

## Chapter 785

### Twin Flames

The brightheart city had once been a subterranean wonder. Sustaining a population in the hundreds of thousands in an enclosed ecology, far from the air and light, was anything but easy. Even with magic, every choice came with compromise, some easier than others.

Gutting the wall between the citadel and main city chambers had seemed like a painless choice. It offered a useful framework and hundreds of tons of raw material, both ideal for stone-shapers. Turning the wall into homes, shops and government administration as the city expanded was an elegant solution. What did the compromised integrity of the wall matter? They hadn't pushed it to dangerous levels, and who would bring war to their deeply buried home?

The city chamber was now a chamber of death. The building façades were unrecognisable, torn open by the undead crawling inside like ants over a corpse. The barricades set up mid-building were the true defensive line, and were near-impenetrable on the lower levels. That strength waned as the levels went up, time and materials both in limited supply.

The undead were like water, following the path of least resistance. They crawled up exposed stairwells, their exteriors ripped away. They climbed the walls of inactive elevating platform shafts, silver-rank strength gouging grip-holds from the stone. They even climbed over piles of other undead, either slower to move or already inert after encountering defenders.

The fifth floor was the break-even point where the defences were weak enough and the level accessible enough that the undead made their biggest push. Gary had stepped into a major breach on the floor, buying enough time for it to be sealed, but it wasn't enough. He was plugging holes in a boat about to snap in half.

That was when Hero stepped in. Gary was now a vision of divine power, standing taller even than the god's avatar. His armour was ornate, black and gold with heat glowing red between the plates. His hammer was not ornate at all, little more than a block of steel on a metal handle. Gold scathed from his eyes like headlights, cutting through the dark.

He stood for a moment at the shattered outer wall, looking down at the flood of undead teeming through the city to the wall. A sea of lesser undead, moving islands of the greater ones interspersed through them. Death's ghostly fire lit up, shrouding his remade body.

Gary launched himself from the wall and into the city of death, trailing a comet-tail of gold and white flames. He crashed to the ground, his feet breaking the flagstone roads in spiderweb fissures. Just the shockwave of his landing destroyed the weakest undead and sent most of the others flying. It was chased by an expanding ring of gold fire that coated everything left in devouring flames.

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Lesser undead fell inert as Arabelle drained the magic from them. Streams of dark purple energy extruded from them, snaking through the air for her to collect. She did so in an ethereal jar floating behind her, the purple streams flowing into the top. At the same time, white orbs of purified death magic streaked out of the jar, shooting past the weaker undead.

The gold and silver-rank undead were too strong to be quickly eliminated by Arabelle draining the power from them. The magic animating them was stronger and greater in quantity, too much to make draining them practical. Instead, Arabelle was refining the undeath magic into the power of natural death it was a corruption of. She was concentrating that refined power into orbs and then firing them off.

The orbs ignored the weaker enemies, seeking out the strongest source of undeath magic. Their power counteracted the animating power of the undead, rarely enough to kill them outright, but enough to slow them down. It worked like a poison, setting them up for her husband Gabriel to deal with.

Gabriel Remore was a more orthodox magic swordsman than his son. While they both employed a mix of mobility, quick spells and powerful special attacks, Gabriel gave up the battle-defining finishers Rufus used for a more conventional approach. His consistent and immediate damage delivery in almost any situation was more in demand than his son's approach. Gabriel was always an in-demand adventurer while Rufus was a better fit for the oddball Team Biscuit.

Gabriel had been showing the value of the orthodox approach by playing cleanup for his wife. She was doing the weird things, throwing the undead's own magic back at them. He did the ordinary but important work of hitting things until they fell down. She defined the battlefield while he made sure nothing slipped through the cracks.

Any of the lesser undead that managed to evade Arabelle's intentions were swiftly and efficiently cleaned up by Gabriel before they got anywhere near his wife. A swift fire bolt spell or the elegant stroke of a flaming scimitar dealt with them quickly. The more powerful undead he jumped on and burned down quickly, weakened as they were by Arabelle's purified death energy.

Gabriel was always where he needed to be. Long experience as an adventurer and fighting alongside his wife made them a well-oiled machine, thorough and efficient. And efficiency was the name of the game when there was always another crisis. They had to carefully balance both time and their mana reserves to last out the battle.

He wielded the twin flames of his own power and the ghost fire as they danced together on his elegant golden scimitar. The ghost fire was invaluable to Gabriel for the simple reason that it cost no mana, allowing him to maintain a healthy reserve. This wasn't just about endurance but also the confidence of having that power available. He knew that if he needed to take a risk in the desperate defence of the wall, he had the power to save himself when something inevitably went wrong.

Even after the retreat of the purple light that marked Undeath's domain, the wall's collapse was an inevitability growing more imminent with every passing moment. They didn't have time to leave the wall and get an update on how close the ritual was to completion, and couldn't have done anything to help if they did. Their role was to buy enough time, and they both had a suspicion they weren't buying enough.

The defenders of the wall included some of the most capable adventurers on the planet and they were already giving their all. Gabriel and Arabelle Remore were certainly counted in this number, but they could not help despair creeping in at the corners of their minds. Then they felt surge a surge of overwhelming power and realised someone had given their all and more.

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- You have entered the area of a divine aura.
  - You are being affected by the aura ability [Hero].
  - All attributes are enhanced.
  - All cooldowns are reduced. All abilities have come off cooldown. They will not be reset again if you exit and re-enter the aura.
  - You have gained damage reduction.
  - You have gained resistance to all negative effects.
  - Afflictions will be periodically cleansed from you.
  - You have an ongoing healing effect.
  - You have an ongoing mana replenishment effect.
  - You have an ongoing stamina replenishment effect.
  - You have gained divine protection. Hostile divine power will be diminished in effect against you.
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Arabelle frowned. Gabriel paused after felling an undead and turned to share a look with his wife.

"Someone drank from the Cup of Heroes," he said grimly.

“Let’s not waste it,” she told him. “We needed something more and now we have it. Let’s hold this wall.”

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The shockwave of Gary's arrival on the ground wiped out an arena's worth of lesser undead. The stronger of the undead were swayed but not destroyed, for all the good it did them. They moved on Gary even as they burned, and he rushed to meet them. His blows were so powerful that anyone watching would doubt their own aura senses. Silvers were being smashed apart with a strike or two as if they were bronze rank. The golds showed the endurance of silver-rankers instead of the near-indestructibility of their true rank.

Gary was a powerhouse, wielding strength that neared diamond-rank and not one but two kinds of divine fire. One was Death’s ghostly fire while the other was his own, divine power transforming his fire essence into a weapon of the gods.

In the first minutes after landing amongst the undead, those flames and Gary's might was enough. The lesser undead were soon steering clear of the area at the direction of an undead priestess. Gary's now-divine senses picked her up, channelling her god's power to control more of the undead than she could alone. He could feel her power drawing back the lesser undead and sending more of the greater in his direction.

Greater undead charged at him from all sides. Some were returning from the direction of the wall he had leapt so far from and he grinned savagely. Every major threat that was kept from the wall bought precious moments. Most came from deeper in the city, though, scrambling over broken streets and erupting out of buildings. Clouds of dust sparkled in the light of gold and white flames as whole sections of wall gave way, not even slowing undead too large for doors.

The priestess didn't bother sending even the most powerful silvers. She was gathering the gold-rankers that were the greatest threat to the wall, realising that Gary was the greatest threat to them. More than a dozen were soon converging on Gary all at once, which was enough for him to start pulling out more powers.

Gary let his hammer drop to the ground, the handle upright as it rested on the square sledge head. He crouched down and plunged both hands into the ground as if the solid stone were a bucket of water. As far as Gary could see, golden chains erupted from the ground to entangle every one of the silver and gold-rank undead.

