

Chapter 779

Put Up or Shut Up

The first major breach of the wall was on the fifth floor. It began as a minor breach, the wall blasting out in a cloud of stone dust and rubble. Gary's team was the first to respond, with Gary once more moving in to block the gap. That was when he saw one of the creatures responsible for the explosions, little more than a glowing blob on four legs. He threw his hammer, trying to kill the thing before it marched into the hole, but something slammed into place to block his attack. A more powerful undead, something like a jet-black mantis with quick, jerking movements and arms ending in chitinous shields. If not for the aura it emitted, it would be hard to tell it was undead.

Gary's hammer flew back to his hand as the mantis creature moved forward, protecting the thing behind it. Gary hunkered behind his own shield as he backed off, knowing what was coming. He yelled at his support team to run.

The blast destroyed the shield mantis creature. Ironically, this also shielded Gary and his golem from the full blast, although they were still both thrown out from the wall to drop five storeys down. The wall itself was not so shielded and had already been weakened by the blast that caused the first breach. The floor above collapsed, taking that level's barricades with it and leaving a two-storey hole for the undead to pour through. They had to climb over the mound of rubble that had dropped from above, but that was barely an impediment.

Gary and his heavy armour left spiderweb cracks in the ground when he landed in a crouch. He slung his massive sledge-like weapon, Gary's Medium Hammer, over his back. The magical bandolier he wore over his conjured armour held it conveniently in place. He then plucked a tiny hammer that was dangling from his belt, the handle barely long enough for his hand to grip. Normally he would keep it in his dimensional pouch, but they were still unreliable and he'd had a feeling he'd need it.

Gary's strength rivalled gold-rank, so he didn't just stand up from a crouch but launched himself straight up into the air, armour and all. He reached the level of the hole he'd been tossed from, even a little higher, and threw the tiny hammer in his hand, Gary's Big Hammer. The hammer grew comically in size as it flew, landing in the hole and grinding the undead crawling through into paste. The hammer wasn't done growing as it landed, expanding to fill the entire gap, even cracking some of the stone wall around it.

Gary landed on a flying stone platform flown under him by one of the gold-rank brightheart guards.

“That’s quite a weapon, Mr Xandier.”

Gary took his medium hammer from his back.

“Bloody expensive, though, and it’s a one-use item unless you find a giant looking for a new hammer. It cost more than this one,” he said, gesturing with the hammer in his hand.

“Then we thank you for the expenditure. We can’t afford a lot of breaches like that.”

They both surveyed the wall from the air, minor breaches happening all over.

“I don’t know how long we can hold this,” Gary said. “I hope Clive is working fast.”

Clive was working fast. There were nine platforms set up around the tree, all of which needed to have individual ritual circles. Each circle had to operate not only in response to the environment but to each other.

Clive, as it turned out, was one of the greatest minds on Pallimustus when it came to the understanding of magical theory. While astral magic was his speciality, there were a handful of other fields in which he was well versed. That did not make him the same as a specialist in those fields, however. Without the people around him, their endeavour would have failed already.

Like almost everyone, Farrah was not the equal of Clive in magical theory. Even so, she was still a respected expert in her field of array magic. Array magic wasn’t a flashy field, and every speciality had at least a fundamental grasp of it. It was only when delving into the more nuanced aspects that being an actual specialist mattered. Clive’s fundamental understanding of array magic was exceptional, but what they needed now went far beyond the fundamentals.

It had swiftly become evident how the original attempt by the messengers to transmute the natural array failed. The complexity of the magic involved boggled even Clive’s mind. Not only was the natural array a paradigm of magic with which he was too unfamiliar, but the interplay between the array and the environment was too much for him to actively track while conducting multiple interlocking rituals.

The interactivity of multiple arrays was an aspect of array magic well outside the fundamentals. Understanding the nuances took too much study for anyone but array specialists, many of whom focused on just that aspect of it. As for natural arrays, Farrah’s study of the grid on Earth made her one of the few true experts on Pallimustus.

Carlos Quilido was proving a surprisingly useful asset in decoding how the natural array’s magic had been twisted by the efforts of the messengers. With the tree as a reference, the expert in magical corruption helped Farrah work backwards from what the

natural array was doing now versus what it should be doing, had the messengers not made their ill-fated attempt to turn it into a soul forge.

Clive was in charge of all the magical theorists currently scrambling to test and retest the ambient magic and set up the foundations of the ritual diagrams they were slowly assembling. He was the foreman on the worksite, overseeing the activity according to the design given to him. Farrah was the architect from which the design originated.

Belinda was of more direct assistance than Clive. Her unconventional training was a mixture of self-teaching, assisting Clive and practical application under often adverse and usually illegal conditions. When it came to speciality knowledge or executing known magic with precision and efficiency, she fell short of Farrah and Clive. When it came to quick and dirty solutions to problems cropping up with improvised magic, she left both of them in the dust.

“That is a wildly inefficient magic conduit,” Clive pointed out as he observed Belinda adding to one of the ritual circles.

“The problem isn’t efficiency,” Belinda told him. “We’ve got magic shooting out of our arses in here. The problem is getting that magic to work for us without blowing up or turning us all into elemental mind slaves like these messengers.”

Farrah wandered over to examine Belinda’s work.

“She’s right,” Farrah told Clive. “What she’s doing here exchanges the magic without causing interference with the source or destination points.”

Clive frowned, not annoyed at being wrong but with curiosity.

“Can you make notes on what you’re doing for me to look at later?”

“No, she can’t!” Farrah told him. “We’re trying to go fast, remember?”

Clive’s face scrunched in a reluctant grimace.

“Fine,” he acceded.

“Can you check in with Jason on how they’re going with the other device?” Farrah asked him. Clive’s expression was back to business at the reminder.

“Yeah,” he said. “None of this means anything if they don’t get it done at the other end.”

“Destruction tricked the surface messengers as well,” Boris explained as he crawled around on the floor, drawing out a ritual circle with the messenger device at its centre. It was situated in a room directly over that containing the echo array in the citadel. Assisting and checking on him was Ramona, the gold-rank ritualist from team Moon’s Edge.

As they worked, Boris was explaining more about his involvement in their current circumstances. His audience was Marla, the brightheart commander, and Jason via Shade.

“Jes Fin Kaal believed that Destruction wanted a massive explosion after the messengers successfully claimed the soul forge,” Boris explained. “That was the deal. Of course, that's not how it was going to work, since all the destructive power would be absorbed into the forge itself. Kaal thought she was playing the god, but she was the one getting played. She never realised whose priests she granted access to the messenger-controlled tunnel. I was expecting to find Destruction priests waiting for us, not Undeath ones. We ran, and that's where Gabriel and his sexy wife came in.”

“You’re already on thin ice,” Jason’s voice came from Shade’s body. “You will treat Arabelle Remore with respect, whether she is present or not.”

“You’re not exactly famous for treating people with respect yourself,” Boris pointed out.

“You’re right. Do you know what I am famous for?”

Boris froze for a moment before resuming his work.

“Nothing but respect for Mrs Remore,” he said. “Almost done, by the way.”

Boris and Ramona drew out the final chalk lines to complete the diagram, then placed materials in various locations within it. A clay bowl full of powder, small piles of quintessence gems and several stacks of spirit coins. After they were done, Boris turned to Shade.

“We can go on your word,” he said. “The device on this end is ready for activation.”

“Thank you,” Jason said.

“Asano,” Marla said. “The citadel chamber won’t stand much longer. The wall is already breached in a dozen places and we can’t plug holes as fast as they’re appearing. More and more of our forces are being pulled from plugging holes to dealing with the undead that have already made it through.”

“How long can you hold?” Jason asked.

“Could be an hour or two. Could be a minute or two. One or two major breaches will see us overrun. Two hours is our limit, though. After that, the encroaching undeath zone will expand to the wall and they’ll have us.”

“We’ll be as fast as we can,” Jason told her.

In the natural array chamber, Jason opened his eyes. He looked for Clive and spotted him already heading their way, sitting on Onslow who was currently the size of a dining table.

“How is the preparation on the other side?” Clive asked.

“They’re ready. Now they need us to be before they get overrun. They’re a lot closer to losing the echo array than I’d like. “How long on our end?”

“Once we’ve calibrated for the incredibly complex and constantly shifting elemental energy that itself is being pressured by the encroaching undeath energy? Less than a minute.”

“And that calibration?”

“I’m hoping another four hours. Definitely no less than three, maybe as many as six or seven.”

“We don’t have that time. I don’t suppose you padded those estimates so that when I ask you to do it faster, you can say yes?”

Clive closed his eyes and let out the groan of someone trying to explain over the phone to their grandmother how to fix her email.

“Jason,” Clive said, “the messengers screwed up. Again. The device, as calibrated by them, wouldn’t have worked. They designed that thing without access to the astral space we examined and without access to the tree. Their arrogance made them think they could get it right without those and they were wrong. Very, very wrong. We’ve got Carlos deciphering the corruption in the ambient magic. Farrah figuring out how to set up an array in this bizarre magic environment. If we didn’t have Belinda, we’d spend half our time finding workarounds for a hundred little problems and magic incompatibilities. My job is to adapt all that to the device so it can actually do the thing it was designed to. This is the most complex improvised multi-aspect array ritual I’ve ever heard of. If any one of us wasn’t here, you’d be looking at days to pull all this together. If at all.”

