

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.

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.”

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.