1607 Godgrave

A vast white plain was shining under blinding sunlight. It seemed deceptively endless, devoid of any features. No living thing was moving across its surface, and none would dare to.

Changing Star of the Immortal Flame Clan, the Sword of Valor, was kneeling on that plain. She had been kneeling there for three days without moving a muscle, and even her right hand was frozen in the air, holding the hilt of a silvery sword. Its blade was like a radiant mirror reflecting a boundless white void.

Her impassive face was showing signs of fatigue, but her beautiful grey eyes were cold and sharp, full of indomitable resolve that bordered on obsession.

Her silver hair was moving slightly in the wind.

"Lady N—ephis... the wind..."

Staying still like a statue, she spoke without looking back:

"I know. Stay strong."

There were a few moments of silence, and then another voice spoke:

"I... don't know how much longer I can endure."

Nephis answered evenly, white sparks igniting in the depths of her calm eyes:

"Stop talking unless you want to die."

She wasn't threatening the man, simply stating a fact. In response to her words, there was silence.

The wind blew across the white plain, crashing into her with furious force. There were a few gasps from behind Nephis, and yet, no member of her retinue allowed themselves to be shaken by the squall.

The only thing that moved was the torn veil of ominous grey clouds. It swirled and flowed, slowly obscuring the merciless sky... not that Nephis could see it, frozen as she was. All she could see was the shadow slowly spreading across the flawless white plain.

Where the shadow of the clouds was cast, the white surface lost its blinding radiance, becoming easy to look at. As Nephis watched the radiance dim, her face remained motionless... her heart, however, started beating faster.

Finally, the stormy veil repaired itself, and the sky became completely hidden behind it. The blade of Neph's sword was extinguished, reflecting nothing but a swirling expanse of grey clouds now. The clouds were glowing brightly with diffused and scattered light.

She let out a quiet sigh.

Behind her, bodies hit the ground in a clatter of metal, and pained groans tore apart the silence. Nephis remained motionless for a few moments, then lowered her sword and slowly stood up.

'This one was long.'

Turning around, she looked at the six Masters that were sprawled on the ground, panting as they tried to recover from three days of torturous stillness. Shim, Kaor, Shakti, Sid, Gorn, Gantry, and Erlas... they were the Fire Keepers that had followed her into the Death Zone on this mission. The rest were in less dangerous regions of the Dream Realm, searching for young Sleepers.

Far away.

There had been a time when Bastion, located in the heartland of the Dream Realm, was separated from Ravenheart by an immeasurable distance. Ravenheart was situated far north-west, after all, on the outskirts of the Hollow Mountains.

But Awakened had conquered a lot of territory in the last few decades. Led by the Great Clans, humans had greatly expanded their area of influence in the Dream Realm. The two enclaves had swallowed many regions... and yet, they still did not share a border.

In the south, both the Sword Domain and the Song Domain bordered the Stormsea, which was ruled by the House of Night. In the north, the Hollow Mountains stood like an impregnable wall in the path of human expansion.

The two Domains were separated by a Death Zone — or rather, several of them, stretching from the Hollow Mountains all the way to the Stormsea. This deadly territory widened in the south, but was comparatively narrow in the north. Which meant that if the two enclaves were to be connected by land, the narrowest and northernmost region separating them had to be conquered.

And that was where Nephis and the Fire Keepers had been sent... to the Death Zone far in the north. This place, which had taken the lives of many powerful Awakened, had no official name. However, people often called it the Godgrave.

The reason for it was rather simple.

Turning her head slightly, Nephis looked north. Out there, far in the distance, a titanic skull was laying on the misty slopes of the Hollow Mountains, staring back at her with one colossal, empty eye socket. Deep darkness nestled in its gaping chasm, still and foreboding.

The other eye socket, as well as the forehead and the entire left side of the titanic skull, had been entirely shattered by some unimaginable blow. The bone splinters, which had rained down thousands of years ago, created mountain peaks of their own.

The skull was connected to a white spine, which stretched south from the Hollow Mountains. In fact, it was connected to an entire skeleton of inconceivable proportions. From the top of the skull to the right knee joint, which was the southernmost intact point of the skeleton, it was at least five thousand kilometers in length.

The skeleton and the ground below it... was the Death Zone. It was called Godgrave because Awakened, shocked and frightened by the terrifying size of the ancient remains, had speculated that it was the corpse of a god.

Of course, Nephis did not think the same way.

In any case, the right hand of the skeleton lay in the Song Domain, while the left hand lay in the Sword Domain. By climbing the skeletal arms, one could travel along the bones of the titanic corpse.

If they could survive the journey, of course, which very few could.

The seemingly endless white plain where Nephis stood was actually the skeleton's breastbone. She had led the Fire Keepers here, climbing up the shattered left arm of the ancient corpse, fighting her way across its vast collar bone, and making progress south over the past two weeks.

The progress was slow because they could not fly the Chain Breaker here. It was too dangerous.

There were three ways of traversing Godgrave, ranging from deadly to absolutely lethal.

The most suicidal one was to move across the ground, which was shrouded in twilight and covered by a carpet of ash. The Death Zones were regions of the Dream Realm where Great, Cursed, and Unholy Nightmare Creatures dwelled... and in this Death Zone, the deadliest things were hiding beneath the ash. Anyone who stepped on it was doomed to be consumed.

The second way was not much better. It was to travel in the great hollows of the titanic bones, hidden from the sky. The hollows were the safest place in Godgrave... and for that reason, they were home to an entire ecosystem of harrowing Nightmare Creatures and tainted flora, all hungering for the taste of human souls. Fighting through that monstrous jungle that thrived within the inconceivable skeleton was just as suicidal.

The last way was to traverse the surface of the ancient bones. Here, there were fewer dreadful abominations, and those who did prowl the surface were a bit less powerful. But that was for a reason, as well.

The reason was that Godgrave had a peculiar nature. There were no nights here, and the sky was constantly shrouded by a veil of clouds. If the veil was broken, though, revealing the radiant white sky...

Anything that moved under the open sky was immediately erased from existence, turning into scatering ash. There was no exception to the rule, and no salvation from the gaze of heaven.

So, that was why Nephis and the Fire Keepers had spent three days without daring to move a muscle. They had been waiting for the torn clouds to hide the sky once again.

And now that the grey veil was mended by the wind, they could continue on their mission...

To find the mysterious Saint who was rumored to have made his home at the very edge of the titanic breastbone, right before the abyssal chasm leading to the skeleton's spine.

The man known as the Lord of Shadows.