
ARTICLE

MANSHOON THE MANYFACED

Ah, Manshoon. Well-known for his clones, Manshoon has learned the value of patience, which, in turn, makes him a deadly enemy to have indeed!

Few individuals in the history of Toril have been more misunderstood than Manshoon, he of the many clones, driving-force founder of the Zhentarim and First Lord of Zhentil Keep. Some of his clones have ruled other places, and the Manshoon onstage in 1479 DR and the decade thereafter was a clone that had awakened as a vampire and had been the Night King in Westgate. A “unique” vampire, it should be noted, of mutable, slowly shifting vampiric abilities. Like so much else about Manshoon, change is paramount.

THE MANSHOON WHO TIRED OF RULERSHIP

Manshoon as a young man was driven by boundless ambition. Evil, cunning, manipulative, and utterly ruthless (from childhood on, he eliminated several relatives without hesitation, as they became obstacles), he wanted to rule Zhentil Keep, sweeping aside an elder generation and rejecting their authority. In fact, he wanted to be free of all authority; doing just as he pleased—yet early on saw the importance of allies, and of manipulating dupes to further his aims and to thwart rivals and outright foes.

Nor did Manshoon fear obvious danger, so without hesitation he made common cause with beholders who made clear from the outset that they saw him as an expendable tool. This alliance lasted for an astonishingly long time, considering the manipulative nature of all parties involved, benefiting both sides greatly as the many-eyed ones bolstered the Zhentarim, and the Zhentarim reached out across Faerûn to sway attitudes and events to benefit both the beholders and Manshoon.

It is this arrogant, aloof, “I’ll coolly rise to rule all, anticipating what all foes will do and being prepared for them, and being mildly amused by their futile strivings” Manshoon whose reputation spread across the continent. Sages and rulers and the commoner in the street envisage this version when they think of Manshoon.

And it is this same power-hungry Manshoon who’s been left in the past by the living Manshoon, though echoes resurface with each newly activated clone.

In truth, Manshoon swiftly tired of ruling and being seen to win and lording it openly over others, giving way to a Manshoon who rather than destroy the Zhentarim (and many of his selves; that is, clone after clone that would be expended in the struggle, as he died and replaced himself repeatedly) to take down Fzoul, decided to lose the struggle with Fzoul to win a better fate for the organization he’d co-founded.

In part, he did this because he’d tired of the ceaseless demands of ruling the Zhentarim, and the constant attempts to undermine him or assassinate him. Increasingly, he had to set aside one of his chief delights: experimenting with magic to devise new spells. And increasingly, this irked him. He wanted time to enjoy working with magic, not just fighting and destroying with it.

Manshoon also realized that he enjoyed manipulation from behind the scenes far more than giving orders and the inescapable protocol and time-consuming obligations of “being seen to rule.” So ruling became a temporary means to furthering his schemes and no longer an end in itself.

THE MANSHOON WHO SURVIVED THE MANSHOON WARS

The infamous “Manshoon Wars” occurred when almost all of the scores of clones of himself Manshoon had prepared were activated at once, and they set about madly trying to destroy each other. It had more than the immediate effect of shredding



Manshoon's sanity until the many, many clones were reduced to a mentally far more comfortable few (his "mass clones" are more mentally stable than clones created by the more widely known *clone* spell). The three surviving, active-on-Toril clones were the most mentally disciplined and experienced, and this mental toughness, more tolerant world-view, and above all increasing patience dominated Manshoon from this point on. (The use of "almost all" here alludes to a handful of magically warded clones and clones that Manshoons located on other planes of existence, who weren't awakened, did not take part in the struggle of many Manshoons, and presumably survive, hidden and in stasis, to this day.)

THE MANSHOON WHO BECAME A VAMPIRE

One of the three surviving Manshoon clones died in the shadovar attack on Zhentil Keep, though he exacted a stiff price for his life. Another perished in Undermountain thanks to the Weave-chaos of the Spellplague that claimed the lives or the sanity of so many wizards. This left just the clone that had awakened as a vampire and risen to command the Night Masks of Westgate—a city even more riddled with intrigue than the Zhentil Keep of Manshoon's early life (before his Zhentarim rule became ironclad). Manshoon enjoyed the cut and thrust of Westgate's intrigues more than ever, but now found the slayings wasteful, and overt threats and displays of power increasingly . . . distasteful. Immediate gains of the sort he'd formerly prized above all, the winning of every battle large and small, he increasingly saw as empty. It was the "long game" Manshoon now prized: the setting and achieving of large, long-term goals without the need to triumph in everything, every day. Manshoon was changing.

THE MANSHOON WHO FACED DOWN MYSTRA

There came a time, chronicled in the Sage of Shadowdale trilogy, when Manshoon was given a direct and public command by Mystra to work with Elminster, in furthering her causes. In effect, she treated him as one of her Chosen.

And he rejected her, behind her back, a moment after her "departure." (Of course, being as the spells he hurled at Elminster called on the Weave, Mystra was well aware of his actions.)

