1514 Burning Rust

The dome of the Serpent King's palace entirely collapsed, falling under its own weight in a colossal cloud of dust. Two enormous, dark figures rose from the cloud, vaguely visible as they tangled together in a furious struggle.

...Down on the streets of the city , Nephis was making her way to the crumbling palace. She was fighting against the human flood, the radiance of her skin shining brightly in the dim twilight of the early dawn. Her incandescent sword had turned into a blur, followed by a trail of crimson haze.

She had long lost count of how many enemies she cut down, how many bodies she sundered, and how much time had passed since the start of this nightmarish battle.

No matter how many vessels of the Soul Stealer she destroyed, their number never decreased. Instead, it only grew. More and more of them flooded from all sides, rushing to pierce her flesh with their swords, their spears, their arrows, their nails and teeth. Their power had grown, as well. There were more Awakened warriors surrounding her now, and more Ascended.

Their powers were like a constant hail that relentlessly assaulted her, lethal and unpredictable, growing more perilous with each step she took.

But something else grew with it, as well.

Her will.

Slowly but surely... Nephis was shaking off the burden of doubt that had covered her heart like rust, at some point. Little by little, its weight had added up, until she became pressed into the ground by it without even noticing.

Here, in the throes of this macabre slaughter, there was no place for doubt.

There was only combat. Steps, lunges, and feints. The movements of her sword, the movements of her body. The measured ruthlessness of her mind, the cold lethality of her skill. The empty eyes of her enemies, the perilous sheen of their weapons, and the inevitable moments of their deaths.

This was clarity. This was the stark world where only pain and will existed.

She was always tormented by harrowing pain. Pain burned everything away, leaving only will.

And Neph's will...

Was to kill them all.

She cut through countless humans, erasing them from existence with her sword. Their bodies come undone under its blade, forming a gruesome path. A river of blood flowed where she had passed, paving the way.

...Her blood was in that river, as well.

Nephis moved with dreadful speed and chilling precision, rending the flesh of her enemies like a radiant, flawless, fatal machine. Lifeless corpses fell to her feet — men and women, young and old. All severed and mutilated, their bodies gaping with horrible wounds.

But she wasn't unscathed, either.

Just then, an Awakened warrior used a strange Aspect Ability and bypassed the steel wall of her defense. His cleaver landed on her shoulder, biting into the chainmail. Her armor held, and her bones held, as well.

But the impact slowed her down, allowing an Ascended champion to ram a spear into her back.

The chainmail broke. The white tunic beneath it was pierced. The spearhead plunged into her flesh.

Snarling, Nephis sent the Awakened flying with a kick and twisted, her sword cutting through the shaft of the spear and the Ascended's head. The bloodied spearhead dissolved into a rain of sparks, and the radiance suffusing Neph's skin dimmed a little.

Instead of blood, white flame flowed from the wound on her back, mending the torn muscles and broken skin.

A moment later, the wound was gone. Only the pain remained.

Nephis gritted her teeth, the same flame burning in her eyes.

'Come, all of you!'

She plunged into the frenzied mob, calling upon the fires of her soul.

Soon, a hurricane of incinerating flames spread through the human river, devouring all who could not resist it. Those who could were cut down by the spirit of light dancing in the midst of the blinding inferno, her sword merciless and unrestrained.

The distant palace drew nearer.

Nephis had unleashed the flames to burn her enemies, but she couldn't maintain the blaze around herself constantly. Her reserves of essence, no matter how deep, would run out too fast that way. In the end, she released the control of the flame, leaving a burning street in her wake.

The hungry fire spread, devouring the broken buildings.

The endless, relentless assault of the hollow-eyed vessels continued, unchanged.

More and more enemies broke through her defenses, leaving terrible marks on her body.

Her bones were broken. Her flesh was cut. Her armor became shattered and torn, full of holes... until it crumbled completely, disappearing into a whirlwind of sparks and leaving only a tattered tunic to cover her radiant body.

A sharp sword slithered its way to her chest, piercing her heart.

Nephis swayed slightly and stared at the man who was holding the sword, a white inferno burning in her eyes.

Then, she reached with her hand and grabbed his throat, crushing it in an incinerating grasp.

The sword slid out of her chest, followed by a gust of flame.

At the same time, a battle axe landed on her shoulder, cutting deep, and a beak of a war hammer struck her head.

But no blood poured out of the fatal wounds. Only fire.

Nephis moved, severing the bodies of everyone around her. She did not fall, did not stagger. She did not even slow down.

If anything, it seemed as though she had become even faster, even brighter, even deadlier. Washed by the white flame, the harrowinf wounds disappeared in the beautiful radiance.

Nephis was not going to die yet.

No... perhaps, she was only getting started...

Losing all restraint and not caring about the pain and the damage dealt to her body anymore, she lunged at her enemies, forcing them to reel back.

"I..."

Her sword tore through their bodies, leaving only death and scattering ash in its wake.

"Will show you..."

Terrible blows rained on her body, but all the gruesome damage they dealt was washed away by the white radiance.

"The horror..."

All around her, the streets of Twilight were being devoured by the spreading blaze.

"Of the Immortal Flame."

Nephis was like an undying, insatiable monster of flame that had taken the form of a slender young woman. Now that she had discarded her doubt and her fear, the true horror of her Aspect was finally unleashed.

No matter how her enemies cut and pierced her radiant body, nothing seemed capable of bringing her down. Her own sword, however, was like an incandescent omen of destruction and ruin, inevitable and inescapable, cutting down everything that stood in its way.

Countless lives were melting in front of her merciless blade.

Her mind was like a white void. Pain had become will. Thought had become flame.

Doubt had become ash.

Nephis cut a road of blood and scorched bodies through the human flood, refusing to go down. Why would she? These swords, these spears, these arrows, these nails and teeth... she would withstand them all. Using her Dormant Ability did not diminish her essence, and so, she would continue to kill, and maim, and burn until Soul Stealer came in person to put a stop to her.

As long as there was fire, she would light herself on fire. She would endure its harrowing blessing. She would persist.

For now.

Of course, even the undying were not invulnerable. No one was. Nephis was going to make a fatal mistake, eventually. Fatigue and mental strain would accumulate, draining her strength away. Then, she would be caught and pinned down, or obliterated entirely.

But until that happened...

She would continue to burn.

Burn brightly in the dim twilight of the endless dawn.