

## Collapse

The ground was shaking, the towering forms advanced through the holes in the walls. The last bastion of the Kingdom of Vertas had fallen. The defense of the city had failed. King Strar watched from the wall surrounding his palace, seeing the burning buildings inside of his city. His army was dead, his people would soon follow.

He didn't even know how things had ended up like this. It felt like it had been only yesterday when life seemed so boring. When he sat on his throne and ruled, when the most he had to deal with was arguing about trade deals or appeasing the crafter Guildmaster. Now, the end has come.

The Kingdom of Vertas was a small one, but respected. They held seven respectfully sized territories deep in the mountains. With only a few passages into their territories, his grandparents had been able to keep their territory. When the greater nations and factions rose, it had been too costly to pursue a war in Vertas' mountains. And so, the Kingdom stood for hundreds of years, wealthy because of their marble and a few other precious stone quarries. They attracted artisans of all kinds, those who wished to pursue their art and level, improve over a longer period of time. They had made a business of it, catering to them, providing homes and anything else that they might need in order to keep their inspiration.

The greatest pieces of art came out of Vertas, but the ones that were at the top, remained in the City of Marvels. Statues were all over the city, on the streets, in great squares. Legendary sculptures that captured moments, ideas, emotions. Vertas had survived on its wealth, on its art. On tourism, of displaying their art. And it was only proper, a high tiered artist could craft a piece of art that could help a Cultivator find inspiration, that could turn sadness into joy, that could change opinions.

Now, it was all rubble.

When it started, Strar, like most of the rulers and leaders around his Kingdom dismissed it, called it a fluke, or a terrible strike that didn't concern them. The Night of Loss as it was called, the night when millions died, along with hundreds, if not thousands of the strongest and most influential people

in the Infinite Realm was a tragedy. But it was also an opportunity for many. Vertas' was isolated enough that they weren't affected by what happened next, when wars broke up, when neighbors turned on one another, seeking to gain more territories, Strar kept his people inside his mountains. He had sent crafters to the tournament, but they were a minor player, his people had gotten out at the first sign of trouble. He didn't believe what others said. It had been fine, they cried about doom and end times, but the world kept going. Wars broke out, and factions turned on each other, but that... that was just what people did when they saw weakness. With the deaths of so many High Rankers, of leaders, it was only natural that old enemies would strike. That those whose great warriors survived would try to take their place at the top.

A year of war, a year in which the cries for unity against these monsters had fallen on deaf ears. Strar himself had ignored them, for why should he fight against a foe that didn't threaten him? The core was a vast place, filled with billions of people, an army of a few million monsters seemed like it was nothing. Others could take care of it, Vertas had no need of weakening itself, not in a time when everyone sought to get an upper hand and fill the vacuum left by those that died.

Perhaps when armies had been assembled and sent against the Tournament City by the factions surrounding it, only for them to not be heard from again, they should've panicked. Yet... it was almost unbelievable, it was easier for them all to think that it was just a plot by those who had lost so much of their power on that night to wrestle some of it back.

Too late did the core realize what they had left to fester, too late had they seen their mistake.

And now, as an army of corrupted monsters and people, of horrors that were almost unimaginable, marched through Strar's city, he realized that they all should've listened.

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He tried to hide; he didn't know what else he could do. Dark covered shapes moved through the darkness. They walked into the village and started capturing everyone in the middle of the night. They entered the homes and pulled people from their beds, dragging them across the streets. He knew

that he should've signaled the alarm, that was his job, the little bell hung above him within reach. All he had to do was reach out, even now, it might save someone who hadn't yet been caught. But he couldn't move, fear gripped him, his mind felt heavy, as if something was pressing on it. And he heard whispers, speaking in a language that he didn't know yet somehow felt like if only he could concentrate, he could understand it.

It didn't matter, he couldn't move. He was paralyzed.

He could only listen to the screams of the people in the villages, to them cursing and threatening, and then to them begging. He heard no sound from those who had entered the village. He didn't know how long it had been since everything started happening, but after what seemed like an eternity everything stopped. He tried to listen carefully, but he heard nothing.

He remained hidden in his guard tower, huddled beneath his blanket under the table. It took him hours to get enough courage to leave his hiding place. By the time he moved, the sun had started to shine in the sky as night turned into day.

He crawled out, and then slowly climbed down the stairs of his guard tower. He walked into the empty village. The whispers in his head were gone.