Mystra had fully anticipated his treachery, though she hoped he'd make another choice. More than anything else, she'd wanted to offer him a place in her willing service, to choose or reject her. Although she knew his rejection was likely, she did not want to destroy him, for she foresaw his usefulness in time to come. More than anything else, she wanted to remind him of her presence and scrutiny, in hopes it would temper his behavior. She was right; it did.

Manshoon had been busily sewing discord in Cormyr to win himself a new base of power when he eventually rose to rule that realm (and in the process, gleefully ruining much of what Elminster had built and held dear). After he'd lashed out and destroyed Elminster (for good or not was immaterial at that moment; what mattered was that he'd slaked his long-nurtured, burning hatred in real triumph), he realized his toying with

Cormyr had been driven solely by the desire to tear down his longtime foe's work. Manshoon didn't want to control Cormyr, either from on its throne or behind it. For one thing, the pettiness and eccentricities of the Forest Kingdom's nobility made it all just too much work.

Mystra had correctly read Manshoon because she, too, was changing—and growing. Her time of hiding in the Weave by immersing herself in it and scattering herself throughout it had led her to experience more of the thoughts, memories, and work of her predecessor (the earlier Mystra), and of the clones of Manshoon that had become “voices in the Weave” (Weave-echoes). Manshoon recovered memories from his earlier selves by the same means, and seeing what he once had been further strengthened his desires to leave what that person behind.

THE MANSHOON WHO SAT OUT THE SUNDERING

As the Sundering of Abeir and Toril proceeded and open warfare spread across Faerûn, Manshoon increasingly became an observer rather than a participant. Although at times his choice to do so left him restless, he consciously decided not to enter the fray. In part, he was protecting himself from almost inevitable destruction, for his scrying had led him to correctly anticipate the shadovar attempts to drain the magical energy of the wards of Candlekeep and the mythal of Myth Drannor, so as to gain power enough to conquer the Weave (and not destroy it in doing so). This scheme was confirmed by his ongoing eavesdropping, and he soon came to foresee Telamont Tanthul's doom.

One of the reasons Manshoon thought the Most High would fail and be destroyed (and that he himself would suffer the same fate if he stepped into this fight) was because he knew Larloch wouldn't be able to resist getting involved—and Manshoon knew this because of his own earlier dealings with the archlich. In these fleeting skirmishes, he resoundingly lost every one—even when he manipulated Fzoul's priests and certain beholders into fighting for him, and so he kept very quiet about them.

Manshoon also knew Mystra would muster her champions (how could she not, when her own survival was at stake?). That would embolden Shar to get directly involved, however briefly . . . and such a high-powered clash just couldn't end well for a lone Manshoon.

After he revealed himself, he would inevitably get caught in a magical crossfire. Manshoon did not foresee the Srinsee's involvement, but did believe (correctly) that other lone wolves and mighty archwizards would also watch from the sidelines and plunge in if they saw a chance.

Now, strong in his new and coldly greater patience, he thought it wiser by far to wait this particular fray out, see who fell and who flourished, and then act accordingly.

After all, if Elminster fell, who better to step forward and take his place than Manshoon? He could become Amarune's mentor and Mystra's servant. He was already the third or fourth string for Mystra's bow—after Storm, but before any attempt to reassemble the

dead and shattered Halaster.

Or if his old, old rival Elminster survived one more time, he could bide his time. Manshoon told himself he really had to outgrow this obsession with the Sage of Shadowdale and decide to merely ignore him and step around his deeds and strivings. There would come a time . . . of his choosing, not Elminster's, when he could triumph.

Not yet, though. Manshoon was no longer raging at waiting, hungry for that day of reckoning to come. No, he had mastered patience and was content to pursue more subtle intrigues in Cormyr and elsewhere, just to keep his hand in, while he turned to crafting new spells again, to increase his power and keep an eye on those liches who now lacked Larloch to guide them (or did they?). Because if these liches were masterless, who better to step in and become their ruler than, ahem, Manshoon? Moreover, crafting those new spells would remind Mystra of his capabilities—that Manshoon of the Many Manshoons was too useful to cast aside . . . that he was indeed a worthy backup bowstring.

Once, such a role would have left him seething. Now, it's one that merely makes him smile. Others may preen or bluster, craft Dread Rings, or try—and fail—to subsume mythals and wards and the Weave itself. Yet he, Manshoon, endured when they failed and fell; always, he was still there. He is the battered rock that endured and would outlast—had outlasted them. Had outlasted everyone.

Except Elminster, all the gods damn him. Except Elminster.

Not a unique sentiment, Elminster is at some pains to remind us all. Many folk want him dead and try to do something about that, yet he is still here. Enduring still and through dozens of happenings that have been called “the Death of Elminster”—and all without even the benefit of clones.

For as Elminster said, “I’m the one who tweaks the noses of clones, and makes them oversized and bright red in the process. I’m *not*, however, responsible for the floppy shoes or the unfunny pranks and jokes.”

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