

Chapter 240

The Boss Comes to Town

Humphrey swung his arms inward, brutally clapping his hands into either side of the cultist vampire's head. It relinquished its bite on Neil's neck, rearing back to let out an alien screech from its inhuman mouth. His jaw unhinged in macabre mockery of the formerly human anatomy. The mouth no longer had teeth, just bare gums and a pair of hairy barbs, growing awkwardly out from the roof of the mouth. They bristled, wet with saliva and Neil's blood.

Humphrey, gripped the vampire by the hair and smashed its head into the stone platform until the body stopped squirming. It was the last of the bizarrely warped adventurers turned inhuman minion.

"I think I got a big dose of that blood curse," Neil said, sounding woozy. He cast a spell on himself.

"Imbue with life."

Clear green light glow around his hand, then shot into his neck.

Ability: [Life Bolt] (Renewal)

- Spell (healing)
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (11%).

- Effect (iron): Delivers life energy through a projectile, giving a small burst of instantaneous healing. Damages certain targets that are inimical to life force, such as most forms of undead.

- Effect (bronze): Bestows a mild, ongoing healing effect.

It was Neil's bread and butter healing spell, which could also be used as a weapon against most forms of undead. He had never actually used it for that, with undead being rare in Greenstone because of the life energy flowing down the Mistrun River. Vampires were no better, with the blood magic flooding their bodies that produced a warped facsimile of life. They were the one form of undead for whom, healing magic was fully effective.

"Give me a second and I'll clear that curse, Neil," Jason said. "I'm a little tied up, right now."

He was stuck to the platform by a blanket of sticky webbing. Gordon was cutting him loose with his four force beams.

“My new armour is definitely a step up,” Jason said as he waited. “That resistance to adhesive effects on the old one would have been handy, though.”

“It was,” Sophie said. She was still using iron-rank armour made primarily, as Jason’s had been, of trap weaver leather. “They were spraying that webbing everywhere, like giant nets. I couldn’t dodge it all.”

“Clive,” Belinda said. “You told us they would be easier to fight after being turned into vampires.”

“And he was right,” Humphrey said. “A few strange spider powers are no compensation for a full suite of bronze-rank abilities.”

“Their transformation was more extreme than I anticipated,” Clive acknowledged. “From what I’ve read about blood weavers, they almost always leave intelligent victims largely intact. They recognise that a high-intelligence minion is worth more than another physically powerful blood puppet.”

“I’m not sure high-intelligence was an issue,” Neil said. “They joined a cult and agreed to come here.”

“Fair point,” Clive conceded. “Blood weavers can put essence users through a stronger transformation, as we saw here, but it destroys the mind. You saw the animalistic way they fought.”

After creepily staring at them from the jungle line, the vampire cultists had recklessly hurled themselves into the team. Their reckless attacks led to the team putting them down in short order, although not before they penetrated the team’s backline. Clive had displayed some unexpectedly solid staff fighting, combining strikes and blocks with blasts of magic. Belinda had used an escape ability but Neil had been latched onto.

Gordon finished cutting Jason free and he immediately started purging the team of afflictions, starting with Neil.

“That was some good work with the staff,” Sophie told Clive. “You’ve been practising with Humphrey?”

“I have,” Clive said. “He told me that I needed to train for the fight I don’t want, along with the one I do. It would appear he was right.”

“Is it just me,” Jason asked, “or was that a bit anti-climactic, after all this time. We came here after the cultists and they turn out to be just more monsters. I mean, after the whole vampire monster army thing, they were just a few more vampires.”

“They seemed more than threatening enough to me,” Neil said, then hit himself with another life bolt spell.

“I’m sorry they got past me,” Sophie apologised to Neil.

“As am I,” Humphrey said. “I don’t think anyone expected that suicide rush. Jason was right, I think. After all the build up, the cultists didn’t amount to much.”

“We need to find where they were staying,” Clive said. “My guess would be somewhere in the centre of the city, past the thickest jungle. That’s probably where the blood weaver found them.”

