

Chapter 780

Miracle

The wall between the citadel chamber and the death chamber was leaking like a sieve. Gary was moving from breach to breach in a rush now, as were the other teams, yet a half dozen gaps were spilling undead into the chamber. The undead that made it through went for the pillars holding up the citadel as defenders moved to intercept them.

Arabelle Remore was a particular star, draining the magic from the undead. Robbed of the force animating them, they fell inert. The hideous monstrosities were returned to a state of gruesome but otherwise ordinary carrion. The magic Arabelle took was collected in a floating ethereal jar. It followed her around as she moved, like a duckling filled with the heinous power of the unliving.

Inside the jar, the corrupted energy of undeath was purified, turning it back into the power of untainted natural death. That death energy was poison to the undead, clashing with the twisted energy inside them with explosive results.

Arabelle's power to drain the undead of their energy was more effective against the lower-ranked undead. She drained the hordes that poured through the breaches, purified their energy and then launched it at the more threatening foes that shambled through. This detonated them, turning them into weapons against their own side.

These stronger undead were either gold-rank or powerful silvers. They were easy to pick out from the ordinary undead who were animated messengers and brighthearts, alongside the occasional subterranean monster. The most dangerous undead were bespoke creations, freakish and varied. Some were amalgams of monsters, messengers and brighthearts, hacked-up parts roughly sewn together with tree roots. Others looked like intact creatures that had been warped through flesh-shaping into nightmare fuel that existed nowhere in the natural world.

The crudely stitched horrors, like the five-headed giant messenger Gabriel had seen, were the most physically powerful. The flesh-shaped monstrosities tended to be more agile and had superior special abilities, like the armoured mantis that had stopped Gary from blocking a breach.

The siege of the citadel chamber turned slowly but inexorably in favour of the undead. Their forces continually grew stronger, from mostly bronze-rankers to almost all silvers, with gold-rank monstrosities scattered amongst them. The demand for gold-rank intervention on the defender side escalated as more of the hard-to-kill abominations forced

their way through the breaches. Some of the larger ones didn't even need the explosive undead, forcing their way through with raw physical power.

Finally, a tipping point was reached where there were too many gold-rank undead for the defenders to respond to. Even with adventurers like Arabelle being the equal of two or more of their enemies, the gold-ranked undead were not quick to eliminate. New abominations arrived faster than the existing ones could be put down. More and more of the undead made it into the chamber, attacking the pillars unchallenged. Some were already showing dangerous cracks, and if enough fell, the citadel would fall with them.

Gary found himself fighting alongside Gabriel in a major breach, holding off a wave of lesser undead while Gabriel sliced apart a pair of golds. Gabriel had split his attacks so the monsters fell together, giving Gary the chance to blast their remains and the silver-rankers with a sonic roar. The roar thundered through the gap, hurling the enemy out through the breach and back into the death chamber.

Gary and Gabriel took a brief moment to rest while Gary's brightheart team stepped in to repair the breach. Gary could have helped, having his own powers to shape stone and metal, but he didn't have the mana to spare. Such large workings were mana intensive and it was more efficient to refine the work of his support team once they were done. He pressed his hands to the barricade wall, subtly altering the material with small but critical alterations to the structure.

"Did you see how close that purple light is getting to the other side?" Gabriel asked grimly.

"Yeah," Gary said.

"Once it reaches here, this wall goes from our territory to theirs. Once that happens, there won't be any more time to buy."

"Then let's make sure we at least hold that long," Gary said with a fierce grin that Gabriel returned.

"There's no quit in you, is there?"

"I tried quitting once. It didn't work out for me."

The bodies of the undead were already rotting by nature. The dark power that animated them also arrested further depreciation, staving off decrepitude and collapse. Jason's necrotic powers not only obviated the power staving off further decline but massively accelerated it. His blade smashed away chunks of flesh like hitting water balloons with a stick, liquefied corpse meat sloughing away in wet clumps. The afflictions he left behind finished off the undead while he was already moving on to the next.

It was a rare chance for Jason to act as a more traditional frontline fighter, although very much in his own mode. His swirling cloak rendered him all but invisible in the patchy light of glowing red flowers and dancing shadows. He shadow-jumped from area to area, one moment carving a path through the rank and file and in another loading a powerful undead with necrotic afflictions. The sword Gary made for him reaped the undead like a harvester's scythe.

Clive had been brought into the command channel of Jason's voice chat to keep Jason and Miriam updated. He had remained silent except for when Miriam asked for progress reports as she balanced the safety of the defenders with how much they had to slow the progress of the undead.

"Progress?" she asked again.

"We're getting a solid handle on how we need to calibrate the rituals," Clive reported. "I'm extremely confident in getting this to work, and at the lower end of my original time frame. Maybe three more hours. That's the good news."

"And the bad news?" Miriam asked.

"If the undead make it into the array chamber, everything changes. The undeath energy will start affecting the array and then we're done. The undead have to be kept out of this chamber at all costs. *All costs.*"

"Alright. Thank you, Clive."

Miriam opened a personal channel to Jason.

"We can't hold them outside of the array chamber for three more hours," she told him bluntly. "We just can't. I can start pushing back harder and slow the progress but we'll start seeing casualties. Once those start mounting, it'll leave us on much the same timeline, but with fewer people left."

"The citadel won't last three more hours anyway," Jason said.

"No," Miriam agreed. "If you've got any miracles you've been hoarding, I'd really like you to take them out now."

"Wouldn't that be nice," Jason said. "But I'm not a..."

Jason vanished, shadow jumping into the backline to emerge from Miriam's shadow.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I actually do have a couple of miracles in my pocket," he said. "They won't help us here, but maybe I can trade them."

"With who?"