“Okay,” Jason said. “I’m just saying that the citadel doesn’t have the time you need. Not probably doesn’t. *Doesn’t.*”

“Jason, if the citadel needs more hours, you need to find them. If we’re going to try activating the device right now, we might as well wander out and let the dead eat us. If the timing is impossible, then it’s time for you to do something impossible. It’s kind of your thing, right?”

Jason let out a groaning sigh.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Clive headed back to the ritual being set up while Jason flew over to where Miriam was directing the defences. The undead were streaming into the tunnels like a river now and the defenders had been employing a measured withdrawal strategy. The adventurers,

cultists and brighthearts were the frontline while the elemental messengers made ranged attacks from the rear.

This had frustrated some of the other defenders until one of the elementals got careless and was caught by an undead surge as the frontline pulled back. The defenders had watched the power drain out of him in an instant, like a plug had been pulled. Moments later, he was back on his feet and fighting for the enemy.

The divine power infusing the undead had proven a major problem. It was draining many of the attacks against them of their power before they had a chance to make an impact. This was especially true for attacks made with elemental power, leaving the messengers with limited combat value. It affected other powers as well, especially the more overtly magical ones. Conjured projectiles were effective, but blasts of energy were diminished or negated entirely. Gordon's butterflies gained no traction, growing dim and vanishing as soon as they neared the undead. They didn't even explode as normal when destroyed.

Jason didn't try deploying Colin. The leech monster fed on life force, and while he could chew up dead organic matter, the poisons that were his main strength would be ineffective. Without Jason to make the undead vulnerable first, their dead flesh would be largely impervious. Given that he didn't want to risk an army of undead worms coming at them, Jason kept Colin inside his body, boosting his regeneration. Once things got hairy, he was probably going to need it.

The defenders reaped countless undead for every inch of surrendered ground, but the dead kept coming and there was only so much ground to surrender. There was still some way to the array chamber where they would need to make a final stand, but that moment was coming.

"How long on the ritual?" Miriam asked Jason as he approached. "At the current rate, they'll reach the array chamber in a couple of hours, and I don't trust that estimate. Right now we're only seeing the dregs of the undead, and we know they have stronger ones."

"They're currently dividing their efforts between us and the citadel chamber," Jason said. "If the citadel falls, it doesn't matter if things accelerate here because we'll already be done. Even so, we need more than a couple of hours."

"How much more?"

"Somewhere between three and seven hours from now. And by the two hours you estimate it'll take the undead to reach the array chamber, the citadel expects to be gone. Maybe long gone. Their wall is already looking shaky."

"Operations Commander, I'll do everything I can to buy us as much time as possible. Even putting aside our less-than-ideal allies, the adventurers here represent an incredible amount of power. I'll spend our lives if that's what it takes, but I can probably get you the hours you need here. But I can't do anything about the citadel."

"I know."

Miriam frowned, her commanding voice lowering to a near whisper.

"Operation Commander. Jason. I know you like to talk about doing the impossible. If that is anything more than just talk, now is the time."

"Why do people keep asking me to do the impossible?"

"I haven't known you that long, but you kind of talk about it a lot. Wasn't that the whole reason they put you in charge?"

"Just between you and me? It's a lot easier when it's just talk. I guess this is why they say put up or shut up."

"Does this mean you're shutting up?"

"You're right; you haven't known me that long."

Chapter 780

Miracle

The wall between the citadel chamber and the death chamber was leaking like a sieve. Gary was moving from breach to breach in a rush now, as were the other teams, yet a half dozen gaps were spilling undead into the chamber. The undead that made it through went for the pillars holding up the citadel as defenders moved to intercept them.

Arabelle Remore was a particular star, draining the magic from the undead. Robbed of the force animating them, they fell inert. The hideous monstrosities were returned to a state of gruesome but otherwise ordinary carrion. The magic Arabelle took was collected in a floating ethereal jar. It followed her around as she moved, like a duckling filled with the heinous power of the unliving.

Inside the jar, the corrupted energy of undeath was purified, turning it back into the power of untainted natural death. That death energy was poison to the undead, clashing with the twisted energy inside them with explosive results.

Arabelle's power to drain the undead of their energy was more effective against the lower-ranked undead. She drained the hordes that poured through the breaches, purified their energy and then launched it at the more threatening foes that shambled through. This detonated them, turning them into weapons against their own side.

These stronger undead were either gold-rank or powerful silvers. They were easy to pick out from the ordinary undead who were animated messengers and brighthearts, alongside the occasional subterranean monster. The most dangerous undead were bespoke creations, freakish and varied. Some were amalgams of monsters, messengers and brighthearts, hacked-up parts roughly sewn together with tree roots. Others looked like intact creatures that had been warped through flesh-shaping into nightmare fuel that existed nowhere in the natural world.

The crudely stitched horrors, like the five-headed giant messenger Gabriel had seen, were the most physically powerful. The flesh-shaped monstrosities tended to be more agile and had superior special abilities, like the armoured mantis that had stopped Gary from blocking a breach.

The siege of the citadel chamber turned slowly but inexorably in favour of the undead. Their forces continually grew stronger, from mostly bronze-rankers to almost all silvers, with gold-rank monstrosities scattered amongst them. The demand for gold-rank intervention on the defender side escalated as more of the hard-to-kill abominations forced

their way through the breaches. Some of the larger ones didn't even need the explosive undead, forcing their way through with raw physical power.

Finally, a tipping point was reached where there were too many gold-rank undead for the defenders to respond to. Even with adventurers like Arabelle being the equal of two or more of their enemies, the gold-ranked undead were not quick to eliminate. New abominations arrived faster than the existing ones could be put down. More and more of the undead made it into the chamber, attacking the pillars unchallenged. Some were already showing dangerous cracks, and if enough fell, the citadel would fall with them.

Gary found himself fighting alongside Gabriel in a major breach, holding off a wave of lesser undead while Gabriel sliced apart a pair of golds. Gabriel had split his attacks so the monsters fell together, giving Gary the chance to blast their remains and the silver-rankers with a sonic roar. The roar thundered through the gap, hurling the enemy out through the breach and back into the death chamber.

Gary and Gabriel took a brief moment to rest while Gary's brightheart team stepped in to repair the breach. Gary could have helped, having his own powers to shape stone and metal, but he didn't have the mana to spare. Such large workings were mana intensive and it was more efficient to refine the work of his support team once they were done. He pressed his hands to the barricade wall, subtly altering the material with small but critical alterations to the structure.

"Did you see how close that purple light is getting to the other side?" Gabriel asked grimly.

"Yeah," Gary said.

"Once it reaches here, this wall goes from our territory to theirs. Once that happens, there won't be any more time to buy."

"Then let's make sure we at least hold that long," Gary said with a fierce grin that Gabriel returned.

"There's no quit in you, is there?"

"I tried quitting once. It didn't work out for me."

The bodies of the undead were already rotting by nature. The dark power that animated them also arrested further depreciation, staving off decrepitude and collapse. Jason's necrotic powers not only obviated the power staving off further decline but massively accelerated it. His blade smashed away chunks of flesh like hitting water balloons with a stick, liquefied corpse meat sloughing away in wet clumps. The afflictions he left behind finished off the undead while he was already moving on to the next.

It was a rare chance for Jason to act as a more traditional frontline fighter, although very much in his own mode. His swirling cloak rendered him all but invisible in the patchy light of glowing red flowers and dancing shadows. He shadow-jumped from area to area, one moment carving a path through the rank and file and in another loading a powerful undead with necrotic afflictions. The sword Gary made for him reaped the undead like a harvester's scythe.

Clive had been brought into the command channel of Jason's voice chat to keep Jason and Miriam updated. He had remained silent except for when Miriam asked for progress reports as she balanced the safety of the defenders with how much they had to slow the progress of the undead.

"Progress?" she asked again.

"We're getting a solid handle on how we need to calibrate the rituals," Clive reported. "I'm extremely confident in getting this to work, and at the lower end of my original time frame. Maybe three more hours. That's the good news."

"And the bad news?" Miriam asked.

"If the undead make it into the array chamber, everything changes. The undeath energy will start affecting the array and then we're done. The undead have to be kept out of this chamber at all costs. *All costs.*"

"Alright. Thank you, Clive."

Miriam opened a personal channel to Jason.

"We can't hold them outside of the array chamber for three more hours," she told him bluntly. "We just can't. I can start pushing back harder and slow the progress but we'll start seeing casualties. Once those start mounting, it'll leave us on much the same timeline, but with fewer people left."

"The citadel won't last three more hours anyway," Jason said.

"No," Miriam agreed. "If you've got any miracles you've been hoarding, I'd really like you to take them out now."

"Wouldn't that be nice," Jason said. "But I'm not a..."

Jason vanished, shadow jumping into the backline to emerge from Miriam's shadow.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I actually do have a couple of miracles in my pocket," he said. "They won't help us here, but maybe I can trade them."

"With who?"

"The other people that have miracles, obviously. I'm going to have to do something I don't like."

“I don’t care what you like, Asano. If you have something you can do, then do it.”

“Yeah,” Jason agreed. “I just never thought I’d be relying on the power of prayer.”

The undead assault on the citadel chamber grew worse, not just in the power of the undead but the coordination with which they were operating. It became clear that the Undeath priests were directing their forces once their more powerful creations entered the fray.

Gary’s Big Hammer had plugged the first major breach, but more had come. The gold-rankers were increasingly occupied holding them, many too far gone to be sealed, tying up the gold-ranker defending them for the rest of the battle. Gary’s forge golem was gone, sacrificed to take out a gold-rank abomination Gary and his team eliminated without needing a gold-rank adventurer.

