

The Fortress

—Several Months Ago—

The sky was slowly getting brighter, but the orange tint remained. The flaming clouds moved slowly, in a circle around the exact center of the territory. The territory was peculiar, and more so than just clouds that were made of fire. The rivers were dark, what flowed through them was not water but liquid metal. The mountain in front of her was tall, and filled with precious ore, some not found anywhere else in the world.

The fortress looming over them all now had never been taken in a straight siege before. The tall black stone walls had been layered over the centuries, the formations and arrays inside of them had been made by the best in the world. It had been at the edge of her territory, a bastion that was supposed to protect the entrance into her lands. Only a fool would try to take the Black Stone Mountain, she had made sure of that when she had it built. It was a city of millions, filled with some of the best metal workers in the world. This had been a forge that fuelled the arms of her troops, that created wonders. And now, it was in the hands of her enemies. Fallen, but not through force of armies, not through siege, but treachery.

The Grey Horde closed her eyes, feeling... weary. More than a decade of fighting wars, of reclaiming lands that she had lost and punishing those that had dared to turn their eyes on what was hers. And this fortress, this territory was the last of her land that was left to retake. The attacks on her Kingdom had not been a result of the madness that had consumed the rest of the Settled Territories. No, it had been executed too perfectly, too many things had already been in place. Oh, they had taken advantage, of course they had. She had taken her armies away, far to the south to deal with another threat to them all, and then... the Tournament, the Dome, Reaction Engine, and everything...

They struck when she wasn't there, they killed her people, taken her lands. They knew exactly where and how to strike; they've been preparing for a long time. Crippling her Kingdom's economy, taking the key

positions, assassinating her governors. By the time she returned, a third of her territory was in the hands of her enemies. And they were pushing to take more, without the bulk of her army there, they were mostly unopposed, fighting only troops that she had left to guard her lands. Which had been... insufficient.

She had returned ahead of her armies, along with a fighting force of her fastest, those that could survive the pace that she kept to return home. The enemy forces stalled when they reached her inner lands, which was one thing she was grateful for. Their foolish attacks had allowed her to test the defense of the core of her lands, and she had found them worthy.

That did not absolve them however for what they had done. Fifteen factions had banded together to wage war against her, and she had crushed all of them. She had rallied the troop remaining in her lands and retaken her territories, fighting a dozen small wars. The progress had been slow until her army returned, and then she had rolled over them all. Taken back her lands and spilled her hordes into theirs, taking everything from them, crushing everything that they have built to rubble.

Only the Black Stone Mountain remained. Her enemies huddled up inside had nowhere to go, she had made a point to destroy their homes before coming here. The factions they used to belong to, no longer existed. It was still not enough to repay for what they had done. Millions of people lived in the city beneath the mountain, and they had butchered their way through it until the rest bowed, just so that they could survive. She knew that they had brought in a lot of their own people over the years, and any information she had of what was happening inside stopped years ago. She didn't even know if any of her people still lived. She couldn't feel them, which meant two things, they were either dead or enslaved, the collars prevented her powers from recognizing them as her own.

And now she had to take a fortress she built to be unconquerable. Grey Horde turned and looked behind her, at her army. The endless sea of troops, the sky was filled with her air ships and combat wings, karura and skreen, flying in lazy circles. The preparations for the siege were being carried out, fortifications built for their camps, siege equipment set up,

all done by the drones. The skreen drones were slow, but methodical, give them a task and they would do it without stopping even if that meant their death.

Even now, after so long since she had awoken, it still pained her to see them used in that manner. But that was the reality of the skreen race. Unlike the other races, the skreen didn't have childhoods. No, they were born as drones, mindless beings of flesh and little intellect, relying only on the telepathic guidance of their hive queens to accomplish their tasks, their purpose. Every type of skreen was the same, from the warrior types to the builders and the queens, only their purpose was different.

She herself had once been just a lowly minder queen, responsible for guiding the operation of her hive for the breeder queen. She still remembered the moment she had awoken, and she truly knew herself and the world. It was the day when the Framework arrived, when monsters entered her small hive and killed the breeder queen. She had been the only one left to command the Hive, and she had. She guided her hive's grey horde against the monsters, and she prevailed. That was the day she earned her soul and her name. Now, she watched over others of her kind, trying so hard to give them that opportunity to live past their drone stage.

