

The Fall 338

Chapter 338: Breaking Out

“What’s the status?” Alea asked with a tired sigh, looking over at Ilvere.

The rugged warrior didn’t have his usual boisterous attitude after entering the town hall that had been turned into a temporary command center for the war efforts of Port Atwood. He rather looked a bit helpless as he scratched his hair, with multiple new scars adorning his arms.

“They keep pressing forward,” Ilvere said. “They’ll be here in a day or so if they keep their usual pace. No matter what we do they won’t be deterred.”

Alea shook her head and looked down at the map with confusion. The last week had been a true exercise in futility.

Initially, everything had gone as planned. The combined forces of Port Atwood and Sino-Indian Alliance met the sea of zombies at the predetermined location and slowly started to whittle down their numbers from the flanks.

The horde didn’t seem to care about the losses and kept stumbling forward in the direction of the Zone rife with human and Ishiate settlements. For every ten meters they progressed they left dozens of destroyed corpses behind as the living continuously peppered them from the sidelines.

Of course, the horde wasn’t completely helpless. Now and then large groups of elite Zombies would break out of the swarm of low tiered undead, charging straight into the ranks of the two armies. These Zombies were not intelligent like humans, but they weren’t like the braindead zombies that only mindlessly stumbled forward.

They were like a pack of wolves, and their bodies were extremely durable. They shot into the ranks of Port Atwood and the other humans, causing some murder and mayhem before rushing back into the safety of the horde. Port Atwood was generally able to rebuff these raids with the help of the powerful demons and superior equipment. But losses were unavoidable, with hundreds of soldiers already having fallen.

Of course, that was nothing compared to the losses of the Sino-Indian Alliance. They possessed large squads that mainly relied on their old world weaponry, so when the elite zombies pounced them they were like foxes let loose in the hen house. The alliance suffered disastrous losses until they rearranged their ranks to protect the normal soldiers with cultivators.

But even Port Atwood was starting to feel the pressure. Gear was getting destroyed and defensive treasures expended at a rapid rate. For now, only recruits had fallen, but their core warriors would start dying soon as well unless they turned the situation around.

But the most baffling thing had happened two days ago. The large horde suddenly changed course and was currently heading in a direction that would lead them dangerously close to their base camp. When such a thing had happened until now there would always be a swarm of zombies that splintered off from the main horde to cull the population of the nearby town. It was a way to bolster their numbers while they marched, or perhaps just have an outlet for their blood lust.

She didn't believe the reason was to bring the fight to them. They would teleport out long before the slow-moving horde managed to reach them. Besides, even if they managed to take down this place there were mostly non-combat personnel and logistics based here. Most warriors were already trailing the horde.

That wasn't the only odd thing. While the horde that the Marshall clan fought kept their original direction apart from a few odd detours, the third horde had veered off-course as well. It was now heading into a mountainous region that was almost completely devoid of people.

That whole sector had long since become a haven for strong beasts, and there weren't just one or two evolved beast kings prowling those mountains. Heading there with a bunch of dumb Zombies would simply turn a large number of them to food for the animals.

Their scouts had also spotted dozens of smaller hordes of one to five million zombies leaving the Dead Zone, and their initial fear had been that they moved to bolster the larger swarms just as they started to reduce their numbers. But the smaller hordes moved in irrational patterns as well, and less than a fifth of the smaller hordes had joined up with the three large ones.

"Start packing up. I don't know why they want this place, but let them have it. We'll relocate to basecamp two," Alea said.

Ilvere nodded in confirmation, leaving the command center to make preparations. Alea stayed behind and looked at the map as though she was in trance. She needed to figure something out to turn things around. If they just kept nipping at the sides of the swarms they would slowly expend their people and resources, creating a pyrrhic victory.

So far no matter how hard they had pushed the horde just wouldn't splinter, and they unhesitatingly sacrificed any small groups that were separated from the flock. If things continued in this manner they would never be able to starve them out, since the innumerable zombies kept spewing out a storm of miasma that tainted everything and obscured their vision.

That cloud of miasma, in turn, stopped them from daring to push too deep into the hordes for a decisive blow. They still had no idea what lurked in the middle of the sea of Zombies. If they cut too far into the horde they might find themselves without a path of retreat.

Her lithe fingers slowly ran across the map as the minutes passed, following the paths the hordes had taken during the past weeks. When her finger reached the small wooden soldiers representing the separate horde's current positions she started again with a different group, over and over. But suddenly she froze, and she quickly got a thick marker to draw out the paths they had walked.

"They're drawing an array!" she blurted out with some terror in her eyes.

It was still in the early stages, but judging by the paths of the hordes the Undead Empire was drawing a massive fractal with their pathing. The three larger hordes were the main veins of the fractal, with the smaller parties creating assisting pathways.

Her thoughts immediately went to the fact that the huge horde stopped for an hour or two every now and then. They had assumed the leaders of the hordes let the weaker Zombies rest, but what if they only stopped to plant array flags into the ground under the cover of the miasmatic cloud. With millions of

zombies stomping the ground afterward there would be no way to tell that they had dug up the ground and left something.