The undead pulled and thrashed helplessly. The chains were all shrouded in Death's ghostly fire, burning into them. Gary stood up straight, a bundle of chains held in each massive hand as he yanked them from the ground. The chains around the undead tightened, bluntly digging through them to leave burning chunks resting on the ground.

Gary felt the power of Undeath, the dark god's influence spreading from within his priestess. It touched the remains of the powerful undead, maintaining their animating force as the chunks started rolling together. They reassembled in clumsy replications of their already hideous forms, patchwork flesh abominations now more patchwork than ever.

The undead were again moving on Gary, albeit with less momentum and even more clumsiness. Undeath's power was strong, but had to contend with that of both his nemesis, Death, and Hero, currently with a rich Gary flavour. Gary was a rocket-powered bulldozer as he ploughed into the still-burning undead, his hammer smashing apart what Undeath had stitched back together.

Gary pulled out more divinely enhanced powers, his hammer glowing gold as he threw it. It flew to strike one undead before bouncing to another, each hit triggering a blast of force and the twin fires of Gary and Death. While waiting for it to come back he cast a Divine Fire Bolt, a golden fire projectile flying off to chain through the enemies like the hammer. When the hammer flew back to his hand, he held it aloft. Golden hammers rained from the sky to smash into the undead.

The power of Undeath was great, but a divinely infused agent also wielding the power of a second god's miracle was too much. A zone that minutes earlier has been a river of undead was now quiet and still. Sizzling spells and crumbling walls were distant sounds coming from the wall behind him. Ahead, the city was dark and eerily quiet for all that a monstrous army lurked within.

The priestess had never come close enough to the battle for Gary to pounce on. He could have chased her down but he was buying time, not hunting priests. The number of gold-rank undead he had just eliminated was a blow even to the seemingly endless horde. The priestess and her god were sadly aware of the sunk-cost fallacy and pulled their forces away from Gary entirely, the priestess retreating to the heart of the city while he still fought.

He looked around, deciding his next move. He could chase the priestess to the base of the enemy, tackling the undead at the source. He decided against it, knowing that victory was not in how many they killed but in how long they survived. Going after the priests and leaving the undead behind him, free to storm the walls, was a bad idea.

He turned to look at the wall, his new perception ability unhampered by darkness or even solid stone. He could see every undead, every defender, every team working to shore up or replace barricades as the wall grew shakier by the moment. His next move would be to plug some breaches and keep the ship from sinking for a little longer. He

would leave a gift for any more of the undead that came this way, though, stalling their reinforcements.

Gary walked in a large circle, a line of golden fire lighting up on the ground in his wake. When the circle was complete, the ground inside it melted, turning to lava. The molten rock then transmuted to metal, gleaming like quicksilver. From the molten metal rose a massive dark figure, white-yellow heat shining from between plates of course dark iron.

The divine forge golem loomed well over twice the height of Gary's own enhanced size. Molten metal dripped from it like water and two holes in the helmet-like head glowed with golden light from within. The metal under its feet cooled into a solid circle and the ring of fire went out. Gary wandered over and tapped the golem companionably on the thigh, then left it to stand sentinel against the next wave of undead.

Looking back to the wall, Gary picked out the spot most in need of help and started running. He gathered speed in a few strides and took a mighty leap, a golden comet streaking through the dark. He crashed into the undead surging into a breach like a meteor and immediately went to work.

## Chapter 786

### Naught But Faith

While the divine ghost fire continued to burn, it was fading in strength. What had once annihilated the lesser undead, swiftly burned through the silvers and strongly impeded the golds was now far less efficacious. Miriam adjusted tactics accordingly, bringing forward the adventurers with wide-area attacks that had been taking the chance to recoup their mana.

Jason was finally able to deploy Gordon's butterflies effectively, his aura suppressing the undeath energy in areas where the ghost fire was too weak to do so anymore. He found himself alongside Zara, the allegedly former princess of the Storm Kingdom. Her wind and water powers had been suppressed for most of the fight, her elements clashing with the natural array. The undeath energy had suppressed it, but the undead had then started absorbing her elemental powers, along with those of everyone else.

The ghost fire had suppressed the undead's ability to absorb magic, but blowing all her mana on area attacks at that stage would have been redundant. Only now that the fires were weakening could she make a worthwhile contribution. The undead were rallying but their power to devour magic was still suppressed, partly by the ghost fire and partly by Jason's aura.

Zara found herself shoulder-to-shoulder with Jason. He wasn't deep amidst the enemy the way he usually fought, leaving that to the elemental messengers who had launched themselves into the fray when, like her, their powers were suddenly more effective.

Jason was focused on his roundabout approach to area damage. Using his aura, he'd grabbed a handful of weaker undead, unnerving the melee defenders he floated them past, despite his warning them beforehand. He then afflicted one and let it spread butterflies to the others.

Most of the undead he grabbed were hurled back, deep into the undead lines. The mindless undead failed to recognise the threat and let the butterflies run rampant. Jason, in the meantime, had kept one of the undead, he pulled in more unafflicted for butterflies to spread to before again hurling most of them away. He was repeating the process over and over to maximise affliction distribution.

Zara's process was less elaborate: she cast a spell and the undead were destroyed. While Jason was launching undead far into the enemy backline, Zara's spell created a storm of wind and water much closer to the fighting. The storm was much smaller than an

actual hurricane, but in a restricted tunnel, it didn't feel like it. Blades of water severed limbs and sliced hideous undead bodies, while others were tossed into the air and pulled apart like rotten fruit.

Some of the elemental messengers were caught up as well, but Zara mentally wrote them off. Their recklessness in the face of danger meant she was far from the only one to pepper them with area powers.

"How are you throwing zombies through my windstorm?" Zara asked Jason, shouting over the wind of her spell.

"You know we have voice chat, right?" he yelled back.

"Oh," she said, too quiet to hear but her sheepish expression said it loud enough. Jason grinned and opened a private channel.

"How are you getting them through my storm?" she asked again. "It's like they're completely unaffected by the wind."

"I'm using my aura to telekinetically counteract the force of the wind and water your spell is throwing at them."

Her head turned on a swivel to stare at him wide-eyed.

"You're *what?*"

"Your spell isn't that strong at any individual point," he explained. "It's just big. It isn't that hard to sense the individual forces being applied to one object inside the spell's area and apply an equal and opposite force to negate them."

"With your aura?" she exclaimed.

"It's actually great practise. We should do this more."

"I don't know that we'll have regular access to zombies."

Jason laughed, taking his eyes from the battle to give her a side glance. His eyes fell on her copper hair, cropped above her shoulders, shorter than when it had been royal sapphire.

"I owe you an apology," he said.

"What for?"

"Your hair. I had no right to make you do that, however angry I might have been."

"It's just a hairstyle."

"However justified my anger may or may not have been, I don't have the right to tell you what to do with your body. Thinking it's okay to do that may seem harmless when it's hair, but what about when it's not? I'm sorry for that."

"Am I about to get one of your famously questionable moral diatribes?"

"What do you mean, famously questionable?"



She laughed. The sound, like water trickling over rocks, entered Jason's mind through his voice chat, stirring dormant reactions he'd thought long dead. He turned his focus back to the fight, silently admonishing himself.

Jason had been immediately drawn to Zara when they'd met on the other side of the world. She'd still been a teenager and he'd still been an idiot. More of an idiot, he admitted to himself. She was the only woman he'd met whose beauty truly competed with that of Sophie, rank-ups having little improvement to make. The five years before they met again felt like twice that and changed them both, him especially. He had thought those years, followed by events in Rimaros, had completely quashed any lingering affection.

