

## CHAPTER 158 – MAN DOWN

More Treants emerged from the forest. None of the living trees seemed to notice Raiko and Sam as they stomped towards the sunken pit.

That was fine for Sam. If his wholesale destruction of their forces didn't draw their attention, then it'd only make his task of laying them low easier.

Darting between some Treants and the pit, Raiko adopted an unfamiliar sword form.

Turning sideways, she flipped the curved katana above her head and balanced the blade's edge against her raised palm. With the weapon's hilt facing the line of Treants, she swiped her blade down with immense speed.

A lightning rift carved through the air, arcing into a set of three Treants. For a moment, Sam could feel ambient mana in the area seeping into the rift, charging it.

Two of the tree monsters toppled against one another, lightning coursing between them. A conflagration of sparks erupted, taking out the third Treant that hadn't been taken out by the initial spellcast.

That took even Raiko by surprise.

**You defeat the [Treant (Level 27 - Copper)].**

**You gain additional Experience for slaying a decent challenge match monster!**

**You defeat the [Treant (Level 27 - Copper)].**

**You gain additional Experience for slaying a decent challenge match monster!**

**You defeat the [Treant (Level 27 - Copper)].**

**You gain additional Experience for slaying a decent challenge match monster!**

It took just a few more torched Treants to push Sam to the next exhilarating level. He laid about him with his [Vulcan Blade], putting the new weapon through its paces.

And what a wonderful weapon it was.

No matter what else was going on, there was something purely visceral about leveling up in the middle of combat. Knowing without any doubt that his next strike would hit even harder than his last felt simply awesome.

**Level Up!**

**Your [Swordsman] Job has reached Level 31.**

**+6 Strength | +6 Vigor | +3 Agility**

**+3 Dexterity**

**+2 Bonus Points**

**Level Up!**

**Your [Voidknight] Legend has reached Level 21.**

**+2 to all Stats**

**+1 to all Talents**

The Treants Sam destroyed acted like burning turrets and obstacles for what few remaining monsters emerged from the [Forest Tile]. A Treant moved too close to one of the burning trees and burst aflame.

Sam swung the [Vulcan Blade], letting loose a wave of Magma mana—which, he supposed, was now Lava mana, now that it was outside of the sword—that washed over the burning Treant.

It should have died. Sam had fully expected it, but he doubted anybody could have expected what came next.

Lava poured down the Treant, transforming it before Sam's eyes. Its wooden body turned to charcoal. Its crown of leaves shifted red with glowing molten veins of heat. Cracks in its charcoal-bark skin now pulsed with liquid stone that flowed within like new lifeblood.

It staggered to a stop, and its burning eyes searched its surroundings until it found Sam.

Something in its gaze made Sam hesitate to strike it down. It wasn't acting like any of the other monsters anymore.

Giving it a closer look, Sam realized even its name had changed.

**[Cinderblood Treant (Level 25 – Copper)].**

“Are you... taming a monster?” Raiko asked, just as puzzled as he was.

“I guess?” Sam said without taking his eyes off the Treant. He didn't even know that was possible for a person to do to a monster. He definitely didn't intend to turn it friendly.

She turned on the spot, brazenly exposing her back to the Cinderblood Treant. “Try this hand sign?”

Glancing down, he watched Raiko make a hand sign he previously saw her communicate to the dullahan.

“What are you trying to get me to say to it?”

“Protect, basically.”

That seemed safe enough, though Sam was skeptical this monster would understand it. Considering Raiko shrugged, she seemed just as uncertain.

Shifting his [Vulcan Blade] to one hand, he made the hand sign at the changed Treant.

It stared at him and didn't seem to do anything further.

*So much for that*, he thought to himself.

That was until another Treant passed by. The Cinderblood went right after it, pummeling it clumsily with lava covered branches.

It was frighteningly effective against the other Treant. The Cinderblood seemed to infect it.

Rather than destroying the other Treant, it converted it with each splash of lava that flowed from its cracked wooden knuckles. The thing had too many arms and limbs altogether, but it used them with surprising effectiveness.

Another, weaker [Cinderblood Treant] was created, and the pair turned away from Sam to deal with their erstwhile brethren.

“That’s good enough for me,” Sam decided. So long as it didn’t attack them, he’d deal with it later.

There were more monsters to deal with for now.

Though, the Cinderbloods’ battle was contributing to the considerable amount of fire spreading across the [Forest Tile]. Smoke and light filled the space between the towering trees.

Sam was glad that they had already used so many trees for the walls.

Sam wasn’t one to let others fight for him, though, no matter how interesting it was to watch more members of his little Cinderblood army grow.

Throwing himself at the nearest aggressive Treant, Sam went back to work.

The wide pit at the center of the conflict resembled trench warfare. The dullahans had held their own before Sam and Raiko arrived. Dozens of defeated [Treants] were strewn about the dirt and rock mixed wall, many of them caught fire from Sam's opening attack.

One [Treant], less senseless than the rest, slipped through the Cinderblood defenses and furiously battered against a swordless dullahan. The damaged iron giant grappled against its branch limbs, struggling to restrain it, while its fellow dullahan desperately hacked away at the monster's trunk.