“So that’s where we’ll probably find it,” Belinda said.

“It could be,” Clive said. “I think it might have run, though. I suspect it realised that we’re strong enough to kill it and threw minions at us to buy time. It probably chose a handful that were strong and mobile and abandoned the area with them while we were chewing through the fodder.”

“We’ll take a break,” Humphrey said. “Then we’ll loot the monsters, burn the cultists and get on to the middle of the city. We’ll find where the cultists were staying before the blood weaver came along and then, what they were up to.”

“That was a huge haul,” Neil said. “Three blood essences and a dark essence. If we find a mouth essence somewhere, we can recreate Jason’s combination.”

They were discussing the loot as they made their way through the still-deserted jungle. Every monster for a wide area had either been taken over by the blood weaver and killed by the team or fled to avoid that fate. They were doubling up on Shade’s three mantis beetle forms, which excelled at cutting a path through the thick scrub. Humphrey with Jason, Neil with Clive and Sophie with Belinda.

“That’s not very mature, Neil,” Jason said. “You shouldn’t make fun of people like that. It’s why people like me more than you.”

“No, that’s because you always bring sandwiches,” Sophie said.

“Sandwiches,” Jason said haughtily, “are the garnish on a prime slab of perfectly pan-seared rakish charm.”

“Getting that myriad essence was the big winner,” Clive said. “A legendary essence, and one of the better ones. We could buy the materials to rank every familiar on the team to silver and still have money left over.”

“I’ll be happy to get mine to bronze,” Belinda said. “I’d also like to get closer to them. How do you do it, Jason? You get along so well with your familiars, but mine are so alien.”

“Colin and Gordon aren’t exactly everyday folk, either,” Jason said.

“Then what’s the secret?” Belinda asked.

“They’re just people,” Jason said. “Treat them that way. Yes, they’re a little odd to our sensibilities, but if it can think, it’s a person. That’s the same, whether you’re talking about a familiar or a god. Even a monster, although that’s a tragic one. Imagine coming into being knowing that you have a terminal condition, and your options are get killed by an adventurer or go insane, kill a bunch of people yourself and die.”

“Gods aren’t people,” Humphrey said.

“That’s a bit rude,” Jason said. “You’ll have to atone for that one.”

“Gods are above people,” Humphrey said.

“There is no above people, Humphrey. There’s just people. Give them enough power and they get a bit weird, but still people.”

“You seem very confident for someone who didn’t believe in gods a year ago,” Humphrey said.

“But I believed in people. It just turns out that some of them are magic. Like us.”

“You do realise that people have different stations in life, right?” Neil asked. “A king is not the same as a pauper.”

“Of course not,” Jason said. “The king inherits a hat and a chair, where the pauper’s lucky to get the hat. Better hat, though. What kind of idiot thinks a metal hat with no top is a great idea. The same guy who thinks monarchy makes sense, I guess.”

“How can you possibly think that gods are just people?” Neil asked. “You think you can just stand before a god and start mouthing off? I’ve been in the presence of gods. Just being near them was like standing under a waterfall.”

“From what I’ve heard, he did exactly that,” Clive said. “I talked to a lot of people after the last excursion into this astral space. A lot of them were talking about the gods showing up and the lunatic talking to them like they were random people off the street.”

“They are random people,” Jason said. “A bit showy, but nice enough. They like to make something of a spectacle of themselves, though.”

The group all turned to stare at Jason. Humphrey had to crane his neck from where he was sitting in front of Jason on the mantis beetle to do it.

“What?” Jason asked.

They passed through the rest of the thick jungle without being accosted by monsters. If any were around, they were apparently smart enough to stay well clear of the ones responsible for getting rid of the rest. The shattered and scattered ruins, buried in jungle,

gave way to fully intact buildings in startlingly short order. The line of demarcation was so stark that it reminded Jason of the Vane estate, where the lush gardens met the desert.

The team made a direct path for the very centre of the city and the large square containing the Order of the Reaper's trial tower. As they moved through the buildings, they started to notice fragments of unusual magic.