"Do I even have hormones at silver-rank?" he muttered.

"What?" she yelled. "I can't hear you without voice chat."

"It's nothing," he said through chat. "I'm just... I shouldn't have told you to do that with your hair."

"You don't like it?" she asked.

"What kind of lunatic wouldn't like it? You look amazing."

She blinked, flustered.

"I wasn't expecting that," she admitted.

"We may have our differences, but I've got eyes. I bet you had a trail of people following you around like ducklings in Yareh. Are there any loose undead left? I think you blew them all away."

Jason panned his gaze, looking for any weak undead he could grab, but Zara and the other area specialists had cleaned them up for the moment.

"I think you're pretty much out of the weak zombies," Zara told him. "There were some people in Yareh who showed perhaps more interest than I was looking for. I'd appreciate it if you could try to dampen your team spy's enthusiasm."

"You mean Estella?"

"Yes. I'm not as open-minded as she would like."

"She did call dibs."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"I do disagree with something you said, Jason."

"What's that?"

"We don't have differences. You have differences with me, and I understand why. I made some mistakes in Rimaros, and they involved you at a time when you needed space and time to heal from whatever it is you went through on your own world. First I used your

good name when I thought you were dead, then you got caught up with my family. Then, after you finally got away from me, I dropped myself in your path again. After you quite explicitly told me that you didn't want me along. But I'd arranged things so that kicking me out would be more trouble than keeping me. I put you in that position."

"It's a mixed bag," Jason said. "You thought I was dead, in which case I wouldn't care. And as for getting involved with royalty, it turns out Soramir had been watching me from the instant I arrived, so that was inevitable. That last bit, forcing your way onto the expedition, was the only crappy thing I can completely drop on your doorstep. And if we just spend all our time being crappy to one another, we'll both turn into worse people. I'm trying out forgiveness as a philosophy."

"And how is that working out?"

"It's bloody hard. So many people suck, and they're usually the ones you have to forgive. If it was all forgiving beautiful princesses, I'd be all over it."

"I do appreciate it. As I said, while you may have issues with me, I never had any with you."

They both leaned to the side as an undead's severed limb was thrown out of the storm, passing between them to land wetly on the ground behind them.

"Princess, are you hitting on me in the middle of a zombie war?"

"When else am I going to do it? It's always something with you."

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Undeath priest Garth Larosse was not happy. His god's nemesis, Death, had no servants in this underground realm, yet had still found pretext to intervene. The territory claimed by Undeath had been driven back to nothing while Death's ghostly fire ravaged their forces. The fires were only truly decisive against the lesser undead, mass-produced from the pits, but that freed the defenders to concentrate on their more powerful forces.

It wasn't an absolute setback; Death's interference could only go so far. The territory could be reclaimed and Death lacked the influence to wipe it clean a second time. The flames would play out, in time, and were already waning, but that time was the critical factor. Undeath had already warned him that they must act with haste to stop what the adventurers were doing, which meant they could not wait for the flames to die out entirely.

Undeath had not told him what the defenders were up to, only that they needed both arrays to accomplish their goal. Garth was certain they would not be able to claim the natural array chamber in time, now, protected as it was by the bulk of the enemy forces and the ghost fire. He would need to refocus his forces on the citadel chamber.

The wall keeping them from the chamber was already hanging by a precarious thread under the weight of their assault. Once breached, they could bring down the citadel and the echo array with it, ending whatever threat had Undeath concerned.

Garth contemplated this inside the city's largest building. It was huge and triangular, with massive crystals in the ceiling that had once bathed everything in yellow light. The elemental power fuelling them had been supplanted, and now their glow was purple. The ground had been covered in firm moss, a triangle playing pitch for some kind of ball sport. The moss was long withered and dead, and most of the space it had occupied now hosted a humungous circular pit.

This was the widest and deepest of the pits that he and his fellow priests had created. Nothing could be seen through the cloud of purple and green miasma within. Nothing, thus far, had emerged from the pit, despite only the best materials going in. The most intact and high-ranking corpse parts, along with the most of the power bestowed upon them by their god. This was not a means to conquer the underground realms but the reason why they were doing it.

Garth came to a decision, to move his forces back from attacking the natural array and add them to the assault on the wall. It would cost them, but he would use up Death's miracle by marching bodies into the fires like a tide if that was what it took. He was about to head for the doors to the massive building when they opened to admit the one priestess amongst his servant clergy.

Jameela's long legs carried her quickly as she came striding towards him. For all the power Garth's skeletal body offered, the addition of the tall, beautiful woman to his group had left him almost sad to have given up his flesh. Capable and intelligent, eager and quick to learn, she was the opposite of another priest he had been forced to bring along.

Jameela quickly reached the edge of the pit. She didn't wear robes, like most of the clergy, but the practical leathers of an adventurer. The short, sharp bow she gave Garth was not a matter of disrespect but hurry.

"High Priest," she said in greeting. "The defenders of the wall have deployed something or someone new. I'm not certain what, exactly, but it tore through some of our strongest undead, even attacking collectively. It's gold-rank, but at a power level like nothing I've ever seen. I withdrew from making more futile attacks and came to report. After our forces stopped assaulting it, it returned to the wall. It's now intervening at our strongest points of attack."

The red lights in the skull sockets that passed for Garth's eyes dimmed as he focused on extending his aura senses. It did not take him long to find what he was looking for. Anger sent the red lights flaring brighter than ever.

"It's a demigod," Garth told her. "Hero has intervened."

"I've never seen anyone who has drunk from the Cup of Heroes," Jameela said. "In retrospect, it's not a startling development. We are pushing them to the brink which is fertile ground for Hero's miracle."

"The problem isn't the miracle but the timing of it," Garth said. "That wall must come down. I was about to order our forces attacking the natural array to back off and reinforce the wall attack. We can take the array in the aftermath, once the threat is dealt with. Redeploy everything to bring down that wall. Collapse it under the sheer weight of bodies if that's what it takes."

"Our resources are many, High Priest, but not infinite. That will deplete us heavily."

"That's the advantage of serving Undeath, Jameela. The harder-fought the battle, the more we have to work with when it's done. This is why everyone is so diligent about suppressing us. They know that unless we are overwhelmingly crushed, every battle makes us stronger and them weaker. The more dangerous our enemies now, the better the servants we will make of them."

A voice filled the air, a deep, harsh rumble that echoed like gravel being dumped into a silo.

"It is not enough," Undeath's voice spoke, and suddenly he was standing before them. Garth and Jameela both dropped to their knees, heads down. Undeath looked like a living man in simple black robes, except for his eyes. Like Garth, they were empty sockets containing a crimson spark.

"Death and Hero have both intervened at this critical juncture," Undeath told them. "Hero was not unexpected, as you reasoned, Priestess Jameela. And as you have said, Garth, the issue is the timing. Alone, neither god's influence would be insurmountable, but both at once requires a response. Death finding a pretext to act was unfortunate."

"I apologise for my failing, Lord," Garth said.

"You have done as I have asked with the resources I have given you," Undeath told him. "If I punish you for following my instructions, I will only end with servants like..."

Death turned to the stone door Jameela had come through as it opened again. It was heavy but not unmanageable for a silver-ranker like Priest Jeff who stepped inside.

"Hey, boss, I think something is going not so great out here..."

Jeff's eyes went wide on spotting Undeath.

“Oh, you’re busy. I’ll come back.”

Jeff backed off and closed the door. Undeath pinched the bridge of his nose.

“If his grandmother wasn’t a high priestess of Destruction... I apologise for his presence, Garth. When dealing with other gods, compromises must be made, even by me.”

“I have naught but faith in you, Lord,” Garth said.