She blankly looked down at the map for a second, her mind reeling at the concept of just what kind of effect such a monstrous fractal would have. If it was completed it would span a greater area than most kingdoms, its lines running thousands of miles.

She needed to report this to Lord Atwood and Ogras immediately. This was too terrifying a prospect, something of this magnitude could never be allowed to be unleashed on a planet. She was no expert on arrays, but judging by their pathing she guessed that they would have drawn out the whole fractal in just a month. There was no way they would be able to grind down the main horde within that time.

The worst thing was that she had a pretty decent idea of what the goal of the undead was. The Undead Empire always aimed to take full control of any planet they encountered during an incursion, turning the world into a land of death. But how would that be possible when they faced the constant oppression of the planet itself, which was constantly generating new Cosmic Energy?

Perhaps the goal of the massive array was to kill the very planet itself.

Alea hurried out of the town hall and immediately headed for the teleportation building. But she stopped in her tracks when she saw the large group of people standing in line outside with confused faces.

“What’s going on?” Alea asked the nearest demon with a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

“Something is wrong the array,” the demon warrior said with a slight frown on his face. “We got the instruction to start moving the base, but the array suddenly shut down again just a few minutes after it was activated.”

Alea immediately nodded in thanks before she hurried into the building to find out what was going on. She didn’t have Lord Atwood’s supernatural sense for danger, but she grew up fending for herself, which awarded one an instinct for survival. And her instincts were currently screaming at her that something was terribly wrong.

“What’s happening?” she asked when she found Ilvere, standing together with a few non-combat personnel.

“I was just about to call you,” Ilvere said with a somber face before he walked closer and continued with a soft voice that only she could hear. “Our array is being blocked.”

“How is that possible?” Alea said with shock. “Those siege tools shouldn’t be available on a baby planet. We haven’t prepared any countermeasures.”

“I have no idea. What do you want to do?” Ilvere asked.

Ilvere was a strong military leader, always fighting in the vanguard to bolster the troop morale. But he wasn’t the best-equipped demon to handle this sort of unclear situation. Alea bit her lip for a second, before looking up with determination.

“Get everyone ready and immediately recall the army. Have them return within 6 hours even if they have to run until their feet bleed. Also, send out scouts to investigate in all directions,” she said. “We need to get away from here, something is wrong. If the teleporters are down we can only leave on foot.”

Ilvere nodded and walked out, immediately starting to bark new orders to the gathering crowd. Alea also left the teleportation room after asking the stationed guards to keep trying. They had no experts in arrays so there was no one that she could ask to figure out a work-around or a way to dispel the blockage. They were currently at the mercy of whoever was running interference.

Various thoughts swirled in her mind as she walked back to her own residence. She quickly put away all her possessions before walking down into the massive room in the basement. It had once been a luxurious spa with two pools, but Alea had turned it into something else completely.

The larger pool was half-filled with a deep green liquid that emanated small puffs of smoke at regular intervals. Alea sighed when she looked at her creation. She was lacking time, and the purification wasn't completely done. But her specially modified [Corpserot Poison] should at least be concentrated enough to make most of the elite zombies fall apart in seconds.

Her mood improved noticeably when she walked over to the smaller pool, whose jets kept the liquid inside in constant motion. The electrical pool was truly a marvel, and she had already decided to get her hands on one of these things for her house after the war was over. Imagine watching the stars in one of these things, perhaps even with a companion.

Alea quickly snapped out of her daydreams and put her hand into the warm golden liquid. It was as though her hand was a vacuum or tear in space, as the potent poison rushed into her body without leaving a drop behind. After the first pool was cleared out she did the same with the second pond.

The hours passed as a subdued atmosphere spread across the small town and its 3000 temporary residents. The human barkeep had tried to enliven people's spirit by offering his energized concoctions, but it barely helped. They all knew that something was truly wrong.

The teleportation array was still out of order after four hours, proving that it was not just some odd coincidence. But worse yet, their scouts had recently found out that their retreating army was harried by a swarm of almost a million elite zombies. The undead had kept pace with them since the soldiers of Port Atwood left the main horde of the zombies.

“Have everyone returned?” Alea asked as she stood in the command center once more for a final meeting.

“Three scouts haven't returned. They were all supposed to scout northwest so I fear they have met some trouble in the passage,” the scout leader said with a sigh. “There's nothing else in the other directions, apart from the beasts.”

Alea looked down at the map with a frown. Northwest was the direction that she had wanted to move in. Northwest had a reasonably safe path between two mountain ranges that led to a large settlement after a week's travel.

If they moved north or east they would have to travel twice that distance in extremely hostile terrain before reaching any town with a teleporter. And even if managed to get through to the towns they

would face catastrophic losses during their flight. Alea and the other leaders weren't like Lord Atwood. They couldn't keep the whole army safe from the continuous onslaught of rabid beasts.

South and southeast were right in the direction of the Zombie horde, and that was to head straight into the maw of the beast. Especially now that the undead seemed to actively fight back for the first time since the conflict started.

“We’ll head northwest,” Alea said as killing intent started to leak from her body. “Someone wants to trap us here, but the people of Port Atwood are not so easy to contain. Prepare for all-out war, we're breaking out by force.”