The [Elite Ironwood Treant's] crown of leafless branches glittered with jagged bits of orange-brown ore. Sitting in the center, like a nest egg or some kind of messed up Treant brain, was a huge boulder of ore and stone.

Mana smoked off the boulder, swirling around the [Elite Ironwood Treant], seeming to empower it far greater than its brethren.

With all the Treant's concentration locked onto the defending dullahan, its back was wide open to Sam's furious reprisal.

Getting a running start, Sam shoved his colossal greatsword into the [Biting Sheath], priming it for the sharpening enhancement. He leapt off the lip of the pit, unsheathing his [Vulcan Blade] in a shower of sparks.

Instinctively using his Fire affinity and Metal affinity, he drew the energy the [Biting Sheath] unleashed into his readying weapon.

*Even past level 30 Swordsman, this sheath is still just as incredible as when I first got it,* Sam thought.

He had already been charging [Heavy Blade] while the weapon was sheathed. With the infusion of additional mana, the ability grew even stronger.

Gripping the huge weapon in two hands, he crashed [Heavy Blade] into the [Elite Ironwood Treant]'s backside.

Sam could feel his greatsword's enhancements working in concert. The momentum damage heightened the effect of him swinging while falling on top of the monster. The magma damage erupted devastating molten stone, and the slashing damage cleaved the rest of the way through.

Sam cut right through a portion of the brain-boulder—as he was starting to consider it—and down through the [Elite Ironwood Treant]'s main body.

And yet, it still wasn't dead.

Perhaps that boulder was its brain, because any creature with a brain at that moment would have just thrown up its hands and accepted defeat.

Only something very stupid would continue to misread the room so poorly. Sam was determined to make it see the error of its ways.

The monster had incredibly sturdy skin, its physical defenses were far more than the typical variant. He already guessed from its nameplate, but didn't expect it to be so extreme.

*Elite, huh?* He'd never seen it before, but it was obviously far stronger than any other Treants. Perhaps even the dullahans.

Even though it had a significant wound that dug through maybe a third of its body, it was still going.

*We'll see about that,* Sam thought, switching to [Essence of Escha].

More mana-leaking cracks rushed across the defending dullahan's arms. The [Elite Ironwood Treant] slammed multiple branch limbs into the dullahan, and the iron giant's arm shattered to pieces up to the elbow.

It didn't cry out, as any other living creature would, and yet Sam could sense its agony all the same.

Anger honed Sam's focus to a razor's edge. He needed to destroy it as fast as possible, and there was one way to do it.

Tapping into his Breaker bloodline, Sam envisioned a weak point upon the [Elite Ironwood Treant] not where he injured it, but where it was strongest.

Surprisingly, that was the brain-boulder perched atop its head. Not quite where he had hit it. Perhaps that was why it survived, because he had just hit *near* where it should have died.

The change to his Breaker bloodline was... interesting. He was used to creating weak points, not simply visualizing them, but this was most definitely the latter.

The Elite twisted and snapped all of its limbs just as Sam was pulling his sword free from its body. It hit him right in the middle and if not for his new [Almorak Cuirass] he would have broken several ribs.

As it was, he knew they were badly bruised. But that was fine. He was getting used to the pain of fighting. It was one of the facts of life, and he made sure to always give back more than he got.

Twisting in a way he never could have before without his higher Agility and Dexterity, Sam's feet found the back of a Cinderblood. He crouched, coiling his legs, amazed that he was—for a fraction of a second—totally perpendicular to the forest floor.

Before gravity had a chance to realize what he was doing, Sam thrust his legs out with all he had. His Strength propelled him forward like a rocket aimed right for the creature's weak point.

He didn't bother with [Heavy Blade].

This was a moment for brutality returned with interest.

Sam crashed the [Vulcan Blade] into the Elite Treant, shattering the strange boulder sticking out like some sort of parasite from the Treant.

But that wasn't all.

His momentum arrested, Sam lifted one hand off the hilt of his weapon and pressed it to the base of the boulder.

A flood of numbing frigid Void mana flowed up and through his arm. He let it build a moment, then unleashed the torrent into the creature.

[Escha: Scour] obliterated the fractured and damaged boulder from the creature's main body, while neatly preserving what was left of its original body.

There was a hesitant moment when the events of the last few moments caught up to the [Elite Treant]. It twitched once or twice, then toppled over like the tree it was.

Sam managed to dislodge his sword from its body and rode the Treant until it crashed into the pit.

Sam looked around in the pit for any other dullahans in need of his help, but they had everything in hand. Aside from the three that had been damaged, one of them was—as far as he could tell—still going strong.

And then Sam saw why they hadn't ever been able to leave. The dullahans were all gathered in a ring at the center.

As he sheathed his sword and walked toward the epicenter, they stepped away to grant him admittance.

It was like a nesting doll of creatures protecting more creatures. The dullahan covered the militia mandragora, and the militia mandragora protected... an even smaller mandragora.

New mandys? Children?



And yet, on closer inspection, it wasn't a mandragora at all. Or if it was, the creature hardly resembled its relatives.

“And just what are you?” Sam asked the strange creature that seemed to be at the center of all this trouble.