“Thank you, Garth. Stand, both of you.”

As the priest and priestess rose to their feet, Undeath moved to the edge of the pit and they followed.

“Unfortunately,” Undeath said, “We are forced into another compromise.”

Garth looked into the pit and realised what his god was talking about.

“Lord, if we animate it now, it will be too weak a vessel. Without the messenger tree as base material, it will only hold a fraction of the power you intended to bestow.”

“As you have correctly just instructed the priestess, Garth, there is always fresh material in the wake of a battle. Beginning again is costly, yes, but we must answer the threat before us now. If we do not react to the demigod, the wall will hold and the adventurers will complete their goal.”

“It will take some time to ready it,” Garth said. “But if compromise is what you require, there are shortcuts that can be made. The lifespan will be cut short in turn, but that is not the concern here, if I understand correctly.”

“You do. Proceed, Garth.”

The undead priest turned to Jameela.

“Go,” he told her. “Order the others to redirect everything from the array chamber to the wall, then gather the ritualists and bring them here.”

Jameela bowed to Undeath and then to Garth.

“Lord. High Priest.”

She strode away and was soon gone.

“If I may ask, Lord,” Garth said, “what exactly is the threat these adventurers pose?”

“They are attempting to remake reality in this area. If they complete their ritual, you and all of our forces will be cut off from my power. You will retain any that you have prior to being dragged in, but that is all.”

“Remake reality? How is such a thing possible?”

“Cosmic forces, older even than I. Events involved in the very creation of this world. As it stands, we have the numbers while our enemies have the individual power. If we fail and you are brought inside this warped reality, your numbers will be divided as all inside

are scattered at random. Your undead will be separated and unguided; you will need to unify them before they are wiped out in isolated pockets.”

“If we animate the avatar now, will it be brought with us?”

Undeath nodded.

“It is good that you see, Garth. Even imperfect, it will be a repository of my power that you can use. Finding it will be your first priority, even above reclaiming your forces. The ultimate goal in this warped reality will be to conquer the territories into which it will be divided. Doing so will allow you to collect your forces. But, while conquering territories is one thing, uniting them once you have is another. If you lack the requisite ability, even attempting to do so will end only in disaster. It would serve only Destruction, who has gleefully stepped back to watch events unfold.”

“I know not of this power to bend reality to my will, Lord. I assume the other side does?”

“The enemy has one with the power. His name is Jason Asano; kill him if you can. I will give this power to the avatar, so you must find it. Without it, everything else is meaningless.”

Undeath looked to the door.

“The ritualists are about to arrive. Be swift, Garth, and do well. Put your faith in me and I shall put my trust in you.”

Garth bowed.

“Always, Lord Undeath.”

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“Two more hours,” Clive told Jason. “Maybe an hour and a half. An hour if you can dig up a miracle from the goddess of knowledge that tells us the rest of what we need to do.”

“We’ve already had two miracles,” Jason told him. “I think that’s more than gracious already.”

“What’s the other one?” Clive asked.

“I’m talking to Marla, in command of the citadel, through Shade. She said someone drank from something called the Cup of Heroes.”

Clive frowned.

“Do we know who?” he asked.

“Not yet. She just said that they’re big and gold and have an actual chance of buying the time you need. What is this magic cup thing? Some kind of power boost miracle?”

“Yeah,” Clive said grimly. “A power that kills you when it’s done. Ask them to find out who used it.”

“Asano,” Miriam said through voice chat. “We need to talk. The undead are pulling back.”

## Chapter 787

### Thinking Like an Adventurer

Miriam and Jason watched as the elemental messengers chased the retreating undead.

"Why have they given up on the natural array chamber?" Miriam wondered. "Just consolidating forces, or do they know about the rituals?"

"The latter," Jason said. "Knowledge was the one who put the idea in my head of triggering a transformation zone. Gods exist in balance, so I imagine Undeath warning his own forces was fair game."

"I think we should divert some of our people in response."

"Agreed, but we can't just abandon this position and rush back to the citadel chamber. The undead will just go behind us and move on the array chamber again."

"We can select who we send by who will do the most good there and the least here."

"You're the tactical commander. You make the picks."

"Check in with Marla in the citadel chamber. Get a sense of what they need."

"Sounds good."

Jason wandered off while Miriam looked over the adventurers. They were at something of a loss after the enemy's retreat, Miriam having ordered them not to pursue. The elemental messengers had ignored her once again. Jason moved towards the wall of the tunnel, the closest he could get to a quiet spot.

"Mr Asano," Shade said. "Our forces in the citadel chamber have made a discovery. Marla is going to tell you something, and I hope you can remain calm."

Jason narrowed his eyes in suspicion, but Shade was speaking from Jason's shadow, leaving him nothing to glare at.

"They've found out who used the magic cup thing?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Mr Asano, it might be best if—"

"Who?" Jason asked again, his voice an icy blade. "Give me the name."

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Rufus had been fighting alongside Taika, Humphrey and Sophie when the undead retreated and they were told to stand down and rest by Miriam. Team Biscuit was not well suited to fixed defensive positions or being part of a defensive line. Once the fires had come, they had done better, going after the stronger undead while the flames cleared out



the rest. The gold-rank undead weren't the equal of an adventurer of the same rank and the team could handle eliminating one of them without gold-rank assistance.

Like the other adventurers, Jason's team were taking the chance to rest. Belinda conjured camp chairs for them, so they didn't have the choice of the stone floor or corrupted plants withered into black filth by undead energy. They didn't relax completely, alert for an undead turnaround. There was also the disconcerting presence of their Builder cult allies.

All the defenders snapped to alert as a sharp sense of danger erupted to fill the space around them. Most of the cultists and brighthearts were looking around with tense expressions while the adventurers, with their sharper aura senses, quickly realised the source.

Rufus looked over at Jason, whose wide eyes were glaring at nothing, but with a fury that looked like it would melt stone. Jason's aura receded and Miriam moved to calm their unsettled allies. She threw a glance at Jason, her expression making it clear that there'd damn well better be a good explanation.

Jason's eyes focused as he turned to meet Rufus' gaze and opened a private voice channel. It also brought in Farrah, still off working in the natural array chamber.

"What is it?" Farrah asked curtly. "I'm quite busy here."

"Do you know what the Cup of Heroes is?" Jason asked, his voice flat.

"Jason," Farrah said, her voice a warning. "Do not drink from Hero's mug."

"He didn't offer it to me. He offered it..."

Jason drew a sharp breath and let it hiss out through clenched teeth.

"...he offered it to Gary."

Neither Rufus nor Farrah responded immediately, shocked silence reigning on their voice channel until Rufus asked a hesitant question.

"Did he accept?"

"Yes," Jason said, sounding defeated.

"Gods damn it, Gary," Farrah said.

"He's apparently the reason that the citadel chamber wall is still holding," Jason said, doing a poor job of sounding positive. "The time we have for you to complete the ritual is time that he bought us. The undead have been pulled from going after your chamber, and he's probably the reason for that too. We're going to send some of our people to buy some more time."

"Rufus," Farrah said. "How bad was Jason when he heard?"

"His aura rattled some people. It wasn't so bad, or you'd have felt it from there."

“Good,” Farrah said. “Jason, do not let this make you go off and do something crazy. We need you for what comes next, so no going off and wrecking yourself by tapping into your soul realm to do something ridiculous.”

“I know.”

