

Chapter 239

The Most Dangerous Thing in the Dark

Behind his front-line team members, Jason injuries swiftly started healing over. The recovery power he gained from devouring vampiric curses combined with the healing Colin provided to close his wounds without requiring intervention from Neil. In most cases, his armour had mitigated the bulk of the damage, so here were no individual injuries that were egregious.

Jason did not immediately turn his attention to the team. First, he looked out at the amassing monsters, picking out the sturdier bronze-rank one. His eyes sought out those who were affected by his afflictions but tough enough that they were still far from being overcome. He cast inexorable doom on them, one after the other, to start churning out the automatic afflictions that would stack his amulet.

Ability: [Inexorable Doom] (Doom)

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

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (09%).

- Effect (iron): Periodically applies an additional instance of each stacking curse, disease, poison or unholy affliction the target is suffering from. This is a curse effect. This effect cannot be cleansed while any other curse or any disease, poison or unholy affliction is in effect.

- Effect (bronze): Inflicts or refreshes the [Inescapable] affliction.

- [Inescapable] (affliction, magic): Subject cannot be affected by teleport or non-damaging dimension effects.

With his afflictions ticking up, Jason turned his attention to the team. Sophie was relatively undamaged, the advantage of being an evasive-type defender. Holding out against numbers was not her strong suit, however, and her own armour was marked with the rents of bite and claw. Jason used his feast of absolution power to absorb the vampiric blood curse from her and stack his own healing in the process.

The others holding the line were Humphrey, Neil's golem and Stash, guarding their rear from behind the platform at the back. He was still in the shape of the massive hydra from which Jason had looted his whip.

The golem was immune to the vampire's curse and didn't require Jason's attention. It had suffered enough damage to be forced into its chrysalis state, but that was not enough to let the enemy past the now bronze-rank summon. The crystalline cocoon was no longer the inert mass it had been in the past. It was now a rune-covered obelisk of crystal, rapid-firing crystal spikes into the crowd. Anything that got close was struck by crystal spears, that shot out to strike a target, then remained bristling from the obelisk like diamond pikes. Given the mass of monsters trying to push past, it had swiftly transitioned from obelisk to tall, diamond echidna, covered in bloody spines. The chrysalis stage, as it turned out, was proving a better blocker than the golem had before entering it.

Humphrey was standing strong against the horde, his strength and fortitude an impassable bulwark as his sword threshed the monsters before him like an apocalyptic farming implement. His armour was much stronger than Sophie's but he had, nonetheless, suffered injuries as he put himself fearless forward. Neil's healing was on top of the injuries, but he had left the afflictions for Jason to drink up, which he did.

That left Stash, who was faring the worst of all, being off the platform and essentially holding the rear alone. Neil had been helping, but the lack of the hydra's regenerative powers was obvious, and the large size of the hydra form made it easy to swarm. Jason drained the afflictions from Stash, then called out to him.

"I'm coming in, Stash!"

Stash stilled his body for a moment, not that the hydra form was agile. Jason jumped directly onto his back, behind the five, long hydra necks, and slapped a hand onto one of them.

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- You have bestowed all instances of [Guardian's Blessing] to a party member's familiar, [Velitraxistaasch].
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Jason made use of his bronze rank agility, the equal of any circus acrobat, and back-flipped off Stash and back to the platform. His cloak didn't entangle him as he could make it incorporeal at will and have it drift right through his body to settle, shrouding his flipping form in shadow.

"Is anyone recording this fight?" he asked.

"We're a little busy, Jason," Clive admonished.

"Right, yep."

Jason cast a gaze over the situation around Stash. The multi-headed hydra form was good at picking off the weaker monsters quickly and Humphrey's familiars were also working that rear side of the battle. They likewise went for the weaker ones, flying in and

snatching them in their talons before carrying them into the air. While their griffin forms were powerful and their dragon-bone bodies not subject to vampiric powers, they did not risk alighting amongst the massing horde. They would peck the monster to death in the air, or carry them high enough that the subsequent drop did the job.

As a result, there was a growing percentage of bronze-rank and tougher iron-rank monsters surrounding Stash, increasingly putting him under pressure. Jason began his intervention, throwing out quick spells at the monsters that presented the biggest threats. He didn't have a lot of afflictions on them yet, but he started with inexorable doom in preparation and followed up with a blood spell.

Ability: [Haemorrhage] (Blood)

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

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (06%).

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

- Effect (bronze): Inflicts the [Necrotoxin] affliction.

