, or Jason, who walked along the surface. Humphrey was left to trudge unhappily through water and mud. The tunnel turned out to be fairly short, breaking back into another room of the complex. It was another large hall, very much demolished. In addition to the breach they entered through, much of the brickwork had been torn out. In its place, recessed alcoves looked like they had been dug out by claws, each one stuffed with a dead creature. Most were swamp creatures, although there were a few dead people as well.

"This one," Clive said, tracking stone in hand. He led them to one of the bodies, an elf in tattered armour. Jason took a casket from his inventory, supplied to him by the Adventure Society.

➤ **Objective complete: Retrieve the remains of your fellow adventurer 1/1.**

While he and Clive placed the body inside, Humphrey was looking around with a concerned expression.

"We should take it and go," Humphrey said. "Fast."

"What is it?" Jason asked. The contract wasn't just to retrieve the body but also kill the monster. If Humphrey wanted to bail out, it was probably bad.

"A swamp-dwelling monster whose appearance could be mistaken for a wyrm, burrows deep into the earth and builds elaborate larders to fill with prey," Humphrey said, and Clive's eyes went wide.

"Yes, we should go," he agreed. "Now."

Jason looked down as a ripple of water came from the corner of the room, spreading over the water that covered the floor. It suddenly occurred to him that he had no idea if all the water was knee-deep. Something bulged up from the surface in the corner of the room. Water poured off its huge mound of a body as it rose up from a submerged tunnel. The

creature was a brown, fleshy mass, with five serpentine necks ending in heads like that of a snake, if snakes had a lot more teeth.

“Marsh hydra,” Humphrey said breathlessly.

None of them had felt its aura approach, but now it washed over them with bronze-rank strength. It moved to block them from the tunnel they had entered through. Its thick legs ended in webbed claws poorly-suited for land movement. Humphrey could have escaped, but seeing Clive and Jason would be cut off, he moved away from the tunnel to join them. The creature, apparently satisfied at boxing them in, eyed them patiently with its five heads.

“Marsh hydras heal fast,” Humphrey said. “Combined with bronze rank toughness, our only chance is that you can pile up enough afflictions to kill it, Jason. Clive and I will try and distract it so you can get close.”

“No need for close,” Jason said. “I’ve got some new tricks; just keep it off me and I’ll get it done.”

Four tree-trunk legs supported the fleshy mound of the hydra’s body, the long necks rising off it like trees on a hill. The creature lumbered towards them and Humphrey went to meet it. Clive patted Onslow on the shell and pulled a long staff from his storage space. It had a large, clear crystal set into the end, and vibrant red-orange runes that shone like fire carved down the full length. Aiming it at the hydra like a gun, a blast of flaming energy launched out, striking one of the hydra’s heads. The runes on the staff dimmed as the struck head shrieked. Its skin was blackened, but the damage appeared superficial.

Jason slit the back of his hand with his wristband razor, sending leeches splashing into the water. They quickly made their way across the room to crawl up the hydra’s trunk legs and swarm over its body.

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- [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Marsh Hydra].
 - [Marsh Hydra] has resisted [Bleeding].
 - [Bleeding] does not take effect.

 - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Leech Toxin] on [Marsh Hydra].
 - [Marsh Hydra] has resisted [Leech Toxin].
 - [Leech Toxin] does not take effect.

 - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Necrotoxin] on [Marsh Hydra].
 - [Marsh Hydra] has resisted [Necrotoxin].
 - [Necrotoxin] does not take effect.
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“That’s not good,” Jason muttered. Even with his aura that penalised resistances, almost every affliction his leeches piled on was shrugged-off by the bronze-rank monster.

Fortunately, Colin offered both quality with quantity, and some of the afflictions were getting through. Jason followed up with spells.

"Your fate is to suffer."

-
- Spell [Inexorable Doom] has inflicted [Inexorable Doom] on [Marsh Hydra].
 - [Marsh Hydra] has resisted [Inexorable Doom].
 - [Inexorable Doom] does not take effect.
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Jason cast the spell a second and third time, each resisted.

"I'm going to need some time," he called out.

Jason would have liked to toss Humphrey his dagger, which inflicted poison and ignored bronze-rank resistances. Humphrey hardly had time to switch out weapons, however, and trading the enormous sword that was barely holding its own for a small dagger would likely get him killed.

Humphrey's huge sword, dragon-scale armour and incredible strength were a terror to iron-rank monsters, but they were barely keeping him alive as heads the size of his torso snapped at him. Even his strongest attack, the unstoppable force, was significantly more stoppable against the power of the bronze-rank hydra. Only the added attention of Clive and his familiar allowed Humphrey to hold out. Through their combined efforts, Humphrey was finally able to cleave off one of the heads.

"Watch out for the head growing back," Clive called out, but to his surprise, there was no sign of it doing so. From what he had read about the creature, its heads should grow back fast enough to see it happening.

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- [Marsh Hydra] has regenerated enough health to negate [Bleeding].
 - [Leech Toxin] has been consumed to reapply [Bleeding] on [Marsh Hydra].
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In the meantime, Jason was casting spell after spell.