"Everyone else is sensing that, right?" Belinda asked.

"Yes."

"Yep."

"Yeah."

"I am."

"Gods damned magic," Sophie muttered. "No."

The team arrested their progress to investigate. The magic was weak enough that it was a curiosity, rather than a threat. It was chaotic, patchy and feeble. They found a fragment of sheared steel, jammed into a brick wall by some tremendous force. Clive took out some tools and began examining it.

"I should look at more," he said as he finished up. At his direction, the team sought out locations from which the strange, scattered magic was emanating. One was a cushion that had somehow buried itself in a wall as forcefully as the metal shard had. Another was a round indentation containing a dark, crystalline powder. After examining the powder for some time, Clive rubbed some between his fingers.

"This is a ground-down awakening stone," he said.

"I didn't realise you could do that," Humphrey said.

"You can't," Clive said. "Every attempt to alter the form an awakening stone has either done nothing or triggered it into returning to a raw magic state. Rainbow smoke."

"This is the result of the Reaper's power," Shade said. "I can sense it because it is the same as my own power."

"You know what happened here?" Clive asked.

"I suspect these fragments are the remnants of the tower's treasure stores. I have previously postulated that the dimensional spaces in which those stores were kept would collapse once the trials came to an end and the power controlling them was withdrawn. My guess would be a mana implosion affected by the protective measures put in place by the order triggered an unexpectedly destructive reaction. There is likely less treasure to find than I originally intimated."

"I think he's right," Clive said. "The traces of astral magic on everything I've looked at are chaotic and unengineered. These fragments don't do anything except throw off some

residual magic. It speaks more to uncontrolled phenomena, like a dimensional explosion.”

“Is this residual magic a threat to us?” Humphrey asked. “It’s weak here, but will there be more dangerous patches?”

“It’s a conglomeration of random dimensional energies,” Clive said, “blasted into a chaotic mess and mixed with the power of a being who could, if it wanted, use that power to assassinate the universe. So... maybe.”

“I think we should give Clive some space,” Jason said. “Leave him to figure things out without having to answer any questions.”

Clive flashed Jason a grateful look as Jason waved the rest of the team away.

“This will be the final ascension ceremony,” Zato told Dougall. “The last of your essence abilities will be gone, but you will cross the threshold of silver-rank today. You can anticipate being filled with something new and far greater.”

“Thank you, Master Zato,” Dougall said. “I know I came to the cult under slightly different circumstances than most, but I am profoundly grateful.”

They were walking through the grounds of the ruined Vane estate, entering what had once been a small wood but now was nothing but dead and withered trees. They reached a space where five equidistant trees stood at the points of a pentagram, part of a magical diagram laid out between them with bricks. The trees could barely be called that anymore, stripped of their branches and bark and sculpted into wooden obelisks. Runes ran down their sides, alternately made from hammered-in steel or engraved directly into the wood and stained the rusty colour of dried blood.

“This is the place,” Zato said. Timos had been waiting for them, head hidden within a voluminous ritual robe. He held out robes for Zato and Dougall. Zato gave Dougall an encouraging smile as they slipped them on.

The ritual took place with Dougall in the middle of the circle, Zato and Timos on opposite sides. On the robes of all three men, magical sigils lit up with power. There was a gathering of energy as the pair conducted an extended chant. Soon, Dougall felt a power rising up from within. The power surged through him, cleansing and changing. He crossed the threshold into silver and impurities started seeping through his pores, leaving him covered in filth. He was panting and tired, but grinning fiercely as he revelled in the sense of power.

Timos stepped forward with a bottle of crystal wash, ignoring the smell. Dougall stripped off the robes and ruined clothes before cleaning himself off, the filth on his skin

and the fallen-out hair sloughing away. Afterwards, Timos lead him to where he had fresh clothes folded neatly in a bag.

