

The Fall 347

Chapter 347: Enemies Ahead

"Persistent bastards," Alea muttered with displeasure as a poisonous cloud billowed out from her hand, causing one zombie after another to stumble before they fell down into a rotting heap.

Her skill [Gift of Talasa] only possessed limited effect against the undead, but it was one that did not require an actual compound to empower it. After the past few days, she knew she would need to ration her basin-sized stockpiles because it was becoming increasingly obvious that the Undead Empire wanted their army dead even if they had to sacrifice a terrifying number of their low-tiered undead.

"Every god damn hour," Ilvere agreed as he led a squad of warriors to mow down dozens of Elite Zombies every second.

His weapon, the huge ball attached to its chain, ripped through the air, creating a circle of death around the demonic general. Any zombie unlucky enough to get hit by the wrecking ball was instantly turned to paste, but those closer to Ilvere weren't much better off as they instantly got bisected by the chain.

The demon wasn't using any skills at the moment, only taking advantage of the reach of his weapon while occasionally infusing the ball with his Dao to increase the momentum. He was conserving his Cosmic Energy in case another powerhouse hid inside the Zombie wave. Unfortunately Alea herself didn't have such a luxury, as her only physical weapon was a thin rapier she used to decapitate any Zombie that got too close.

There were also the [Wailing Spikes], but controlling those cursed objects cost too much, and wasn't something that she would use unless she was out of options. So she was stuck wasting Cosmic Energy, desperately circulating her cultivation manual to restore her constantly depleting reserves. But there was no choice, the undead were completely relentless in their pursuit of the bedraggled forces of Port Atwood.

The 15 000 man strong group had kept a rapid pace northwest to outrun the horde of elite zombies on their tail. They hadn't stopped moving since they fled their temporary base, moving through the wilderness at a rapid pace to get away. But the zombies seemed to have no trouble keeping up, with raids assaulting their rear constantly.

There was no rest for the warriors of Port Atwood. Even Alea herself and Ilvere were forced to occasionally defend the rear to avoid too many casualties. But neither of them ever dared to go all out to clean out a larger swathe of the attacking undead.

Alea was constantly on guard against a pincer strike from ahead. She had thought it would come almost immediately after they fled the small town due to the missing scouts, but so far they hadn't even seen the shadows of any threat at all. That did not instill any confidence though, but rather the opposite.

It appeared the undead were taking a page out of her own playbook, and they seemed willing to slowly grind them down. Normally the constant raids from Zombies wouldn't be a too large concern as Port Atwood lacked neither experts nor gear. But the fact that they were constantly on the move made it hard if not impossible to properly rest up after the battles.

After a full day of fleeing they had tried to take a short rest while the rear guard protected their camp, but just moments after their large group stopped the undead turned crazy, heedlessly rushing their position. Only after a frantic one hour escape did the undead relent, resuming their pattern of constant, but manageable, harassment.

"Enemies ahead! Golems and beacons!" a blaring warning came from a command crystal in Alea's hand, and she immediately gathered a number of the elites fortifying the rear.

Ilvere and his squad also retreated, leaving the task of defending against the elite zombies to the regular army. Some demons would stay behind as well to help out, but the lack of elites would no doubt cause some deaths. But there was nothing to be done since the true threat came from the front.

On a hill a few kilometers ahead a small army stood ready. Their numbers were less than 500, but Alea could sense the powerful energies from the members even from this distance. Their lines were orderly and well-armed. A few of the gargantuan Corpse Golems were present as well, proving this was not another group of rabble. Even two large monoliths were erected, constantly spewing out miasma in the surroundings.

"It's finally here," Alea muttered, before turning to Ilvere. "We need to go all out on this one."

Ilvere somberly nodded as he looked out over the elite army barring their path.

"Can you find the leader?" Alea whispered as her eyes scanned the army over and over.

"No, but I think that's a good thing," Ilvere hesitantly said. "If there was a true powerhouse there he wouldn't bother to hide within the ranks, right? I think there's no general spearheading this army."

"It also means we won't be able to complete our quest just yet," Alea sardonically smiled.

Soon enough the elites of Port Atwood stood ready, but their numbers were less than half of that of the Undead Army. Of course, Port Atwood was able to augment their lack of experts in various ways.

"Get the lunatics as well," Alea said after some deliberation.

"Are you sure? We can only use them a few times," Ilvere asked from the side, but Alea nodded without hesitation.

She honestly didn't feel confident against this small but intimidating force in front of them. It would be one thing if they had Lord Atwood or Ogras here, but there was no one to hold down the fort for them. They would need to use every weapon in their arsenal.

Soon enough ten ragged Ishiate rushed over. They looked wrung out from the last day's march, but a manic gleam could be seen in all of their eyes. It was the tinkerers that had created the terrifying cannons that utilized Nexus Crystals. They had been working on improving their inventions since their last field test. Alea hadn't used them in the war so far, wanting to keep their extremely destructive weaponry as a hidden ace.

"Are you confident in blowing up those two pillars over there?" Alea asked a one-eyed Ishiate.

"Mistress, I'd say we need four shots to be somewhat sure. But even the shots we miss would cause some mayhem," the maimed Ishiate said after spying on the Undead squad through a brass binocular. "Of course, if they possess shielding that's another matter."

"Good. We'll sound them out and hopefully break their defensive array. Try to destroy those beacons no matter what. If it seems impossible, maximum carnage," Alea said.

"Maximum carnage," the Ishiate agreed, a wide smile spreading across his face.

Ideally, she would have wanted to prepare longer before assaulting a pure core squad from the Undead Empire, but the Elite Zombies were putting immense pressure on their rear. She could only start the assault prematurely as they truly needed to move forward. A thousand man strong army rushed forward until they created some distance from their non-combatants.

