

The Fall 305

Chapter 305: War

"The hordes will arrive in our designated War Zone in eight days. We expect the second horde to come in contact with the coalition of Port Atwood and the Sino-Indians two days later," Mark said as he looked down at the map.

Mark was a distant uncle to Thea, and he was assigned as her primary advisor for the upcoming war. The middle aged man was a seasoned veteran of the Royal Air Force and a decorated general, so it was no surprise that he would be calling the shots in the battle against the undead. Officially he was only here in an advisory role though, with Thea being the figurehead.

Still, she wanted to understand as much as she could even if she might not be the real strategist of the war. A lot of people would die in the upcoming weeks, some as a direct result of her commands. She owed it to them to do everything she could to keep that number as low as possible.

"Why don't we immediately fight them?" Thea asked with a frown. "We're giving them free rein over hundreds of miles of land."

"For one we want them as far away as possible from the Incursion," Mark explained as he pointed toward the edge of the Dead Zone. "The geeks have surmised that these hordes are large enough to affect the area, changing the Cosmic Energy into miasma at a rate higher than they consume.

"But our goal is to splinter the horde and whittle them down, turning the horde into smaller groups that won't have this benefit. If we can bring the units beneath the critical mass needed to maintain the transformation we can starve them out. Even if they turn back at that time they will have a week's travel before they can resupply on miasma," the general said as he scratched his beard.

"But they will destroy all the towns in their path," Thea muttered.

"Small price to pay. Besides, we have evacuated most of the people living in the path toward us," Mark said.

"How long do you think this war will take?" Thea asked, her thoughts heading to Zac.

"At least a month," Mark said with some hesitation. "Problem is we can't tell how many elite warriors they have, and that will affect the speed at which can dismantle the horde. They have a thick layer of trash out at the edges, and the cloud of miasma blocks our vision of what hides in the core."

"How many Incursions do you think their team will be able to close in that time?" Thea asked, interested in hearing the opinion of a war veteran.

"I wouldn't know, girl. You know his strength better than me. But it seems they want to keep the land they claim, and that will take far more time than the battle," Mark said with a snort. "Port Atwood is about to get a real headache on their hands."

"You know, you will need a better strategy than simply running interference," Ilvere's voice said as he walked inside the tent.

"What?" Alea said with confusion, once again looking down at the map detailing the progress of the undead horde.

"Lord Atwood," Ilvere guffawed, drawing an even stare from the poison mistresses. "I heard about your little stalking over in that human town. You even sent the little blue one to ruin the mood, no?"

"That is none of your business. Besides, it was to avoid letting that woman taking advantage of us," Alea said.

"I'm sure," Ilvere snorted as he walked over to the table. "You should know that our cultures are different. I could simply beat up the others to court Lady Alyn, but that sort of approach seems to make the humans angry."

"I don't understand what you see in that bloodthirsty lunatic," Alea said with a shake of his head.

"Perhaps I simply like living on the edge," Ilvere smiled.

Alea rolled her eyes before she looked down at the table in silence a few seconds, as if in deep thought.

"Am I a fool for pursuing this?" Alea suddenly asked.

"Following one's heart is never foolish," Ilvere said.

"When did you become so wise?" Alea said, some humor returning to her eyes.

"Well, I wasn't blessed with a rich daddy nor a pretty face, so I had to use my head for my conquests," Ilvere grinned before once again looking down at the map. "So what are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that we will have to work a lot without pay. These things will barely bring any money per kill," Alea sighed. "At least it will temper this pathetic excuse for an army."

"If you think ours is bad you should see the ones from that other force," Ilvere said with disgust. "It's no wonder their countries became food for the undead."

"What do you mean?" Alea asked with confusion. "Our reports say their armies are almost three hundred thousand men strong, with more joining every day."

"A large group of trash," Ilvere said. "Armed with pre-integration weaponry. Most are below level 10. They will probably just turn into even more zombies to kill. And all that energy and money being left on the table. I'd say that only fifty thousand or so are proper warriors, though their levels aren't anything impressive."

"What about the two elites that are on the ladder?" Alea asked.

"They act like they're gods, but I'd be able to fight them both to a draw with my restrictions in place," Ilvere said with a shake of his head.

"About the restrictions," Alea slowly prodded. "Did you...?"

"Yeah, I got the quest. As did Janos," Ilvere said. "But completing our mission comes first."

"Agreed, but if we see the opportunity," Alea said, drawing a nod from the demon general.

“And if those two get in the way?”

“Then they can join the Undead General in hell,” Alea said with equanimity.

“If you were only this assertive with your private life,” Ilvere said with a final laugh as he left the tent, holding his breath to avoid the wave of poison that followed him out.

“Thank you as always, Miss Sui,” Ling Tian said as he stood up.

“You should rest some more,” Sui said as she looked at the back of her new team leader with worry.

He looked fine but Sui knew that he was anything but. His whole body was a maze of scars from countless battles with the undead.

“I might not be a cultivator but I can gain strength with these two hands,” Ling Tian said, tightening his fist. “More importantly, every Zombie we kill now will be one less to rampage across the settlements in the coming weeks. This is the final battle.”

“But you need to be alive to keep protecting the people,” Sui sighed.

“Haven’t you read the stories?” Ling Tian said with a youthful smile as he stood up to rejoin the battle.

“The hero always starts out as a weakling, but soon grows into prominence.”

Sui didn’t know what to say as she saw the receding form of Ling Tian, unsure whether it was her place to butt in. She knew that many made fun of Ling Tian for his chosen name or what they perceived as a vain attempt of playing the hero.

