

Chapter 161: A Well-Informed Man

The City of Fallen Echoes was teeming with monsters. On their second day, Jason and Sophie had an encounter almost hourly as they made their way. Sometimes they followed streets, other times they went across rooftops. Either way, there was no shortage of monsters willing to come after them.

There were similarities between the jungle-covered city and the delta where they usually hunted monsters, with the muggy heat and the lush plant life. The monsters they encountered were similar, if not the same. They fought snake monsters, spider monsters and, especially unpleasant, a snake-spider the size of a transit van that slithered on its hairy abdomen and had eight snake heads instead of limbs.

The big difference between fighting monsters in the delta was in numbers. The magically-saturated astral space produced far more monsters than the outside world. Jason and Sophie had already realised this, but as they surveilled their potential next encounter, the point was really rammed home.

Crouched on a rooftop, Jason and Sophie looked down at a teeming mass of margolls. They had both handled the dog-headed humanoids in the past, but they were looking at a throng of monsters four times the size of a normal pack.

"I count forty-one," Jason said quietly. From six storeys up they had a good vantage. There was little breeze to carry their scent and the poor eyesight of the creatures made being spotted unlikely. The ravenous creatures had just taken down a smaller group of monsters and were loudly feasting on the bodies, jostling for position around the corpses.

"That was my count, too," Sophie said. "What do you think?"

"Honestly? I want to try it. We have to do it right, though. If we just fight them on the street they'll overrun us."

"You're looking at that building, across the way?"

"I am," Jason said. "We complicate the environment. Bottlenecks, escape paths. Bunch them up until their numbers help us more than hurt us."

"How do you want to lure them?" Sophie asked.

"They're aggressive, relentless and not all that bright. I say we just drop down and run straight in. They'll chase us all through the building and we escape from the roof if it gets too much."

"Split up or stick together?" she asked.

"Lady's choice."

“Split up. I’ll do better finding a choke point and holding my ground, while you’ll do better on the move.”

“Sounds good,” Jason said. “Just make sure you always have an exit and keep in touch through the voice chat. Calculate your risk.”

They leapt off the building, drifting over the street to land in front of the one they had chosen on the other side. The margolls smelled them before they landed and were already looking around as they touched down and rushed for the building. They dashed through the open doorway into darkness, Jason immediately vanishing as Sophie made for a set of stone stairs that rose along one wall. Everything else in the large room had long since rotted away, except vines and mushrooms that thrived in shadows more than the bright sun outside.

Stopping halfway up the stairs, Sophie turned and began a slow, fighting retreat. The margolls were forced to face her two at a time, the rest stuck crowding behind. She fearlessly met the attack of their huge claws, and powerful jaws, trusting her powers to shield whatever body part she used to block. She retaliated with brutal punches and savage kicks, sending crippled margolls tumbling off the side of the stairs. When she bought herself some room she would send a wind blade slicing its way down the stairs, the monsters shoving for position had no space to dodge.

The margolls gathered at the bottom of the stairs howled their frustration as they pushed each other in the race for prey. Some swiped at each other with their wicked claws as they fought for access to the stairs, others tried climbing the vines growing on the side of the stairs. The dark interior of the building was not as overgrown as the exterior, but there was growth enough that some of them eventually made their way up. Sophie kicked them back down as their heads popped up over the side of the stairs but it drew her attention from the monsters in front of her. Unwilling to let herself be flanked, she backed up the stairs to the next level, where she fled in search of a new bottleneck.

In the large room, the margolls left at the back started to notice something wrong. They were catching snatches of a scent that vanished as quickly as it appeared. They noticed one of their number, dead on the ground, far from the commotion of where the woman was kicking them back down the stairs. A second backline margoll fell dead with no more sound than its body hitting the ground and a third soon followed.

Margolls had poor eyesight, relying much more on their sense of smell. Having just come in out of the bright sun, their vision was all the worse. Several more of their number were silently slain before they noticed the dark figure moving amongst them, appearing and disappearing just as quickly.