- [Bleeding] (affliction, wounding, blood): 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.

- [Necrotoxin] (affliction, poison, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until poison is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

He went through the strongest enemies, dropping the two-spell combination on each. When he was happy with his coverage, he leapt into the fray once more, wading through the monsters to support Stash. He went after the monsters he had thrown spells on, one to the next. He would hit each of them just once, laying on afflictions with his dagger before moving on. His whip he continued to thrash in the direction of the weaker enemies, using it to make space as best he could in the press of monsters.

By the time he was done, so many afflictions were ticking over that his amulet accrued blessings faster than the hits he was taking could consume them. On his way

back to the platform, he once again bestowed them on Stash. They would only last so long, but it was a respite for Neil's healing that was welcome in the endurance battle.

Back on the platform, Jason turned back to look at the monsters held back by Stash's massive hydra body and five snapping heads. He looked for one of the tougher, now heavy afflicted monsters and cast a spell. Instead of his usual finishers, punishment or verdict, he hit it with something different.

Ability: [Feast of Blood] (Blood)

- Spell (drain, blood)
- Base Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (03%).

- Effect (iron): Drain health and stamina. Only affects targets with bleeding wounds or who are suffering from the [Bleeding] affliction.

- Effect (bronze): Drains additional health and stamina for each instance of poison on the target.

Of all Jason's abilities, bar one, feast of blood had proven the most powerful against vampires, feeding on the blood magic coursing through them. After ranking up it grew stronger from every stance of poison on the target and Jason could layer quite a number of poisons. Necrotoxin, leech toxin, the ruination of the blood from his dagger and the umbral snake venom from his new armour, all stackable and piling up under the effects of inexorable doom. The result, amplified by the vampiric vulnerability to blood magic, made the first monster wither and die, its empty husk falling to the ground.

Even his transcendent damage finisher was not as strong against the vampiric monsters. While he waited for the cooldown, he threw out more spells, turning his attention to Sophie's side of the platform. Still an iron-ranker, she was fearlessly punching above her weight, but while she had not been in as much danger as Stash, hers was the side closest to being pushed in. Jason continued throwing out spells on her side, in between using feast of blood as a finisher on Stash's.

Jason glanced over the rest of the field. Humphrey was holding the most steady. Neil's growth spell had worn off, but Humphrey remained a powerhouse, stronger and tougher than any other member of the team. Jason asked Neil about Humphrey's mana consumption.

"He's doing great," Neil said. "Very controlled; we've barely had to top him off."

Despite the deadly, blood-soaked porcupine, monsters were starting to accumulate on the golem's side. Jason was about to intervene when the golem erupted from its chrysalis. This time, it had taken the form of three plain, crystal blocks, each seeming comical and harmless as they stood on three legs apiece. It became less funny as they waddled into place to form a wall, each proving to possess the same spike power as the chrysalis form. Soon, all three were bristling with bloody spines.

Jason turned his attention back to Stash, firing off another feast of blood spell before bestowing a third stack of blessings on the familiar. Many of the toughest enemies were now cleared off and Stash and the griffins could handle the rest for the moment.

Jason returned to Sophie's side, where she fought, uncomplaining, even as her injuries and the pressure upon her mounted. Jason stepped forward and held up his hand to unleash his strongest trump card, the power that was unequivocally his strongest against the vampire monsters. Blood seeped out of his palm and then leeches started erupting from his hand. He swept his arm like a water cannon at a riot, scattering his swarm familiar over the crowd of monsters.

Colin was a vampire-devouring machine and that whole side of the battle collapsed like wilting flowers. Jason had considered unleashing Colin from the start, but had decided that holding him for when he was needed most would be the most effective use. The monsters had largely recovered from the team's initial big hits and were ramping up the pressure, so it seemed like the moment was right to deploy his strongest weapon.

"I'll cover you," Jason said after draining Sophie's afflictions again. "Take a rest."

While the front-liners had been bearing the brunt of the attacks, Clive and Belinda had been dishing out the damage, like Jason. Using her specious sorcerer power, Belinda gained the ability to use wands and staves like Clive. Even though she could take advantage of his battle platform ritual and he had also put enhancement rituals on her weapons, she was still a pale comparison. He was a rank higher, as were his legendary items.

Both Belinda and Clive had been using their rune trap powers on cooldown. It was a little costly on mana, but so long as they otherwise stuck to their weapons it was sustainable. The value of the spells, even Belinda's iron-rank version, was incredible. The monsters were too packed together to move out of the way, pushing each other into maximising the effectiveness of the small explosive area.