But she truly felt he was a hero. He wasn’t overly strong, yet he dared to risk his life over and over. Who knew how many he had saved over the past months, relentlessly keeping the undead at bay in the area around Eastern Hills. That in of itself was a great achievement. After all, he was not like that man.

Ling Tian was not able to single-handedly mow through an army with a swing of his axe, and his aura wasn’t as vast as the sea.

Suddenly, as if summoned by her thoughts she saw the hunched-over form of Wang Fang walking by. By now he was only a shell of the man he once was, with his cheeks sunken and dark circles under his eyes. The aura of life around him had long turned a murky yellow, compared to the vibrant gold that she usually saw around people. He was not long for the world.

“Enjoying the effects of your boyfriend’s scheming?” Wang Fang growled when he noticed Sui’s glance.

“David told you the water was poisoned and warned everyone not to drink it,” Sui said with annoyance, having repeated the same thing untold times.

It wasn’t only his body that had warped, but so had Wang Fang’s mind. His actions against David had caused the Monastery to speak out against him in the end, causing their whole hunting squad to become pariahs in the whole eastern border of the Dead Zone.

But not once had Wang Fang looked inward to his own failings, and instead squarely put all the blame on the man who called himself David. Of those who had ignored David’s warning and partook in the cursed water, only Wang Fang was still alive.

Their group had no choice but to travel to a settlement far away to avoid the angry mob wanting to curry favor with the Abbot. But they were soon driven out again due to Wang Fang's infamy and irascible personality. It was only at Ling Tian's town Eastern Hills they found sanctuary. Ling Tian took anyone in as long as they were ready to fight the undead threat.

"I might die soon, but that man might join the war. I will drag that schemer with me to hell if it's the last thing I do," Wang Fang growled after throwing Sui one last glance, walking away toward his tent.

"The next time we meet David will be the day he dies," a condescending voice said from behind. "How does he still not realize who he is?"

Sui looked back at John, one of the few westerners who had lived in the Dead Zone since the beginning.

"The poisonous water has made him irrational and paranoid. He doesn't believe people when they explain how the description of the Super Brother-Man in King's Crossing perfectly matches David," Sui said with some helplessness.

But she wondered, would he be in the army they were heading toward?

"Your Eminence, the town of Port Atwood has once again arrived to check up on our status. Do you wish to meet with them?" the elderly monk asked after opening the doors to the secluded courtyard.

Abbot Everlasting Peace sighed as he looked up at the sky. Ribbons of gold crossed the sky above him, making him feel both wonder and despair. Everything would come to an end, but would he truly be able to sever it? Should he?

Was this truly the correct path toward enlightenment?

Brother Stillness looked at the wistful expression on the usually serene face, and worry started to mar his ancient face. He had assisted the Abbot for decades, and he had never seen such an expression.

"Your eminence...?" elder Stillness said with concern as he took a hesitant step toward the pond. "Is it the yin creatures? The mountain will provide sanctuary."

"Brother Stillness, do you remember when we were young?" Abbot Everlasting Peace suddenly said as he looked at the elder monk across the pond. "This penniless monk ate the Yumberries that elder Small Mountain had grown with meticulous care behind his abode."

"When this one scurried away he noticed Brother Stillness sitting in a tree not far away, witnessing the theft. Yet when asked by elder Small Mountain Brother Stillness lied and said you ate them. Was this lie good or bad?"

The elder's long wispy brows rose in surprise before he donned a thoughtful look.

"Lying is not only harming others, but it is also harming one's self. It is a corruption of the path, and the Buddha decreed lying to be against one the moral precepts," elder Stillness said before he bowed in thanks. "Amitabha. Only through self-reflection can one find the path."

Abbot smiled as he looked at the ribbons once more, his eyes turning toward the 5 Pitch-Black ones rising into the cosmos from various corners of the continent. Next, his eyes moved toward the Silver

ribbon inlaid with countless fractals, which as usual thrummed with recognition when it was being observed. He once again sighed and looked back down at his old friend.

"Small Mountain was not truly harmed by my theft. He never intended to eat them himself, and chalked it up to the berries going to their fateful owners," Abbot Everlasting Peace smiled as he caressed the thick golden line connecting himself and elder Stillness. "Yet the shelter you provided a young scared acolyte proved to become a gesture that this penniless monk remembers even 80 years later."

The old monk looked a bit confused at the Abbot's exclamation. Was this a karmic lesson, or was the Abbot simply reminiscing? But he didn't have the chance to inquire as the old Abbot suddenly rose to his feet for the first time in months.

"Abbot..! Your wound..?" Stillness exclaimed with worry, though he couldn't hide the excitement in his eyes.

"What will come to be, will be," Abbot Everlasting Peace said, stepping out from the lotus.

Small ripples expanded on the pond as the abbot stepped on the water surface as though it was solid ground. But that wasn't what truly shocked the old monk.

The magical Zen Treasure that Abbot had sat upon for months in order to recuperate started glowing and changing the moment that the Abbot stepped down from it. The flower radiated a holy light as it rose from the pond, and flew up to position itself behind the Abbot.

As Everlasting Peace walked across the pond golden Sanskrit started to appear in a script across the flower, which itself turned into a holy white. In just seconds it had turned into a Buddhist halo, with dense writings covering its every surface.

As brother Stillness' eyes read the lines his mind turned blank for a second, before he felt an unprecedented clarity. His eyes, full of understanding, quickly moved to meet the Abbot's, who only smiled in response. Excitement filled brother Stillness' heart for a second, but it soon was suffused by a deep sadness.

"Your eminence, this means...?!" he hesitantly asked.

"What will be, will be."