A champion approached her, then came to a stop standing just next to her as she turned to look back at the fortress.

"We'll be ready to begin the siege within the hour, my Queen," Trklak, the Horde Itself, reported.

She glanced at him, then back at the city.

"Did I go wrong somewhere?" She asked softly.

Her champion turned his head in her direction. "My Queen?"

"How did they think that they could do something like this? That they could attack me and live to exploit what they had taken," Grey Horde was not the one to speak so openly. But he was... her closest confidant. And perhaps, he would understand such things more than she did. He still kept his drone name after all. In some ways he didn't think like other skreen. Their race was structured, one did not think outside of their

assigned role. The Framework allowed them to veer off that path, as she had done—but even now she was still operating within her assigned role. A minder for her hive, now a kingdom filled with skreen and other races. She had become a creature of war, a Warrior Queen, whose job was to make sure that the hive was always safe.

Trklak, for all his strength, thought more like these... other races. His defect was more than physical.

He didn't answer immediately, but when he did it was in a low, hesitant tone. "My Queen, it... sometimes, we who have lived for so long forget. Memory is a fleeting thing, even for us. The world knows and honors your name, they fear the Triumphant Hive, they fear our armies and our commanders. Our great names. And we are only as good as we are because of you, we know it, without your power we would not be nearly as powerful as we are. But... the last great war you had taken part in person, on the battlefield, was four hundred years ago."

"I've fought on battlefields since," Grey Horde said.

"You've expanded our frontier, fought against monsters. You've fought a few wars against factions that we destroyed completely, no one left to spread the tales. And I understand why you've been doing that, but... that is part of why they thought that they could win. They forgot."

Grey Horde closed her eyes, thinking. She knew that he was right. She had held herself back from making war on purpose. A part of it was because she didn't enjoy it anymore. Everyone was so much... weaker than her. There was no challenge in it for her. It was just... empty. Another part was her perks. It wasn't just a focus that could be pilfering, perks could too. And while their influence wasn't as great... it was still there. She had seen first hand how things like that could spiral out of control. If there was one thing she prided herself on, it was her control, and it had taken her centuries to get it.

She had been using her reputation, the fear that they had of her to deal with issues for far too long. Perhaps she should remind them.

“Gather a squadron, only our best and strongest. Place them at the front of our formations, closest to the fortress,” she said. “I’ll... talk with our enemies.”

Trklak paused, he probably knew what she planned. But he didn’t say anything, after a moment he bowed his head and left her alone on the hill. She spread her wings and flew toward the fortress. She wondered absently, if they would dare and try shoot her down. Not that they could, her army was here and nothing that they had could really touch her.

She landed in front of the great gates, and simply looked above at the defenders staring down at her.

It didn’t take long for someone to come out and speak with her. A shape shimmered into existence in front of her, a tall minotaur wearing elaborate clothing more suited for meeting rooms than a battlefield.

“Grey Horde,” he inclined his head. No honorifics, no respect.

She didn’t even know who he was for sure, could be one of two people. Both were minotaurs, one put in charge of the city, and the other a merchant prince who was supposed to oversee the exploitation of her mines and the craft of the city.

“My army is here, you will not hold the city for long,” she said simply. Despite everything, she would still rather avoid death, if at all possible.

The minotaur’s eye twitched. “You built this fortress so that it could not be taken, I very much doubt that.”

He was right, of course. The only reason they had taken it was because they had been betrayed from within, they teleported their army directly inside.

“Besides,” the minotaur continued. “Even if you manage to take it, you will break your army against these walls. Let’s not pretend, you left this place for last for a reason. And the moment we know that we are losing, we will make sure that the mountain and the city will never serve anyone ever again.”

Her anger rose at that, but she kept it under control. Trklak’s words echoed inside her head again, and she made a decision.

“Very well then,” Grey Horde closed her eyes.

“Come, old friend,” she spoke, and her awakened gauntlets rose from the depths of her soul to nestle against her arms.

“Finally,” War Path said. *“We were always meant to lead from the front.”*

“I know my friend,” she said as she activated his **War Gear** ability. Her body was enveloped in a suit of silver armor, leaving only her wings and antennae peeking out. They would learn who she really was.