

Chapter 790

What He Wants For Himself

Gabriel swept his sword in a horizontal arc and a wave of flame washed over the undead. This left the lesser undead falling apart as their flesh turned to ash and their bones to dust, but the greater ones continued unabated. A massive claw from some burrowing monster, grafted to the arm of a messenger, was swung at his head. He vanished, teleporting just a few steps back.

The teleport disorientation was light from a short-range power and he was used to it after years of use, so he didn't lose even half a step. Even so, his wife beat him to the punch as streams of white magic flowed into the patchwork monstrosity. Foul black ichor oozed from the seams where crude stitches had fused flesh and the abomination collapsed, tumbling off the ledge.

"Where have you been?" he asked as Arabelle dropped down from a higher level.

"Setting up some recording crystals," she told him.

"Is this really the time?" he asked.

In response, she pointed at the golden lion and the shackled zombie clashing with such force that shockwaves were visible in how they stirred the dust around them.

"We're seeing a legend play out in front of us," she said. "We may not be able to save Gary, but we can make sure he's remembered for saving us."

More of the lesser undead crawled up to their level and Gabriel cleared them with another flame wave.

"I don't think being remembered as a hero is what Gary wants for himself," Gabriel told his wife.

"No," Arabelle agreed. "But what else can we do?"

"We can remember him as a friend. *That's* what he wants for himself."

"Are we done?" Clive asked, sounding surprised at his own question. He stood with Farrah overlooking the formation array of ritual circles set up around the tree.

"Yeah," Farrah said. "This is as far as we can go until the other ritual is active so we can make final calibrations. We need the citadel team to start up the device in the echo array chamber."

"I shall tell them they can begin," Shade said from Farrah's shadow.

"That leaves the question of how long after we fire this up does everything happen?" Farrah told Clive.

“I’ve never seen a section of the universe break down into elements based on shortcuts made by the being that created it,” Clive said. “Enough time for a sandwich, I think.”

“It was thoughtful of Jason to leave us a snack table.”

“I’ve been saving the one with the fire cherry sauce,” he said turning around. “There’s nothing as delicious as good food done after hard work... where’s my sandwich?”

He looked at the plate now containing only a few crumbs and a note telling no one else to eat it.

“BELINDA!”

Zara’s windstorm scoured lesser undead from the face of the wall while a lightning arrow from one of her team’s strikers chained between the more powerful ones. She couldn’t count how many they’d destroyed or at least sent flying, forcing them to return to the wall and start climbing again. Even so, their numbers seemed limitless and the wall ever more fragile. She glanced over at the massive harpoon still buried in it, the broken chain dangling from the back.

Like other groups in the defensive force, they’d been tasked with focusing on an area around one of the dozen harpoons. These were weak points in the wall and there was no telling if the giant zombie would attempt to use them again. Like with the avatar tying up Asano’s leonid friend, it served to draw defenders away from the breaches. More and more, the strange explosive undead were getting through and further weakening the wall.

Boris the messenger looked at the now active magical device as the light it shed changed colour again. The rate at which it shifted increased until a second colour at a time was added. More and more colours came with rapidly escalating shifts until it was a blinding kaleidoscope filling the room.

“Well, that’s it,” he said.

“What now?” Marla asked.

“Now we hope the people in the natural array chamber got something very complicated exactly right.”

“Will it work?” she asked, her stern façade cracking to reveal her nervousness.

“I’m not Asano,” Boris said. “This is my first time breaking a universe. For all I know, we’re all about to die. Which means...”

He turned to look at Marla.

"...we should treat each moment as if it's our last. I know the quiet-yet-undeniable longing between us has gone unspoken—"

Marla strode out the door and Boris shook his head.

"The icy chains she has wrapped around her own heart—"

"She's gay," the brightheart guard on the door said.

"Oh," Boris said. "So that's how she resisted my raw animal magnetism."

"Sure," the guard said. "*That's* how."

