

A long time ago

She hurried down the corridor, her head turning as she tried to make sure that she was alone. It was unnecessary, her **|Greater Thermoception|** already told her that she was all alone in this part of the fortress. Most were asleep, and the guards weren't focused on this part of the fortress, deep in its heart, their eyes were too busy looking outward.

She reached the room that was her destination, a small pantry, and made her way to the end. She reached behind the produce on the shelf, and found the tiny indent hidden behind it. She pressed it once quickly, then again only this time she held it for exactly three seconds. She heard a click and then the wall in front of her slid open.

Quickly she entered and then pushed the wall back into place, leaving her in complete darkness. She pulled out a torch from her storage ring and then focused, with an effort of will the heat around the torch increased until it was enough to generate Fire Essence. A spark was all it took to ignite the torch and bring light to the tight tunnel. Carefully she started walking down the twisting stairs, heading deep beneath the fortress. She tried to move at a brisk pace, but the tight walls made any real haste too difficult to accomplish.

She tried to keep her mind clear, tried not to think about what was to come. She had tried too hard, and she had failed. Now, there was only one path left. She was scared, terrified really, but she also knew that there was no choice.

She reached the bottom, where the corridor widened as it entered the Under's cave system that led far deeper into the depths. She made her way through the labyrinth of corridors, knowing exactly where to go. Finally, she arrived at the meeting spot, and found it empty.

For a moment, she feared that the lack of anyone to meet with her meant something terrible, but then she calmed herself. The meeting time wasn't precise, neither of them could be sure when they would be able to slip away. She settled in to wait, trying not to let her fears run wild.

Then, a while later, her skill sensed a source of heat coming in her direction. She focused and identified a torch carried by a single person. She

sighed in relief as she saw light at the end of the tunnel in front of her, and then a form step out of it.

The woman looked as if she hadn't slept in years. Her hair was unkempt between her horns, her clothes hastily thrown on. Her wings were folded behind her back, and her tail was swishing from side to side in nervous ticks.

"Tali," she said as she stood and walked to meet her. "I feared that you wouldn't come."

Anatalien sighed, a weary sound left her mouth. "I'm sorry Karya, it took me a while to get away. I had to be sure that I was alone. Verostion's people are everywhere."

Karya nodded in understanding. She had enough trouble getting away herself, and she enjoyed much trust in the fortress. She shivered at the thought of trying to evade Verostion. The most powerful person in the world was not known for being kind, if Tali got caught...

"I understand," Karya said then bowed her head. "And I am sorry, I failed."

"We always knew that it was a possibility," Tali said slowly. "What happened?"

"What always happens," Karya sighed. "Bolas is too charismatic, people love him too much. I couldn't convince Erakael that Bolas is going to get us all killed."

"Fuck," Tali sighed.

"What about the others?" Karya asked.

"Nothing, I couldn't convince any of them. They don't care, not really. Eratemus thinks that all of this is just a foolish distraction, he doesn't see what it can spiral into. The others all think a variation on the same. Be glad that the Grey Horde isn't here, that she is still obsessed with the kreceans. She would've made things more complicated."

"Zenker?" Karya asked, the drake was the most powerful of the second Iteration. If there was anyone who could try and end this without bloodshed, it would be him.

“No,” Tali shook her head. “He doesn’t want to get involved, I fear that he will realize the truth too late to change anything. Regardless, he spends too little time with people, they won’t follow him.”

“Damn it,” Karya said. “So we are doing this then?”

“We must,” Tali said. “Both Verostion and Bolas are insane, we cannot let them continue to lead. Even if we manage to avoid the full-on war, they will eventually lead us to ruin. And the others are too scared to deal with them.”

A part of Karya understood, Verostion was the most powerful being in the world, a Ranker of the First Iteration. He was a pillar that all looked up to, no amount of words would convince those who follow him otherwise. And Bolas was the same, the strongest person of the Third Iteration, as charismatic as he was insane. Obsessed with ruling everything. Both of them had advanced far in all three focuses, and gained great power. But it was obvious now that they had underestimated the effects of what that had done to them. Karya only lamented not planning this sooner, before they managed to create such a schism between the third and the rest of the Iterations.

“It needs to go perfectly,” Tali said. “We cannot allow any room for error.”

“I know,” Karya told her. “I’ve managed to split our forces, Bolas and those he trusts the most are camped in the western side of the fortress. He sleeps in the tallest tower. I’ve pulled all that I trust to other sides, those that I think will support Erakael when Bolas is gone.”

“That leaves Verostion,” Tali grimaced. “I don’t have an idea what to do about him. I can’t kill him, he is too strong, and even if I tried, everyone will know that I did it.”

Karya had a plan, but she wasn’t sure if Tali would agree. “I might be able to do it.”

