

## 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.

\*\*\*

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."

\*\*\*

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 helpless, 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.”