It began with a cracking sound. A whole section of wall slid away from the seventh level, turning into an avalanche as the already stressed support structure started giving way. The result wasn't just a breach but the beginning of a slow but unstoppable collapse. Defenders were scrambling to reach safety, rushing back through the breaches to the citadel side. Some were caught on the collapsing side and were forced to get out of the way of falling stone as best they could.

The wall fell in large patches, starting with the façades but taking enough supporting structure with it that whole sections fell away. After the first few moments, it was hard to tell what was happening as clouds of dust obscured everything. The wall, its defenders and the undead attacking it were all obscured, their fates uncertain to anyone looking on.

Garth and Jameela were doing just that. They couldn't see the wall but the ongoing sounds of collapse dwarfed the thunder of a storm, filling the air more thoroughly than the dust.

"And the final line of defence falls," Garth said with satisfaction, letting out a laugh.

"Listen to this guy," Jason muttered, observing Garth through one of Shade's bodies. "You can't go around laughing like Skeletor when you already look like him. And he needs to learn that the guy inside the explosion cloud is never really dead. Actually, who am I kidding? I would totally go the Skeletor motif."

"What are you mumbling about?" Emir asked. "I can't hear you over all this."

Emir was moving quickly, his staff extending and shrinking as he deflected debris from the collapsing wall away from the living defenders.

"Don't worry about it," Jason told him through voice chat.

Garth and Jameela continued looking on, but it was hard to make anything out. Even the erratic lights of adventurer spells and brightheart powers had died out, leaving the two divine giants as the only sources of light. They hadn't even paused to look as the wall

came down, still hitting one another with weapons or even parts of the city, picked up and hurled.

“Now they can’t stop us,” Garth crowed, audible as the rumbling collapse finally fell away. It still echoed through the chamber but the cacophonous sound was finally dying out.

“They barely had the people to hold the breaches,” Garth continued gleefully, “let alone an open pile of rubble. They’ll have lost defenders, too, trapped if not killed outright.”

“I doubt they’ve lost many,” Jameela said. “The brighthearts, perhaps, but the adventurers are elites. They’re fast and capable whereas our undead have no sense of self-preservation. It’s hard to see through the dust but I imagine we lost far more than the enemy.”

“Which we can well afford while their every loss is a blow.”

“But it will cost us time,” Jameela pointed out. “If all the undead we had at the wall were crushed, or as many as makes no difference, then we will need our forces to replenish before they can cross the rubble. We still need to breach the chamber and bring down the citadel.”

“Yes,” Garth agreed. “Thank you, Priestess; getting ahead of myself is unwise. The defenders might not have a lot of time left, but we should take as much of it from them as we can. Signal the priests commanding the undead to have them push on, even if the wall is still in the process of falling. Be clear that only progress matters; losses are irrelevant.”

While Jameela used the skeleton standing by them to relay commands to the other priests, Garth continued to look at the wall. Darkness did not impede his vision, the red pinpricks of light in his skull sockets not operating the same way as eyes. They could not see through the dust cloud, however, so when light started appearing within it, he had no idea of the source.

“What is that?”

Jameela turned from the skeleton to follow the priest’s gaze. The blue and orange light shining within the dust cloud was easy to spot in the dark. It suffused the cloud, growing brighter and more widespread by the moment. Garth expanded his senses, pushing them through the turbulent magic and roiling auras that pervaded the chamber. The divine auras were the hardest to penetrate, blanketing everything with their vast, clashing power. Garth did manage to sense something floating in the dust cloud, fragile but volatile, and extremely numerous.

As he focused on his senses, Garth noticed something else that had escaped his attention so far, much closer to himself. Even trying to isolate it, he found it hard to pin

down, like shadows dancing in the light of a fire. He looked around, attempting to catch it with his senses like trapping a skittering bug.

“What is it?” Jameela asked.

“It’s my familiar,” came a voice as a dark figure emerged from the shadow of a broken section of wall. It was some manner of shadow entity, made of darkness but with touches of white that made it appear like a neatly dressed humanoid. It gave off the sense of being the ghost of an impeccably attired servant.