The monsters milled in confusion. Their baseline aggression, their large numbers in a relatively tight space and the frustration of enemies they couldn't pin down were becoming a toxic brew as some of them started turning on one another. If it weren't for Sophie being forced to fall back, letting the monsters vent up the stairs in pursuit, the margolls may well have killed each other.

Sometime later, Sophie and Jason were on the rooftop, fighting the last of the margolls. Despite having their numbers whittled down as they pursued the pair through the building, the savage monsters never faltered in their furious assault until the last of them had fallen. Jason and Sophie then made their way down through the building, finishing off those too crippled to continue the chase. Jason touched each one to tag it for looting.

➤ *Would you like to loot [Margoll]?*

He would only accept once they were away from the bodies and the stink they would produce as they dissolved. As they scoured the building, Jason made a pleasant discovery. A dark cube lay in an alcove under a stairwell, in a place that the light outside would never reach. If it weren't for his ability to see in the dark, he would have never seen it at all.

Item: [Dark Essence] (unranked, uncommon)

Manifested essence of darkness (consumable, essence).

- *Requirements: Less than 4 absorbed essences.*
 - *Effect: Imbues 1 awakened dark essence ability and 4 unawakened dark essence abilities.*
 - *You have absorbed 4/4 essences.*
 - *You do not meet the requirements to use this item.*
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"Nostalgic," he mused to himself.

"What's that?" Sophie asked, walking up to him.

"I found an essence," Jason said. "It's a dark essence, which was my first."

"Should go for a good price, right?"

"It should," Jason said. "It's only uncommon and there'll probably be a glut of essences on the market after all this, but dark is a popular one. It has great utility and is the last word in stealth essences. You should take it when we split up the loot after all this

is done. The essences Belinda wants are all common, so you can probably trade this for two of them, or at least the magic essence and some solid awakening stones.”

They went out on the street, in front of the building, before Jason accepted all the loot messages. Soon, rainbow smoke was streaming out of windows from the plume rising up of the building generated by all 41 bodies being converted at once.

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- 41 [Monster Cores (Iron)] have been added to your inventory.
 - 410 [Iron Rank Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 60 [Dog Quintessence Gems] have been added to your inventory.
 - 10 [Myriad Quintessence Gems] have been added to your inventory.

 - 410 [Iron Rank Spirit Coins] have been awarded to party member [Sophie Wexler].
 - 60 [Dog Quintessence Gems] have been awarded to party member [Sophie Wexler].
 - 10 [Myriad Quintessence Gems] have been awarded to party member [Sophie Wexler].
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Sophie stepped back, her loot-dodge timing having improved enough that the three bags fell to the ground in front of her.

“So, your power conjured the bags, right?” she asked.

“Yep,” Jason said. “As I understand it, a looting power like mine or Neil’s takes the magic from the monster as it merges with the ambient magic and makes items with it. Usually magical manifestations like spirit coins or these quintessence gems we just got, but sometimes items.”

“Belinda said Clive spent a whole day examining one of those bags to see if there was anything special about it.”

“That does sound like him,” Jason said.

Sophie opened up one of the bags, taking out a quintessence gem to examine. It was like a diamond, almost spherical but covered in tiny facets.

Item: [Myriad Quintessence] (iron rank, legendary)
Manifested essence of multiplicity. (crafting material, essence).

- Effect: Crafting material for items with multiplicative attributes.
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“Pretty,” Jason said as she held it up for him to see. It caught the bright sunlight, refracting rainbow colours.

“Legendary rarity,” she said. “Should be valuable, right?”

“I imagine so,” Jason said. “The myriad essence is legendary, too. Emily, the archer from Beth Cavendish’s team has it.”

“She’s the celestine?” Sophie asked.

“That’s right.”

Sophie dropped the gem back into the bag and handed her loot to Jason for storage. He took out a notebook and recorded all the loot for splitting up later. As he wrote in it, Sophie craned her head back to watch the rainbow smoke from more than forty monsters rising up from the building.

“All those monsters,” she said. “It’s like this place has a monster surge going on.”

“It essentially does,” Jason said, putting his notebook away. “A monster surge is a weeks-long increase in magical saturation.”