The golem had self-detonated, coating the abomination in molten metal while inside the breach. Gary’s support team had then shaped spears of metal and stone from the walls, impaling the undead dozens of times over while closing the breach at the same time.

Gary watched another large breach explode out, right below his current location. His footing shook as the bottom half of the stairwell he was on collapsed. He looked around and realised that, once again, there were no unoccupied gold-rankers left to respond. He gave his support team a grave look and nodded downwards.

“Let’s go.”

“Gary, that’s a massive breach,” said Kollas, the leader of Gary’s brightheart support team. “We can’t hold that alone.”

“I can hold it,” Gary told her. “At least long enough for you to seal the breach behind me.”

“What? No! If we cut you off out there, it’ll take a miracle for you to survive.”

“Then do me a favour and start praying.”

“Gary, I’ve been praying for the last two hours.”

Gary’s reassuring grin wasn’t, his leonine face looking like he’d just spotted prey. He stepped off the shattered stairway to drop into the breach, landing in a cloud of stone dust, thick as fog. The undead were already pouring through, silhouettes in the cloud backlit by purple light. He let out a roar that cracked stonework, blasting them back with sound and force. The stone dust roiled wildly, lit up with purple light.

Only one undead had held firm through the blast, a gold-rank beetle-like creature made of stitched flesh with hundreds of eyes sewn into its body. It radiated out an

aggressive aura, pressing down on Gary's with gold-rank might. This was not the aura of a living thing but an artificial aura, instilled into this monstrosity by its creators.

Gary's aura buckled under the onslaught but didn't break. The creature's aura probed for weaknesses to exploit and found nothing. Years of training with Farrah and then Jason had refined Gary's aura into a fortress. The raw power of gold-rank threatened to crush it whole, but Gary held fast with raw determination. Aura combat was one of the few places where willpower could tip the scales of rank, if only a little.

Gary didn't let the spiritual battle pause the physical one. He was coated in armour of dark heavy steel that glowed red hot between the plates and his hammer lit up the same way. The monster was gold-rank, but designed for spiritual assault. That didn't mean the fight would be easy, but it would be possible.

Behind him, Gary's support team frantically called for him to return. He called out to them without turning or slowing his stride.

"It has been an honour," he yelled back. "You know what to do."

He conjured up a stone wall, reinforced with a metal framework. He didn't have time to reinforce it properly and spent as little mana as he could. It was to make a point, not a barricade. The stone and metal-shapers on the other side would do that.

The abomination was bizarre, little more than a flesh mound with six legs and a patchwork body, covered in eyes. It neither retreated nor advanced at Gary's approach, continuing its spiritual barrage. Behind it, the undead horde was rushing in after being flung back by Gary's roar. He shifted his stance and raised his hammer.

The undead were a unifying force. The brighthearts, elemental messengers, cultists and adventurers each counted two members of their alliance as bane foes, yet the undead brought them all together. An all-consuming, existential threat, the undead turned even nemesis into ally.

Miriam was on overall command, directing a slow withdrawal through the chambers and tunnels. Each new wave of undead was forced to crawl over the remains of the last. The wide-open chambers were surrendered relatively quickly, being harder and more costly to defend. The tunnels were the true battleground, the tight confines turned into kill-boxes. The undead paid dearly for every inch, sometimes forced to dig through piles of their own fallen to advance.

Jason stood well behind the backline in one such tunnel, head bowed and eyes closed. His starlight cloak had been dismissed, showing a face stained with the grime of battle.

“I know you’re watching this closely,” he whispered. “I know you are more against the undead even than those of us likely to die to them. You know what I need.”

“That,” a warm female voice said quietly, “was a very mediocre prayer. And rather demanding at the end.”

Jason smiled, raised his head and opened his eyes. The goddess of death stood before him in the guise of a stocky, middle-aged woman with a colourful dress. She gave off the warm feeling of a matronly tavern keeper.

“You may not have heard,” Jason told her, “but prayer isn’t really my thing.”

“Oh, I’ve heard.”

“And I heard you normally show up as a stern-faced man in this region.”

“Do you want me to?”

“No, I like you this way,” he said, glancing over at the ongoing battle. “There’s enough cold and grim from the other side.”

“I agree.”

He looked around and saw that only he seemed to have noticed the goddess.

“What do you want from me, Jason Asano? You know people who keep resurrecting aren’t exactly in my best graces.”

“You like me more than the undead, though.”

“Yes. But if you want a miracle, you need one of my servants or a grand sacrifice. And despite what people cannot seem to stop believing, I have no interest in the sacrifice of lives.”

“I know,” Jason said. “Death is just one part of the cycle.”

“Do you? You seem determined to escape that cycle.”

“I don’t think there is an escape. I think some cycles are just a lot larger than others.”

“I would like to think so, but my remit does not reach beyond this planet, which itself will have its time.”

“I have two resurrections,” Jason said. “You can have them. I offer that as my sacrifice.”

“I decline,” Death told him. “It is not enough.”

Chapter 781

Death Knows How to Wait

“Two resurrections aren’t enough?” Jason asked the goddess. “Even as justification for doing something you must want to do anyway?”

“The purpose does not make the sacrifice cheaper,” Death told him. “The sacrifice is judged by what is given up. And what are resurrections to you, Jason Asano? You, who stand at the threshold of true immortality.”

“Oh,” he said as realisation struck. “I get it. If you help, we probably win and I turn into an astral king. Then I won’t need those resurrections, which means they aren’t any sacrifice at all.”

“They aren’t nothing. But aren’t enough.”

“What is?” he asked.

“Your path forward is one of power that goes beyond mortality, taking you outside of my authority. But if you commit to respecting my will, even as you move beyond my power, that has value.”

Jason narrowed his eyes as he met the gaze of the goddess.

“You don’t want a sacrifice,” he said. “You want to make some kind of bargain.”

“Pacts are how transcendents deal with one another.”

“I’m not transcendent yet. Could you please help me out with something so I can understand what we’re talking about here? No one has been completely explicit about what half-transcended means. My understanding is that once you max out diamond rank, reaching the maximal stage of mortal power, you’re then a half transcendent.”

“That is accurate.”

“So, if that half is the power requirement, is the other half some way to get you over the line? To cross the threshold of mortality?”

“That’s precisely what it is,” she confirmed. “Almost all half transcendents have reached the peak of mortal power and search for a means to move past the final limitation. Far less common are those like you, who obtain the other half before reaching the power threshold.”

“I haven’t obtained either half yet. And I won’t, without your help. If you won’t accept my sacrifice, why seek a pact with me? Someone who *maybe* has a chance at *potentially* getting halfway to the kind of person you make pacts with? It doesn’t sound like a reliable bet.”

“Immortality brings patience, Jason Asano. Death knows how to wait. I can gain a concession from you now that you would never accept in the future. The value in that is worth a miracle.”

“Obviously, I’m curious about what concession you’re looking for, but there’s something I have to ask first. When you said that ‘death knows how to wait,’ were you making a metaphor about the concept of death or were you talking in the third person? On an unrelated note, being in a conversation where that’s a genuine question is one of the coolest things that’s ever happened to me. And I’m an interdimensional ninja warlock, so epic moments are kind of my thing.”

Her only response was to look at him from under raised eyebrows.

“Oh, come on,” he said. “I know this is a very serious situation, and this whole thing is a tragedy for the brighthearts where we’re trying to salvage what little remains of their people. But some days you have to stop and recognise your life is awesome. I’m negotiating an immortality pact with the goddess of death so I can fight that undead army over there. And the reason I’m doing that is so my friend uses a wizard spell so I can fight over a magic tree inside a warped pocket of reality. This is a top-seven moment for me. Probably. Top-eight, definitely. I once found a taco that looked just like the British actor Brian Blessed. I mean, I think it did; I was pretty drunk.”

“I will lay out the concessions I am looking for,” she told him, ignoring everything else he said. “I will take your resurrections. Those you have, those you could ever have and those you could bestow upon others. You will agree that whatever your power, whatever your need, you will never bring anyone back from the dead.”

“I can accept that.”

“It is easy to agree to when you are less than thirty years old. What of when you are thirty thousand? You may come to chafe at the restriction.”

“Are you trying to talk me out of giving you what you want?”

“Pacts between immortals can outlast the lifespan of universes. My existence will be relatively short on that scale, but it will be long enough. There is no value in creating an antagonism that will last for millions of years, so a pact must be equitable. It is not a place for short-term thinking.”

“It may be short-term thinking, but I’ve learned that victory and defeat are decided in moments. The right gift in the right moment, however small, is worth more than anything the future has to offer. Where I come from, we say a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. I’m willing to risk recrimination from my future self.”

“So long as you are going into this with understanding, Jason Asano, there can be a compact between us.”

“If it is to be a pact then we need to define terms. Let’s start with what you want: no resurrecting people. I can accept that, but I need to know where the line is. Where does drastic emergency healing end and resurrection begin? My understanding is that even magic is blurry on that. Many high-rank healing abilities don’t differentiate between healing the near dead and restoring the dead.”

“You may use your power to arrest the condition of someone on the border of death, even beyond, if you can. You may keep them until you find someone else that can restore them, so long as you do not do so yourself.”

“So, as long as someone isn’t too far gone that they can’t be brought back with someone else’s resurrection magic, I can toss them in my soul space until I find someone who can use that magic? If I’m fast enough that their soul hasn’t done a runner, I assume.”

“Yes.”

“Acceptable. Which means we move onto my terms.”

“You will receive a miracle.”

“Not enough. You are asking for infinity and offer a moment.”