"Your fate is to suffer."

-
- Spell [Inexorable Doom] has inflicted [Inexorable Doom] on [Marsh Hydra].
-

"Yes!"

With inexorable doom in place and the leeches making slow but constant progress, the afflictions would stack up. Jason raised his hand again and cast one of his new spells.

"Suffer the cost of your transgressions."

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- Spell [Castigate] has inflicted [Sin] on [Marsh Hydra].
 - [Marsh Hydra] has resisted [Sin].
 - [Sin] does not take effect.

 - Spell [Castigate] has inflicted [Mark of Sin] on [Marsh Hydra].
 - [Marsh Hydra] has resisted [Mark of Sin].
 - [Mark of Sin] does not take effect.
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His sin curse was one of the keys to his escalating damage combination. His new spell allowed him to apply it at range, so long as it wasn't resisted. It was the first of Jason's two new spells. The broker he went to had taken a while to find a good trade for the rat essence, as it was not popular with anyone who could afford to be choosy. He could have traded it for a half-dozen awakening stones of the fish but instead went with two stones of the magus. It was a common awakening stone, especially with humans. It almost guaranteed a spell, which humans rarely awakened, with an outside chance of a coveted summoning or familiar power.

Ability: [Castigate] (Sin)

- Spell (curse, holy)
 - Cost: Moderate mana.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

 - Effect (iron): Burns a painful brand into the target, inflicting slight transcendent damage and the [Sin] and [Mark of Sin] conditions. The brand cannot be healed so long as the target retains any instances of [Sin].

 - [Sin] (affliction, curse, stacking): All necrotic damage taken is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

 - [Mark of Sin] (affliction, holy): Prevents aura retraction. Cannot be cleansed while target retains any instances of [Sin] or [Legacy of Sin].
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"How's it going?" Humphrey called out.

"It's coming along," Jason called back.

"If it could come any faster, that would be really, really great!"

Jason kept casting spells until his mana ran low, chugged a mana potion from his belt and started casting some more.

"Suffer the cost of your transgressions."

-
- Spell [Castigate] has inflicted [Sin] on [Marsh Hydra].
 - Spell [Castigate] has inflicted [Mark of Sin] on [Marsh Hydra].
 - [Marsh Hydra] has resisted [Mark of Sin].
 - [Mark of Sin] does not take effect.
-

Jason let out a whoop of triumph. The mark of sin effect was of little use in the current battle, so it didn't matter if it was resisted. With inexorable doom, sin and Colin's necrotoxin in place, the damage would increase exponentially.

"Everything's done," Jason called out. "Stay strong and we have it!"

"I'm not sure if waiting is an option," Clive said, his voice enervated. He drank a mana potion even as he poured his mana into his familiar. One of the runes on Onslow's shell lit up, then dimmed immediately as a cloud rose up out of his shell. Water bullets erupted out of the cloud, pounding into the hydra.

In front of the hydra, Humphrey was bloody and exhausted but defiant, pushing on through sheer force of will. The hydra was doomed now, but it could still take them with it. Jason resumed casting spells, trying to hasten its demise.

"Bleed for me."

- Spell [Haemorrhage] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Marsh Hydra].
 - [Marsh Hydra] is already affected by [Bleeding]. [Bleeding] is refreshed.
 - Spell [Haemorrhage] has inflicted [Sacrificial Victim] on [Marsh Hydra].
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"First time," Jason cheered. "Good stuff."

The affliction reduction from Jason's aura had limited effect at the start of the fight, but it penalised resistances further for each instance of the sin curse. With the curses now stacking up, afflictions from both Jason and Colin were becoming more reliable, including those from Jason's other new spell.

Ability: [Haemorrhage] (Blood)

- Spell (wounding, unholy)
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Inflicts or refreshes the [Bleeding] and [Sacrificial Victim] afflictions.

- [Bleeding] (affliction, wounding): Deals ongoing damage by causing or increasing blood loss. As a wounding effect, this condition absorbs and negates an amount of incoming healing, after which this affliction immediately ends.

- [Sacrificial Victim] (affliction, unholy): Any drain attacks or blood afflictions suffered have increased effect.

The sacrificial victim affliction would help bleed away the hydra's health, but the massive monster had a lot of health to bleed. Clive had a huge amount of mana, most of which he had thrown at the monster. He no longer had enough to recharge the powers of his rune tortoise familiar.

With his afflictions applied, Jason could do little else without wading into melee range. He was confident that would lead to his near-immediate death, probably getting Humphrey killed trying to save him. He had one more spell, but the thirty seconds between casts felt like an eternity.

"Suffer the cost of your transgressions."

Ability: [Punition] (Doom)

- Spell
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Iron 1 (06%).

- Effect (iron): Inflicts necrotic damage for each curse, disease, poison and unholy affliction the target is suffering.

Despite the afflictions built-up on the hydra, it's resistance to iron-rank damage prevented the spell from taking full effect. Jason had nothing left to contribute.

Humphrey's will was strong, but he had been going full power from the beginning. The hydra was finally fading, but Humphrey was fading faster. He staggered back one

step, then another. It looked like he could barely lift his sword, but he did so again and again.