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High Lord Marxus Ri Palon stood with his hands leaning on the table in front of him. A large map of his territories was rolled over it, with pins representing his troops as well as those of his enemy. The attack hadn't been unexpected, ever since Forest Walker and Cloud Splitter died in the Tournament City his faction had struggled. Losing two High Rankers would've been bad enough, but they also lost most of the leadership. It was only chance that Marxus hadn't been at the Tournament, his pregnant wife had been close to birth and they couldn't travel. With the invention of viewing screens, it didn't seem that important for him to make the trip as well.

He still didn't know if he had been lucky or if those that had died were. Their neighbors had turned on them once they sensed weakness. All of their best were at the tournament. And without his greatest warriors and generals,

Marxus was left with those who were good enough to hold the fort, not those who excelled.

The war had pushed them hard; they had lost four territories on the Eastern and Northern sides of their lands, and had managed to hold off the attackers from the West. Thankfully, there were no attacks from the South, at least not in the last few months. The Barkenfield Kingdom had joined in the attacks initially, but then they had been attacked by their own neighbors and were forced to retreat.

The core was in chaos, with thousands of little wars ignited across it. The big factions remained mostly intact, their alliances solid, or they pressed the smaller factions that were weaker. But the rest? They were all fighting.

He read through the reports, seeing that his enemies up north were preparing for another push. He grimaced at that, his forces were spread too thin, and he knew that they couldn't hold for much longer.

"High Lord," one of his attendants interrupted him as he walked into Marxus' tent.

"What is it?" Marxus asked.

The man walked over and put a scroll on the table. "More reports from down south."

Marxus blinked, then reached over and skimmed through it. "Two more villages disappeared."

"Yes High Lord. There was a witness this time, his account is in the second report" his attendant said.

Marxus look down again, reading more carefully. The account wasn't anything useful. A guard hid while someone attacked the village and took all the inhabitants. This was the twelfth village that disappeared in the last three months. None of them were large, a few thousand inhabitants at the most. They were unimportant, but it was still an issue. Their neighbors in the south were the only possible suspects for the raids, but... His spies in the Barkenfield Kingdom told him that they were too busy fighting on other fronts to try something like this, most of their army was engaged on the other side of their territory.

Marxus wished that he could send a few legions south to investigate and catch whoever it was that was kidnapping his people, but reality was that he couldn't afford it. The loss of those villages was acceptable.

"Send orders to the local cities, have them increase patrols," Marxus ordered, that was as much as he could do. For now, he had to focus on the war effort, his legions were close to their breaking point, and if they faltered then a few missing villages wouldn't matter at all.

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Eho, the Blade of a Thousand Cuts, moved through the battlefield unopposed. His four swords slashing all around him, killing the skreen warrior forms by the dozens. The Blue Forest Hive had picked the worst possible moment to restart their ages old war. With the loss of their leader and one of their High Rankers, the Oceanside Kingdom of the krecean people had been left vulnerable. The skreen had taken advantage. The Blue Forest Hive was one of the few independent skreen hives, most of the others had joined with the Grey Horde long ago.

It did not mean that they were weak. The Blue Forest Hive forms were powerful, and their warriors utilized nasty defense-based classes that made it hard for any army to deal with. Eho was one of the few that could destabilize a battlefield for long enough that their army could push the skreen back.

Yet, he was barely used. He understood, his Queen did not wish to risk him, he was their last remaining High Ranker, and one of the most powerful warriors in the entire Kingdom now. With the loss of the others and the king... they were barely holding on. All of their landlocked territories had been conquered, millions had died. The only reason the war was still being fought was because skreen were terrible on the water, and they couldn't touch their underwater cities or their fleets.

Now, as he charged across the sand of the beach, Eho whirled like a storm of death and metal. His curved swords carved a path through his enemy, heading straight for their siege weapons. The large cast cannons were glowing with formations, a clear sign that they were purchased and not built

by the hive. Skreen were terrible at Cultivation, the only way they could get those was by buying them from others.

If he was able to take them down, they wouldn't be able to repair, or even replace them that easily. And they needed to go down, their range was greater than that of the fleet on the water just off the coast, and without the support of the fleet the skreen would overrun them soon.

And Eho did not wish to get drowned in bodies today.

He created a path for himself and reached the cannons. With an effort of will he triggered his greatest perk and danced. Crescents of blue light flew in all directions around him, cutting anything and everything they touched. The champion form skreen guarding the cannons tried to defend against one and was cleanly cut in half. All the skreen around him died with him. The cannons were hit next and fell to pieces.