“You better know. How many times have you had your back to the wall and your solution was calling on some power, whatever the price? You had no intention of accepting the World-Phoenix's blessing, but when you needed to break into an astral space to rescue me, you let your fundamental nature be transformed. When you needed to portal people out of a place you couldn't, you used a reality core to overcharge yourself to the point it took magic we didn't know existed to keep you alive. If Gary has drunk from the Cup of Heroes, he's following your shitty example, and he doesn't come back from the dead. So, if you want to be a hero again — and we could really use some heroes right now — then figure out how to fight smarter instead of yanking yet another fistful of magic out of your ass.”

Jason and Rufus stared at each other while Farrah yelled at Jason through voice chat.

“And you'd best believe that Gary is going to get the same...”

Farrah broke off, her second tirade cut off by a sob before it could get started.

“I need to get back to work,” she said angrily and left the voice channel.

Jason's fury had been washed away by Farrah's words. He shared a look with Rufus, each feeling the same mix of anger, hopelessness and loss.

“Is this what it feels like?” Jason asked. “Is that what it feels like every time I—”

“Yes,” Rufus said.

“I'm sorry.”

“So you should be. Now, follow Farrah's example and get back to work.”

Rufus strode off in Miriam's direction. Jason was about to do the same when he found someone standing in front of him. He looked human, wearing plain armour and carrying no weapon. Jason looked around and saw that no one reacted to the divine presence. Even the people that had been watching him after his aura outburst were suddenly shifting their attention as if they'd forgotten his very existence.

“You're really going to show your face right now?” Jason asked.

“I am sorry about your friend, Jason Asano. But you understand the choices here more than most, I think.”

“My friend just gave me an earful for understanding.”

"Do you think I like what I do? My name is Hero, yet I will never be one. I have spent my entire existence finding the greatest people on their darkest days, turning their likely deaths into certain ones. I've seen glorious deaths on grand battlefields, immortalised in tapestry and stained glass. I've been the only witness to sacrifices that went completely unnoticed. Countless lives saved by heroes unremembered and unsung by all but my priests."

"Cool story, bro. I've got a thing, so if you've got some kind of point you're rounding up on, I'd appreciate you getting on with it."

"Each god has a role that defines our mandate to influence the world, determining the nature and degree of our influence."

"So, that's a 'no' to getting on with it?"

"I do have a point to make, Jason Asano, and I do not make it lightly. When a god speaks, it is not without purpose."

Jason opened his mouth to speak, then clamped his mouth shut with a grimace. He'd told Death he would try to be more respectful, and as angry as he was, Hero had been right. He understood sacrifice more than most.

"Alright," he said. "Speak your piece."

"Few gods have as little influence as I, or are so restricted in its use. If heroes are given all they need, then they are not truly heroes. Even my priests gain no miracles from me without doing something very ill-advised. But there are times we can shift the normal limitations. I can act to counterbalance other gods like Coward, Dominion or Despair."

"I get it. You've just got the one miracle, and the one condition to use it."

"You have three times met conditions for my intervention, but I either could or did not intervene for various reasons. The first instance was when you faced a silver-rank monster when you were only iron, to give a village time to evacuate. If you had needed to defeat that monster, rather than simply distract it, I would have offered you the power to do so. For only distraction, I knew that you would refuse."

"No kidding."

"The second time was when you chose to engage the Builder's vessel in personal combat. In this instance, you were in an astral space beyond my area of influence. I only know of this event from stories, and I would not be surprised to learn there are more from your time back in your own world. The final time you opened the door to my intervention was when you overcharged a portal and almost killed yourself in the process."

"People keep bringing that up today."

"I did not intervene there because there was no point once you supplied the power to open the portal yourself. My miracle would only have taken your death from a near certainty to an absolute one."

"Maybe you should expand your miracle repertoire. Add something non-lethal."

"I would very much like that, but there are dangers. My kind do not change with the ease that mortals do, or even other kinds of transcendent. The repercussions of change for us are hard to predict, often indirect and rarely positive. This is especially true for one as specific as myself. Compare me to Purity, whose nature had had many more aspects than I, yet his change was such a debacle. The magnitude of the unintended consequences his act set in motion created so much misery."

"Why did Purity turn himself into an artefact? What did he hope to accomplish?"

"I cannot be certain, only make guesses. The god of Purity is one with both very positive and negative aspects. You understand this, I believe. There was a war that engulfed a continent as a human-dominant empire sought to spread a very specific concept of what it meant to be pure. It was a time when Purity was in danger of being seen as one of the dark gods. That empire was where the Order of Redeeming Light was born."

"I thought the order was founded when fake Purity was in charge."

"As do most, but this is not the case. What Disguise made of the order is something else, but the seed had already been planted. I believe that Purity intended to refocus the very concept he embodied, following the fall of that nation."

"He picked a crappy way to do it."

"Indeed he did. Perhaps, then, you can see why I am wary to make changes to my own nature."

"I guess. It feels like maybe you could try something less drastic, though. Now, why are you here? I need to go help my friend you killed."

"I spoke on pushing the limits of my influence. Much of how we use our influence is a matter of pretext, and you have done enough that I can push those limits. Not enough to produce or alter a miracle, but enough to give you a gift, much as Healer did."

Hero held out his hand which contained an orb filled with blue, gold and silver light. Jason possessed an identical orb, given to him by Healer. He reached out and took this second one.

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Item: [\[Genesis Command: Source\]](#) (transcendent rank, legendary)

*The authority to link power. (consumable, magic core).*

- Effect: Assign or reassign a source of power. Requirements of use vary by the nature of the origin and destination of the power
  - Uses remaining: 1/1
- 

"It is the best I can do," Hero said, his tone apologetic, and was gone.

Eyes snapped onto Jason as if everyone suddenly remembered that he existed. He put the orb in his inventory as Miriam strode up to him, shaking her head as if shaking off sleep.

"Did you contact Marla?" she asked.

"Sorry, no," Jason said.

"Death again?" Miriam asked. "Hanging around you, I'm starting to recognise the feeling of my perception being divinely pushed aside."

"The gods have done enough," Jason said without answering. "It's time Undeath stopped worrying about Death and Hero, and started worrying about us."

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Jason, Miriam and Marla discussed the best approach for adventurer reinforcements. Jason and Miriam being in one area and Marla being in the citadel made the conversation logistically awkward. Jason could speak with Miriam in person or to Marla through Shade, but the two women could not speak with each other directly. He settled on Shade acting like a translator, relaying to each leader the parts of the conversation they were otherwise not privy to.

"Your friend's intercession has tipped the scales in terms of reacting to wall breaches," Marla said. "As it stands, we won't lose out because of gaps in the wall. That means we can stand as long as the wall itself does. That's time we desperately needed, but it won't last forever. We're waiting for word that the ritual is ready on your side."

"An hour, maybe two," Jason told her. "Somewhere in the middle, most likely. Will the wall last that long?"

"Right now, I'd say yes. But the god's fire dimming means we'll be dealing with raw numbers again soon. Doubly so if the forces attacking you are moving on us. It doesn't matter if they're all weak; they can bring the wall down through sheer weight of numbers."

Jason waited for Shade to finish repeating Marla's words, giving Miriam a chance to respond.

"It sounds like what you need is someone to thin out the numbers on the weaker undead," Miriam said. "None of our gold-rankers are ideally suited to area attacks, but one of our silver-rank teams is."

"Silver-rankers are fine, so long as they can deal with the numbers," Marla said after her own delay. "Oddly enough, we can handle the more powerful threats. Their numbers are low enough that the gold-rankers and our Hero-enhanced warrior are dealing with them. What we need is more clearance of the sheer mass of undead we expect will be coming for us at any moment."

"I'll send you team Storm Shredder," Miriam said for Shade to pass on. "They come from a kingdom where the adventurers like to specialise, and their specialty is killing a lot of things at once. Good enough?"

"Good enough," came Marla's answer. "I need to get back to commanding the defence, but send them as soon as you can."