“I don’t think I can hold it,” Humphrey called back, despair in his voice.

Jason let out a reluctant groan, then steeled his shoulders.

“I’m coming in,” he yelled.

“You’ll die!” Humphrey said as Jason appeared behind him.

“Then I guess you’d better protect me,” Jason said.

Humphrey glanced at Jason, seeing nothing but determination. He turned back to the monster, letting out a wild yell. His wavering stance straightened, waning arms renewed. Where he had been reduced to only defending, he once again went on the attack. Light started shining out of him, the blue-grey of iron rank. He didn’t notice Jason stepping back into safety.

“I was just trying to get him pumped-up,” Jason said, looking at the light shining from Humphrey. “What is that?”

“Racial gift transfiguration,” Clive said in wonder. “It seems his drive to protect is so strong it literally changed who he is.”

Clive gave Jason a wild grin.

“If he can manage that, how can I not make a full effort?” he asked.

Clive glared at the hydra with renewed determination. The red glow of life-force emerged from his body and started turning blue as he burned life-force to restore his emptied-out mana. Clive’s skin turned pale and he gritted his teeth against the pain, but kept pushing for more mana.

Clive dropped his staff into the water and held both hands out in front of him, palms facing out. A magic circle appeared in front of them, turning in the air. It grew and changed, becoming more complicated as Clive pumped more mana into it, then chanted out a spell.

“Feel the annihilation of reality unmade.”

A beam of rainbow light blasted out of the circle in front of Clive, locking onto one of the hydra’s four remaining heads. The rainbow colours started fading, one by one, until all that remained was black. The beam vanished and the hydra’s head was annihilated as a vortex of darkness replaced it. The vortex sucked in air, causing the hydra’s severed neck to flap like a streamer in the wind as the vortex sucked at it.

The spell ended, the dark vortex fading into nothing. The neck dropped limp, as did Clive, who fell to his knees in the water. Onslow gave him a concerned nudge and Clive supported himself on the tortoise’s neck.

Jason looked at Clive, who had burned himself out to contribute. He looked at Humphrey, who had given up escape to be the shield between the monster and his companions.

“I don’t know what kind of person deserves friends like this,” Jason muttered to himself, “but I’m pretty sure it’s not me.”

A blue-grey light lit up from within Jason, just as had from Humphrey. Jason looked at the glow shining from underneath his skin.

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- Outworlder racial ability [Interface] has evolved to [Party Interface].

Ability: [Party Interface]

- You have access to a contacts list. You can form a party by sending invitations through the contacts list.
 - Party members can access interface features so long as they remain in the party.
 - Party members have access to party chat and voice chat. These functions have limited range.
 - Quests from the [Quest System] can be shared with party members. Quest only remains available to party members while they are in the party.
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“You too?” Clive asked wearily, still draped over Onslow’s neck. He watched the light shine out of Jason.

“I’m not sure it actually helps, right now,” Jason said.

Clive’s spell claiming the monster’s second head had marked the turning of the tide. Necrosis was turning the hydra’s flesh to rot as its blood, black with venom, spilled into the water. Humphrey’s sword claimed a third head and the hydra moved to flee, heading for the submerged tunnel.

As the monster was about to plunge into the water, a huge shab rose up from the depths, gaping shark mouth biting savagely into the hydra’s flesh. The shab then turned into a colourful parrot, flying over to land on Onslow.

“Nasty, nasty,” it said, spitting out black fluid.

The injured hydra was confused long enough for Humphrey to come up behind it and bury his sword in a rear leg. Jason followed, digging into the other rear leg with his dagger. The wound wasn’t deep compared to the size of the creature, and his special attack, punish, only dealt a small amount of necrotic damage. However, every instance of the sin curse amplified that damage and the hydra had been accumulating them for a while. The

flesh blackened and withered, shrinking away from Jason's slicing blade. Side-by-side, Jason and Humphrey laid into the crippled monster until it fell still.

Quest: [Contract: Fallen Comrade]

- Objective complete: Eliminate the monster that killed your fellow adventurer 1/1.
 - Reward: [Awakening Stone of Absolution] (Jason Asano).
 - Reward: [Awakening Stone of the Champion] (Humphrey Geller).
 - Reward: [Ring of the Hydra] (Clive Standish).

 - Quest complete. All party members receive:
 - 100 [Bronze Spirit Coins].
 - 1000 [Iron Spirit Coins].
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Humphrey went over to Stash the parrot, who was hopping up and down excitedly on Onslow's shell.

"Stash chase worm! Stash chase worm!"

The parrot flew toward Humphrey, transforming into a puppy mid-air and landing in Humphrey's arms. Humphrey was covered in hydra blood, but Stash didn't seem to mind the mess as much as Humphrey's armour. Humphrey dismissed the hard scale armour and Stash snuggled into his chest as Humphrey scratched him behind the ears.

The three adventurers stood exhausted, looking at each other and the dead hydra.

"Clear eyes, full hearts," Jason said.

"What?" Clive asked.

Jason waved a dismissive hand.

"Ah, we'll deal with that later," Jason said.