“The right gift in the right moment. Your words. You came to me looking for a miracle.”

“At the cost of a sacrifice that you refused. Then you offered a whole other deal. You’re the one who asked for a pact for me to enact your will forever. I’m okay with that because, to my surprise, some things really should be left to god. Or gods, as it turns out. Cloning dinosaurs never seems to work out, for example. Not that I’m saying gods should get into dinosaur cloning.”

Death gave him a sharp look, and Death’s sharp look was very sharp indeed.

“My point is,” Jason said, “I don’t mind what you’re asking for, but it’s something I’ll be giving you forever. Forever is a long time, even for you. Will you outlast this planet?”

“No. All things have their time, including this planet, its gods and the universe in which it resides. There is even an end for that which lies beyond reality, although such things are not yet for you to know.”

“Then, assuming this works out, I’ll still be knocking around, respecting your wishes about resurrection, long after you’re gone. You said that pacts should be equitable. Should not my benefits be just as eternal as yours?”

“I do not disagree in principle, but do not ask too much if you still want your miracle.”

“It occurs to me that if you’re asking me to carry out the will of death, then that’s exactly what I should do. If resurrection is anathema to me, shouldn’t undeath be as well?”

Death smiled.

“Indeed it should,” she said. “Your terms are acceptable.”

“We should probably go into specifics.”

“You will be satisfied, I give you my word. Are you willing to trust my word, Jason Asano?”

He looked at her for a long, silent moment before nodding.

“I will,” he said.

“I would like to point out that I could have offered you only the miracle you need here and nothing else. And I could have asked far more than what I have in return and you would have accepted.”

“I would,” Jason admitted. “Is that what you’re doing?”

“No. But I think my fellow deities would appreciate you gaining an understanding of divine benevolence.”

Jason nodded.

“I do understand. I’ve never denied being a fool, but I’m not a blind fool. I can’t deny all the gods have done for me at this point.”

“Then perhaps you would have the decency to demonstrate more respect in the future.”

“That’s fair,” Jason said. “I’m self-aware enough to realise that my biases have affected the way I relate to you all. Dominion is still kind of a dick, though.”

Death gave him a flat look.

“Right, respect. Sorry about that. Personal growth is an ongoing process. Can we move on to the miracle now, please?”

“I must warn you, Jason Asano, that my miracle will not hand you victory. It will give you only a chance that you and your allies must seize with your own hands.”

“We don’t need you to fight our fight for us. We need a god who helps those who help themselves.”

“Then the terms of our pact are set.”

Death Pact: The Sanctity of Death

- If you accept the death pact, any ability to resurrect yourself or another will be sealed. This pact will persist through any changes in nature or power that you undergo.

- The power of undeath will be suppressed by your aura. Existing undead will not be impaired but undeath will not animate and undeath energy will be purged from the ambient magic.
 - The pact will be enacted by the Pallimustus goddess of death guiding your soul to make changes to itself. The deity will not gain access to your soul. Any attempt at instigating changes outside the agreed-upon conditions will be rejected by your soul.
 - As an external condition of this pact, the Pallimustus goddess of death shall enact a miracle.
-

Death held out her hand and Jason did the same, pressing their palms together. He felt the immensity of her power, his own a droplet of water next to an ocean that spanned out forever. That power resonated with his soul, not an attack but a guide, showing him a path to reshape himself.

Jason was well-versed in the offensive methods of soul interaction. His first and most drastic lesson had been from the Builder but he had developed those powers for himself, then alongside Amos Pensinata. This was doing the same thing but within an entirely different paradigm, not aggressive but benevolent. Jason watched with his spiritual senses as a new branch of spiritual manipulation was opened up before him.

Concentrating became harder as his soul reshaped itself. It was a relatively small and entirely innocuous change, but it was still his soul reshaping itself. As the process drew to a close, Jason felt the goddess calling out to the power he had taken from all the messengers he had drained. He drew on that power and delivered it to her, as per their agreement. It flowed out of his soul and into her, and then her power withdrew.

- You have accepted a pact with the Pallimustus goddess of death.
- You have accepted the cycle of natural death as an intrinsic element of your soul.

New Title: Keeper of the Cycle

- You may not resurrect yourself or others. This is a change self-applied to your own soul and may not be undone. This effect will carry through any transformation of body or soul. This condition is part of a compact. Should you circumvent this condition, all other aspects of the pact will be negated and you will suffer severe spiritual backlash.
- You have become an exclusion zone for undeath energy. Undeath energy cannot exist in the ambient mana of your soul realm, spirit domains or the area within your aura. Undeath energy of significantly higher rank than your power may fully or partly overcome this exclusion.
- Power bestowed to the undead, such as through divine power, is negated. This has a greater or lesser effect depending on the relative strength of you and the power in question.
- Suppressing the aura of an undead will impede the abilities of that undead. Undead able to partially or fully resist your aura suppression will resist this effect to an

- equivalent degree. Undead weaker than you may have their animating force negated, depending on the nature of the magic animating them.
- Abilities that apply afflictions also apply ghost fire. Abilities that drain mana will degrade the animating force of the undead. Those with a direct connection to your soul will have their abilities enhanced in the same way if they are in relative proximity to you.
 - While your aura is actively suppressing the undead, allies within your aura are affected by ghost fire.
 - [Ghost Fire] (affliction, damage-over-time, magic): Ghost fire is harmless to the living, calming the mind and shielding them from the effects of undead auras and ambient magic infused with undeath energy. Ghost fire is extremely harmful to the undead, degrading their animating force and inflicting ongoing transcendent damage.
-

Death vanished but Jason barely noticed as he fell to his knees, his soul roiling. He struggled to restrain his unstable aura, contain it as best he could. His insides felt like they were passing through a blender. The gold-rankers noticed his disrupted aura and Miriam pulled Emir from the fighting to go check on him.

“Jason, what’s happening?” Emir asked as he reached Jason. Jason was on his hands and knees, leaning forward as if expecting to throw up.

“Had a chat with the goddess of death,” Jason said, his voice strained through gritted teeth. “I’m okay.”

“Goddess of death?” Emir asked, looking around. “Are you sure? Death was a god, last I checked, not a goddess.”

“I think the gods just pick whatever gender they like on the day. Some of them, at least. You didn’t know that?”

“I’ve never been especially religious. They just switch it up? I know someone like that. They’re still waiting for you to talk to them about your cloud house, by the way. You’re making a diamond-ranker very cranky, which is never a great idea.”

“Mate, on the seating chart of problems I have to deal with, a cranky diamond-ranker is at the kids table. Why are you here?”

“I was sent to check if you were okay.”

Jason turned from where he’d been staring at the ground to give Emir a pointed look.

“So, uh, are you okay?”

“I’ve been worse.”

“That’s what I figured. I checked in with your team healer over voice chat while I was coming over. Neil said you were probably twisting yourself inside out so you could pull some ridiculous power out of your rear end.”

“Something like that. I don’t suppose you’ve noticed a miracle going off?”

Chapter 782

Sometimes They Do

“A miracle?” Emir asked. “That’s why you met the goddess of death?”

“You think we don’t need one?” Jason asked.

“No, we definitely need one.”

“That’s why I thought I’d go supplier direct.”

“You know, I used to talk about my fancy diamond-rank connections all the time.

Knowing you makes it very hard to be a braggart, Jason.”

Jason let out a wheezing laugh that turned into coughing.

“Help me up?” he asked after the fit subsided.

Emir helped Jason unsteadily to his feet.

“Are you really alright?”

“I’ll be fine. Spiritual damage is harder to get used to than physical damage, but you can get there. I think I’m building up a tolerance.”

“Jason, you may want to re-examine the way you approach life if you’re injuring your soul enough to build up a tolerance for it.”

“I know, right? You didn’t answer me, by the way.”

“What was the question?”

“Did you see a miracle happening?”

“I didn’t notice one, no.”

Jason nodded.

“I told Death I wanted a god who helps those that help themselves. I’d best get on that.”

“You’re not exactly in fighting shape, Jason.”

“It’s fine. I just need to get my aura under control. The body will follow. Let’s head for the frontline.”

Jason took one stumbling step, righting himself before he fell over. Emir grabbed him and slung Jason’s arm over his shoulder for support. It was a little awkward as Emir was decently tall while Jason was not, but they got slowly moving. They made their way towards the frontline from the protected position where Jason had communed with Death.

The stonework underfoot was cracked and strewn with sinister, red-veined plants that painted everything with a bloody red glow. Jason could have floated over the uneven floor of the tunnel but he wasn’t using his still-recovering aura. Instead, Emir helped him pick his way through the uneven terrain as he grew stronger and faster by the moment. Moving

with care also helped him concentrate on something other than his mind spike of a headache.

“I can feel your aura starting to calm down,” Emir said. “It feels different.”

“It does?”

“You can’t tell?”

“Right now my soul feels like a meat smoothie. I guess that’s different.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.”

“I did just make a pact with the goddess of death. Gods don’t muck about when cutting deals, as it turns out. Is my aura all deathly now? Bleak and cold with the silent inevitability of the final demise?”

“No,” Emir said. “It feels... I’m not sure how to describe it. Natural, but not of nature. It’s not plants and trees, it’s more like...”

Emir paused to give it some more thought before continuing.

“Jason, your aura has always given off a sense of authority. It’s judgemental. Impersonal. Oppressive. It feels like a massive stone slab, engraved with commandments, that will fall over and crush you if you break them.”

“That’s not the most flattering description I’ve heard.”