“You’re Asano,” Garth said.

“Your boss told you about me? Probably to make sure you kill me if you get the chance.”

“Yes, but that won’t be necessary. The citadel will fall shortly. Your demigod has failed.”

“Is that so? The way I see it, not only have you failed but you were always destined to do so.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Because the undead are as ugly as it gets. What’s your name, bloke?”

“I am Garth Larosse, High Priest of Undeath.”

“I’m Jason Asano, man’s man, ladies’ man, man about town.”

“You’re a fool.”

“Oh yes.”

“Why would the undead being ugly have any bearing on victory here?”

“Because it’s not about what you do, Garth; it’s about how good you look doing it.”

“You’re just blustering.”

“Yeah, but you’ll get used to it. The important thing you need to realise is that, as you’re about to see for yourself, I make this look *good*.”

The shadowy figure turned to look at the dust cloud, now filled to bursting with blue and orange light. Tiny shapes could be made out, flittering within.

“What is that?” Garth asked again.

Like water from a bursting dam, a torrent of tiny glowing butterflies rushed out of the dust cloud. They spilled into the air, a waterfall of light to rival Niagara, pouring down on the undead as they clambered over their own fallen and the rubble that used to be the wall.

“Harbingers of doom?” Garth said.

“You recognise them?” Jason asked, not hiding his surprise.

“They won’t be enough to stop all my undead.”

“No, but look at that light show. Of secondary importance to the visual spectacle is that they’ll slow your creepy army down, which is all we need.”

“We’ll see.”

“We already have, can’t you feel it? The universe starting to tear itself apart? Maybe your creepy undead body isn’t great at picking up on dimensional phenomena. Still, you’re rocking that awesome Skeletor aesthetic, so worth the trade. Way to be a chuuni, bloke.”

“You’re speaking nonsense.”

“Once you get to know me, you’ll realise that’s how you know you’re in trouble.”

“He’s not bluffing, High Priest,” Jameela said. “I can sense something happening around us. The world feels wrong, somehow. Like standing on a frozen lake as the ice starts to crack.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “I just got word the ritual was off to the races. I need to go talk to a guy, but we’ll probably chat again in the transformation zone. That’s what it’s called, by the way, the unformed reality we’ll be fighting over. See you in there.”

Garth reached out to grab the shadow creature but it dissolved into nothing.

“We’ve failed,” Jameela said.

“Victory may have eluded us for now,” Garth said, “but they have not won. They have only avoided defeat. The battlefield is shifting but the battle continues.”

The zombie avatar backed off, retreating rapidly back to the city. Neither Gary nor the avatar had managed to significantly harm the other, the power flowing through them too great to be easily extinguished. Gary released the Vessel of the Ancestors ability, shrinking back to normal size. He was concerned it would accelerate the divine power’s passage from his body if he maintained the state too long.

Blue and orange butterflies lit up what passed for a sky in the chamber, seeking out the undead. None came close to Gary as the undead were avoiding him, even after shrinking down. He looked up at the spectacular light display.

“Can’t help showing off, can you?”

“What can I say?” Jason asked, stepping out of a shadow. “The difference is presentation.”

“It’s strange, being able to sense you coming.”

“Yeah, I can’t hide from divine eyes quite yet. Give me a while and I’ll figure it out.”

“I don’t think I’ll have time to wait, sorry.”

Jason put a hand on Gary’s arm, not just for comfort but to examine his demigod state.

"You're a mess, bloke."

"I'm afraid not even one of your ridiculous stunts can get me out of this one, Jason."

"I can feel the power trying to return to Hero. We're about to go somewhere it can't get away, though. That might buy you some time."

"It will," Gary said. "But that debt will have to be paid eventually."

"Yeah, but I'm pretty sure Hero wants you to live."

"I don't think he gets a choice, Jason."

"I don't think he does, no. But maybe, every now and again, he gets an opportunity."

"What are you saying?"

"That maybe this time, the one who gets the choice is you."