

Chapter 227

A Man Transformed

The team congratulated Jason as another of his abilities reached bronze rank during his evening meditation. As they were all perpetually using the party interface, they had shared the notification.

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- Ability [Blade of Doom] (Doom) has reached Iron 9 (100%).
 - Ability [Blade of Doom] (Doom) has reached Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Ability [Blade of Doom] (Doom) has gained a new effect.
 - Ability [Blade of Doom] (Doom) has gained the [Curse], [Disease] and [Poison] subtypes.

Ability: [Blade of Doom] (Doom)

- Conjunction (unholy, curse, disease, poison).
 - Cost: Moderate mana.
 - Cooldown: None.
 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Effect (iron): Conjures [Ruin, the Blade of Tribulation]. Attacks made with Ruin will inflict an instance of [Vulnerable] and refresh any wounding effects on the target. Wounding effects refreshed by Ruin require more healing than normal to negate. Ruin is an unholy object.
 - Effect (bronze): Ruin inflicts one instance each of [Ruin of the Blood], [Ruin of the Flesh] and [Ruin of the Spirit].
 - [Vulnerable] (affliction, unholy, stacking): All resistances are reduced. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Consumed to cleanse instances of [Resistant] on a 1:1 basis.
 - [Ruin of the Blood] (damage-over-time, poison, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until poison is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
 - [Ruin of the Flesh] (damage-over-time, disease, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until poison is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
 - [Ruin of the Spirit] (damage-over-time, curse, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until poison is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
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“That’s a strong boost to your short-term damage output,” Clive said. “It’s not the same as a direct damage power, but for weaker enemies, a quick handful of damaging afflictions will let you spread a lot of misery in not a lot of time.”

“That will help you a lot against groups,” Humphrey agreed. “That’s always been an issue for you because it took more time than it was worth to layer afflictions. Now you can put, what? Four damage afflictions with a simple cut from your dagger?”

“It’s probably for the best you’re not evil,” Neil said. “You’re not evil, right?”

“No, I’m not evil,” Jason said.

“Because you seem evil. With your powers.”

“Well, I’m not.”

“That’s good to know,” Neil said. “Thankfully, someone evil wouldn’t lie about that. Oh, wait...”

“You realise who is at the top of my list if I really am evil, right?” Jason asked.

“The guy who bought out the cheesemonger on Maple Street and replaced it with a building supply store?” Neil suggested

“Oh yeah. I hate that guy.”

Clive was standing atop a broken spire as monsters swarmed towards it like a river. They were akin to apes, but leaner and with longer legs. They approached the tower on which he stood with a quick, semi-quadrupedal lope.

Clive was standing on what had once been the interior of a tower-top, now exposed on all sides with the walls and roof long gone. Under his feet, the floor glowed with a ritual circles drawn by his power in lines of golden light. It was the result of the bronze-rank variant of his strong attack spell.

Ability: [Wrath of the Magister] (Magic)

- Spell/ritual (fire, magic, curse, poison, wounding, ice, dimension)
- Cost: Varies.
- Cooldown: Varies.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%)

- Effect (bronze): Create a ritual circle in which the magical attacks of spells, staves and wands have increased effect. This effect has a very high mana cost and a one hour cooldown.

Rather than enhancing what was already a potent and versatile attack spell, the bronze-rank variant offered another means to enhance combat effectiveness. Clive was

wielding one of his two legendary set weapons, the wand and the staff, in each hand. At the end of each were more ritual circles, floating in the air like magical barrel attachments.

Ability: [Tools of the Magister] (Magic)

- Special ability/ritual.
 - Cost: Varies.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%)

 - Effect (iron): Utilise specialty magic tools, vehicles and weapons.

 - Effect (bronze): Use a ritual circle to enhance the magical attack of a staff or wand. This variant requires high mana.
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Clive unleashed bolts from his staff that hurtled into the approaching monsters. He wasn't even really aiming as he essentially hip-fired the staff, gripping it in one hand and tucked into his armpit. Whether the bolts hit the ground or a monster, the results were explosive, throwing out splinters of wood and stone from the overgrown environment, or chunks of aggressively disincorporated monster.

In his other hand, his wand emitted a continuous beam that he worked back and forth through the monsters with little more accuracy than the staff. Normally the wand required continual focus to be deadly, but the enhanced beam sliced through the monsters in a sweeping line, lopping off limbs or killing outright.

Through a far-seeing crystal, Jason and the rest of the team watched on. To Jason's eyes, Clive had turned the broken spire into a sci-fi beam tower from an RTS. The monsters were undeterred by their losses, however, and continued their zerg rush at Clive's position.

"I can see why he had you bait them now," Jason said to Sophie. She was freshly returned from lured the monsters in Clive's direction.

