

War in the Mountain Country

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Simon bears witness to the rise of General Wilburn D'Armo.

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Prologue

The scrawny messenger rushed up the hill, fists pumping the air furiously. His master stroked his mustache thoughtfully, but did not raise from his folding chair below the gently blowing banners. "Master!" the young man panted, coming to a sudden stop directly across from the general. General Wilburn D'Armo gestured at him to speak. The assorted foot soldiers, archers, and commanders surrounding the general leaned in curiously to hear the news from Rainot Hill. Preparing for battle in such lush, hilly country made it difficult for the general to find a good vantage point for viewing his troops' deployment.

"The enemy advanced at least ten yards, making Field Captain Bortner pretty nervous," the messy-haired young man paused to try and catch his breath. A dozen pairs of anxious eyes hurried him onward. General D'Armo appeared nonchalant. "I told him that you had ordered all companies to hold their ground, but he told me that he was- Well, he wouldn't listen," he explained with a bit of embarrassment, "He hurried to retake that no man's land. Two hills over it's an all-out melee. That's all I have to report. The war has begun, Master."

"Get this man a drink of water," D'Armo commanded the man standing closest to him, an archer wearing the blue and violet of the duke's personal guard.

The duke, Royan Mikastari, usually commanded his troops himself with D'Armo serving at his side, but for the past two years, his health had been declining, forcing General D'Armo to work alone. The duke had no heirs. When he died, his lands would be passed on to D'Armo.

"Good work, Sim," the general thanked his messenger.

Simon, called "Sim" by his general, flopped down on the damp grass at D'Armo's feet. He was worn out with all this running up and down hills at a break-neck speed and he was sure that these tight, new boots were giving him blisters. "They're no match for you, Master," he remarked conversationally as the soldiers headed back to watch more diligently from their posts.

"What was that?" The middle-aged man had been deep in thought and had not caught Simon's words.

"The enemy troops are no match for you. You'll crush them," Simon patiently explained.

"That's little surprise," General D'Armo laughed. He had twenty years of experience on the battlefield. Mercenary troops from Allay were nothing to him. He had lost to Wuttaine's troops on several occasions and met his match strategically in Lady Nor from Bular, but he had survived all that as well and only found himself stronger for it.

The archer returned with a full canteen and Simon busily glugged it down. One advantage of their current terrain was the abundance of water. Several rivers flowed through the region and the many

streams branching off of them provided a clear supply for the troops.

"You look sharp in your uniform, Sim," the general complimented his subordinate.

Simon nodded appreciatively and smiled as he wiped his damp lips with his sleeve. He gave the canteen back to the archer and looked himself over. His uniform was already rather dirty and he had torn a small hole at his left elbow. His boots were a bit tight in the toes, as his feet were on the square side. And besides, he looked like every other foot soldier on the field. Sometimes the general was like this. Simon could not see where these sudden compliments stemmed from, but he was thankful for them nevertheless. The general was looking at him softly, a thin smile curled around his mustache and a twinkle in his narrow, dark eyes. Simon smiled back sheepishly.

D'Armo stood up and gazed fiercely toward the horizon, as though he could see something miles away and was scrutinizing it very carefully.

"General?" queried Kaldor, the archery captain.

The tall man shook his head, "It's nothing, good Kaldor. But we should not be wasting time here. Best we march forward. We must reclaim whatever territory Bortner may have lost and try to hold the line. The duke doesn't want an all-out war and neither do I."

"Understood, Sir," Kaldor nodded. He brushed some loose blond strands of hair out of his face and marched off to gather his troops. "I'll be needing a haircut soon," he grumbled, "This mess of long bangs is going to ruin my accuracy."

"Maybe Sim could do the job for you if you can't wait until we're off the field. He's not half bad with a pair of shears," D'Armo suggested.

"He trim your hair?" Kaldor wondered, "Cause it's a far sight neater than his own mop."

"It's easier," Simon mumbled, "To fix other people's hair than your own."

"Let's do it tonight," the archer agreed, "That is if we're standing stalemate." He resumed his march back to his waiting battalion and Simon smiled at his bobbing ponytail as he went. If only Kaldor had the patience to just grow his bangs out, he wouldn't have this problem every four months.

"Come, Sim, let's move," said the general.