

## 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."*

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- 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.
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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.

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- 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.
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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.

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- 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].
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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.

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- 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].
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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.

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- You have used [Divine Forge].
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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.

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

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

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