“You haven’t experienced one, right?” she asked. “They don’t have them in your world?”

“We don’t have monsters at all,” Jason said. “I’ve only been learning about how they work studying astral magic with Clive. I hope he’s doing alright.”

Clive had become worried once he realised that none of his team had arrived with him through the archway. As people started forming makeshift teams, he didn’t expect to find anyone looking for his eclectic selection of powers. His unconventional abilities worked best when used in conjunction with people who knew and were prepared for them. A hastily-formed team would do better with a ranged attacker with straightforward powers that they could readily adapt to.

He considered pulling a Jason and “adjusting” the perspective through which he described his abilities but immediately dismissed the idea. Worse than no one wanting him on their team would be getting abandoned in the middle of a monster-infested city for misrepresenting what he had to contribute.

One of the people present had the exact opposite problem. He wasn’t a large man, his slight physique reminding Clive of Jason. If the man’s blond hair and fair skin hadn’t marked him as one of the foreign adventurers, the impressive equipment Clive recognised did. Once equipment passed a certain level of expense, it started to move from ostentatious back to unremarkable, and this man’s equipment looked very unremarkable indeed. Clive knew it to be the kind of expensive that was wasted on iron-rank gear unless you had so much money to throw around it was laughable.

The man looked to be wearing light and simple clothes, but Clive picked out the subtle signs in the way the cloth draped that signalled incredibly powerful reinforcement magic. It was the kind of armour favoured by adventurers with mobility and high-skill power sets. He had a sword at his hip, with a ring at the top of the scabbard that most would

dismiss as part of the design. Clive recognised it as a magic item that would impart extra damage to the first strike after drawing the blade. The man's jacket was made of supple leather, protective without being constrictive. Clive knew from the odd way it conformed to the body shape underneath that it was a dimensional jacket, much like that used by Emir Bahadir.

The other foreign adventurers clearly knew who he was, all clamouring to form a team with him. To Clive's surprise, the man's eyes picked him out. Clive watched as the man walked away from the people inviting him to their groups and straight over to Clive.

"You're Clive Standish," the man said.

"That's right," Clive said. "I'm not sure who you are but you're wearing more expensive gear than I've seen on a bronze ranker."

The man let out a friendly chuckle.

"Which means either someone didn't trust me to survive," he said, "or thinks I'm worth it."

"You're worth it," Clive said. "If someone doesn't have the skill, you spend that money very differently."

The man laughed again and held out his hand for Clive to shake.

"I'm Valdis. You live up to your reputation, Mr Standish."

"Clive is fine," Clive said. "I have a reputation?"

"I like to keep informed. The authorities in Greenstone know a lot more about the Builder cult than most provincial areas and your contributions have been a very large part of that. Word just hasn't gotten around yet because of how closely information is being held, right now."

"But not from you, it seems," Clive said.

"My father has some small standing overseas, which affords me a little more influence than I really deserve."

"My father's an eel farmer, which affords me more long, slimy fish than I really want."

Valdis laughed once more, clearly more comfortable with their circumstances than most of the adventurers present. Clive was noticing the unhappy looks from the adventurers who had been courting Valdis' attention.

"Would you like to form a group with me, Clive?"

"I should warn you," Clive said, "my abilities can be a bit complicated. My damage comes in bursts and a lot of my abilities require anticipation and set up."

"Your confluence is the karmic essence, if I recall correctly, yes?"

“Yes,” Clive said. “You really do like to keep informed. I have some retributive damage buffs and a lot of mana recovery. Mostly I attack with staves and wands but I have a big, versatile attack spell.”

“I know someone with the karmic essence,” Valdis said. “She says that judgement and timing are the keys to success.”

“I’d have to agree,” Clive said.

“I’m a classic swordsman myself; sword, swift, adept, master. More mana-intensive abilities than you’d expect with that combo, though, so I’ll look forward to that mana recovery you mentioned. Assuming you want to join me.”

“Definitely,” Clive said.

“Great,” Valdis said, rubbing his hands together as he turned his attention to the group listening in on them. “Let’s find ourselves some team members.”