"He's making a mess, but he's rather imprecise," Humphrey observed. "They'll start climbing that tower any moment."

"I imagine that's what his backup is for," Belinda said.

Just as Humphrey said, the monsters reached the tower and started to climb, for which the ape-like creatures were well-suited. As they did, a large, round figure floated slowly through the air from behind the tower.

Clive's familiar, Onslow, drifted ponderously into view, suspended in the sky on a cushion of shimmering air. Now bronze rank, he was roughly the size and shape of a Volkswagen Beetle, with more runes engraved into his shell than ever before.

The rune tortoise started blasting the creatures climbing up with elemental attacks, sourced from the runes on his shell. An explosive bolt of flame blasted several off at once, while a bolt of lightning chained from one to another to another, sending them screaming off the side. A dark, heavy cloud rose up from Onslow's shell, growing larger than the tortoise itself, and started peppering the side of the tower with water bullets. They weren't very lethal, even to the iron-rank monsters, but did serve to dislodge them, while also leaving the stone of the tower wet and harder to climb.

Clive continued blasting away at the main force of the monsters, which was rapidly thinning out, as Onslow continued to pick off the stragglers. There was a brief pause as Onslow floated up to Clive, who used his own mana to recharge the runes on Onslow's shell before the pair returned to action.

Even though most of their number were cut down before even reaching the tower, the monsters continued, unabated. The team, watching from a distance, had been poised to jump in at any time. When Clive told them he wanted to face the horde alone, they were wary but accepting. Now they just looked on in amazement at the pyrotechnic display as the monsters charged into a futile death.

"Well, damn," Sophie said.

"Won't all this get a lot of attention?" Neil asked.

"Probably," Humphrey said. "Anything with even a modicum of sense will take one look at this and run in the other direction, though."

In amongst the several dozen iron rank monsters were two larger, bronze-rank variants. Clive seemed to ignore them as they reached the spire and started rapidly climbing. Onslow didn't react either, other than to float further away from the tower. As the first one reached the top, Clive used his switch-teleport power.

Ability: [Juxtapose] (Balance)

- Special ability.
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Swap the location of two allies and/or enemies. You must be able to see both subjects of the spell. If an ally resists or otherwise prevents the effect, this ability is negated but the cooldown is reduced to 30 seconds.

- Effect (bronze): Enemies affected by this ability take additional damage from all sources for a brief period.

The monster vanished, with Onslow appearing in its place. Now in the air where Onslow had been, the monster fell, wildly flailing its limbs. It landed hard, right on one of Clive's invisible rune traps. The trap triggered, sending the monster, or at least the parts that used to be a monster, back into the air and scattering them over the battlefield. A few moments later, smaller explosions rang out where the larger chunks of monster had fallen.

Ability: [Rune Trap] (Rune)

- Spell.
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Create an explosive rune that will disappear after a short period. The rune can be set to trigger by proximity, caster trigger, or both.

- Effect (bronze): Enemies affected by the rune trap will be the source of a secondary explosion after a brief period.

The second monster crested the tower and launched a huge fist at Clive. The air around the ape-like creature's fist shimmered, much like the cushion holding up Onslow. The fist crashed in on Clive like a hammer, striking the shield around Clive which briefly became visible as it sucked up Clive's mana to withstand the blow.

Clive shoved his wand between his teeth and his now empty hand turned mirror-silver. The air around it shimmered, just as the monster's had, and he rammed his fist into the hairy monster's torso. Despite the lanky man punching a monster at least three times

his weight, the monster went sailing off the spire. Clive quickly aimed and blasted out a shot from his staff, hitting the monster in mid air.

The red of life force emerged from Clive's body, a tendril snaking out and into the rune circle that was floating at the edge of his staff. The golden lines of the ritual circle transformed into an angry, bloody crimson.

Ability: [Blood Magic] (Balance)

- Special ability.
- Cost: Varies.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Consume an amount of your own life force to replenish your mana.

- Effect (bronze): Consume an amount of your life force to enhance the effect of an active ritual.

The next blast that emerged from the staff was much larger than those that had come before. The energy bolt hit the monster at the same time the monster hit the ground, from which it did not get up.

By this point, the iron rank monsters were a scattered remnant of the original horde, but the wildly aggressive creatures kept rampaging forward in the face of inevitable destruction. When the last of them were dead, Clive hopped lightly onto Onslow's shell, sitting cross-legged as the tortoise floated back to the team. The familiar's new flight ability was much faster when hovering close to the ground, so Onslow dropped low and floated just over the bodies of the dead monsters as they made their return to the team.

Clive arrived at the ruined building where the team had been watching from hiding. He lightly slid down Onslow's shell, wand held casually in one hand and staff slung over one shoulder.