“How?” Tali asked.

“You make sure to kill Bolas, and I’ll convince Erakeal to retreat. We’ll go through the southern pass. You need to convince Verostion to follow after us.”

“That won’t be very difficult,” Tali said. “He will want to crush you.”

“You also need to make sure that he comes with as few people as possible,” Karya said.

“That will be much more difficult,” Tali grimaced. “Why?”

“Because I will bathe that pass in dawnfire, everything that enters will die.”

“Karya...”

“Do you see any other way to kill him?” she asked.

Tali closed her eyes, then shook her head. “No, but he won’t come with a small party, no matter what I say. He will bring an army, you know how he likes to posture.”

“Then you make sure that all that are with him are those that we want dead.”

“Karya, no matter how I arrange the army, I won’t be able to make sure that only his lackeys are with him,” Tali warned.

“I don’t think that we have a choice,” Karya said.

“What about his immortality?” Tali asked. “He will just come back.”

“Not this time,” Karya shook her head. “I have some of Eratemus’s soul catcher formations. They will force their souls to remain in the pass, pull them into the real world. They’ll burn.”

“You know what that will mean then?” Tali asked. “I won’t be able to stop the others, I won’t be able to push them toward peace. We will have a real war on our hands.”

Karya glanced away from the intense look in Tali’s eyes. She looked at the stone, but not really seeing it. She was imagining the future where Bolas and Verostion lived, where they continued to rule. They would have a war either way, but if they don’t die here, then they would only grow more powerful. “Do you want to see what Verostion can do if he manages to get his ideal improved? If he slips deeper into madness than he already is?” Karya shook her head and turned, meeting Tali’s eyes. “They need to die, and we must make sure that people like them never become so powerful again. We will have a war, and I’ll convince Erakael to run, it will be better.”

“They will hunt you,” Tali said. “They will push you beyond the areas we have tamed. You’ll die out there.”

“No,” Karya smiled. “We will thrive. It is why others fear us so.”

Tali closed her eyes, and then nodded. "Very well my friend," she stepped closer and they embraced. Then Tali whispered in her ear. "Be safe, and make sure that you don't miss."

"You too," Karya whispered back.

The day was yet to come when it happened. Karya had been waiting, she had already disabled the sensory formations, crippled the shielding ones so that they will fail the moment they were hit, and she had changed the guards to those who had weaker sensory powers. She had very nearly gotten caught, but in the end, few suspected her. She was one of the most trusted of Bolas' people.

It pained her to do this, but she could see where things were headed. Bolas would kill them all eventually. He pushed recklessly, always trying to gain more power. He killed those around him on a whim for the smallest of insults. But perhaps most importantly, he didn't really care about his people, not beyond taking everything that he could from them.

She stood on the Eastern Side of the White Fortress, a long and curving structure that hugged the tops of the mountains, several kilometers long, fewer wide, made out of white stone. It resembled a snake twining around peaks that had towers built on top of them, as crowns on top of heads. It was an achievement, one of the great feats of the people that now lived here.

"Long night?" Karya blinked, startled at the voice. She turned and froze for a moment, but then she recognized the drake. Erakael stood behind her, his wings folded behind him, and his brown scales dancing with shadows in the firelight.

"Yes, it is," Karya said slowly as he walked over and stood next to her.

"I..." Erakael started, but then paused. He shook his head and continued. "I'm sorry about what I said earlier. I just... you know why I can't do what you asked?"

"I understand, even if I disagree," Karya told him.

“If only we could all be like you Karya. The world would be a much better place,” he chuckled to himself. Then sobered a few moments later. He glanced in her direction, his face now serious. “How long do you think we have? Before Verostion decides that he can’t suffer our disregard for his leadership?”

Less than you fear my friend, she thought to herself. Outwardly she made a show of thinking. “A while at least, his generals will not let him act foolishly.”

“Yes,” Erakael nodded. “We need to be ready. If we show them that we can keep them at bay, that we can make them hurt. They will understand that we need to have peace.”

“But will Bolas agree?” Karya asked.

“He will,” Erakael said, so full of belief.

“Will he really?” Karya pressed trying to keep as much of her scepticism from her tone. “He loves to fight, he loves war, will he really stop if we show the others that we can stand up to them?”

“I’m sure, he will listen to me,” Erakael said slowly.

“He hasn’t listened to you so far,” Karya told him.

“Karya, please, I don’t want to have another argument,” Erakael said.

She sighed, knowing that there would be no convincing him. She had tried for so long and so hard to make him see. But Erakael was blind to Bolas’s failings.

“I guess that we’ll see who was right eventually,” Karya said finally.

“Yes, you’ll see that he can be better,” Erakael said.