Shade retreated into Miriam's shadow as she turned to Jason.

"Will you join them?" she asked. "The rest of your team don't have strong area attacks, but I could attach you to team Storm Shredder. Your butterflies could be valuable if you can make them work."

"Whether I can is definitely a question," Jason said. "My concern is the Undeath priests that are sure to be directing the attack on the wall. Intelligent enemies have a habit of shutting down my butterflies before they reach the critical mass where they can't be stopped."

"You'll stay here, then?" Miriam asked him.

"Actually, I would like to go, and I want to take Emir and Constance Bahadir with me. I had an idea, and I need people who can safely capture some gold-rank undead without destroying them to make it work."

Jason proceeded to explain his idea to Miriam, who agreed.

"Having some gold-rankers will help you get through the death chamber unscathed," she said. "Gather them up and go immediately."

Jason nodded and got moving, issuing orders through voice chat.

Farrah had been right, Jason realised. His essence abilities had been stalled out since he hit the wall of silver back on Earth and were only starting to crawl forward again. It was his spiritual powers that had grown, and he'd paid the price for that. When faced with dangerous challenges he'd become too reliant on pulling out some crazy power or bullying with his tyrannical aura. He had to fight smarter with the tools he had instead of wrecking himself with reckless improvised power. It was time to stop thinking like an astral king and start thinking like an adventurer again.

## Chapter 788

### Dread and Crushing Despair

The reinforcement group made up of Jason, Emir, Constance and team Storm Shredder paused at the massive entrance that led into the former brightheart city. The tunnels and chambers they had passed through to get there had all been abandoned, the undead giving up that territory entirely.

What they had not given up was the city, now a bastion of the undead. They were out there, in the dark, hidden from sight. Far across the chamber, flashing light and faint sound marked the conflict raging several kilometres away.

“There’s ten of us,” said Kalif, a member of team Storm Shredder. “How many undead are out there?”

“We can’t be certain,” Jason said. “There were originally around two hundred thousand brighthearts, most of whom died, plus messengers and Builder cultists that died. There’s no telling how many have been turned into undead or stitched together in bigger undead. On the other hand, thousands of them have been destroyed by us, the citadel defenders or Death’s ghost fire.”

“So there’s more than ten left then,” Kalif said.

“I’d call that a fairly safe assumption, yeah,” Jason said.

“Shouldn’t we have brought more people?” Kalif asked.

“You say that like you’ve never fought a hundred thousand undead before,” Jason told him.

“And you have?”

“Yep.”

“When was this?”

“A couple of years ago.”

“Korinne,” Kalif said to his team leader. “I think we should find different adventurers to follow around.”

Jason chuckled to himself. Indulging in some light banter didn’t push Gary’s predicament out of his mind entirely, but was at least something of a distraction.

The group set out into the airspace of the death chamber, high above the fallen city where the undead were massing. Constance and Emir stood together on a flying cloud conjured up by Emir while the silver-rankers flew in two air skimmers produced by Shade. It wasn’t the most secure mode of transport if attacked but it was fast, convenient and let

the group travel in tight formation. It was also low profile to visual and aura perception compared to something like Zara's pegasus made of sapphires.

The hope was that the mass of powerful clashing auras on the other side of the chamber would distract the undead, letting the group cross the vast cavern unchallenged. The battle for the wall was certainly an attention-grabbing spectacle, visible from the opposite end of the chamber, kilometres away. Spells flared brightly in the dark, illuminating the sea of undead in brief flashes, like dancers at a rave. Patch remnants of ghost fire were guttering out, taking undead with it as Death's miracle finally petered out. Most arresting was a beacon of gold, exploding in bursts and leaping up and down the wall.

Jason extended his senses to get a closer look at Gary's aura. That wasn't hard as he'd never felt anything short of a diamond-ranker's that compared to what Gary was blasting out. The group had barely started crossing the chamber before Jason's interface gave them all a message about the effects of Gary's aura power, named simply Hero. With dozens of aura powers overlapping, Jason had turned off messages about individual ones, but Gary's power overrode that. Whether due to its divine nature or raw power, Jason's interface decided it was not to be overlooked.

The divinity coursing through Gary was impossible to miss. Jason had discovered his senses were more sensitive to divine power than most but that wasn't at all necessary here. Gary's golden radiance did everything short of skywriting the word 'demigod' and drawing a giant arrow pointing right at him. Jason's friend was, for the moment, divinity manifested upon the world.

A message notified Jason when he came into communication range of the wall defenders. He resisted the urge to open a channel to Gary who seemed rather busy and reached out to Marla. He set up command channels for Marla and other leaders like Arabelle to better communicate.

Around halfway across the chamber they finally drew the attention from some of the undead. They were flying in a curve, so as to avoid the heart of undead territory, but some flying monstrosities still noticed them and rose through the air to intercept. There were five gold-rankers amongst them, each a bulbous frankenzombie stitched together from seemingly random parts. They had limbs, none of which matched, affixed in vaguely the right spots. Messenger wings had been stuck on their backs, random in both placement and number. With their bulging bodies and too-small limbs, the elephant-sized nightmare-fuel cherubs were twisted mockeries of not just life but the laws of aerodynamics.



The rest of the flyers were more conventional, a few dozen zombie messengers. Oddly, their normal wings had been removed and replaced with skin stretched over frameworks of segmented bone.

In the absence of Miriam, Jason had designated Emir tactical commander for the group. He was both the most powerful and the most experienced member of the group. Jason waited for him to start issuing commands, but he didn't. Instead, he conjured a staff of black lacquered wood, etched with gold runes and shod with gold at each end. Holding it vertically, he lifted it slightly and then brought it back down. The small, unhurried movement was sharply contrasted by the result.

Massive pillars, each a dozen metres across and hundreds of metres long came smashing down from above. Each looked identical to Emir's staff, only orders of magnitude bigger. Buildings cracked as the pillars struck heavily and then disappeared.

"We should move instead of fight," Emir said. "That power looks destructive but mostly it knocks things around and stuns them for a bit, which undead shake off rather quickly. The ability looks impressive but isn't as powerful as it seems."

"Every power set has a theme," Constance observed.

Emir turned his head to level a flat glare at his wife who was squeezing her lips pressed tightly together to contain a laugh. At the same time, the cloud and the Shade skimmers were shooting forward, continuing their path to the wall.

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The reinforcement group slowed before reaching the point where they would get caught up in the battle for the wall. It was close enough that they could see the state of the battle, the undead piled on top of each other at the base, so many they formed a ramp that the others were climbing over. The real fighting began at the top of the slope, on the third floor. The third through seventh levels saw the most intense fighting as an endless stream of deathless climbers was beaten back by the defenders.

There were now many open breaches in the wall but the defenders were holding them. As much as Gary's personal intervention helped strained defensive positions, it was his aura that did the most work. His other powers were at the base level of gold-rank while his aura power alone had ranked all the way up to diamond. On top of that, it was a wholly unbalanced ability, fuelled by divine power and only made possible by the Demigod essence. The raw power of the enhancements it offered were transformative for all of the defenders, even the gold-rank ones.

While his aura was aiding the overall battle, his personal presence arrived like the salvation of god when he moved to aid the defenders. Every swing of his hammer sent

waves of force and fire that devastated even the strongest undead. When he roared, the wall was scoured clean of the enemy, although had to be careful not to blast away sections of the wall itself.

Jason finally couldn't help himself and opened a voice channel to Gary.

"I'm sorry it come to this," Jason said.

"We're adventurers," Gary told him. "We can try and quit all we like, but in the end, someone has to stand up. If that wasn't going to be us, we wouldn't be who we are. I know it. Rufus knows it. You definitely know it; it's been your turn a few too many times already."