“It is what it is, Jason. This change fits into that, another part of that authoritative nature. It’s a sense that messing with the laws of life and death around you is a very bad idea. It doesn’t feel like something imposed on you from the outside, though. It hasn’t changed what you are so much as unveiled something new that still completely fits.”

“A new sin for people to commit.”

“Yes, but not as harsh as I make that sound. Murder is a transgression too. A rigid authority shielding you from that can be harsh but also comforting in the safety it offers. This is similar, but it also feels natural. Warm. Rather than safety from murder, it’s safety from...”

He gestured at the frontline and the undead pushing in on the living.

“...from that,” Emir continued. “From the cold, corrupting grip of unlife. It’s like your aura went from being a courthouse to being a—”

“Please don’t say a church.”

“I’m sorry, Jason, but that’s what it feels like. Judgemental, but also comforting. Sheltering. An authority that tolerates no transgression but also offers sanctuary.”

“I don’t want people thinking of my aura like church roaming around. I’m not a tent revival preacher.”

“It’s a good change, Jason. Your aura needed some softening up.”

“Your description doesn’t make it sound soft.”

“I’ll say ‘less hard,’ then. Freedom is good, and while I know that’s a principle you hold, no one seems to have told your aura.”

“My aura power is called Hegemony, Emir, not ‘let’s all have a nice time and talk about scrapbooking.’”

“Yes, but your power is only an aspect of your aura. More important is who you are, at the core.”

“So, it’s not my power that’s a hardcore religious thug, it’s me?”

“I’m not saying that. And I’m not saying your aura is bad. It can be hard, yes, but sometimes what you need is hard. Like it or not, Jason, you’re our leader here. The ultimate authority in this expedition. Your aura being so authoritative helps when you’re giving commands.”

“It’s mostly Miriam giving commands.”

“Jason, most of these adventurers were trained their whole lives. They understand the difference between a field commander and a commander-in-chief. You were a bit uneven at the start of this expedition, it’s true. Maybe you let Miriam take the lead a little too much. This kind of leadership is new to you; it’s okay to rely on an experienced hand. But when the moment called, you answered. When the dead rose, you took command. You stepped forward and charted our course when what we needed was a strong hand at the tiller. Leadership isn’t just about giving commands, Jason. People have to rely on you. An aura that feels like a sanctuary in dangerous times is something people will follow.”

“Thank you,” Jason said. “You’ve led a large and successful operation for a long time, and I’ve seen that your people like and respect you. I admire your leadership ability, so that means a lot coming from you.”

“Thank you, although it’s mostly Constance if I’m being honest. Without her, I’d be hopeless. I have ideas, but she’s the one who has to figure out how to make them work. She’s my Miriam, I guess.”

“Then I’d best not learn all my lessons from you. I have no intention of secretly pining after Miriam for a decade before finally growing the balls to propose.”

“Do you want to get dropped on the ground?”

Jason chuckled.

“Actually, yes, let me go,” he said. “I’m recovering quite quickly, so let’s give this another try.”

Jason started walking on his own, although Emir kept close in case he stumbled. Jason thought over Emir’s words for a while before speaking up, his voice troubled.

“Emir, you said people will follow my aura.”

“Yes. Jason, I haven’t just been going on and on about this to make small talk. I’ve been trying to express how your aura feels from the outside because there’s something I think you don’t understand.”

“What’s that?”

“The impact your aura has when you stop hiding it. You hide it, most of the time. Not just holding back the strength but masking the more unusual aspects of it. When you take off that mask, the way you have for these battles, people see it in full. You don’t realise the impact it has on people.”

“I get that my aura is strong and can do some weird stuff, but-”

“It’s not about how strong it is, Jason. It’s not about how you can use it. I’m talking about the most fundamental thing: how it feels. People of this world are used to potent auras floating around. Adventurers with their well-trained power. Aristocrats stuffed to the gills with monster cores, holding back their auras with magic items so they don’t give some old man a heart attack.”

He gestured around them.

“Ours is a world of personal power,” he said. “My understanding is that yours isn’t.”

“This is my world, now.”

“But you weren’t raised here. You weren’t brought up surrounded by power but, in this world, we are. Even normal rankers are exposed to auras they can barely sense, yet wash over them constantly, brushing against their perception their whole lives.”

“I’m not sure that I get your point,” Jason said.

“The point is that, in this world, we grow up learning what powerful people feel like. And what power that that doesn’t come from people feels like. I grew up visiting worship squares and seeing gods. Everyone does. And I’m not saying you feel like a god, Jason, although not entirely unlike one, either. I’m saying that your power feels like something different and the stronger you grow, the closer you get to feeling like other than just a person. You need to understand that this isn’t just me talking. Every person you meet in this world who gets a real look at your aura feels that way.”

“Are you saying I’m not a person?”

“Of course you’re a person, Jason, but your power doesn’t feel like it belongs to one. Power like that is something the people of this world grew up learning to venerate. To follow. To worship even.”

“Are you trying to get me in trouble with the gods?”

“Jason, you already are. You think just anyone can call up a god to ask for a miracle?”

“Isn’t that the whole point of prayer?”

“Most people don’t get answers, Jason, let alone a personal visitation. We’ve been watching gods appear before you as if you were a priest to all of them. We’ve watched you talk to them as if they’re equals, which is one thing, but the way talk back is very much another. People don’t think you’re a god, Jason, but we see you standing on the same stage as them. Shining with a power that is maybe closer to theirs than to ours. Everything we’ve been told about power from when we were children tells us that what you have is something to be followed. And we will follow, believe me. I don’t think you get a choice in that.”

Jason stopped walking and took a deep breath before letting it out slowly.

“I know I’m the centre of a lot of strangeness, Emir. Some I’ve chosen and some I haven’t. But I’m still just a person in the middle of it all.”

“No, you’re not. You don’t get be ‘just’ anything anymore. Look at what we’re here to do. We’re trying to rewrite reality and turn you into what? Some kind of messenger demigod? You’re limping along because you just called up the goddess of death to cut a deal.”

“I just wanted a miracle. The deal was her idea.”

Emir gave him a flat look.

“I’m not exactly refuting your point, am I?” Jason asked.

“Jason, you have a power that goes beyond just being a leader. And we both know it’s going to get less normal as the years pass, not more. People feel that and they’re going to follow you for it. At some point, you have to decide what you’re going to do about that.”

“You’ve been saying my name a lot. It feels aggressive, like a verbal finger poke.”

Emir jabbed Jason’s forehead with his finger.

“That’s because I’m trying to get something through that head. Somewhere in your mind is the idea that you’re still that lost kid I met six years ago. That you’re a normal person in extraordinary circumstances. You’re not. You *are* the extraordinary circumstances, and you’re happening to people. Sooner or later, we all need you to take responsibility for that. That’s why I’m spending all this time talking about your aura, about how it feels to be around you. That’s why I’m talking about leadership.”

“I’m looking to be an astral king, Emir, not a regular king.”

“Jason, listen to yourself. You’re not trying to be a king, you’re trying to be a special magic king. But it doesn’t matter what label you put on it. Whatever you call it, it’s about the responsibility. And you know what I’m talking about, even if you haven’t admitted it to yourself. In the Storm Kingdom, you opened a portal that shouldn’t have opened. You used it to rescue people it shouldn’t have been able to carry. Was that your first miracle, Jason?”

“Doing that almost killed me. Miracles don’t kill the people using them.”

“Yes, Jason. Sometimes they do.”

They resumed their walk in silence while Jason considered Emir’s words. His hobble became a walk and his walk became a stride, no longer worried about tripping on vines and uneven ground. Emir was hesitant to go but the battle lines needed him. It didn’t take Jason long to convince him to return to the fray. Jason continued alone and, by the time he reached Miriam, he felt largely intact. He still had a throbbing headache but his aura had settled enough that he could use it again.

Miriam was unleashing powerful magic while also issuing commands through voice chat. Like Allayeth who had trained her, the plant essence was central to Miriam’s power set. She showed visible distaste at using the bizarre plants produced by the messenger tree, but Plant specialists were always made stronger by plant-rich environments, especially when those plants had a lot of magic.

“What have you been up to?” she asked Jason when he arrived. She was standing on a large rock for vantage and he employed his now-stable aura to float up next to her.

“You asked for a miracle,” he said. “I was praying.”

“And how did that go?”

Jason closed his eyes and calmed his mind, readying to push out hard with his aura.

“I think we’re about to find out.”

They were in a tunnel, wide but easier to hold than open chambers. Miriam surrendered those chambers cheaply, but in the tunnels, the undead had to pay. Jason was floating in the air, not far behind the line where adventurers, cultists and brighthearts held back the unliving tide. The lifeless foes were eerily silent, limitless in number and unconcerned at being mowed down like grass. They had no morale to shake as they climbed over growing mounds of the undead that came before them.

Jason sent his aura flooding down the tunnel to wash over the dead. The effect was immediate as the defenders sensed the pervasive energy of undeath being washed away. The power infused in the undead as a group to devour magic thrown at them vanished; attacks that had landed weakly moments before now slammed home with impact.

Most notably affected were the brighthearts and the messengers. Their elemental powers had been the most severely impeded, fading to little or nothing by the time they struck the undead. Now those attacks were impacting hard. Explosive balls of fire sent charred and dismembered remains flying through the air. Clouds of embers and ash scoured dead flesh from dry bones. Stone spears that had been glancing off undead bodies now tore them apart, creating palisades decorated with helplessly impaled victims.

“This is your miracle?” Miriam asked. “Not bad. You just turned the largest part of our force from all but useless to highly effective.”