Karya didn’t say anything, she didn’t know what more was left to be said. It was all so complicated. The fate of so many people rested on so few, those who had managed to get powerful enough to rule. And the two that were the strongest were not good rulers, their madness couldn’t be allowed to continue.

“What is that?” Erakael asked suddenly.

Karya blinked then saw him looking at the sky. Her heart started to beat faster as she followed his sight-line. Out among the clouds, she could see shapes moving, barely visible, as shadows in the night.

“I don’t see anything,” Karya said.

“There is something flying up there,” Erakael said, flexing his wings.

Karya put her hand on his shoulder, halting him from taking flight.
Just a bit longer.

“Karya, what is it?”

“You are right,” Karya said. “I see something.”

“Let me go check,” Erakael said.

“The formations would’ve sounded the alarm if it was dangerous,” Karya said.

“Regardless, I should—” Erakael tried to move her hand, but by then it was too late.

The night turned to day, as the force in the sky opened fire. Abilities, techniques, perks, and everything else that they had, they unleashed on the western side of the White Fortress.

The formation that protected it flared for an instant, and then collapsed. The walls of the fortress cracked under the onslaught, the stone beneath them shattered, and then the entire wall and the courtyards, buildings, and the army camped inside of them were falling. An avalanche of stone and fire tumbled down the mountain, as the still asleep warriors died, crushed beneath the stone or boiled alive in the river of fire that followed the tumbling stone down the side of the mountain.

And it was not even the focus of the attack. The strongest attack was targeting the tallest tower, that had been standing above the walls on the peak. She saw lines of fire, storms of wind, conjured weapons, tiny spheres filled with explosive concoctions or worse, all falling on top of it.

The tower shattered in an instant.

Erakeal screamed. “Bolas!” His wings flexed, but Karya jumped on him, pulling him back.

“What are you doing?” He yelled at her.

“Don’t, he’s—” Karya started, when a bellow shook the mountain. A form flew out of the fire, sending shattered stone in all directions. She saw Bolas his wings beating and sending him up into the sky. The attack had created fires that illuminated everything. She saw that he was missing a leg, that his scales were bloody and his body injured with a dozen wounds. Bolas didn’t care, he flew into the sky straight for Anatalien.

He should've known better than to challenge her in the air. Her people flew away in haste, retreating outside the range. Bolas screamed incomprehensibly, and Anatalien raised her hands.

Karya saw or sensed nothing from the distance, but the clouds fell, Bolas didn't even reach her, he was violently thrown down, his body twisting in the air as he was pushed in the opposite direction, along with everything else around her. Anatalien dove down, after him toward the side of the peak. And a moment later they heard the impact.

Erakael was standing still, not even breathing, his eyes looking at the place where Bolas and Tali fell. Karya saw warriors around them, on the walls, in the courtyards, everyone who still lived, all were frozen and looking at the sky.

A moment later a shape flew up, and Karya closed her eyes. She heard Erakael's sob, and she forced herself to look. She had done this.

Anatalien flew high above, holding half of Bolas's body in one hand by his head. Half a wing was still attached, along with his upper torso, the rest was gone. The gauntlet in her right was glowing and holding a squirming and glowing soul. The gauntlet flashed and the soul exploded into a thousand pieces. She dropped the piece of Bolas's body and then flew away.

"Brother!" Erakael screamed, and Karya nearly lost it, but she pushed through.

"He is dead," she told him. "We need to go!"

She was yelling at him, the screams of rage and denial filled the fortress from those who had seen.

"Go?!" Erakael rounded at her, glaring. "We need to find her, make her suffer."

"We just lost most of our warriors!" Karya yelled back. "We can't fight now."

She grabbed him and turned him around, forcing him to look down into the Eastern Pass between the mountains. "Look," she said knowing what he would see. "Their army is here, we can't fight Verostion like this. We need to get our people to safety."

"She killed my brother I'm not just—"

Karya slapped him, making his head twist to the side. “Bolas is dead, you are now our leader. Do you think that they attacked us only here? We need to get to our people, we are responsible for all of them. Will you let your vengeance consume you? Will you kill us all?” She gestured at the warriors around them, all running around without knowing what to do, some looking at the sky in disbelief.

“I...” He closed his eyes, and then opened them. He met her eyes, resolute. “Order a retreat.”

His whisper sent a chill through her bones, but she knew that she had to continue. After all, it was not yet done. She glanced down the mountain, seeing Verostion and the rest of his armies coming slowly. It was his arrogance that made him do that, he wanted them to see and know that he was coming. And that was going to be his undoing. Wings of fire sprang from her back and she flew, heading toward where her troops were. She needed to be careful, they had to retreat fast enough that only Verostion could follow, but not fast enough that they could get away.

Once she got him in the pass, this would all end.