Sophie resumed her position and Jason once again dove into the mess of monsters, roaming about, laying afflictions. Through the voice chat, Clive warned them of a new threat.

“Flying monsters,” he announced. “I think they’re night shrikes.”

The team looked up the approaching creatures, winging their way over the jungle canopy and into their air above their clearing. Night shrikes were another monster they had encountered before. Their bodies were the size of a small, slender person, something between a bat and a hook-billed bird. They were bronze-rank, but very much on the weak side, physically. Their advantages lay in their flight and their special power, which they combined to make hit and run attacks with their sharp beaks.

Floating above the team, Onslow turned his head to the new enemy, but Clive directed him to stay focused on the ground monsters.

“Jason will handle them,” Clive told his familiar.

As monster ranks increased, so did the likelihood of monsters with exotic powers. In the case of the night shrike, they had the ability to plunge an area into magical darkness that even drained the magic from glow stones, although none were out for this daylight battle. The shrikes would then strike using the darkness as their weapon, as their own senses were unimpeded by it.

As anticipated, the shrikes blanketed the platform in complete darkness, turning bright day into deeper than night. What the flying monsters would quickly discover, as had those of their kind who came before, was that they were not the most dangerous thing in the dark.

Jason was no more impeded by the absence of light than the shrikes. Stars lit up on his cloak, shedding light that penetrated the magical power of the shrikes. The motes of light floated off his cloak, leaving it void black, as they floated up and around the platform. They concentrated on the platform itself, giving the team all the light they needed to keep fighting.

Around the platform, the motes of light were softer and spread out, giving just enough illumination to turn the black void of darkness into shadowy gloom. By turning the monsters’ realm of absolute darkness into a realm of shadows, Jason made their kingdom his own.

In a zone of ubiquitous shadow, Jason could teleport around as he wished. He shadow-jumped behind one of the shrikes, wrapping his legs around its, under its wings, and one arm around its neck. The weight reducing power of his cloak stopped them from immediately plunging out of the sky, but the creature’s flight was drastically impeded and they started arcing sharply down. Jason ignored their predicament, ramming his dagger into the monster multiple times before jumping again.

Jason proved a horrifying nemesis to the shrikes, jumping from one to the other and sending them crashing into their monster brethren below. Some were already dead when they hit the ground, the rest soon after from the hard landing and Jason's afflictions.

The shrikes scattered, wings beating heavily as they climbed skyward. It didn't matter. The cover of darkness was vanishing in patches as the shrikes died in rapid succession, restoring the bright sunlight to dominance. When the final shrike died in the air, Jason found himself floating alone in the sky.

Using the new gliding power of his cloak, Jason drifted his way over the team. Cloak fluttering around him, he alighted gently amongst them.

"Alright," Neil acknowledged. "You might kind of make this look good."

"What do you think?" Humphrey asked Neil, refocusing his attention. "Is it time?"

"There's a lot of Jason's sin affliction around now," Neil said. "Yeah, I think it's time. Everyone dump your mana."

The team started unleashing every high cost ability they had, rapidly draining their mana pools much as they had at the beginning of the battle. Colin gathered up during that time, strips of bloody cloth snaking through the battlefield to collect leeches like fly paper and drag them into a central mass that wrapped up into its humanoid form.

"Here we go," Neil said, and activated his power, sending the team, plus their summons and familiars into a dimensional space.

Ability: [Reaper's Redoubt] (Shield)

- Special ability (dimension, recovery, disease).
 - Cost: Extreme mana.
 - Cooldown: 6 hours.

 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (01%).

 - Effect (iron): Take allies into a dimensional space briefly while flooding the area with death energy, dealing disruptive-force damage, necrotic damage and inflicting [Creeping Death] on everything in the area.

 - Effect (bronze): Allies undergo extreme mana replenishment while in the dimensional space.

 - [Creeping Death] (damage-over-time, disease, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until the disease is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
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The team emerged from the dimensional space with their mana replenished. The jungle around them had been withered by Neil's power and most of the monsters were dead. Only a handful lingered past what was now the jungle line, having been outside the power's range.

They were about to move on them when eight figures emerged from the jungle. Unlike the monsters, these were all human. They stepped forward slowly, with none of the rush that the monsters had.

"That's them," Humphrey said, face turned steely. "Time to do what we came here for."