“The miracle isn’t mine and this isn’t it,” Jason told her. “When it comes, save your thanks for the goddess of death.”

“Death is a god.”

“Why does no one know about the gender fluid thing?”

“What?”

Jason was saved from giving an explanation, and Miriam from getting it, by the arrival of Death’s miracle. Every member of the defending side had ghostly white flames ignite over their bodies, ethereal and pure. It did not burn but had a calming warmth, shoring up morale and forestalling any panic at suddenly catching on fire.

-
- You have been affected by a miracle of Death.
 - You have been affected by [Divine Ghost Fire].
 - You may not resurrect while under this effect.
 - You are impervious to undeath energy.
 - Any undeath-related afflictions have been purged.
 - Any undead you contact or affect with your abilities will be affected by [Divine Ghost Fire] which is extremely harmful to them.

 - [Divine Ghost Fire] (affliction, damage-over-time, magic): Divine ghost fire is harmless to the living, calming the mind and shielding them from the power of undeath and purging any undeath magic from which they are suffering. Divine ghost fire spreads on contact and is extremely harmful to the undead, degrading their animating force and inflicting ongoing transcendent damage.
-

Miriam immediately saw a problem and opened up a voice channel to all the defenders.

“Don’t stop and read!” she yelled at them “Fight!”

Chapter 783

Fighting Alone

Jason hadn't yet used the ghost fire power he had gained on the undead. Now he was watching the divinely enhanced version engulf the undead like a wildfire, spreading from the defenders as if they were holy arsonists. Any time a weapon, armour or body part touched an undead, flames crawled onto it as if it had been doused in accelerant. The fire passed from one to the other until the entire battlefield was a white, ethereal inferno. Even as they burned, the undead didn't react, continuing to fight in eerie silence, until their bodies were eaten away by the fire.

Jason relaxed his suppression of the undeath energy, unnecessary when all the undead in sight were suffering under the ghostly white flames. Still nursing a divine pact hangover, the chance to let his aura rest was very welcome. Miriam also allowed herself to relax a little, ordering the ranged attackers to take a break. They tended to use the most mana, being heavily made up of spellcasters. They had a chance to recover some of that mana while the flames pushed the undead back for them.

On the battlefield, even the frontliners were taking a rest. Death's miracle had brought respite to the battlefield, although there were no illusions that the job was done. For now, though, there was peace as the piled bodies of the undead were burned to ash and rainbow smoke. The corpses the undead were animated from had been sustained by death magic, preventing them from dissolving. The ghost flames broke that power.

"This is your miracle," Miriam said.

"Death's miracle," Jason corrected.

"What did you sacrifice for this?"

"Not much. Death was looking for a pretext to step in, so it was just a token, really."

Miriam bowed her head, quietly offering a thankful prayer to the god of death.

"You are welcome, Miriam Vance," Death said, appearing next to her.

Jason looked around, seeing that once again, Death had restricted who could sense his presence. His new guise was that of a male elf, pale with sharp features and dark eyes. He wore neat grey clothes in the Yaresh style, less flashy than the outfits of tropical Rimaros. His voice was monotone, cold and hollow as an empty tomb.

Miriam knelt before him, on the rock from which she had been observing the defences. Like Jason, Death floated in the air next to her.

"Thank you, Lord Death," Miriam said, head bowed.

"Stand, Miriam Vance," Death told her. "You still command this battle."

“Of course, Lord Death,” Miriam said, standing and turning her attention back to the fight. She couldn’t help but make side glances at the god, however. She had seen gods her whole life, but this was different. This was no temple or worship square. What she was doing was important enough that a god had appeared. Even if he was mostly here for Asano, he could have hidden from her the way he had from everyone. Instead, he had appeared before her and spoken her name.

“I think you’re distracting her a little,” Jason told Death.

“She will adapt,” Death said. “Her will is strong.”

“She has carried a lot on this expedition,” Jason said. “Including my noob leadership, most of the time. And now she carries your hopes. I can promise you that they are in good hands.”

“I know,” Death said.

Miriam drew a sharp, startled breath, not taking her eyes from the battle. She stood rigid between Jason and the god, head spinning as they casually chatted. Like every child, she had been taught how to act during a god’s visitation to a worship square or a temple. No one had ever told her what to do now.

“Thanks for the miracle, by the way,” Jason said.

“It was an equitable pact, Jason Asano. There is no need for thanks.”

“I’ll thank you anyway.”

“Then I shall thank you again for retrieving my clergy those years ago. Allowing them to be snatched away and locked in stasis, out of my reach, was a grave failing on my part. Doubly so as they could neither live their lives nor reach their deaths. For faith in me they were returned to a world where almost everyone they knew was centuries dead. The places they lived were often unrecognisable, if not gone entirely.”

“How are they reacclimatising?” Jason asked.

“Some better than others. They were happy to learn of your return from the grave. Despite my admonitions at the sentiment.”

Jason noticed the slightest smile tease the corners of Death’s mouth, even as his voice remained gravestone flat. He saw curiosity gnawing at Miriam in her expression but she couldn’t bring herself to ask in front of the god.

“We gods have asked them to leave you be, for the moment,” Death continued.

“Many look up to you in a way that we know you are not yet comfortable with. I would advise caution should you encounter the former Purity priests, however. Those who did not find other faiths have suffered. Many are confused and lost. Some have taken their own lives. Others are angry, and some of that rage is directed at you, irrational as that is.”

“Anger doesn’t have to make sense. And they came by it honestly. Did Purity sanction himself and get replaced by Disguise while they were locked away?”

“Yes.”

“That’s why he rejected all his priests, then?”

“You are correct,” Death said. “Disguise moved slowly and carefully on first adopting the role of Purity. As time passed and the clergy changed with the passage of generations, he moved it painstakingly towards the extreme aspects of Purity’s remit.”

“But a bunch of people who knew the original recipe wouldn’t go for the new spicier flavour.”

“It would have been a risk not worth taking, yes.”

“Do you not feel even a little bad about not telling everyone that Disguise was faking it for centuries?”

“Jason!” Miriam hissed.

“Worry not, Miriam Vance,” Death told her. “I take no offence at Jason Asano’s question. It is one being asked of us all around the world, even by our faithful. Especially by our faithful. Have you not asked that question yourself, Miriam Vance? Even in your own mind?”

“I... have,” Miriam admitted.

“There is no shame in doubt, child,” Death told her, his voice warmer than it had been. “Wisdom comes from knowledge, not ignorance. There is a relationship between gods and mortals, and you were deceived. We were frustrated, as much as our kind can be, but we could do nothing. The hidden gods operate differently from those of us who work in the open. There is a place of worship dedicated to me in every township large enough that we are not worshipped collectively in a single hall. My presence exists everywhere in this world where things live and die. My influence has a home in every city and hamlet, and I employ it every day. Gods like Undeath, Destruction and Disguise have only hidden strongholds that are constantly being hunted. They hoard their power, saving it for their attempts at grand works of depravity. Masquerading as Purity was Disguise’s greatest triumph, and all we could do was watch and wait.”

“For what?” Miriam asked.

“For you to figure out the truth.”

“Me?” Miriam asked, eyes wide and voice an octave higher than normal as she turned to stare at Death.

“Mortals,” Death clarified.

Jason stifled a chuckle as Miriam turned beet red.

“Eyes on the battle, Miriam Vance,” Death reminded her gently.

Miriam let out a whimpering noise as she turned her gaze back to the fight. Her body language was that of a turtle who found itself with no shell to crawl into, despite really, *really* wanting to.

Despite her nervousness, Miriam’s mind was racing. She was concentrating on the changing state of the battle and the reactions of her forces. The commands she issued through group chat showed no indication of her unease at the presence of the god only Asano could see.

She glanced at Jason, showing nothing but complete ease in his body language and his aura. It genuinely looked as if he was unfazed by the undead army, the miracle in front of them or the presence of the god responsible for it. He noticed her look and nodded, absently scratching his ear. Whatever he had given up to have Death turn the tide of battle, she was certain it was not so inconsequential as he claimed. If he didn’t want to say then she wouldn’t push, restricting herself to silent gratitude as she turned her attention back to the battle.

Fresh waves of undead were moving in to replace the massive losses they’d suffered from the flames. Many of the elemental messengers hadn’t been able to fight at all thus far, for fear of their power being drained. The disappearance of the power devouring their magic and the comforting power of divine ghost fire had emboldened them. Miriam only realised how much when they surged into the attack, flying over the frontline en masse.

“Oh, gods damn it all!” Miriam snarled. “We can barely communicate with these things. How am I meant to get them back into tactical positions?”

“It’s good they actually matter now,” Jason said.

“They won’t matter if they get isolated and cut down. We can’t rely on Death’s power forever; this is our fight.”

Jason smiled at Death’s slight nod of approval, although Miriam missed it as she directed the battle lines to adapt to the messengers running wild.

“The tree is the key to the messengers,” Jason said. “I don’t think it has a mind, but it has a will. Maybe I could try and impart your intentions to it?”

“A multi-stage communication line with an entity that has instincts but maybe not intelligence? No way of issuing clear instructions that it may or may not agree with? In battle, Operations Commander, simplicity is what works. Sometimes. Complexity lasts exactly as long as it takes for one thing to happen and the plan is out the window. I appreciate the offer, but issuing commands to an unreliable ally through a game of whispers with a tree is not something I have time to try.”