Hundreds of the Atwood Academy recruits immediately started to infuse crystals with energy, creating a wide shimmering wall in front of them. They would be the defensive line protecting the non-combat classes and the ranged strikers such as the Ishiate craftsmen.

At the same time a smaller force pushed forward, including just the strongest warriors. Ilvere was already spinning his weapon in the air above them, accumulating a terrifying momentum. Janos was there as well, and energy surged around him as the area was suddenly filled with demonic warriors storming the front while a haze spread over them. All of it were illusions of course, but it would improve their survivability while hiding their actions within the mist.

"Are you ready?" Alea said to one of the demons with a ranged class, and he nodded as he took out an extremely oversized crossbow from his Cosmos Sack.

The demon was peak F-Grade, but he was barely able to carry the monstrosity. It was more apt to call it a ballista going by its size, and that was just what it was before the craftsmen of Port Atwood got their hands on it. It was over three meters long, and the slot for its bolts looked large enough fit a young tree. It was part of the arsenal Clan Azh'Rezak brought for sieges, and it had served well during the final battle against the beast waves.

But Alea had required something portable since they knew from the start that the war against the Undead would be a continuously moving skirmish, so the craftsmen modified it for such a purpose. Unfortunately, the modifications led to a loss in power, but it was still an extremely mighty weapon. The ranger expertly loaded the crossbow with a densely inscribed bolt that was as long as he was. The number of such a munition was quite limited, but they weren't in a situation to hold back against an army of this level.

But a wail from behind made her snap her neck around just as Alea was ready to give the command to start the operation. Her eyes widened in shock to see a hundred translucent ghosts appearing out of nowhere, assassinating one soldier after another. The soldiers were quick to respond, but most attacks just passed right through their incorporeal bodies.

Only a few of the demons were able to harm them with the help of their Dao, but it was clear that even most Daos were ineffective against them.

"Divine Array!" a captain under Ilvere roared from the defensive line, and the next moment the whole army lit up in golden radiance.

It was an array that Calrin had managed to purchase after a lot of trouble. It didn't make warriors any stronger, but it turned all attacks inside Life-Attuned. The one-sided slaughter quickly turned around, and two-thirds of the ghosts were cut down in rapid succession before the rest managed to slink away. Alea could breathe out in relief when she saw that the Ishiate tinkers were fine and ready to go.

"Now," she nodded at the ranger, who immediately got down on his knee. The inscribed cross-bolt was released with a powerful twang that caused a small shockwave as the projectile soared toward the Undead army.

An azure shield sprung up in front of the army, and the bolt got stuck as it started to release a tremendous amount of lightning that tried to rip open the barrier. However, the defensive array was empowered by not one but two Unholy beacons, and the extremely expensive bolt was only able to cause some hairline cracks that let a few errant lightning bolts inside.

Ilvere let out a resounding roar as he pushed the chain forward with enough power to make his whole body shake with strain. The large wrecking ball that had been accumulating a terrifying momentum immediately changed course and soared toward the undead army, its chain magically elongating as it sped forward.

The huge ball was thrown with such force that a few explosions took place in the air as it broke the sound barrier, until it slammed straight into the lodged cross-bolt with pinpoint accuracy. It was like a hammerhead hitting a nail, and the bolt pushed straight through the array. It unleashing a final burst of lightning inside, causing chaos even among the elite soldiers.

Most importantly the attack managed to crack the array, exposing the whole army beneath. A couple of deep thumps erupted from behind, sounding like primordial drums of war. It was the Ishiate tinkers who shot their extremely unstable payload at the exposed army with the help of their comically large cannons. The large projectiles soared above Alea's head like four miniature suns, a mix of splendor and terror waiting to erupt.

The undead warriors clearly understood the threat of the incoming bombs, and a storm of attacks rose from their camp to intercept. But the insane Ishiate hadn't been lazing about the past months, and thick green shields sprung up around the projectiles, blocking out the attacks lucky enough to hit. They had managed to incorporate a few defensive treasures into each of the bombs, effectively creating a defensive coating that would allow them to reach their target.

The power of the undead army wasn't anything to scoff at though, and they soon managed to destroy one of the bombs. Its explosion created an enormous fireball up in the air that threw Alea and her party into the ground, and it also dispersed Janos' illusions in an instant.

A second detonation followed soon after to submerge the heavens in an even greater conflagration, making it seem like the end of days were approaching. A third explosion followed after a brief pause, but Alea breathed out in relief to see that it detonated just above the undead army.

The shockwave slammed all the warriors apart from the mighty corpse golems into the ground, immediately stopping the persistent attacks toward the air. Better yet, hidden defensive arrays around

the two unholy beacons flashed into being before they got destroyed just as quickly, leaving the towers defenseless.

It allowed the final bomb to sail into the enemy camp and explode just in front of one of the beacons. It looked like a sun erupted, swallowing a third of the army. A second detonation followed soon after, causing an azure wind blade to rip through the firestorm and cause even more mayhem in the undead ranks.

It was the Unholy Beacon getting destroyed by the bomb. The second beacon still stood, but the results were still above Alea's expectations. Those crazy beastmen had made the detonations far stronger than they let on. The hair on her head stood at end when she remembered that those lunatics had repeatedly taken the bombs out to fiddle with the runes, even while running along with the army.

She looked back at their camp with incredulity, seeing the group dance around their cannons in glee, some of them sporting obvious burn marks.

"One fight at the time," Ilvere laughed as he spat a bit of dirt out of his mouth. "Hopefully we won't need to enlist their help again. I'm sure your boyfriend is on his way."

Alea rolled her eyes in exasperation, but a sense of sweetness welled up in her heart. It was true, Lord Atwood was surely on his way by now.

"Just shut up and help me destroy this army."