"The other people that have miracles, obviously. I'm going to have to do something I don't like."

“I don’t care what you like, Asano. If you have something you can do, then do it.”

“Yeah,” Jason agreed. “I just never thought I’d be relying on the power of prayer.”

The undead assault on the citadel chamber grew worse, not just in the power of the undead but the coordination with which they were operating. It became clear that the Undeath priests were directing their forces once their more powerful creations entered the fray.

Gary’s Big Hammer had plugged the first major breach, but more had come. The gold-rankers were increasingly occupied holding them, many too far gone to be sealed, tying up the gold-ranker defending them for the rest of the battle. Gary’s forge golem was gone, sacrificed to take out a gold-rank abomination Gary and his team eliminated without needing a gold-rank adventurer.

The golem had self-detonated, coating the abomination in molten metal while inside the breach. Gary’s support team had then shaped spears of metal and stone from the walls, impaling the undead dozens of times over while closing the breach at the same time.

Gary watched another large breach explode out, right below his current location. His footing shook as the bottom half of the stairwell he was on collapsed. He looked around and realised that, once again, there were no unoccupied gold-rankers left to respond. He gave his support team a grave look and nodded downwards.

“Let’s go.”

“Gary, that’s a massive breach,” said Kollas, the leader of Gary’s brightheart support team. “We can’t hold that alone.”

“I can hold it,” Gary told her. “At least long enough for you to seal the breach behind me.”

“What? No! If we cut you off out there, it’ll take a miracle for you to survive.”

“Then do me a favour and start praying.”

“Gary, I’ve been praying for the last two hours.”

Gary’s reassuring grin wasn’t, his leonine face looking like he’d just spotted prey. He stepped off the shattered stairway to drop into the breach, landing in a cloud of stone dust, thick as fog. The undead were already pouring through, silhouettes in the cloud backlit by purple light. He let out a roar that cracked stonework, blasting them back with sound and force. The stone dust roiled wildly, lit up with purple light.

Only one undead had held firm through the blast, a gold-rank beetle-like creature made of stitched flesh with hundreds of eyes sewn into its body. It radiated out an

aggressive aura, pressing down on Gary's with gold-rank might. This was not the aura of a living thing but an artificial aura, instilled into this monstrosity by its creators.

Gary's aura buckled under the onslaught but didn't break. The creature's aura probed for weaknesses to exploit and found nothing. Years of training with Farrah and then Jason had refined Gary's aura into a fortress. The raw power of gold-rank threatened to crush it whole, but Gary held fast with raw determination. Aura combat was one of the few places where willpower could tip the scales of rank, if only a little.

Gary didn't let the spiritual battle pause the physical one. He was coated in armour of dark heavy steel that glowed red hot between the plates and his hammer lit up the same way. The monster was gold-rank, but designed for spiritual assault. That didn't mean the fight would be easy, but it would be possible.

Behind him, Gary's support team frantically called for him to return. He called out to them without turning or slowing his stride.

"It has been an honour," he yelled back. "You know what to do."

He conjured up a stone wall, reinforced with a metal framework. He didn't have time to reinforce it properly and spent as little mana as he could. It was to make a point, not a barricade. The stone and metal-shapers on the other side would do that.

The abomination was bizarre, little more than a flesh mound with six legs and a patchwork body, covered in eyes. It neither retreated nor advanced at Gary's approach, continuing its spiritual barrage. Behind it, the undead horde was rushing in after being flung back by Gary's roar. He shifted his stance and raised his hammer.

The undead were a unifying force. The brighthearts, elemental messengers, cultists and adventurers each counted two members of their alliance as bane foes, yet the undead brought them all together. An all-consuming, existential threat, the undead turned even nemesis into ally.

Miriam was on overall command, directing a slow withdrawal through the chambers and tunnels. Each new wave of undead was forced to crawl over the remains of the last. The wide-open chambers were surrendered relatively quickly, being harder and more costly to defend. The tunnels were the true battleground, the tight confines turned into kill-boxes. The undead paid dearly for every inch, sometimes forced to dig through piles of their own fallen to advance.

Jason stood well behind the backline in one such tunnel, head bowed and eyes closed. His starlight cloak had been dismissed, showing a face stained with the grime of battle.

“I know you’re watching this closely,” he whispered. “I know you are more against the undead even than those of us likely to die to them. You know what I need.”

“That,” a warm female voice said quietly, “was a very mediocre prayer. And rather demanding at the end.”

Jason smiled, raised his head and opened his eyes. The goddess of death stood before him in the guise of a stocky, middle-aged woman with a colourful dress. She gave off the warm feeling of a matronly tavern keeper.

“You may not have heard,” Jason told her, “but prayer isn’t really my thing.”

“Oh, I’ve heard.”

“And I heard you normally show up as a stern-faced man in this region.”

“Do you want me to?”

“No, I like you this way,” he said, glancing over at the ongoing battle. “There’s enough cold and grim from the other side.”

“I agree.”

He looked around and saw that only he seemed to have noticed the goddess.

“What do you want from me, Jason Asano? You know people who keep resurrecting aren’t exactly in my best graces.”

“You like me more than the undead, though.”

“Yes. But if you want a miracle, you need one of my servants or a grand sacrifice. And despite what people cannot seem to stop believing, I have no interest in the sacrifice of lives.”

“I know,” Jason said. “Death is just one part of the cycle.”

“Do you? You seem determined to escape that cycle.”

“I don’t think there is an escape. I think some cycles are just a lot larger than others.”

“I would like to think so, but my remit does not reach beyond this planet, which itself will have its time.”

“I have two resurrections,” Jason said. “You can have them. I offer that as my sacrifice.”

“I decline,” Death told him. “It is not enough.”