The actions of the messengers had blown away Miriam's nervousness at the presence of their divine observer as if she'd forgotten his presence. While she'd been explaining to Jason why talking to the tree wouldn't help she'd also been issuing orders across multiple voice channels. Her eyes scanned the field to assess the new situation and look for optimal responses, realigning their forces accordingly. At least the ones that would listen to her.

Jason resumed his aura suppression, using it on the most powerful undead. The gold-rank abominations were too strong for him to entirely suppress, but even partial diminution of their power helped. With their powers diminished and the weaker undead cleared out by fire, the defenders came crashing down on one abomination after another.

"What do you think?" Jason asked once Miriam had stopped barking out constant orders through voice chat. "Is it enough? Will we hold them out of the natural array chamber?"

"Yes. I'm about to order us to push forward and reclaim some of the ground we've given. They'll be back, but it won't be enough. We'll hold."

"Then it's all about the citadel chamber."

"Yes. Fighting back the undead is one thing, but that purple light is another. Once it infests the wall, they're done. Can you push that light back with whatever you're doing to the ambient magic?"

"No. I've felt it growing, and that's not just something in the ambient magic. It's something deeper. The god of undeath is claiming territory, seeping his power into the ground. He's making it his domain. I know that power better than most and it will take more than an aura to stop it."

"Unholy ground?" Miriam asked.

"Yes," Jason said. "I think he's trying to turn this entire underground realm into a massive temple."

"He is," Death confirmed. "Undeath is claiming territory."

"Then what do we do about the wall?" Miriam asked. "Will that fire stop death from expanding his territory over it?"

"No," Death said. "That is why the ghost fire is only half of the miracle I promised."

"What was the other half?" Jason asked.

"Undeath had been liberally spending his influence in this place," Death said.

"Isn't that his whole thing?" Jason asked. "Saving it up his 'interfere with the mortal realm' tokens so he can use them all on the big prize? Also, you didn't answer my question."

“Physical reality is a place of limits, even if we gods have none,” Death said. Jason rolled his eyes as his question still went unanswered.

“Those limits,” Death continued, “are inescapable if we wish to exert our influence on the physical realm. We gods are in balance; an intricate harmony that works much like the natural world does. We are a part of the natural order, after all. Even gods like Corruption, Destruction and Pain have their place. But Undeath is an exception. Corruption exists within the natural cycle, but the concept of undeath is a corruption of the cycle itself. Its god likewise stands apart, not understanding the balance that exists between the rest of us. He cannot understand it because it is his nature not to. We must, therefore, rein him in from time to time.”

“Then why are we even fighting his creepy army?” Jason asked. “Go tell him off. Is that the other part of the miracle? Telling him off?”

“Yes.”

“Wait, really?”

“I have reset the territory he has claimed, quashing his domain, but that is as much as I can do. He has already started building it again and I cannot intervene a second time, even as he continues to act. Balance affects me, just as it does him. He has long garnered his power to influence the mortal realm and now he spends it. His domain has started spreading again and his priests conduct a terrible working in the darkness. The conflict between Undeath and myself is a proxy war now, fought between his priests and your adventurers. I hope you do well.”

Death was gone as suddenly and silently as he had appeared, without so much as a disturbance of the air.

“Did Death just make us his generals in a holy war?” Miriam asked.

“Yep. I’d say that deserves a sandwich but the air here is pretty funky. It’d probably taste weird.”

“How can you be so casual about this?”

“Nothing’s changed,” Jason said. “We were always going to fight. If you get worked up some diamond-rankers, gods or great astral beings take an interest in you, you’ll never get anything done.”

“That does not feel even remotely correct.”

Jason chuckled.

“I get it,” he said. “A god is relying on you and you’re feeling that pressure. But I’ll say it again: nothing’s changed. Put it out of your mind and do what you were already going to do.”

Miriam gave a nervous nod. She would not have let that lack of confidence show to any of her subordinates in the expedition, but Jason was her commander. He was the only one she could go to for comfort and he did his best.

“If we can hold long enough to activate the devices here and in the citadel chamber,” he said, “then we can face them in the transformation zone. There, Undeath’s power won’t be able to reach them. The undead will also be divided up into zones, so the priests won’t be able to influence them until they conquer those zones one by one. Which means that we can beat them. There is a path to victory, Miriam. We just have to walk it.”

She nodded, assuring herself.

“We just have hold long enough for the devices to activate,” she said, glancing down the tunnel behind them. That way led to Clive and the ritualists getting ready in the array chamber.

“Yes,” Jason said. “If the citadel doesn’t have to deal with their wall turning purple and evil, then the defenders there just have to hold against the undead.”

“You’re the one who has been speaking to them,” Miriam said. “Do you think they can?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think; I’m out of things to do about it from here. At this point, all we can do is trust our friends.”

“I don’t have any friends over there,” Miriam said. “I’ve only just met most of these people.”

“Well, I do have friends over there,” Jason said. “And believe me, friends are better than allies.”

“You’re not worried about losing them?”

“Oh, terrified. I’ve lost people before. But if you try and leave them behind for their own protection, they won’t thank you. I lost a brother, a lover and a friend because they decided to fight alongside me. I blamed myself for letting them come along, but I ultimately accepted that they made their own choices. They chose to stand and fight for their world and I had no right to take that from them. We don’t get to do that. I’ve been here before, Miriam. Armies of undead, transformation zones, everything on the line. After I lost those people, I took on the rest of it alone. That helped me realise that what I needed more than anything else was to have the people I trust at my back. This time I do, and I’ll take that over fighting alone every time.”

Chapter 784

Insufficient Vessel

The death chamber side of the wall was an unrecognisable ruin from its days as a vertical stack of buildings. The outer walls had been staved in by the invading undead, exposing the insides the defenders had barricaded. Gary stood between the undead and one such barricade, holding them off while the people on the other side reinforced it. It was a large breach, the interior walls smashed apart, and blocking it off effectively was taking time.

Having trapped himself on the unpleasant side, Gary hadn't expected to last long. His only intention had been to keep the undead off until his support team finished their work, but then the impossible happened. Just as he was about to be overwhelmed, his body had lit up with flames that burned away the undead dog-piling him.

The white fire and the red glow between the plates of his armour were the only sources of light. The encroaching purple glow of Undeath's domain had vanished with the arrival of the flames, plunging the city into darkness. Now the only light amongst the ruined buildings came from burning undead. As they were tossed off the wall, engulfed in flames, they fell amongst their brethren like sparks in dry brush. The divine ghostly fire swiftly spread from every point they landed.

Jason's interface power had given Gary a message that he had briefly skimmed. After spotting the words 'Death,' 'goddess' and 'miracle,' he decided that was all he needed to know. He closed the window and started swinging his hammer, learning the rest by doing. It was just good to know Jason's interface power was up and running again, punching through the magic interference. Voice chat would have been better, but either the lingering elemental power or the undeath energy was still blocking it.

A zombie messenger loomed over Gary as it lumbered forward, lifting its arms and bringing them back down like twin hammers. They landed on Gary's shield which budged as much as a windscreen struck by a bug. White flames ran up the zombie's arms as if coated in petrol and Gary sent it stumbling back with a mighty shove. It fell into the undead crammed shoulder-to-shoulder behind it and the flames quickly jumped onto them.

Gary's hammer rose and fell in a mad rush, like a xylophone player on way too much caffeine. Heads were smashed open and limbs torn off by blunt force, every strike delivering more of the ghostly fire. The head of his hammer crashed through the hard shell of an undead beetle the size of a compact car, its insides being some kind of fluid. The

fluid proved extremely flammable before the ghostly fire. The flames reached it and the beetle immediately detonated, annihilating itself and all the undead around it.

Gary's shield took the bulk of the blast that came his way but it still hit him like a runaway train. He was hurtled back like a thrown rock, bouncing off the barricade to land heavily on the floor. He immediately pushed himself up, turning to the open wall to look for undead. The explosion had cleared it and, thus far, no more were crawling in. Peace wouldn't last with more undead always on the way, but it gave him a brief moment of calm.

He'd dropped his hammer in the blast and pressed his empty weapon hand to the barricade while whispering a spell, his voice hoarse.

"Let integrity be clear in my eyes."

-
- You have used [Inspector's Eye].
 - You are able to perceive the structural integrity of rigid objects, assessing weak and strong points.
 - Abilities used by you to weaken or strengthen objects you have inspected are enhanced.
 - Non-magical crafting abilities will have enhanced effects when actively used in conjunction with this ability.
-

The magic allowed Gary to assess the state of the barricade. His support team on the other side of it had made good use of the time he bought them, sealing the breach with a solid barrier, but his spell showed him the weak points left by the rush to get it done. He wanted to use his own powers to fix them but he had neither the time nor the mana to spare.

The thought made him realise how quiet it was behind him. The undead did not yell or scream in battle but that only made the sound of them scrambling up half-shattered stairs and climbing through broken walls easier to hear. The absence of that sound meant something unusual, and Gary wasn't having the kind of day where unusual turned out to be a good thing.

He looked to the entrance to see a huge leonid standing in the shattered gap of the outer wall. Taller than Gary by a head, he wore simple armour and no weapons. The armour was worn but well-maintained to Gary's trained eye, even as his spell failed to assess it. Gary stared at the leonid for a long time, trying not to look crestfallen.

"Lord Hero," Gary said. He did not kneel, only nodding to the god.

"Well met, Gareth."

The god's voice was quiet for a leonid, soft and gentle like a hand cradling a baby bird.

Gary moved to pick up his dropped hammer. He then rested it on the ground, the handle sticking up ready to be grabbed quickly.

