

## Chapter 235

### Anyone Can Be Useful

"I actually got the materials pretty cheap," Jason said. "Gary made it from local materials in the first place, so I just needed higher-grade versions of the same stuff."

Jason had drawn out the diagram for the ritual of ascension that would have his sword, like he had himself, advance from iron-rank to bronze. He was now laying out ingots of blood gold and star-fall silver, piles of quintessence gems and neat stacks of bronze-rank spirit coins.

The rest of the team were lounging about on the porch of the cloud house in hanging chairs. Jason turned to look at Sophie who had been staring at him all day.

"What?" he asked.

"What?" she asked.

"You've been looking at me like that all day."

"Like what?" Sophie asked.

"Impassively, I guess," Jason said. "You do everything impassively, so it's hard to differentiate."

"Your face," she said.

"What about my face?"

"Bronze rank," she said. "It made it less awful."

"Yep," Belinda agreed.

"I miss the chin," Neil said. "It kind of looked like some weird essence power."

"It wasn't that bad," Jason said. "Humphrey, tell them it wasn't that bad."

"It wasn't that bad," Humphrey said. "I'd even say it was good."

"Thank you," Jason said.

"I mean," Humphrey continued, "if I ever ran out of mana and couldn't conjure a sword, it was right there. What do I use for a backup, now?"

Jason looked put upon as the team laughed.

"It really does look good," Belinda said, taking pity on him. "Bronze rank's been good to you. The square-jaw thing you have happening now that is actually not bad. Right, Soph?"

"Its... not terrible."

"That's Sophie language for 'sexy as all get-out,' which I think is a little excessive, but each to their own," Belinda said. It earned her a glare from Sophie, while Jason shook his head and went back to his ritual.

It would have been faster for Clive to perform the ritual, as he had with Neil's growth items, but Clive hadn't offered and Jason hadn't asked. They both understood that if you could advance your growth items yourself, you did it yourself.

The sword was simple and elegant in its design; silvery blade, a simple, red gold hilt with black binding and a short black tassel. Jason carefully placed it at the centre of the magic circle and performed the ritual.

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- Growth item [Dread Salvation] has advanced from iron rank to bronze rank.
  - Growth item [Dread Salvation] has reached its maximum potential. It must be reforged by the original craftsman in order to advance further.
  - Item [Dread Salvation] has gained new abilities.
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Clive, Neil and Humphrey had already ranked-up their growth items with no additional effects, and the same had happened for Jason's amulet. His sword was the first of their items to gain new effects.

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Item: [Dread Salvation] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

- *A sword crafted with gratitude, in hope it would be of the greatest use in the moment of greatest need. It was forged with passion and expertise to be a reliable companion, bestowing upon it an incredible potential (weapon, sword).*
  - Effect: If a special attack that applies an affliction is made with this sword, but the subject of the attack has a physical immunity to it, an instance of [Stone Cutter] is applied to the blade and an instance of [Vibrant Echo] is inflicted to the enemy.
  - Effect: If a special attack that applies an affliction is made with this sword, but the subject of the attack has a magical immunity to it, an instance of [Spell Breaker] is applied to the blade and an instance of [Radiant Echo] is inflicted to the enemy.
  - [Stone Cutter] (magic, stacking): All attacks deal additional resonating-force damage; highly effective against physical defences. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
  - [Vibrant Echo] (damage-over-time, magic, stacking): Deal ongoing, resonating-force damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
  - [Spell Breaker] (magic, stacking): All attacks deal additional disruptive-force damage; highly effective against magical defences and incorporeal entities. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
  - [Radiant Echo] (damage-over-time, magic, stacking): Deal ongoing, disruptive-force damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
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In addition to getting more powerful over time, the sword's new abilities allowed it to leave behind ongoing damage effects, bringing it more in line with Jason's own power set. Magic-type afflictions were easier to dispel than most, but almost nothing was immune to them, unlike Jason's various maledictions. To advance the sword further would require Gary's help, but silver rank was, for the moment, a distant horizon.

He was saving his familiar upgrades for last, so he moved on to the cloud flask. He shoed everyone off the porch and returned the cloud house to its flask, the house taking several minutes to dissolve into smoke and pour into the bottle like a genie.

"There must be a big, involved ritual for an item like the cloud flask," Neil said.

"Nope," Jason said. "You just have to get to bronze rank, then feed the greedy bugger about a squillion bucks worth of goodies."

He shook his head at the bottle as he pulled a funnel from his inventory, placed it in the mouth of flask and then started shoving in fistfuls of quintessence.

"Twenty-two hundred quintessence," he complained. "Two hundred of it dimension quintessence. Remind me to thank to thank Emir again for supplying the goods for the first rank up. No way could I have afforded this, on top of everything else."

Shovelling in all the quintessence gems and then ten thousand spirit coins took longer than the rituals for Jason and Neil's growth weapons put together. Deprived of their comfortable cloud seats, some of the team grew impatient.

"Could you have just used silver coins?" Neil asked. "Or gold. That would have sent it along nicely."

"It's not about the value of the coins," Clive said. "It's about the magic inside them. All that power doesn't just fuel the upgrade but balances out all the magic involved in the transformation, so it doesn't go awry."

"You know," Neil said to Clive, "just once, I'd like something to come up and have you say that you have no idea."

"Hey Clive," Belinda said.

"Yes?"

"How would Neil kill any monsters if we weren't around?"

"I have no idea," Clive said.

"You two are hilarious," Neil said flatly.

"Actually, that was pretty good," Jason said.

"Shut up and play with your bottle."

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The cult leader Zato, led Timos and Thadwick across the ruined grounds of the Vane estate. The last remnants of the climate-shifting magic were gone and the desert was

rapidly reclaiming the once lush territory. Now it was nothing but withered remnants and piled ruins, only the now-dormant magical pylons marking had once been a stark line between the estate and the desert.

