1608 Death Zone

Nephis studied the immaculately white bone plain in front of her for a few moments, then turned around and looked at the Fire Keepers. They were gracelessly sprawled on the ground, with pained expressions on their faces. Even with their powerful Ascended bodies, it had not been easy to remain completely still for three long days.

If there was one consolation, it was that Nightmare Creatures they had been fighting when the merciless skies revealed themselves were nothing but ash now. The Fire Keepers, meanwhile, had all survived.

There was a reason why she had chosen this particular cohort to follow her into the Godgrave.

The Fire Keepers were a fearsome force even now, when the number of Awakened, Masters, and Saints had vastly increased. That was because each of them was an Ascended, and a cohesive battle unit consisting of close to fifty seasoned Masters could not be ignored by anyone.

Not to mention that the Fire Keepers were the survivors of the Forgotten Shore, and as such, could be easily called the most talented Awakened warriors of their generation... all generations, perhaps.

These warriors were her personal army, and under her leadership, their brilliant glory and fame had grown explosively in the past four years. The Ivory Tower, the Chain Breaker, the crest of the Fire Keepers, and her own name, Changing Star, had all become symbols of unrivaled virtue, valor, and excellence.

Their names were known far and wide, all according to her conscious will and intent.

The Fire Keepers were her heralds and emissaries, but each was also a heroic figure in their own right... still, some of them had more renown than others. The seven Masters in front of her had once been Cassie's own cohort, and therefore, they were a cut above the rest.

That was not the reason why Nephis had chosen them for this mission, though. The real reason was that one of the members of the cohort, Erlas, possessed an Aspect that could augment the endurance and stamina of his allies. Knowing what waited for them in Godgrave, she wanted to have his powers at hand for when the white void of the sky above the ancient corpse was revealed.

As it turned out, her consideration had not been in vain. If not for his support, the last three days would have been much more torturous, and potentially fatal for the members of her retinue.

Even Nephis had felt the strain. Nevertheless, there was no time to waste. Looking at the Fire Keepers, she said evenly:

"We have five minutes to recover. Five more to drink water and eat. Then, we continue south."

Such a short span of time was not enough for them to rest their weary bodies, but it was better to relieve the fatigue on the move. The sky was not the only danger in this desolate bone expanse, after all.

"Yes, Lady Nephis."

The Fire Keepers groaned as they started to move. Storage Memories were summoned, water and field rations were hastily consumed. Shim, the leader of the cohort, used his healing powers to help the less resilient members recover faster. They were seasoned veterans and did not need her to tell them what to do.

Nephis used the short rest to quench her thirst, as well.

By the time the ten minutes she had given her subordinates ran out, the bone plain was already starting to move.

"Ready your weapons! Forward!"

As she started to walk, the Fire Keepers followed her.

Although the sun-bleached bones of the dead god — or whatever the ancient skeleton had been, once — seemed like a continuous surface of solid white, in truth, they were littered with cracks and fissures. The deepest of those cracks led to the great hollows within the titanic bones, and the inner hell hidden in their horrid expanse.

Merely ten minutes after the veil of clouds had been mended, those cracks exploded with life. Tendrils of vibrant red moss and vermilion grass spread from them, devouring the flawlessly white surface of the ancient bones. Swarms of tiny Nightmare Creatures were instantly born, hunting each other as they moved between the stalks of grass.

That was only the beginning.

Since everything that moved under the merciless gaze of the white sky was instantly incinerated, the abominable life thriving in Godgrave had adapted to its whims. There was no way to predict when the veil of clouds would be torn, and how long it would take for the stormy barrier to repair itself. Therefore, everything here lived at incredible speed.

The red moss, the vermilion grass, the tiny Nightmare Creatures, and the larger abominations that were yet to be born... all of them were in a hurry to be born, grow, consume, and propagate before turning to ash. The white plain was bare and featureless a few minutes ago, but in an hour or two, it would be teeming with horrid life.

If the veil of clouds was not broken for the next several days, Godgrave would come to look as if the infernal subterranean jungle had escaped the great hollows. By then, the most harrowing of the surface hunters would have been born and reached maturity, making the surface of the bones almost as dangerous as their inner expanse.

But even now, Nephis and the Fire Keepers were already in danger.

The predatory vegetation and the swarms of tiny critters were enough to envelop and devour a legion of Masters.

This... was the Death Zone.

Watching a sea of red slowly surround them, crawling closer with each moment, Nephis silently raised her sword.

"Prepare."

As she brandished the silver sword, a wave of sparks exploded from where its tip scraped against the surface of the white bone.

A moment later, each of the sparks exploded with a thundering roar, and a flood of white flame was unleashed into the world. The wave of fire rolled forward and enveloped a wide swath of the red grass, incinerating countless vermin in an instant.

It did not stop there, though.

Following Neph's will, the flames moved, turning into a wide ring around the Fire Keepers. Then, it spread in all directions like a flash fire, flooding the air with heat and ash.

Soon, the vast bone plain had turned into a terrible white inferno.