As Dougall changed, he revelled in the sensation of his new power. He could no longer sense his essences, but compared to the power he could feel it was no loss. He could even feel more potential power, hidden deep within his soul. It was laying untapped, right next to the... star seed.

He was gripped by a sudden sense of dread; the realisation that the power inside him did not belong to him a all.

As if it were germinating, he felt power swell out from the star seed. It kept coming and coming; an alien might flooding out of his own soul to fill the channels of power that months of ritual treatments had installed in his body. He went cold with fear and an absolute certainty that his soul was no longer his own.

Dougall's last free thought was rage at Zato for his betrayal. He opened his mouth to yell but was choked off as the new power initiated a new, sweeping change. Flesh rippled, but not with organic fluidity. It was like his flesh was comprised of tiny, tiny blocks, undergoing some kind of shift. The strange rippling swept his whole body before settling again, leave no lingering indication of a body anything but organic.

His body went limp, standing like a puppet hanging loose from a string. Dougall stood up straight, his expression was blank, his eyes plain, grey orbs. He looked at the clothes half put-on and finished dressing. Zato and Timos kneeled to the ground, heads bowed, as Dougall finished and looked over his body.

"Lord Builder," Zato greeted, not looking up.

"This vessel is adequate," the Builder, now occupying Dougall's body said. "If I use more than silver-rank power it will break down immediately, but the vessel was prepared efficiently. With care, it will last some time.

"The next vessel is already at a late stage of preparation, Lord Builder," Zato said.

"I know," the Builder said. "I am in your soul. There is nothing you can hide from me."

"No, Lord Builder."

The Builder walked over to where Zato was kneeling, head down.

"There have been a cavalcade of failures here," the builder said. "You made the correct choice in continuing the work, but you made it out of fear. Fear of the consequences of failure."

"We did, Lord Builder," Zato admitted.

The Builder was silent for a long time. Zato could see from his feet that he hadn't moved. Timos couldn't see him at all, not daring to raise his eyes.

“Your motivations are acceptable,” the Builder said finally. “The consequences of failure are there to spur desirable behaviour, after all, which is what they have done. Stand, both of you.”

The cultists stood, but kept their eyes lowered.

“I know all that has transpired,” the Builder said. “I am impressed with how the pair of you have handled dire circumstances placed upon you by the failures of others. Continuing the work instead of drawing back and regrouping was the right choice. Preparing a vessel that I might direct you now, instead of waiting for a success to buffer the failures here was likewise a correct choice. The intrusion of this astral space is more crucial than you realise.”

“Lord Builder?”

“You had not yet been made privy to the true purpose of the astral space we are about to claim. It is one of a small number on this world that are more important than the others. The original intention was for a clockwork king to lead this expedition. In the wake of the failed summoning, the leadership here made a sequence of costly mistakes. This included raising our profile to the point that I was no longer able to move significant resources here without alerting the natives to the importance of the task now ahead of you.”

“We will do what we can with what we have, Lord Builder,” Zato said.

“As you have been doing. I am satisfied that you have both risen to the stations thrust upon you by the inadequacies of those the led before you.”

“Thank you, Lord Builder,” both men said.

“This astral space was something taken from me in the past,” the builder said. “The time has come to reclaim it. There are tools within that will greatly assist our work on this world.”

“What would you have us do, Lord Builder?” Zato asked.

“For now, continue as you have been. First, we enter the astral space. Then we prepare to bring my world engineers here. Your remaining ritualists are mediocre, but under my direction they will be sufficient. Opening those gates will be wildly destructive, but you knew this.”

“Yes, Lord Builder,” Zato said. “I was told that claiming the astral space would be unusually destructive, but not why.”

“It is hard to interrogate our people, but not impossible,” the Builder said. “For this reason, the secret was restricted to the leadership. You will understand the full purpose soon enough.”

“Thank you, Lord Builder. As you obviously know, the Rejector is already in the astral space. Once we are there, I will see to it that the Rejector is found and killed, should he still be alive on our arrival.”

“No,” the Builder said. “The Rejector and I have unfinished business. You will bring him to me alive.”