They arrived at what had one been the manor house, now crumbling stone and dried wood. Zato held out an arm and the limb segmented into pieces, revealing not warm flesh and blood within, but cold iron. The pieces were strung together on a wire, which spooled out as the segments sprung forward, burying themselves in the piled debris.

Moments later, chunks of that debris started floating into the air, more and more of them, moving into an organised shape. The materials melted, wood and stone flowing like water as they blended together to form a strange hybrid material. The material flowed into lines, creating a ritual circle on the ground and then a dome that covered it, leaving only a hole large enough to crawl through.

“As you grow stronger,” Zato said, “Your meagre essence abilities will be supplanted, one by one, by the superior power of the Builder. You will not be bound by mortal limitations, scrabbling for scraps of might from worthless training or miserable monster cores.”

“This will make me strong?” Thadwick asked, nodding at the dome as it neared completion.

“Yes,” Zato said. “So many have passed you over, Thadwick, but I see your true potential. You will prove of supreme value to the Builder, once you are stronger. Enter, and feel the power flow through you.”

After a last, wary look, Thadwick got down and crawled through the hole. When the hole closed behind him and he was plunged into darkness, he panicked for a moment. Then he felt the promised power surging into him. It had only been a matter of moments, but he could feel the strength flowing through him and he started laughing like a madman.

Outside the dome, Zato and Timos could no more hear Thadwick than he could hear them as they walked away.

“When you said you would find something for Thadwick, I was not optimistic,” Timos said. “I didn’t realise that something like this was possible.”

“More than possible, it is necessary,” Zato said. “I was not fully inducted into the leadership, who took their plans with them to the grave fighting on the island. We have need of guidance. Thadwick and the other one...?”

“Dougall,” Timos reminded.

“Right, yes. Thadwick and Dougall are not true believers. They came to us out of desperate, mercenary sensibilities. Half loyalties will be met with half membership. They will pay the rest of their way with sacrifice and will be venerated for their service.”

“Why bother with the ruse?” Timos asked. “Why not just force Thadwick along?”

“Because even with the soul seed inside it, altering a soul is difficult business unless that soul is willing. Why force the poison down his throat when a spoonful of honey will have him gulping it down?”

“Honestly? I want to make him choke on the spoon?”

Zato chuckled.

“How close to ready is Dougall?” Timos asked.

“He will reach the requisite state shortly before the Church of Purity’s people arrive,” Zato said. “The timing is fortuitous. For the moment, make sure that neither Dougall nor Thadwick realise that they are receiving the same treatment.”

“Not a problem,” Timos said. “Dougall is so keen on ingratiating himself that he will do exactly as asked. Thadwick is so self-obsessed that he is oblivious to any of the goings on.”

Zato smiled.

“See? Anyone can be useful, if you find the task that best suits their abilities.”

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“It’s big,” Neil said.

“It wouldn’t let me use the blending-in version,” Jason said.

“I don’t think there’s a version of this that you can discreetly move through a jungle,” Humphrey said.

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#### Item: [Cloud Flask] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

- This item is bound to you and cannot be used by anyone else.
- Use the energies within the cloud flask to create buildings and vehicles made of clouds. Available forms are restricted by rank.
- Items contained within the cloud construct when it is returned to the flask are stored in a dimensional space and cannot be recovered until another cloud construct is formed.
- Available forms (iron rank): Cloud house (grand), cloud house (adaptive).
- Available forms (bronze rank): Carriage house (grand).
- Unavailable forms (bronze rank): Carriage house (adaptive).

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“A carriage house is meant to be a building that holds carriages,” Jason said. “Not a building that trundles about like one.”

To Jason, the cloud flask’s bronze-rank form looked as much as anything like a massive recreational vehicle, one of the stupidly expensive ones with two levels and a roof deck that movie stars lived in on set. It even had a spot for a driver at the front, although it

was directed by placing hands on a misty orb, rather than a steering wheel. Other than that, Jason could direct its movements mentally.

The cloudy white vehicle with its sunset embellishments stood out brightly amongst the dark stone and deep greenery of the overgrown jungle. There were no wheels, making it something of a hovercraft RV. The boulevards of the overgrown streets were wide, but thick with jungle, making them impassable for the huge vehicle. Jason had moved it back and forth a little, but there really wasn't room to drive around.

The interior was likewise akin to a luxurious RV, with beds, couches and comfortable chairs. There actually was a roof deck. From the inside, translucent mist made for clear windows, although they could not be seen through from the outside.

"Well," Humphrey consoled, "it'll be nice once we're back out of the astral space. "It'll be great for taking long trip so you, me and Clive can visit locations to portal to, later. That's what my mother did all through bronze rank. Travelling the world, having adventures."

"Actually, that sounds kind of awesome. Neil doesn't get an opening credit until season two, though, and it'll be an 'also starring' with his face hidden by a melon or something."

"What?"

"We can figure it out later," Jason said. "I guess I should turn it back into a house, and then finish up. What do you say, fellas? Saving the best for last?"

Gordon appeared with a flash of Jason's aura as Shade appeared from his shadow.

"Gordon says that I should be last," Shade said. Gordon orange orb flashed brightly, which was his signal for no.

"See?" Shade asked. "He really doesn't want to go last."

The orange orb started angrily strobing.

"He's quite vociferous on the topic," Shade continued.

"Shade, stop teasing Gordon," Jason said. "Gordon, it's just an expression. Being last doesn't actually mean you're the best."

A small patch of blood seeped from Jason's neck, turning into a leech that crawled along his shoulder. Jason turned to look at it.

"Colin, you've already ranked up. You can't do it again."

The disconsolate leech slinked back into Jason's neck.