“If you’ll forgive me saying, Lord Hero, it isn’t well met. Meeting you on a day like this is as grim as it gets.”

“I understand. I see people on their darkest days, which is when they are shining brightest.”

“That must be nice for you. The wall isn’t going to hold, then? Even with that purple filth pushed back?”

“It will not. The fires will slow the dead but their numbers are too many. You have seen for yourself that this wall was never intended to be a defensive line.”

Gary nodded.

“The barricades we put up are stronger than the wall itself,” he said. “The brighthearts hollowed it out, leaving just enough strength that the whole thing didn’t collapse. To not fall over and little more.”

“I am sorry, Gareth.”

“Are you?” Gary asked, his voice bitter. “Aren’t these the days you live for? The heroic last stands? The blaze of glory that will live in song for a thousand years?”

“Yes,” Hero admitted. “These are the days I live for.”

Gary hung his head.

“I didn’t want to come here, you know,” he said in little more than a whisper. “I wanted to put this life behind me. Be a smith. Master my craft and forge the tools that carried my friends to victory. It would have been easier to found another damn city than dig out what’s left of the last one and rebuild it.”

“Yet, if you and your companions hadn’t, the results would have been a disaster on far greater a scale than just one razed city.”

“We didn’t know that.”

“No, you did not. You, yourself, had the choice not to join, Gareth.”

“No I didn’t,” Gary growled. “This isn’t just some monster hunt I could merrily wait for them to come back from. What kind of man would let his friends go off and do this without him?”

Hero smiled.

“The kind I will never meet.”

“Lucky me. Are you holding back the undead?”

“They are avoiding me. Even these mindless creations know to be wary of a god. The echo of Undeath’s power in them, perhaps.”

“Then go stand in one of the big breaches and leave me alone.”

“You know that’s not how it works, Gareth.”

“Yeah,” Gary growled. “I know. But this shouldn’t count as a sacrifice, anyway. I’m going to live. With this magic fire, the breach behind me closed and the undead on the back foot, I can fight my way to an open breach and get back inside.”

“You didn’t know about Death’s miracle when you came out here, Gareth. You believed that you came here to die. People keep thinking that what the gods want in sacrifice is their lives, but that is not the case. You chose to come out here, believing you would die. Your choice was the sacrifice, not your life.”

“For all the good it did me. Might as well get it over with, then. Bring it out.”

Hero nodded and stepped forward until he was within arm’s reach of Gary. He held out one hand and conjured a large goblet into it. The cup was made of the same dark metal as Gary’s armour. Engravings etched into it glowed with the light of molten steel. Hero took his other hand and held a single finger over the goblet.

A rainbow dewdrop appeared on the fingertip, hanging for a moment before falling into the cup. The goblet lit up as it filled with liquid swirling gold, silver and blue, light shining from the top to light up the inside of the building.

“This cup—” Hero began before Gary snatched it from his hand.

“I know what it is,” Gary snarled. Not a single drop had splashed from the goblet as he grabbed it, despite the rough treatment.

“Gareth, this choice—”

“Isn’t a choice,” Gary said, cutting off the god again. Hero made no sign of anger, his expression instead that of a proud but sad father.

“The fact that you see it that way,” Hero said, “is what brought us both here.”

“How long?” Gary asked as he peered into the cup.

“Around seven hours.”

Gary nodded, put the cup to his lips and quaffed it down. None of the liquid spilled from the sides of his mouth, despite crudely chugging it. He tossed the cup aside when he was done and picked up his hammer.

“How long does it take to—”

Gary staggered, dropping his hammer again as power surged through him like a fire-hose enema. Silver light filled his body, glowing under his skin and blazing from his eyes and mouth, open in a silent scream. He dropped to his knees and slumped, head lolled back and motionless as a corpse.

- You have drunk from the Cup of Heroes.
 - You have accepted divine power into your soul.
 - You have absorbed divine power belonging to the Pallimustus god of heroes. Unless you are isolated from the god's influence. The divine power will naturally work to leave your soul and rejoin the god. Your soul can resist this for another seven hours and forty-one minutes before the power overcomes your ability to contain it.
 - Your body is an insufficient vessel to sustain the current spiritual strength of your soul.
 - Your divine power is reforging your body into a physical and spiritual gestalt to contain your spiritual strength.
-

The light inside Gary shone brighter and brighter. It would be utterly blinding to almost anyone, but the solitary divine witness was unimpeded. He watched through the light as Gary's conjured armour and the clothes beneath dissolved into nothing. Gary's body then did the same. The light vanished, leaving the chamber dark and empty save for Hero and Gary's hammer, still laying on the floor.

Hero felt Gary's soul dragging magic from the astral and using it to forge not just a new body but itself. It began with a golden spark that expanded like a singularity at the birth of a universe. The chamber was flooded with a more blinding light than ever, but this time warm gold instead of cold silver.

Hero watched Gary's new form coalesce, body and soul merging into a single, cohesive state. It came into being kneeling on the floor, head bowed as if he had fallen asleep meditating. Still blazing with light, Gary's new body started moving. He shook his head as if to clear it after waking up. The light faded almost entirely away until all that was left was Gary kneeling naked on the floor. Now the golden light shone only from his eyes.

- Your [Hammer] essence has been replaced with the [Divine Hammer] essence. Your [Divine Hammer] essence abilities have reached [Gold 0].
- Your [Fire] essence has been replaced with the [Divine Fire] essence. Your [Divine Fire] essence abilities have reached [Gold 0].
- Your [Iron] essence has been replaced with the [Divine Iron] essence. Your [Divine Iron] essence abilities have reached [Gold 0].
- Your [Forge] confluence essence has been replaced with the [Demigod] essence.
- Essence ability [Craftsman's Gaze] has been replaced with [All-Seeing Eye]. [All-Seeing Eye] has reached [Gold 0].
- Essence ability [Stoke the Forge] has been replaced with [First Son of the Leonids]. [First Son of the Leonids] has reached [Gold 0].
- Essence ability [Inspector's Eye] has been replaced with [Vessel of the Ancestors]. [Vessel of the Ancestors] has reached [Gold 0].
- Essence ability [Refinement Process] has been replaced with [Divine Forge]. [Divine Forge] has reached [Gold 0].

- Essence ability [Hand that Holds the Hammer] has been replaced with [Hero]. [Hero] has reached [Gold 0].
-

Gary rose unsteadily to his feet. He looked much the same but with some key differences. He was larger than Hero now, taller and broader of shoulder. His proportions remained identical, however, as if he'd been scaled up from the original. The other major difference was his eyes, a pair of golden orbs that lit up the chamber.

- You have reached [Gold rank].
 - Essence ability may advance beyond [Gold 0].
 - You have an innate resistance to, and damage reduction against, silver-rank and lower effects.

 - Demigod essence ability [Hero] has reached gold [Gold 1].
 - Demigod essence ability [Hero] has reached gold [Gold 2].
 - Demigod essence ability [Hero] has reached gold [Gold 3].
 - Demigod essence ability [Hero] has reached gold [Gold 4].
 - Demigod essence ability [Hero] has reached gold [Gold 5].
 - Demigod essence ability [Hero] has reached gold [Gold 6].
 - Demigod essence ability [Hero] has reached gold [Gold 7].
 - Demigod essence ability [Hero] has reached gold [Gold 8].
 - Demigod essence ability [Hero] has reached gold [Gold 9].
 - Demigod essence ability [Hero] has reached diamond [Diamond 0].
-

Hero gestured at Gary whose nakedness was immediately covered in pants and a gambeson of pristine white. Gary made a gesture of his own and a golden fire came into existence, floating in the air before him. It shed enough heat to make the air shimmer.

- You have used [Divine Forge].
-

Pieces of plated armour started floating out of the fire and attaching themselves to Gary's body. The plates were shining black and etched with gold. As each one settled next to another, the glow of molten steel lit up between them. The final piece was a shield in the same black and gold, molten steel lines running over it, encircling the gold etching. When the armour was complete it covered Gary neck to toe, leaving only his head revealed. His mane hung wildly behind him, his face a vision of power.

- You have forged [Gary's Divine Armour]. This armour is a divine relic.
-

There were small hooks set around the waist of the armour. Tiny hammers emerged from the fire and floated to Gary, the loops on their handles settling over the hooks.

-
- You have forged [Gary's Large Hammer].
 - You have forged [Gary's Large Hammer].
 - You have forged [Gary's Large Hammer].
 - You have forged [Gary's Large Hammer].
 - You have forged [Gary's Large Hammer].
 - You have forged [Gary's Large Hammer].
-

Gary knelt to pick up the hammer still laid on the floor. He stood up straight and shoved the hammer and half of his arm into the flames still burning in the air. The fire shrank slowly as it was absorbed into the hammer until the fire was gone entirely, leaving the reforged hammer in Gary's hand.

- You have forged [Gary's Medium Hammer] into [Gary's Last Hammer].
-

The hammer was not ostentatious or ornately crafted like the armour he now wore. It was a simple thing, made from a single piece of what looked like ordinary steel. It was a sledge with an oversized head and a steel handle wrapped in cloth for grip. It was plain and crude, looking more like a tool than a weapon.

Gary dropped his arm to his side, the hammer resting in his hand so comfortably it was like a part of him.

"You are ready," Hero said. "The fight rages on, Gareth, and it is time for you to rejoin it."

Gary nodded and headed for the open wall leading into the death chamber. He paused at the threshold, half turning his head. When he spoke, his voice was resigned but also resolved.

"Thank you, Hero. For giving me the power to save them."

"No, hero," the god told him. "Thank *you*."