His mission complete, Eho turned around before the skreen managed to counterattack and overwhelm him. He was the most powerful being on the battlefield, but anyone could get drowned in numbers. There was no need to risk it, the fleet would be able to get back into range, and soon the skreen would face its the bombardment.

As he made his way back to his side, he wondered how everything had changed so quickly. It was only a bit over a year since the terrible attack on the tournament, and now... Everyone was at each other's throats. And he was even hearing whispers that whatever monster army that had been unleashed on the city was moving again.

He wished that they had dealt with it before, but... he couldn't have abandoned his people in their time of need. Not when enemies lurked in the shadows just waiting to pounce on them. He pushed those thoughts out of his mind and focused, his battle was here.

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The night was quiet, unnaturally so, there was no sound of animals in the air. Even the wind seemed to be silent. Havara had crossed a lot of ground, utilized all of her perks and abilities to arrive without being detected. She had spent her entire life in the shadows, a member of the Thieves Guild she had

gone through her share of dangerous situations. She was probably the highest tier and most powerful member of the guild at this point, certainly the strongest. If she hadn't acted only in the shadows, she most certainly would've been named a High Ranker. There was no one who was her equal at what she did.

It was because of that she assumed that she was hired for this job. She cursed herself for accepting, but the reward had been enough to convince her, despite the state of her own treasury. And a part of her was intrigued. She had heard whispers from the people living in the territories near the Tournament City for the entire first year following the attack. Attacks in the night, monsters invading and taking cities, entire territories even. And then, those whispers got drown in the chaos that erupted inside the core. The wars, the backstabbing and new alliances. The map of the core was being redrawn daily at this point. And the center of the core was growing increasingly more silent. She hadn't even realized it, but several factions had just dropped off the map, and people stopped coming out.

She had nearly refused when she had been offered a mission to go deep into the core and find as much as she could about what was happening. The reward was what had changed her mind, and now she wished that she had asked for more. Her travel had been uneventful. She had passed through ghost villages and towns, all empty and looking as if they had been abandoned months ago. In some, she would see signs of battle, in others it would look as if the people just walked out of their homes on their own. Then came the cities, empty and without any signs of life. The strangest thing was that there were no monsters either.

She had run into signs of life only when she had grown near the tournament territory. She had encountered patrols, groups of people with all black eyes, walking alongside monsters with the eyes that looked the same. She observed them for a while, seeing how strangely they moved, how in sync they were. It was possible that those monsters were pets controlled by a beast master class, but the more she looked at them, the more she realized that it was unlikely.

Then, she started encountering the other kind of monsters. She recognized them from the few reports and accounts that she had been given

of the invading horde. Black and monstrous, those monsters were clearly far more dangerous. She had encountered several cities, their walls covered in black growths that pulsed. She had nearly tried to infiltrate one, but decided to go deeper in. Her mission was to reach the Tournament City.

It took her weeks of dodging patrols both on the ground and in the air, and the closer she got, the more the landscape changed. It was as if the ground itself had become covered with black material that looked almost like dust. She didn't know what it did, and she didn't inspect it too closely.

She hadn't felt any of the signs of mental attacks that she had been warned about, for which she was thankful, it meant that her masterwork item that protected her mind worked. She had wondered.

Finally, she reached her destination. She crawled on top of a mountain and looked through her magnifying glass.

The Tournament City had been a massive settlement, capable of housing millions of people, now it spilled out of its boundary. It had nearly doubled in size. And all of it was covered in black growths. Monsters flew in the air above it in a circle, creating a dome above it that kept the sun's light from ever touching the ground. In the city, she saw a horde that numbered far more than what her reports indicated.

She saw people, human, demasi, drakes, and all the other races. Walking among the buildings almost mechanically, as if they were being controlled. She saw monsters of all kinds doing the same. The invading horde had taken control of both people and monsters, added them to their numbers. In one corner of the city she saw a large pit, and it took her a moment to realize what it was as she zoomed in. She saw piles and piles of corpses, being thrown into the pit filled with dark ichor. She saw tendrils pumping out of that pit, feeding into a large bulbous building near the wall of the arena.

She didn't know what it all meant, but one thing was for certain. This horde was multiplying itself and they were taking control of people and monsters. For the first time in a long time, she felt fear.

She closed her glass and turned around, heading back, she had learned enough.