"You know," he told the waiting team, "I'm starting to think I might not be too bad at this."

The night before they expected to reach the centre of the city, the team was doing their evening meditation. Jason was leading Neil, Sophie, Belinda and Humphrey in the Dance of the Sword Fairy, a meditation technique that incorporated dance-like physical movements using a sword as a focus. It was something that Rufus had taught to him and had proven one of the more successful techniques for Sophie.

Clive was outside, having made preparations for his anticipated ascension to bronze. He had set aside a space for the messy transition, picking a spot inside some ruins near the cloud house. He had stripped down to his underwear and placed fresh clothes where he could reach them later. Close to hand was one of Jason's precious few bottles of undiluted crystal wash.

Clive was settled into some soft moss, meditating.

"No, Onslow, don't eat the moss. That's my seat."

Clive called Onslow back into the tattoo on his torso before resuming meditation.

When he crossed the final threshold, the rest of the team knew immediately.

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- Ability [Vengeance Mirror] (Karmic) has reached Iron 9 (100%).
 - Ability [Vengeance Mirror] (Karmic) has reached Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Ability [Vengeance Mirror] (Karmic) has gained a new effect.

Ability: [Vengeance Mirror] (Karmic)

- Special ability.
- Cost: Varies.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Replicate the last spell or special attack used on you by an enemy. Mana cost is determined by the ability replicated. You may still use this ability if the triggering effect was negated by your abilities but not if it was negated by the abilities of an ally. The replicated power functions at the rank of this ability, not the rank of the enemy that originally used it.
- Effect (bronze): Use the replicated ability a second time.

That was just the beginning of a strenuous series of changes.

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- All [Karmic Essence] abilities have reached [Bronze 0].
 - Linked attribute [Power] has increased from [Iron 9] to [Bronze 0].
 - Progress to bronze rank: 100% (4/4 essences complete).

Amber light started shining from within Clive's body as he felt pressure build up inside him like a balloon inflated toward the point of bursting. The team rushed outside but didn't intrude on his secluded area in the ruins, instead standing back and watching the amber light shine from within.

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- All your attributes have reached bronze rank.
 - You have reached bronze rank.
 - You have gained resistance to iron-rank and lower damage sources and effects.
 - The potency of your aura has increased.
 - Your aura senses have improved.
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- Progress to silver rank: 00%.
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“Oh, this feels amazing,” Clive said through voice chat. “I’m just waiting for the... oh, there it is.”

The sounds coming from Clive’s secluded spot were bad, but nothing compared to the smell. The coughing, spluttering vomit noises were matched by a stench they had all experienced before on reaching iron rank, when their bodies had purged and renewed all the biomass it would immediately replace.

“I wish I hadn’t just got my spirit attribute to bronze,” Neil winced, holding his nose. “The improved senses are not appreciated right now.”

“You should take this as a training opportunity,” Humphrey said. “There are monsters that will use stench against you, so you should adjust now.”

“Tell me that again when you’re smelling this with a bronze-rank sense of smell and maybe I’ll listen.”

The noises stopped and all they could hear was heavy, exhausted breathing.

“You still conscious in there, mate?” Jason called out.

“Yes,” Clive said wearily. He used voice chat again, rather than expend the effort to yell out. “Give me a moment to clean up. I suspect that once I’ve gotten away from the smell, I’m going to be very hungry.”

“No worries,” Jason said. “I’m just going to move the cloud house upwind a bit, and then I’ll set out a feast for a king. A small king; we only had so much space.”

Clive arrived at the slightly relocated cloud house, crystal wash clean and with a fresh set of clothes. He was a man literally transformed; the awkward, lanky frame and hapless, bookish features were gone. In their place was a tall and lean figure with an easy grace to his step and effortlessly appealing facial features.

“You’re the scientist no one listens to at the start of a disaster movie,” Jason said. “Except now you’re at the end of the movie, when you’ve lost your glasses, your hair is attractively tousled, you’ve found the heroism within and realised your unrealistically attractive lab assistant was pining for you the whole time.”

“I’m not even going to try and follow that,” Clive said. “I’ll just assume it’s a compliment and say thank you.”

“Also, I’m not pining,” Belinda said. “I did like the unrealistically attractive part, though. You should try finding a man you like when Sophie’s standing next to you. Thank the gods Jory has depth of character.”

“Are you suggesting people are only interested in my looks?” Sophie asked.

“Of course I’m saying that,” Belinda said. “You’re like a treasure chest full of swords with no handles. It looks enticing, but rummaging about inside is going to get you hurt.”

“Thank you,” Sophie said brightly.

“That was not a compliment!”

“How is that not a compliment?” Sophie asked. “Who doesn’t want to be full of swords?”

“Can we just move on to the food?” Clive asked.