"Doesn't mean I have to like it."

Gary laughed.

"You damn well better not. Don't let Rufus get too depressed, alright? I don't want you and him doing the same sad boy tour I did after losing you and Farrah. She's not here, right?"

"She's busy with the ritual."

"Good. I'm pretty sure she'd give me a kicking for this, demigod or not."

Jason laughed.

"Oh, I don't think there's any dodging that, Gary. You can expect her to tear strips off you once we're all in the transformation zone."

"I'm looking forward to it," Gary said, his voice heavy. "Now, I assume you're here to pull out some crazy power to deal with all these undead?"

"No, this is your magic show, Gary. I'm here to play your glamorous assistant Lorena, wearing something sparkly and gesturing prettily when the curtain comes down."

"This wall feels about as flimsy as a curtain."

"You're doing better than anyone thought possible. Have no doubt that without you, we'd have already lost. Clive, Farrah and the others have done a great job of getting the ritual ready as fast as possible, so keep holding and we'll get things done."

"Thanks, Jason."

"No, Gary, thank *you*."

"Hero said almost the exact same thing. You should stop spending time with gods, Jason; they're a bad influence."

Jason laughed as he closed the channel. They were approaching the wall, ranged attacks fending off undead as they headed for a freshly cleared breach to meet Arabelle and Gabriel.

"You'll be under the direct command of Arabelle Remore and the overall command of the brightheart leader, Marla," Jason told team Storm Shredder. "You'll be operating

largely on this side of the wall to thin out the rank and file of the enemy from the relatively safe upper levels. I'll be taking Constance and Emir to hide on the inside of the citadel chamber where it's safe."

Storm Shredder's leader, Korinne, quashed any questions from her own team. They moved into the breach, Jason, Emir and Constance nodding their greetings to Arabelle and Gabriel before getting straight to business.

"I'm going to need you to let through the occasional gold-rank undead," Jason said. As we use them up we'll need fresh ones, although I'm not sure fresh is the word."

"We won't need to let anything through," Gabriel told him. "We're holding and resealing breaches but they're still getting in as fresh holes get punched through the wall. The defenders inside are cleaning them up, but you'll have your pick."

"Thanks," Jason said and they moved on, not stopping for small talk. Korinne and her team were already defending against fresh attempts to enter the breach.

Jason led his gold-rank companions out the citadel side of the wall, still recognisable as something that had once been a building. They were on a balcony looking out at the citadel itself, the massive round construct held in the middle of the chamber by equally massive pillars coming from the floor and ceiling.

The floor pillars were the targets of the undead that had gotten through the breaches. They didn't need to invade the building to stop the ritual ready to take place in the echo array chamber, located in the citadel. If the citadel collapsed entirely, everything inside would naturally be handled.

"How many gold-rank undead can you safely contain at once?" Jason asked.

"It should be a few," Emir said. "They're weak for the rank, and not all of them have special powers. We should prioritise ones that are just big and tough. They don't need arms or legs or anything, right?"

"No," Jason said. "No, they don't."

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Jason looked at the limbless undead, held in place by Emir's conjured staves jutting up from the ground to impale it. The monstrosity struggled helplessly, the strength and duration of Emir's staves boosted by Constance's support powers.

"This will work," Jason said. "Now let's get to..."

All three turned to look at the wall, even though their senses focused on something far beyond it. Divine power blazed, but this was not Gary. It was not glorious but profane, inspiring nothing but dread and crushing despair.

"What is that?" Constance asked, her voice hollow.

“Gary’s job,” Jason said. “Undeath is making a clutch play.”

“That’s not for us to deal with,” Emir said. “Hero’s miracles are about the greatest of final stands, and Gary is about to make his. We have our own job to do.”

“Yes,” Jason agreed. “Let’s get to work.”

## Chapter 789

### Avatar and Demigod

The battle for the wall was being fought in the mouths of the various breaches. The intercession of Gary and his demigod power had given the defenders breathing room to hold breaches long enough for barricades to be put back in place, but they were duct-taping over holes. Sooner or later, there would be nothing left but duct tape and the wall would crumble.

Deep in the city that was now the territory of the undead, an explosion rocked the darkness. Purple light blasted like a spaceship cannon from the now-missing roof of the largest building in the city. It was a massive triangular building, dwarfing those around it. The defenders fighting on the death chamber side of the breaches couldn't help but stare, wondering what new horror the undead were about to unleash.

Their distraction did not cost them as the undead they were fighting had frozen in place. The aura of Undeath flooded over the city like a tsunami before crashing into the seawall of Gary's divine power. The two auras clashed, reaching a *détente* that diminished Gary's ability to enhance the entire battlefield, focused as it was on suppressing Undeath's influence.

Standing on the wall next to Gabriel Remore on one of the upper levels, Gary grimaced as he stood in place, pushed back against the god's power. For the first time since drinking from the Cup of Heroes, something was an actual struggle.

The spiritual clash was a wild storm, yet everything else was strangely still. The undead paused, as if frozen and the defenders were reeling from the aura conflict raging around them. There was little movement and, as the rumble of the distant explosion faded, near-silence.

The massive beam of light coming from the building was painting the ceiling of the chamber more than a kilometre in the air. That beam was partially blocked by something moving around inside the building, something that had to be very large. The arm of a giant, pale, sickly and missing chunks of flesh, emerged from the broken roof to grab the wall. A manacle, dangling a broken chain, hung from the wrist. A second arm reached out, grabbing the wall like the first, and a humungous figure pulled itself up and onto the wall.

It was hard to make out, lit from beneath by the purple beam, but it looked like a zombified giant, larger than most of the buildings in the city. Only the one massive structure had been large enough to contain it. The zombie tried climbing the wall but it wall

gave way, crumbling to the ground and dropping the zombie with it. The resulting cloud of stone dust rose to be illuminated by the purple light, like a sunbeam in a dusty room.

The massive zombie pulled itself to its feet, standing amongst the city buildings like a kaiju. Broken chains hung from manacles around its wrists and ankles and started shedding purple light, an echo of the beam still shining behind it.

The zombie rising to its feet was like a starter's gun that set the battle back into motion. The endless horde of the unliving resumed their surge on the wall protecting the citadel chamber and the defenders sent magic blazing out to meet them.

From their high point on the wall, Gabriel and Gary had scant moments before the undead were on them again. Gary's eyes were fixed on the distant zombie as he continued battling its aura. It took an awkward, stumbling step forward, beginning a shambling walk in the direction of the wall.

"That doesn't look stitched together," Gabriel observed. "There was a giant down here for them to animate?"

Gary's divine senses could see things Gabriel could not.

"That's not a thing they animated," he told Gabriel. "It's an avatar of their god, but it's incomplete. They've sent it out unfinished to stop me."

"Will it?"

Gary wasn't even looking at Gabriel, but the grin on his leonine face sent a chill down Gabriel's spine.

"The undead will be climbing back up here soon," Gary said in place of an answer. "Do you want to take them or the big one?"

Gabriel turned to look at him.

"I think I might leave the big one to you."

The undead were on them a moment later and Gabriel went to work, fire blazing down the edge of his golden scimitar. Even without the divine ghost fire, he made short work of anything attempting to enter the breach in the wall. Gary didn't join the fight, staying concentrated on the zombie avatar. After shambling down a ruined boulevard it stopped and raised its arms, broken chains hanging loosely as it reached for the distant wall as if trying to grab it. The chains grew longer and dug into the ground, piercing through the broken flagstones as if solid stone was loose soil.

From his high vantage, Gary watched the glowing chains dig into the ground with a frown. He suspected the avatar was about to use a power similar to one of his own and did not care for the comparison.

