

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.

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?”

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.

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

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- 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.
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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.

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.”