Harpoons the size of school buses erupted from the ground around the zombie avatar, trailing purple chains. A dozen of them rocketed through the air, massive barbed tips plunging through the wall. The chains then yanked back, pulling taught as the barbs held the harpoons in place.

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The air in the citadel chamber was becoming obscured but it was hard to miss the arrival of the massive harpoons. Jason, Emir and Constance watched as the harpoons were pulled back and their massive tines dug into the wall. Stone around the harpoons cracked as the wall trembled at the strain.

“I’m pretty sure that’s bad,” Jason said.

“There’s not much we can do about it except keep getting ready,” Constance said.

“True enough,” Jason said, looking at the debilitated gold-rank undead in front of him.

“This one’s just about done; can you fish me up another?”

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On his high platform, the undead kept off him by Gabriel, Gary looked at the chains trying to pull the wall down.

“Nope,” he said to himself and took one of the six small hammers hanging from loops around his waist. It lit up with golden flames.

- 
- You have used [Flame Investiture].
  - You have infused [Gary’s Large Hammer] with divine fire.
- 

Gary threw the hammer at the closest chain, the hammer growing to the size of a house as it flew. It shattered the chain on contact and immediately deflected towards the next. It did the same thing over and over until every chain had broken, then flew off at the avatar zombie.

The hammer didn’t slow down on hitting the zombie in the torso. They both went crashing into the ground, digging a trough as they slid. The zombie pushed the massive hammer off itself, stood up and moved in the direction of the wall. It was awkward at first, moving with the slow foot-dragging shuffle of the zombie it looked like. With each step, however, the massive light beam behind it dimmed and the zombie grew more coordinated. By the time the beam was gone entirely, the zombie was moving like a living thing. It no longer stumbled over chunks of shattered buildings but navigated them adroitly, approaching the wall with distance-eating strides.

From his high vantage point on the wall, Gary broke into a run, ignoring the undead between him and the ledge, still fighting Gabriel. They bounced off him like bugs hitting a

high-voltage fence, not slowing him at all as he reached the edge and leapt off, sailing through the air. His body grew much larger, just as his hammer had, and lit up with a golden radiance that trailed behind him as he soared through the dark.

- 
- You have used [Vessel of the Ancestors].
  - Your [Power], [Spirit] and [Speed] attributes are enhanced.
  - Your size is increased.
  - You have ongoing mana, health and stamina recovery.
  - Some of your essence abilities will have altered effects.
  - Some of your leonid gifts will have altered effects.
- 

Now as large as the zombie, Gary sailed over its head to land with a thunderous crash. Unused to his new size and power, he hit a building and wound up face down, covered in rubble. He shook it off, pushed himself to his feet and wandered over to his giant hammer, still burning with fire where the zombie had left it. It was now a good fit for his giant size and he picked it up before turning to face the avatar, down the rubble-strewn boulevard it had followed towards the wall.

The chains once more hanging loose from the avatar's arms and legs wrapped themselves around its body like armour. It was especially tight around the hands and forearms, like a pair of chain gauntlets.

The avatar turned to face Gary and they stared each other down across the dark and broken city. One was a proud figure of blazing power. The other was a dark figure in chains that glowered with sinister light. Purple and gold beacons in the cold necropolis, undead streamed past their giant feet like water in a shallow creek.

Gary threw his hammer and it flew straight as a well-hung shelf, gravity taking no interest in it. The avatar braced itself, crossing its forearms in front of it like a shield. Chains shot from its body and dug into the ground, anchoring it in place. The hammer struck, this time not smashing the avatar into the ground but pushing it back until its chain anchors pulled tight. The hammer bounced off and fell to the ground, its divine fire dying out. The zombie's arms flopped loosely, broken in various places. They flopped and jerked as the bones snapped back together, sometimes visibly through sections of absent flesh.

Gary pulled his regular hammer from his back where magic had held it in place, ready for convenient grabbing. The chains binding the avatar to the ground were released and the giant zombie held out its arms. A chain snaked out from each of its chain gauntlets and impaled the largest of the gold-rank monsters passing by on the ground. The monsters withered a little, then a dozen glowing purple spikes erupted from them turning them into the balls on a pair of spiked flails.



The two massive beings stared at each other as they loomed like kaiju amongst the buildings of the broken city. Gary charged at the avatar in a golden blur and they clashed with enough impact to cause shockwaves, divine power against divine power. It was a holy war embodied in two giants so charged with power their bodies could barely contain it.

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Garth had not allowed the Undeath priests to all gather in one place. They were spread out, communicating through animated skeletons linked through magic. He was standing atop a building with a good vantage of both the wall and the battle between the divinely empowered giants.

“Uh, boss?” a nervous voice came through the skeleton next to Garth. “Are you sure you sent me to the right spot?”

“I’m quite certain,” Garth said.

“It’s just that I’m feeling a bit exposed here.”

“Just keep watching, Jeff.”

“Well, that’s kind of hard because of all the dust. The gold one picked up a building and hit the purple one with it. He used the building that’s next to the one I’m standing on. Or, it used to be next to it. It’s kind of scattered loosely across the area now.”

“The ‘purple one,’ Jeff, is the avatar of our lord and should be referred to with the appropriate respect.”

“Are you sure, boss? It’s just that it looks like a regular zombie, but bigger. A bit half-cooked, you know? The magic chains look good, although I’m not sure how that fits with the undeath theme.”

“If you can’t see through the dust, Jeff, you have my permission to move closer.”

“Boss, is this because I said Jameela had nice—”

“That’s quite enough, Jeff.”

“I didn’t know she could hear me. And you have to admit, she does have nice—”

“She can also hear you now,” Garth said.

“She’s there with you? Are you two...? I just didn’t think you could... you’re a skeleton, is what I’m saying. I mean, I think you are. You’re always wrapped up in that robe thing. Is it a robe, or more like a toga? Or just a complicated cloak? It’s hard to tell, especially with the way it drapes. It just looks like it’s not a regular person under there, even one made of bones. Not that I’m saying you’re not a person.”

Garth rapped a knuckle repeatedly against his forehead.

“What’s that tapping sound?” Jeff asked. “Anyway, uh, hi Jamie. You know I’m sorry, right? About saying you had... and that time I tried to... look, I was drunk, to be fair, and a

piece of advice: do *not* try fermenting those weird plants the messenger tree makes. The point is, I could apologise properly if we got together and—”

Jameela reached out with one of her long fingers to push the skeleton's jawbone closed, cutting off the communication magic.

“Do you think he'll die?” she asked hopefully.

“No,” Garth said with a rueful shake of his skeletal head. “His ability to survive every situation I put him in makes me wonder if he's a test of faith from our lord.”

“Would he do that to you?”

“Our lord is neither capricious nor kind, Jameela. It is wise to test those on whom you rely. Their understanding and willingness to endure is a test in itself.”

Jameela turned her attention back to the titanic clash.

“Should the avatar let the demigod distract him like this?” she asked. “The goal is to bring down the wall, not kill the demigod. He will die, in time, regardless. And make for excellent raw materials, if we get to them fast enough.”

“The demigod was critical in keeping the wall intact,” Garth explained. “He can no longer personally defend it and his aura is occupied, pushing back against the avatar's. He can no longer use it to blanket all the defenders, just the closest ones.”

“So, when you directed our forces away from the fight between them, it wasn't just to avoid collateral damage but focus on the weaker parts of the wall defences.”

“Precisely. Even if the demigod is not destroyed, so long as it is kept from the defence of the wall, the advantage is ours.”

## 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 can do?"

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

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"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!”

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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.

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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."

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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.

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"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 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.

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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.”

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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.”